



# Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice

## A History

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SWR  
STUDIES IN WRITING AND RHETORIC

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Cover Design: Mary Rohrer and Lynn Weckhorst

NCTE Stock Number: 07300; eStock Number: 07317  
ISBN 978-0-8141-0730-0; eISBN 978-0-8141-0731-7

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Holt, Mara, 1951– author.

Title: Collaborative learning as democratic practice : a history / Mara Holt.

Description: Urbana, Illinois : National Council of Teachers of English, 2017. |

Series: CCCC Studies in writing & rhetoric | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017023515 (print) | LCCN 2017045987 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814107317 | ISBN 9780814107300(pbk.) | ISBN 9780814107317 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Group work in education—United States—History. | Group work in education—Social aspects. | Progressive education—United States—History. | Democracy and education—United States—History.

Classification: LCC LB1032 (ebook) | LCC LB1032 .H663 2017 (print) | DDC 371.3/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017023515>

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## Introduction and Overview

[P]ractice is never natural or neutral; there is always a theory in place, so that the first job of any teacher of criticism is to bring the assumptions that are in place out in the open for scrutiny.

—Robert Scholes, *Textual Power* (1985)

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CAN BE DEFINED LOOSELY AS A pedagogy that organizes students to work together in groups. It takes a variety of forms. It may, for instance, entail students working together on a project, copyediting one another's writing, solving a specific intellectual task together, participating in electronic class discussions, or as a group providing encouragement for individual writers. All cases of collaborative pedagogy include some form of interaction among students. I do not wish to define the concept more narrowly than this, since my purpose here is to explore variation in the practice and theory of collaborative pedagogy.<sup>1</sup>

A shift toward student-centered approaches has infused standard assumptions about teaching writing, so that collaborative learning has diffused into mainstream curricula, along with process pedagogy, to produce a conventional pedagogical protocol: freewrite, draft, peer review, revise, hand in. Students are routinely taught how to read others' writing. Teachers handle class discussion in ways that create more engagement among students. Collaboration is a standard part of computer pedagogy. And wikis, or collaborative texts modeled after Wikipedia, are becoming a popular classroom assignment.<sup>2</sup>

Proponents of collaborative learning claim that students learn critical judgment and problem-solving skills and are socialized into an academic discipline (Bruffee). They learn to resist (Kail

and Trimbur). They become empowered, learn conflict-resolution skills, and open their minds (Schniedewind). Proponents of computer-mediated collaboration claim that students learn the process of how communities form beliefs and change authority structures (Zappen, Gurak, and Doheny-Farina) by further decentralizing the role of teacher and centralizing peer interaction (Harasim). Collaborative pedagogy can help to overcome racism by giving voice to diverse participants and managing conflicts (Hertz-Lazarowitz), which increases students' literacy of difference (Blair). It creates opportunities for students to communicate, mentor one another, and become good citizens (Zuckerman).

Although there is a great deal of overlap, different versions of collaborative practice have different goals. We may practice collaboration under the assumption that we are inviting our students to participate in the creation of knowledge. Or we may believe that we are doing something very different, such as providing the conditions through which individual creativity can be released or raising our students' awareness about oppressive social structures. We may be trying to raise their self-esteem, provoke reflection, or train them to be future workers. Or we may not really think about what we're teaching our students through our pedagogy. If we are unconscious about our practices, we may be giving our students mixed messages, such as a teacher who wants to give students authority but micro-manages them in groups.

Specific goals have varied historically, as well as across individual classrooms. Although collaborative learning is often practiced as standard boilerplate writing pedagogy, it has a distinctive twentieth-century history associated with American pragmatist philosophy. In the scholarship I found describing 1930s collaborative practices, for example, students were taught to cooperate with one another for social and economic survival in a time of no jobs. Group work in the late 1950s took some responsibility off the teachers for the increased student population of baby boomers. In the 1960s, collaborative learning and peer tutoring helped beleaguered teachers cope with open admissions. This led in the 1970s to collaboration in support of students unpacking the writing process, on the one

hand, and protesting the Vietnam War, on the other. In the 1980s and 1990s, collaborative practice represented socially constructed knowledge in a time of postmodern epistemological uncertainty, a method to question the dominant ideologies of class and gender, and new notions of textuality exposed by electronic media. In the twenty-first century we are venturing into collaborations that recognize the contributions of objects and companion species.

A historical scan reveals a rich diversity of practices and can give us the distance necessary to examine our own practices. I take a historical approach to the study of collaborative learning for three reasons. Collaborative learning takes place in a particular context that must be understood and worked from for the practice to make any sense. Furthermore, collaborative learning has been underhistoricized, with the result that achievements have not built upon one another, but rather have emerged intermittently in the literature with the self-consciousness of repetitive spontaneous innovations. Finally, pragmatist philosophy, which offers the best rationale for collaborative pedagogy and has a long and productive relationship with it, depends upon dialectical connections among practice, theory, and material circumstances, to which a historical approach is crucial.

Teachers and historians in composition studies can benefit from knowing this history because our own practices are also historically situated. I argue that the effectiveness of collaborative learning is related to teachers' goals in using it, and that its practice is not separable from its historical and ideological situation. I use an analytical framework of knowledge, power, and social relations to understand various practices in their historical situations. I believe that a lack of awareness of the ideologies that saturate teachers' practices can subvert teachers' intentions and support a dysfunctional or antidemocratic environment for student learning. A book that documents the historical uses of collaborative practices can enable teachers to build on its earlier constructions, to analyze pedagogical moves in historical circumstances of cultural and political shifts, and to be more deliberate about what we do in our classrooms.

SITUATED MATERIAL CONTEXTS  
FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

A brief look at scholarship in relationship to context reveals some situational diversity in collaborative practices. For instance, Kenneth Bruffee's descriptions of collaborative practice are based in Brooklyn College, where his assumption is that differences among students don't need to be coaxed into expression, but rather constructively engaged. Lester Faigley faced a less pleasant version of this, describing one of his early computer-mediated classrooms as outrageously out of hand in his book *Fragments of Rationality* and showing concern about his students' racist, sexist discourse. Marilyn Cooper, in "Postmodern Possibilities in Electronic Conversations," sees Faigley's students' conflict as productive, even refreshing, perhaps because she was teaching a relatively homogeneous group of science majors in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, a place where differences among students' beliefs may be more nuanced. Nevertheless, the focus on difference or consensus that has been debated in conversations in the discipline is often surprisingly devoid of attention to the material conditions and even the specific practices of the pedagogy at hand.

The material conditions of technology have had a significant impact on collaborative practices. Indeed, both Cooper's and Faigley's practices can be read as responses to the sudden new freedom students appropriated when their collaborative interactions were freed from spoken interaction, the classroom site at which teacher authority was ingrained in them from a hundred-year history of teacher control. The quick dance of keyboard response drives discourse more immediately than the spoken word. Its relative anonymity and simultaneity, in my experience, sometimes morphs a shy, obedient student into an outlaw subject. For a while, nonetheless, the readers and writers of the journal *Computers and Writing*—much like early face-to-face collaboration enthusiasts—saw in electronic collaboration a free space for egalitarian interaction. This is the context in which Faigley voiced his initial surprise and concern.

My fascination with physical, material contexts for pedagogical discussions and hands-on practices started in 1980 in the contrast

between the Brooklyn College Summer Institute and my home institution, Alabama State. The institute fellows sat in a classroom high up in the CUNY Graduate School on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street (the pre-Giuliani pornographic version) doing collaborative tasks in the mornings and relating them to group dynamics and philosophy in the afternoons. My home context was a vibrant but overwhelmed HBCU that had sent me to New York soon after requiring tutoring for all of its twelve hundred first-year students in a writing lab that I had been hired to create without any funding for tutors. Both situations had their origin in the Civil Rights Movement, but the needs, the culture, and the material conditions were in striking contrast.

#### COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AS A SERIES OF PARALLEL INNOVATIONS

In addition to my interest in situated history, my second reason for pursuing a historical approach to this book is that many forms of collaborative practice don't talk to one another, and indeed don't necessarily know one another exist, and this happens synchronically as well as diachronically. Part of this is the nature of academic publishing in the discipline. In English studies, and thus in composition, practices and theories don't necessarily build on what came before, but may react against it and look toward innovation. This is particularly true for collaborative learning, which has been intermittently lost and found, rather than built upon, over the course of the twentieth century. There is much scholarship on collaborative practices in the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, but very little in the 1940s and 1950s. When collaborative learning is mentioned in the 1950s, it is without reference to or knowledge of the earlier practices, but rather as an epiphany. Collaborative pedagogies emerge in the scholarship again in the late 1960s and 1970s and come to flower in the 1980s. But in the 1990s, when teachers begin struggling with the pedagogical implications of computer classrooms, they treat issues of student collaboration and teacher authority as if they're brand-new problems, and they renew the cyclical process of reinventing the wheel. This has also happened in wiki scholarship.



COLLABORATIVE LEARNING  
AND PHILOSOPHICAL PRAGMATISM

The third reason for a historical approach is that collaborative learning is historically aligned with American pragmatism, which guided John Dewey's influence on education throughout the twentieth century. Pragmatism remains the best guide to collaborative practice because of Dewey's extensive and unsurpassed work on the relationship between practice and theory in educational settings. It grounds, rather than limits, collaborative practice, and it offers a way to talk about all its varieties and their different situations. Issues that chronically concern teachers can be productively viewed in the context of the following four pragmatist principles. The first is that theory and practice must be connected, that they entail and reinforce each other. The second is that knowledge is fundamentally social and that collaborative interpretation is authoritative. One important premise of this second principle is that the self is a social product, or perhaps more accurately process. The third principle is that the most important, indeed crucial, component of education is growth in critical thinking. Closely related to the third principle is the fourth, that democracy and education require active social participation. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey argues for education as a way to democratically reconstruct society, to prepare citizens for participation (20–22).

Pragmatist principles provide several suggestive leads regarding the most important avenues of investigation on this topic. These foci of attention include (1) power/authority issues, (2) social relations, and (3) conceptions of knowledge. These show up in teachers' definitions of knowledge and who has access to it; authority in the classroom and who has it; definitions of the self or subject; design of tasks, including structuring relationships among students; the nature of the relationship between individual freedom and social responsibility; the theme of democracy; the link between collaborative learning and social/political currents; the context of collaborative learning in the institution in which it is practiced; and the effectiveness of collaborative learning in meeting academic goals. Regardless of the variety of situations and practices, however,

there are a few conditions generally in place when collaborative learning is successful. These include well-designed tasks, the freedom for students to complete the work collectively, and a method for holding students accountable.

Chapter 2 addresses collaborative practices that began in the early twentieth century progressive movement in education spurred by John Dewey's project to reform society by revising educational practice. Depression-era 1930s collaborative practices most closely approximated Dewey's intentions to provide education for participatory democracy. And then with the rise of general education, World War II, and the advent of the Cold War, the few collaborative pedagogies in the literature were based either on the group-dynamics research at the intersection of psychology and education or on the labor-saving, antiprogressive pedagogies that anticipated the effect of the baby boom on college enrollments. Although the 1930s show the most successful collaborative pedagogies in the early twentieth century, a comparison with the 1950s shows the significant difference between collaborative learning as inspired by Dewey and collaborative learning as a rejection of Dewey.

In Chapter 3 I argue that although Dewey and collaborative methods had lost popularity in a previous era of conformity, they blossomed again because of the protest movements that helped jumpstart the area of rhetoric and composition. A consequence of civil rights protest was the sudden implementation of open admissions in New York in 1970, which led to peer tutoring as one of many creative ideas to foster democracy systemically and in the classroom. As people realized the importance of democratic practices of citizenship, students gained some control over their education, and teachers developed methods to structure student participation. Using a historical and ideological framework, I examine the prominent methods such as peer tutoring, antiestablishment pedagogy (including the Happening), and the rise of writing-support groups.

Chapter 4 I devote to Peter Elbow, Kenneth Bruffee, Ira Shor, and antiracist pedagogy. Although student group work would likely have continued into the late twentieth century in some form, Elbow and Bruffee—both influenced by Dewey—are largely respon-

sible for the way we think about and practice collaborative learning today. Their groundbreaking work came directly out of the material conditions of the 1960s. Their work not only made a large impact on the development of the field, but that influence continues. Without them, collaborative pedagogy might not have been as powerful a component of everyday writing instruction as it is today. Shor's pedagogy fulfilled Dewey's radical principles, because it grew from his focus on working-class pedagogy, which is designed to make students aware of economic injustice. I conclude Chapter 4 with a brief section on race and racism, partly to point out what's missing from the mainstream collaborative work.

Chapter 5 begins with the Marxian feminist work of Nancy Schniedewind and Carolyn Shrewsbury in the 1980s and moves to twenty-first-century feminist pedagogies that shift the collective power from "community" to "alliance." Schniedewind and Shrewsbury embody Dewey's project of influencing participatory democracy through education with detailed attention to practice designed to prepare students to bring feminist action to their political lives and workplaces when they graduate. Amie Macdonald and Susan Sánchez-Casals's *Twenty-First-Century Feminist Classrooms: Pedagogies of Identity and Difference* grapples with democracy-promoting practices in an environment of incommensurable differences, revealing the influence of pragmatist philosophy working in an environment of the shifting diversity of student populations and transnational concerns. The collaborative practices described in Chapter 5, along with the work of Shor and scholars on race, attempt to empower students collectively to become aware of, and potentially to do something about, inequities in class, race, and gender. I argue that the feminist collaborative pedagogies of Schniedewind and *Twenty-First-Century Feminist Classrooms* offer an extension of Dewey's vision and a response to the changing demographics and political needs of the twenty-first century.

Bruffee's work started in the writing center and continues in the alliances formed with European writing programs in the International Writing Center Association. His writing center in Brooklyn

fostered his influential version of collaborative learning, and his Brooklyn College Summer Institute served as a seedbed for writing center directors nationally. One of those directors, Harvey Kail, has been influential in his work with teachers in emerging post-Wall democracies. The International Writing Centers Association is at the forefront of transnational work on pedagogy in the field of rhetoric and composition. At the same time, technological change is revolutionizing the way we write as well as what counts as writing. Writing centers are struggling with redefining their practices with new technological challenges and possibilities.

Participatory democracy has been part of the discourse of computer-mediated instruction from the introduction of computers into the classroom in the late twentieth century to the current blossoming of the wiki. In Chapter 7, I argue that Bruffee's collaborative learning theory was an integral part of the early networked classrooms at the University of Texas, which influenced the development of electronic collaboration. Lester Faigley and the group of graduate students who were trained in that program published prolifically, producing significant advances in the field as a result of those experiences. Additionally, pragmatist collaborative theory forms much of the early wiki scholarship. Both strands—networked classrooms and the wiki—have a pragmatist lineage and a familiarity with the cracks in network egalitarianism.

#### A NOTE ON METHOD

My documentation and analysis of collaborative pedagogy in Chapters 2 and 3 is based primarily on an examination of articles in three major English journals that historically have devoted substantial space to the topic of composition. The journals and years examined are *English Journal* (1912–38), *College English* (1939–86), and *College Composition and Communication* (1950–86).<sup>3</sup> In Chapters 4 and 5 I expanded my source list as the field has expanded and scattered to some extent. I have made use of search databases and delved into other journals such as *Computers and Composition*, *Radical Teacher*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and various education journals.

I have read these texts on two levels. First, I have read them as information about what was being published, what the discourse of the community was in terms of progressive pedagogy. Second, I have read these texts hermeneutically through the lenses of various social theories, theories of identities, epistemologies, and ideologies. Finally, I have privileged those discourses that are drawn upon in the field of composition studies, and I have chosen to focus on the dominant threads in the field at a particular moment, rather than the minority voices. Suffice it to say that progressive pedagogy is, more often than not, a minority voice itself.

Mara Holt's *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History* provides a grounded history of collaboration as a pedagogical tactic. Tracing this tactic through different decades, Holt not only establishes the presence of collaboration as an important cultural practice but also unpacks the theoretical assumptions undergirding its use. This book will be of value to rhetoric and composition scholars interested in the histories, theories, and practices of collaboration; it will also be of interest to those who employ collaboration within other academic disciplines and within sites beyond the academy.

—Krista Ratcliffe, Arizona State University

Collaborative learning is not only a standard part of writing pedagogy, but it is also a part of contemporary culture. *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History* examines the rich historical and political contexts of collaborative learning, starting with John Dewey's impact on progressive education in the early twentieth century. In the 1930s, for instance, collaborative practices flourished. In the 1950s, they operated in stealth, within an ideology suspicious of collaboration. Collaborative pedagogies blossomed in the protests of the 1960s and continued into the 1980s with the social turn in composition theory. Twenty-first-century collaborative practices influenced by pragmatism are found in writing centers, feminist pedagogies, and computer-mediated instruction. Mara Holt argues that as composition changes with the influence of ecological and posthuman theories, there is evidence of a significant pragmatist commitment to evaluating theory by its consequences.

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ISBN 978-0-8141-0730-0



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