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## When the Writing Classroom Is a Lab for Democracy

*Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History*,  
by Mara Holt. National Council of Teachers of English, 2018, 163 pages.

*Maira A. Connelly*

In this book, published in the CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric series, Mara Holt provides a historical overview of collaborative pedagogy in US writing classrooms. In fact, Holt argues that collaborative writing pedagogy reflects and is shaped by its historical context. The book defines collaborative learning broadly, as “a pedagogy that organizes students to work together in groups” (1). Although she focuses on collaborative writing, Holt casts a wide net to capture writing classroom practices that she sees as applications of John Dewey’s philosophy of American pragmatism. Holt argues that the American pragmatism espoused by Dewey is enacted in many collaborative writing practices, allowing those pedagogies to transform classrooms into training grounds for participatory democracy.

Holt, who is professor and director of composition at Ohio University, intentionally operates both as a historian and as a writing studies scholar. The book has roots in Holt’s (1988) history-based dissertation, “Collaborative Learning from 1911–1986,” submitted over thirty years ago, and in what the composition theorist James Berlin (1987) calls the significance of history in writing studies. Holt identifies a social-constructivist perspective in Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism that aligns with her argument that collab-

orative learning practices are shaped by their temporal context. Pragmatism, Holt says, offers general principles to ground education: 1) a focus on praxis; 2) knowledge creation as social, and collaboration as potentially “authoritative” (6); 3) the importance of critical thinking; and 4) the classroom as a place to model democracy and prepare students to participate in it. While Holt admits that Dewey probably never used the term *collaborative* (12), she implies that his principles are enacted in the most democratic collaborative learning practices.

After a chapter of introduction, the chapters of *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice* each provide case studies of collaborative learning in US writing classrooms at a transformational moment in US political or pedagogical history. In the introduction, Holt asserts her underlying thesis that a historical overview of collaborative writing pedagogy is needed to help new generations of writing teachers understand that they are part of a tradition of using collaborative writing in the classroom for democratic pedagogical purposes. Holt also argues that a historical perspective is necessary for educators to fully understand and assess collaborative writing practices. Chapters 2 and 3 outline collaborative learning in writing classrooms during the Progressive Era and the Cold War; chapter 4 considers the impacts of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. Chapters 5 through 7 consider moments of pedagogical shift—feminist theory, the creation of writing centers, and computer-mediated collaboration. The book concludes with a chapter in which Holt reflects on the future of collaborative learning as it intersects with three current movements: globalization, posthumanism, and Black Lives Matter.

In some ways, *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice* is a contemporary complement to Anne Ruggles Gere’s (1987) *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. Writing at a time when social-constructivism was coming into its own, Gere outlines a theory to explain how writing groups, the collaborative writing pedagogy that she focuses on, are evidence of writing as a socially constructed activity. Holt’s book, on the other hand, takes as accepted theory that writing is socially constructed and links that social interaction to Dewey’s pragmatism. As a result, Gere and Holt share the notion that collaborative writing is affected by historical context. Like Gere, Holt includes historical background for the pedagogies she discusses, but Gere begins her history in the colonial era, starting at an earlier moment in US history than Holt, who extends the time line of collaborative writing into the twenty-first century.

In addition to being a thesis-based history book, Holt’s *Collabora-*

*tive Learning as Democratic Practice* is part memoir. Holt weaves over forty years of personal experience as a writing studies scholar into her narrative. In the preface, Holt notes that her “first formal interaction with collaborative learning was at Kenneth Bruffee’s Brooklyn College Institute in Peer Tutor Training and Collaborative Learning in 1980” (ix). Through her affiliation with the Brooklyn Institute she met Peter Elbow, Stanley Fish, Carol Stanger, John Trimbur, Harvey Kail, and Peter Hawkes. She read texts by Lev Vygotsky, Clifford Geertz, Richard Rorty, Thomas Kuhn, John Dewey, and Paulo Freire. Her experiences at the Bruffee institute led Holt to pursue a PhD at the University of Texas at Austin, where she met James Berlin, who was a visiting professor from the University of Cincinnati. Holt’s dissertation director was Lester Faigley. Holt also acknowledges Victor Villanueva as a major influence. The array of scholars that Holt was taught by, wrote with, and thought with shows the depth of her connection to the foundation of the field. Her connection and experience in the field lends credibility both to her authority to survey the history of collaborative learning within the field and to select case studies not just with an eye to proving her point, but because they were some of the most important developments of collaborative learning in the field at that moment.

Sometimes, however, these personal details can distract from her argument; they add names and dates to case studies already crowded with such information. Some personal details may also distance Holt from readers when she recalls memories in a way that requires insider knowledge. For example, she references the iteration of the “CUNY Graduate School on 42nd Street,” which she attended as the “pre-Giuliani pornographic version,” which assumes knowledge of both the pre- and post-Giuliani versions of the building (5). The text also includes other unnecessary details. For example, Holt notes that 1930s progressivism affected how first-year writing programs were administered; that’s interesting history about first-year writing, but it says little about collaborative learning.

Overall, Holt effectively argues that collaborative learning in writing classrooms was shaped by its historical context. For example, during the labor movements and nascent socialism of the 1930s, pedagogies emerged that were based on collective, student-centered practices. Likewise, during the rise of Nazism and Fascism in World War II, when international collectivist movements were viewed as oppressive, the use of collaborative pedagogies declined. In addition, Holt demonstrates that collaborative writing practices decades apart can mimic each other, proving her point that a historical knowledge of collaborative writing might prevent reinvention. For example,

under the “Oregon Plan” of the 1950s, students critiqued each other’s writing before revising it to be turned in to the teacher. These examples of peer critique foreshadowed Bruffee’s peer revision of the 1970s, but Holt presents no causal link between the two pedagogies. In fact, Holt stresses that, while collaborative learning practices of one era may seem similar to those of another, their purposes will vary because their proponents are responding to different historical contexts and may be rejecting rather than amplifying democratic values. In the case above, Holt says that the Oregon Plan arose in a 1950s context in which students interacted with each other’s texts suspiciously, whereas in Bruffee’s context, students were encouraged to depend on classmates for educational gain.

In chapter 6, Holt argues that writing centers, mostly through peer tutoring programs, have been key to the development of collaborative writing pedagogy. She also outlines current historical situations to which writing centers have responded in recent decades, including increasing numbers of underprepared and international students, and the shift from alpha text to multimodal composition. In focusing on the internationalization of writing centers, Holt also notes that American English is no longer the assumed standard in US writing centers and that institutions around the world have created writing centers of their own.

In chapter 6 Holt traces the advent of computer-mediated collaboration in writing pedagogy by outlining how writing centers responded to the introduction of computers. In chapter 7 she extends her analysis of computer-mediated collaboration into the twenty-first century by acknowledging that much collaborative learning in writing classrooms is now mediated by technology. The tech-mediated case studies Holt considers in chapter 7 are the Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment at the University of Texas in the 1980s and the more recent use of wikis in writing instruction. While Holt asserts that such tech-mediated pedagogies are “solidly connected to Deweyan/Bruffeean theory and practice” (109), her analysis overlooks the ideology of the infrastructure that supports tech-mediated collaboration—the technology itself. As a result, it may be that an updated version of a Deweyan/Bruffeean framework is needed to analyze collaborative learning in an increasingly tech-mediated classroom. As Holt persuasively shows, collaborative pedagogies in writing classrooms often embody democratic ideals, so a framework based on egalitarian principles is appropriate for their analysis, but perhaps that framework needs to have the capacity to analyze the infrastructure mediating the collaboration as well as the collaboration itself. Such a theoretical framework might be technofeminism, a framework concerned

with issues of equity and access, but which also accounts for the ideology of the technology (Bates, Macarthy, and Warren-Riley 2018).

Some readers may balk at the notion of examining collaborative writing pedagogies through any sort of theoretical framework at all. Indeed, educators from many ideological persuasions have used collaborative writing to help students improve their writing and thinking. Rather, what Holt implies is that collaborative writing almost by definition embodies elements of Dewey's democratic goals for education and that to practice collaborative writing is to enact Deweyism. Holt makes a strong case that collaborative writing pedagogies reflect the full context of their historical moment, and that many of them reflect Dewey's ideas of social reform; however, her survey also demonstrates that in an age of technology-mediated classrooms, a framework that incorporates the perspectives of colleagues who study technology through a lens of equity may be a way to productively analyze collaborative writing pedagogies in the future.

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