

# BECOMING RHIZOME: DELEUZE AND GUATTARI'S RHIZOME AS A THEORY AND METHOD

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome as a multifaceted approach within educational research, suggesting it as an alternative way of mapping complexities, limiting structures and messiness which may not always be surfaced in more traditional theoretical frameworks, methods, and methodologies. Despite its potential to enrich higher education scholarship through non-linear and interconnected perspectives, adoption has been hindered by the perceptions of its dense philosophical language and ideas and the fear of 'doing it wrong'. By offering a primer on rhizome theory and its potential for methodological and theoretical frameworks, this chapter seeks to demystify it for scholars new to Deleuze and Guattari, acknowledging and building upon previous work in this field. A case study illustrates the rhizome's capacity to challenge traditional epistemological assumptions, presenting a more holistic and connected view of teaching with technologies in universities. The chapter concludes with a critical discussion on the limitations of rhizome theory and suggests opportunities for its broader application in higher education research. This exploration recommends rhizome's potential in reflecting the dynamic, complex nature of educational scholarship and practices.*

**Keywords:** Rhizome; Deleuze; Guattari; rhizoanalysis; philosophy

**Introduction.** Deleuze and Guattari (1988) propose the rhizome as a concept to understand the world which challenges traditional linear and hierarchical modes of thought. It has been put to work in education research in the decades since they wrote and lectured together about this multiplicitous and frequently dense philosophy. Yet, it is often still viewed as controversial (Fenwick et al., 2011a) and indeed with fear of not doing it 'right' (Strom, 2017), so calls for rhizome-infused

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research have mostly not resulted in more widespread uptake. Some well-intentioned work promoting the rhizome may have backfired in its purpose by reproducing elitist and inaccessible language found in the original works by Deleuze and Guattari. Undoubtedly, there is a balance to be struck between accessibility, on the one hand, and the rich complexity to be found in the rhizome, on the other hand. This chapter offers the reader multiple routes into the rhizome (as theory, philosophy, and method), pointing the curious scholar towards its affordances of alternative approaches to conventional methods, methodologies and theoretical frameworks, while also acknowledging issues and limitations.

While perhaps daunting for those new to Deleuze and Guattari's work, and possibly oversimplified for those well-versed in their work, the chapter starts with a modest primer in rhizome theory, followed by an overview of where it might sit as a theoretical framework and method in higher education research. The chapter continues with an appraisal of the debates about rhizome's potential use within educational research and the epistemological considerations. A case study follows which maps how rhizome theory infected and re-shaped a research project and brought a critical eye to its philosophical underpinnings. Briefly, it will discuss: (a) how rhizome probed traditional epistemological and ontological assumptions behind qualitative educational research methods; (b) how rhizome theory and methods allowed for a more comprehensive, less structured picture of teaching practice to be viewed and analysed, and (c) rhizome as a way of understanding the research process itself, especially in contrast to the static nature of how research is represented in text.

The chapter will conclude with a critical discussion, including limitations of the rhizome, and recommendations for how higher education scholarship could benefit from its wider use ~~of it~~.

## A RHIZOME PRIMER

Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome can be described and applied in multiple ways, but one starting position is to see it as a theory; that is as a framework or model for understanding knowledge, culture, society and various forms of organisation to varying degrees of abstraction. Within that understanding, the rhizome is imbued with a philosophical position which challenges traditional Western thought. As such, the rhizome has been called a philosophy (or more accurately, *part* of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy), a theory, a conceptual framework and a method. In calling it 'rhizome theory' here, I do not wish to conflate the purpose of each of these important aspects of scholarship, but rather to try to capture the multiple levels – from the highly abstract to the applied – of scholarship where rhizome can be put to work.

Taking inspiration from the botanical rootstalk, this element of Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) philosophy seeks out and celebrates organic and experimental growth which can, and does, connect with anything. At every turn, the rhizome challenges any assumptions that there is a centre, from which everything else derives, or that binaries are the only natural order. Instead, the rhizome has no

centre, adapts to its context, never stays still nor reaches its 'potential'. As with a map, it can be entered and exited at any point. The rhizome is juxtaposed with the idea of the *tree*. This *arborescence*, as they term it, is seen as the limiting structure behind traditional Western thought, which is characterised by hierarchical growth from a central root or trunk, reproduction through binary division to create branches and is only capable of tracing a delimited, prescribed journey. As such, rhizome is a challenge to individualistic, patriarchal and colonising thought.

Their work, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), is recognised as the volume in which they refine and provide most examples of how rhizome may manifest. However, it is also a dense, erudite and, at times inaccessible text (Harris, 2016). Taking St Pierre's counsel on how to read their work may help:

But if we keep reading, the concepts begin to pile up and wash over us, producing a jamming effect that infiltrates and destroys the being we were told was real so we might be ready for another image of thought. That is the lure of their work, their invitation - thinking differently. Being different. St. Pierre (2016, p. 1,082)

Helpfully, they enumerate six principles of the rhizome in their first chapter, itself a seemingly 'un-rhizomatic' thing to do (see Strom, 2017), but typical of their movement in and out of rhizomatic forms:

1. and 2. *Principles of connection and heterogeneity*: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 7). The nature of the rhizome means that as it grows, it endlessly makes connections to itself and to other entities which are different from itself.
3. *The Principle of multiplicity*: A multiplicity cannot be reduced or divided into a single unit. Therefore, the positions of subjectivity or objectivity are incompatible with being rhizomatic:

It is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, "multiplicity", that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world. Multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are. There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject. (p. 8)

4. *The Principle of asignifying rupture*: 'A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines' (p. 9). Unlike the *tree*, the rhizome can grow successfully from these breakages. However, the rhizome is in constant productive dialogue with the *tree*; indeed, the rhizome can contain *arborescent* properties:

Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome. (p. 8)

This endless connectedness makes dualist or binary thinking impossible:

These lines always tie back to one another. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad". (p. 8)

5. and 6. *The Principles of cartography and decalcomania*: ‘a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is a stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure’ (p. 12). The logic of the *tree* is a sequence of growth along a pre-determined path with a definite endpoint. The rhizome does not follow such a path but forges its own pathway:

What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real[...] The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation[...] Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways[...] The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged “competence”. (pp. 12–13)

Deleuze and Guattari employ many other images, stories and terminology from an eclectic range of literature, art and history to portray the rhizome in different contexts. Like the rhizome itself, there are links out to many of their other concepts contained in their other writings. The following is a selection of a few which may offer the researcher a ‘way in’ to the rhizome, but it is by no means comprehensive of all their works.

A rhizomatic conception of unbounded fluid space, *smooth space*, is made up ‘of intensities constructed through a proliferation of connections’ (Roy, 2003, p. 73). *Smooth* space allows unfettered movement from one point to another where movement itself is more important than the arrival. *Becoming* is such movement, simultaneously *detrterritorialising* (becoming rhizome) and *reterritorialising* (becoming *arborescent* or tree-like). Deleuze and Guattari present non-urban sites, like the sea or a field as smooth space:

A field, a heterogeneous smooth space, is wedded to a very particular type of multiplicity: nonmetric, acentered, rhizomatic multiplicities that occupy space without “counting” it and can “be explored only by legwork”. (1988, p. 371)

*Striated space*, on the other hand, is structured and hierarchical, where movement is regulated and defined by arrival. In contrast to *smooth* space, Deleuze and Guattari use urban imagery: ‘sedentary space is *striated*, by walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures’ (p. 381). *Smooth* and *striated* spaces are not separate physical locations, but forces which are acting and interacting within spaces. Therefore, *smooth* space can be *reterritorialised* into *striated* space and vice versa.

*Smooth* space is seen as the habitat of the *nomad*, a figure used frequently in *A Thousand Plateaus* to stand for pure rhizomatic *becoming*. The *nomad*, who is self-sufficient, sits outside ordered society and operates organically and efficiently, regardless of boundaries or territories. The *nomad* forges their own pathways experimentally. In contrast to the *nomad* is the *Roman Empire* and moving between the two is the *barbarian*:

On one side, we have the rigid segmentarity of the Roman Empire, with its center of resonance and periphery, its State, its *pax romana*, its geometry, its camps, its *limes* (boundary lines). Then, on the horizon, there is an entirely different kind of line, the line of the nomads who come

in off the steppes, venture a fluid and active escape, sow deterritorialization everywhere, launch flows whose quanta heat up and are swept along by a Stateless war machine. The migrant barbarians are indeed between the two: they come and go, cross and recross frontiers, pillage and ransom, but also integrate themselves and reterritorialize. At times they will subside into the empire, assigning themselves a segment of it, becoming mercenaries or confederates, settling down, occupying land or carving out their own State (the wise Visigoths). At other times, they will go over to the nomads, allying with them, becoming indiscernible (the brilliant Ostrogoths). (pp. 222–223)

Thus, the *Roman Empire* is a regulating force, concerned with boundaries, territories, responsibility, and hierarchy. The *barbarian* plunders the formal system when useful to them, exploits it, even attacks it, then assimilates into it as it suits them, or, alternatively, reintegrates into nomadic life. As with the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari do not set these conceptualisations in opposition – like the rhizome is not *against* the *arborescent* tree – but in a sort of uneasy entanglement, with movement between free and *smooth* spaces into bound *striated* space not only possible, but necessary.

### **‘THINKING DIFFERENTLY’ IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH**

Informed as it is by many other disciplines, higher educational research has been viewed as fragmented in approaches (Macfarlane, 2012), though representation of theories has been shown to be improving in a slowly maturing field (Hamann & Kosmützky, 2021; Macfarlane, 2022; Tight, 2019, 2023). Research in this area tends to operate within silos, sometimes seemingly being conducted without the knowledge of alternative methods and conceptions of research (Tight, 2019) or even what ontological and epistemological stances accompany proscribed methods (St. Pierre, 2016). Understandably, transdisciplinarity informs much higher education research, with researchers moving into the field from elsewhere and bringing with them the philosophies and methodologies of their home disciplines (Tight, 2014). Publications such as this book series have made strides in assembling potential approaches and shedding light on the rich possibilities open to researchers. Yet the broader swathe of higher education research published year on year continues to be dominated by a narrow range of methods, rare use of theoretical frameworks (Tight, 2020) and a seeming reluctance to engage with theory (Kinchin & Gravett, 2022). This is not to say the methods, particularly quantitative ones, are not appropriate for exploring certain research questions. However, the acknowledged ‘messiness’ of education practices (Jones, 2011) can often be more fully explored within looser, more open paradigms, and the rhizome has been previously proposed as just such a means to ‘open up’ scholarly inquiry (McKay et al., 2014).

The rhizome can serve as a counterpoint to some of the methodological strictures which come with mimicking positivist claims for truth (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008) or as Oliver puts it, the misapplication of the scientific method (2016). This situates the rhizome as a method within post-structural (Lather, 1993) and post-qualitative (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013) spaces which require researchers

to 'operate within and against tradition' (p. 629). Within higher education, many educational and pedagogical theories and methods are rooted in linear and hierarchical models which simplify the complexity of educational phenomena, leading to reductive understandings of learning and teaching. The rhizome offers the researcher principles to guide how to conduct inquiries, organise information, and understand relationships in a manner that reflects the non-linear, interconnected and multiplicitous nature of reality. Rhizomatic methods may, on the surface, look similar to other methods but are undertaken with the purpose of opening up nuanced and holistic understandings which acknowledge the complexity and multiplicity of pathways through educational fields of inquiry, and are aligned with epistemological and ontological positions coherent with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy.

As a theoretical framework, the rhizome can provide a context which allows for the flow of ideas across different areas, including disciplinary boundaries, which could overcome the lack of intradisciplinary communication and insights. With its emphasis on decentring dominant hierarchies and structures, the rhizome can be put to work alongside critical theories which challenge and seek change in existing practices and knowledge in higher education, for example decolonising work, student co-construction of the curriculum, and critical pedagogies. The interplay of process-bound activities and informal agents within higher education can be reflected within the rhizome's *striated* and *smooth* spaces; formal structures and informal practices can be acknowledged and recognised as tree-like and rhizome-like respectively. Moving understanding beyond cause and effect, rhizome's emphasis on interconnectedness allows for the complex interplay of various factors, some of which may be informal and previously unacknowledged or invisible. It can also account for a holistic understanding of education, especially learning which happens informally or outwith quantifiable spaces with metricised outputs. Learning, and indeed teaching, can occur in spaces which are not classrooms and between actors who may not hold roles formally ascribed to 'learner' or 'teacher'.

While rhizome theory can provide an alternative lens, not in opposition to, but in juxtaposition to other more established approaches to researching higher education, treading this balance is not straightforward nor without issues, as will be discussed later. However, taking Deleuze and Guattari's own recommendation to 'plug-in' to see 'what works', thinking and analysis can pursue exploratory lines. Mazzei and Jackson's frame this methodological approach so that "theory and data 'constitute one another and in doing so resist (over) simplification' (2012 quoted in Nelson, 2017, p. 186); in other words, the data collected in advance theoretical understanding, and vice versa, with mutual enrichment. With thoughtful use, rhizome theory may provide an approach which is reflective of the complex, dynamic and interconnected nature of scholarship in higher education.

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## THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RHIZOME

Like the subterranean weed that it is, rhizome theory and its permutations have no beginning and no end in how they can infiltrate scholarly work. In line with

Hamann and Kosmützky's proposal of 'theory work' as a craft which needs to be illuminated (2021), the rhizome may be 'a small machine' which is 'plugged in' to 'think differently' in a discrete area, or *lines of flight* connecting points of difference with each other, or rhizomatic and *nomadic* perspectives on research itself (Brown & Leigh, 2018). As a research philosophy in higher education, the rhizome can be put to work as an epistemology which, for example, challenges hierarchical and Western understandings of knowledge. It chimes with Haraway's 'antagonistic dualisms' (2007) and post-humanist thought which counter the valorising of the individual and subjective, and Platonic binaries and dualisms which perpetuate patriarchal and colonial views of the world. As such, to attempt to insert it into Burrell and Morgan's somewhat *arborescent* categorisation of paradigms (1994), the rhizome may sit within both social theory paradigms of regulation or radical change, i.e. it can be put to work to map the status quo of 'what is' or it can challenge and activate towards emancipatory practices.

Rhizomatic understandings of the research process itself can provide the educational researcher with forms for developing research questions which do not assume dichotomies or orderly underlying structures. The field of higher education can therefore be viewed as an *assemblage* (another word which manifests rhizome) of *smooth* and *striated* spaces, constantly *becoming*, as learners, academics and administrators move through and across boundaries. Data can be understood as *multiplicities*, with no unifying or essentialist principle to be interpreted through an objective eye of the researcher. Indeed, differences within data are to be welcomed and connected to one another. The choice for the researcher is how far to allow rhizomatic approaches to *detritorialise* research conventions, and when to stay within, or return (*reterritorialise*) to, the familiar ground of *striated* tree-like spaces underpinned by research traditions. Reading a map can take experience and skill, so there is an argument to say that going 'full rhizome' risks alienating audiences which are less familiar with Deleuze and Guattari's work and terminology. For the higher education researcher, moving knowingly between research structures and *lines of flight*, while observing philosophical and methodological coherence may prove challenging.

Of the practical applications of rhizome, rhizomatic analysis or 'rhizoanalysis' can be found in higher education research (Honan & Sellers, 2006; McKay et al., 2014; Sellers, 2015; Strom & Martin, 2013). This takes Deleuze and Guattari's adage that 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be' (1988, p. 7) and implements it as data analysis. However, detailed accounts in the literature of what this looks like in practice are few and most argue that formulating protocols and processes for rhizoanalysis is itself impossible (Honan & Sellers, 2006). Indeed, Lather states, 'This inquiry cannot be tidily described in textbooks or handbooks. There is no methodological instrumentality to be unproblematically learnt. In this methodology-to-come, we begin to do it differently wherever we are in our projects' (2013, p. 635). Cumming (2015) recognises the difficulties of rhizoanalysis when there is a lack of models which can be followed, instead outlining her own reflexive examples to fill in the gaps. Offering transparency in lieu of procedures is a common approach (Honan & Sellers, 2006; McKay et al., 2014; Sellers, 2015; Strom & Martin, 2013). The case



study within this chapter is offered in a similar vein, as a ‘light touch’ rhizoanalysis to elucidate rather than mandate.

## A WORD ON VOCABULARY

Deleuze and Guattari’s works provide a vocabulary palette which affords the scholar opportunities to express and interrogate their thinking through and even against the rhizome. This jargon can be challenging for both writer and reader (therefore the key terms which may cause the reader to pause have been italicised in this chapter). In their original writings in French, they co-opt existing terms and spin them into an adjacent meaning. This can be further complicated through translation from the original French, where approximations add another layer of obscurity. There are no shortcuts through this difficulty other than following St Pierre’s advice to let it wash over us. We can also make use of multiple sources to connect multiple points of connection to aid understanding and the judicious use of works such as the *Deleuze Dictionary* (Parr, 2010) even though some may argue its existence is ‘not very Deleuzian’! Questioning and reflecting on academic conventions is no bad thing, so even if a choice is made ultimately to not go ‘full rhizome’ in order to make work more within reach of an early career researcher (and their PhD examiners) and accessible to a wider audience, the rhizome can be broken off and left to sit dormant within work, laying a seed of an idea which may later sprout for the reader. This is not to say that rhizome-informed terminology can be liberally sprinkled through a work to make it ‘rhizomatic’, but I maintain that readers and researchers/writers are also rhizome and should be seen as constantly in motion through ideas and positionalities.

It is none-the-less challenging for the scholar. For example, within a philosophical position aligned with rhizome theory, there is an understanding that all is continuation and there is nothing ‘new’ to be discovered, no interpretation to be made; within this context, the research convention of ‘findings’ does not stack up. The common label ‘Findings’ for a section of writing was rejected by Honan and Sellers (2006), Grellier (2013), and Strom and Martin (2013) for this very reason. Yet, there are also claims for rhizoanalysis that are represented in texts which unproblematically include sections called ‘findings’, such as work by Wohlwend and Handsfield (2012). Is this doing Deleuze ‘wrong’? There are numerous trip hazards when making claims for rhizomatic approaches. For example, Deleuze and Guattari rejected the idea of representation which separated words and their meanings as observed by St. Pierre (2016), who makes a robust argument against qualitative methods which make claims for representation or lack of understanding of the ‘transcendental empiricism’ (p. 1,081) of employing the rhizome. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari pathologise the quest for meaning as ‘interpretosis’. Once the rhizomatic thread is pulled on the vocabulary conventions for describing what is done in educational research, the familiar methods of coding, interpretive inquiry, and thematic analysis and categorization



(that which we are ‘well trained in’ according to St. Pierre (2016)) all fall away, leaving researchers without methods nor a means to describe them.

I take the position that getting to grips with rhizome is like stepping through a never-ending series of thresholds concepts (Meyer & Land, 2005); every portal into Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas is irreversibly transformational, albeit sometimes painful. However, inhabiting a pure ‘rhizome’ state is impossible, as there is, and should always be, movement through liminality. Some of that movement is incremental, just as Deleuze and Guattari often start with dualisms to step beyond them into pluralistic understandings which *detrterritorialise* dualism. As Strom (2017) eloquently argues, there are times when being un-rhizomatic is very ‘Deleuzian’.

Finally, rhizome can extend into the presentation and communication of higher education research. Employing the principle of ‘no beginning and no end’, formats and structural conventions for writings such as articles, books and theses can be upended, with readers invited to enter at will through any point ‘as if a map’. Providing a key can offer the uninitiated reader a lifeline, but presenting scholarly work in this way can reconfigure the author–reader relationship, distributing agency back upon the reader, connecting them onwards to Deleuze and Guattari’s original works. It is not only structure which can be upended by a rhizomatic presentation but also modalities and genres like poetry (Charteris et al., 2019). Why must we represent research through text? The growing creative methods movement has tapped into such approaches, some explicitly to rhizome theory (de Vries et al., 2023; Honan & Sellers, 2006).

## A LITERATURE REVIEW ON RHIZOME THEORY IN EDUCATION

In recent years, examples of rhizoanalysis have been employed to examine the messy complexity of students’ experiences of transitions into university (Gravett, 2019; Gravett & Winstone, 2021; Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). Gravett (2019) suggests that, unlike thematic or discourse analysis, rhizomatic analysis does not aim to identify patterns nor collapse complexity, but instead allows a focus on the multiplicities of ‘hot spots’ of interest. Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) draw more heavily on the imagery and language of rhizome theory to reconceptualise transitions away from students fitting into pre-existing structures, but into assemblages which incorporate a holistic account of elements in space and time. In more recent work, Gravett and Winstone (2021) connect rhizome theorisations of student transitions with Meyer and Land’s threshold concepts (2005) to deepen understanding of their diverse and rich experiences through troublesome, liminal and *becoming* lenses.

Smith McGloin (2021) examines doctoral journeys through mapping students’ reflective diaries to ‘moorings, spaces and rhizomes’, combining Deleuze and Guattari’s work with Sheller and Urry’s (2006) mobilities paradigm although the article itself demonstrates little or no follow-through on using rhizome theory for analysis, discussion or conceptualisation, having only cited it as a paradigm that

was used. This is not uncommon, perhaps as multiple paradigms must compete for space within constricted word counts.

### **CASE STUDY: RHIZOME THEORY TO MAP THEORY AND PRACTICE IN TEACHING WITH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AT UNIVERSITIES**

The case study presented here concerns a qualitative research project on teaching with digital technologies in universities in Scotland and Ireland, specifically questioning the role of theory in these practices (Drumm, 2015, 2019). Rhizome theory was originally conceived as an overarching theoretical framework to conceptualise the complex relationships between lecturers, technologies, teaching practices, and theories of learning and technology. However, once inserted into the project, the rhizome grew, weed-like, infiltrating aspects of the research, presenting challenges and opportunities such as

- problematising dichotomies found in this field such as theory/practice, digital/human, online/in-person, novice/expert user, and good/bad uses of technology,
- crosscutting connections and questioning hierarchies between theories and other theories and practices with practices,
- enabling a philosophical position on the nature of what is ‘real’ and what is ‘knowable’ within the context of the field and placing it within the post-structuralist tradition,
- as means to map how lecturers create *lines of flight* from institutionally sanctioned teaching methods and technologies, into innovative or subversive digital education practices to benefit student learning,
- a method of assembling, analysing and connecting data, while recognising the multiplicities inherent in the data through a ‘light-touch’ rhizoanalysis, and
- questioning how to present the research, specifically the static, structured and linear conventions of text vs the fluid and dynamic nature of the topic.

While I am not claiming this research as ‘fully’ rhizomatic, the idea of presenting it as a case study here is to demonstrate how the project moved into, and out of, the rhizome. It is just this interaction between conventions (methods, terminology, and academic writing) and rhizome which could be seen as more rhizomatic than ‘pure’ rhizome, as in Strom’s (2017) words, ‘Although lines of flight are always fleeting and will be recaptured by the molar line, they shuffle normative systems, structures, or discourses and thus can reshape the status quo in unpredictable ways’ (p. 6). The result, in both process and product, was a balancing act between observing scholarly conventions to ensure validity, readability, and accessibility of the work, while maintaining rhizomatic congruence (itself something of an oxymoron when one considered it is a philosophy of difference!). As a text, the nature of academic writing about research is linear. It flows hierarchically, building an argument through successive elements and

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evidence. As a book, *A Thousand Plateaus* eschews a traditional linear framework and instructs the reader to enter the text at any point with multiple possibilities of reader engagement. Some publications employing rhizomatic methodologies for the analysis of teaching have re-framed the linear language of scholarship into less *arborescent* terms (Sellers & Gough, 2010; Strom & Martin, 2013). Braver scholars than I have claimed to have written a rhizomatic PhD thesis (Honan & Sellers, 2006; Sellers, 2015) complete with poetry and art. This was not such a piece of work.

Discourses about, for example, theory and practice are steeped in terminology which imply underlying, perhaps even determining structures: e.g. theory ‘underpinning practice’ as explored at the end of this chapter. As discussed earlier, research conventions, methods and terminology such as interviews, interpretation or presenting ‘findings’ can be problematic due to accompanying essentialist assumptions which contradict, not just rhizomatic thinking but also ontological and epistemological positions (St. Pierre, 2016). Yet there is a dearth of ways to communicate alternative approaches which readily trip off the tongue and do not require more explanation than they provide clarity. As a result, I find myself resorting to conventional terminology, but do so with circumspection. Nevertheless, the strength in a rhizomatic approach is not in its opposition to linear *arborescence*, but in its coexistence with it. The rhizome is dependent on the existence of the tree in order to define itself in juxtaposition to it.

Rather than talking to ourselves, I favour inviting in readers who may not be familiar with rhizome theory, whereas a more post-qualitative approach could, as Greene (2013) posits, result in loss of systematicity and clarity of communication. I acknowledge that not all *lines of flight* were pursued (this would be impossible), although I have, in my experimental use of rhizoanalysis described next, attempted to move ‘beyond current scripts and their conventional codifying and disciplining of inquiry’ (Lather, 2013, p. 638).

### *Rhizoanalysis*

However, while there may be different approaches to rhizoanalysis, the ontology remains the same: subject decentered, immanence, and difference. Masny (2016, p. 669)

The process of rhizoanalysis can be difficult to discern within scholarship, as its very nature eschews regimented processes. This makes for double the frustration for would-be rhizoanalysts who are used to conventional methods described in familiar terms. Though it is worth remembering Strom and Martin’s (2013) assertion that rhizoanalysis is unique to the researcher, so trustworthiness may be evidenced through transparency. The researcher themselves must embody Masny’s quote above and challenge themselves to think differently:

It is a challenge to think nomadically after decades and centuries of Cartesian logic and transcendent empiricism. A nomadic thinking is important to qualitative research because it is a game-changer: transforming life. Masny (2013, p. 345)

Within the case study presented here, rhizoanalysis was employed with a 'light touch'. To give the methodological background first; data were collected via semi-structured interviews with lecturers on their reported practices and beliefs on using digital technologies for teaching, with the understanding that no participant was a singular voice but a multiplicity of experiences. From the first interview onward, the process was planned as an iterative cycle of data collection and analysis, where each part would be revisited, and a growing understanding would allow for connections between the different parts of the process ~~to be made~~. Thus, the methods chosen, and the very structure of the research process itself, aligned with the theoretical approach of the research. In short, the research design's methods and process enabled a rhizomatic approach on my part as the researcher where 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 7). Following Silverman's (2006) recommendations for constant comparison for similarities and deviations, a rhizomatic view allowed me to generate an overview of the data which embraced multiplicities and differences, as much as similarities and patterns. As Cumming (2015) states, 'rhizoanalytic approaches offer opportunities to engage with, and disrupt the sometimes limiting strictures of qualitative research methodologies' (p. 138). In the same spirit, I employed rhizome theory, not so much in pure *nomadic* form, but as a *barbarian* would: weaving into and out of *striated* spaces and escaping as needed into *smooth* space.

Initially, analysis traced the conventional thematic coding of the data for emergent patterns, targeting sections which addressed the a priori research question and stratifying the data. In parallel to this approach, I engaged in 'data walking' (Strom & Martin, 2013) through the transcripts, embracing a lack of researcher 'distance' from the data, or any illusion that I could 'interpret' what I read as 'representing' anything other than what was said. As can be seen elsewhere in more conventionally reported terms (Drumm, 2019), these points of interest were collated and categorised within spreadsheets though not without the knowledge of irony of using true/false binaries in spreadsheets for rhizoanalysis! However, as multiple points on the flat plane of a spreadsheet, which were then mapped back on to every participant, it became possible to connect any point within the data directly to any other, no matter where it occurred. Instead of hierarchies of codes and themes, this flat plane could fold upon itself into a multidimensional form, with lines of flight breaking out in any direction and spaces where ~~this~~ no connectivity thrown into sharp relief. For example, through colour coding joins and disconnects on the spreadsheet, heterogeneous aspects could be connected such as

- not having a teaching qualification *joined* to teacher-centred descriptions of teaching,
- using a variety of teaching methods *connected* to rationales for personalised learning,
- not mentioning explicit theories of learning or pedagogical terms still *connected* to descriptions of teaching which were social constructivist, and
- lecturers found it easier to describe what 'shouldn't be done' with technology in education than ~~their~~ own practices.

Throughout this process of mapping points of connection and disconnection within the data, I employed a rhizomatic lens to view what the participants were saying, constantly asking whether rhizomatic understandings could be plugged in to illuminate the concepts, structures and spaces through which they were navigating their teaching with technologies. The technologies themselves were seen by lecturers as both *smooth* and *striated spaces*, with multiple efficiencies and ease of use contrasting with the embarrassment of facing a lecture theatre full of students when the technology (or the user) fails. This seemingly contradictory belief could be held by the same person, indicating multiplicities were at play. Some lecturers preferred to work like *nomads*, using their own devices, servers or accounts rather than use institutionally run technologies. Others put strict boundaries between their personal and professional use of technology, teaching only within the *Roman Empire* walled garden of university systems. A few acted as *barbarians*, selectively engaging and subverting the intended use of provisions for other means, such as co-opting computer labs for examinations without official sanction.

Some digital education practices reinscribed structured and hierarchical pedagogies, such as controlling means and access to online learning materials for students through bound spaces such as virtual learning environments where learners were offered little choice and could only follow the prescribed pathway. Those lecturers who demonstrated more pedagogically informed practices often used self-completion learning activities, like multiple choice questions which provide immediate and automatic feedback, and they appeared to be informed theoretically by disciplinary understandings of knowledge, particularly those in 'hard' disciplines where knowledge could be described as hierarchical, atomistic and ultimately *arborescent*. However, these student activities seemed to be most effective when blended or *connected* with other teaching methods, creating what could be described as a *line of flight* out of striated spaces. In contrast, lecturers who used technology to broadcast content to students provided means for students to connect in multiple ways to learning experiences, thereby accommodating student differences. For lecturers who used technologies in low stakes learning activities, these were playful experiments to test *lines of flight* to see where they would take them, which, if successful, would be reterritorialised into formal learning or assessment methods.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF RHIZOME THEORY

Rhizome theory has, by definition, no structure or formulaic procedures to follow, which can make it challenging to employ, particularly for novice researchers. As a method, rhizoanalysis does not have a canon of examples of what it looks like in practice. For researchers or readers conditioned to educational research being conducted under the conditions of validity, replicability, and generalisability, rhizomatic work could be potentially accused of lack of rigour as it appears not to be systematic nor objective. Da Silva Lopes et al. propose that validation is better evidenced through a minimisation of invalidity,

and that making decisions transparent through an iterative and interactive approach can tell a fuller story of a research project (2016). A further risk is that peer reviewers may be either unaware or prejudiced against rhizome theory, and this may prevent researchers from using it as a theoretical or methodological framework.

While the case study presented here demonstrates the layers and depths to which rhizome theory can be employed, that is not to say that rhizome theory is appropriate for every context or audience. The epistemological challenges of putting rhizome theory to work in educational research are not insignificant. While rhizome theory may be ‘plugged in’ as if a ‘little machine’, without an appreciation of its coherence – or incoherence – with the rest of the research’s ontological and epistemological propositions, there is a risk of contradiction and ultimately a reterritorialisation of rhizome into philosophical positions which negate the benefits of the rhizome. Most importantly, St. Pierre warns of importing rhizome terms into research without comprehending the ontological structures that come with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept (2016). St. Pierre argues that, for example, a method which centres the phenomenological voice is fundamentally incompatible with the post-humanist decentring of the human subject in rhizome theory, where there is no singular and no meaning to interpret.

There is also the question of whether it is possible to maintain rhizomatic congruence while also being accessible. Engaging with *A Thousand Plateaus* and the ideas can take time and effort and of course may not be to all readers’ tastes. There is a growing body of higher education scholarship using and, in the case of Strom (2017), debating rhizome theory, yet no assumptions can be made that the majority of readers will be familiar with it and the original works. Often limited word counts in publications mean authors have little space to give a fully rounded and nuanced explanation and background to complex theory, philosophy, and methodologies used (hence this chapter). What assumption, if any, can be made that readers are aware of, say, Deleuze and Guattari’s unique lexicon? The challenges of understanding their ideas start with their repurposing of existing words into nuanced new meanings, further compounded by refraction through translation from French into English.

As a culture, we are steeped in textual practices which seek out representation, but Deleuze and Guattari were emphatic in their denial of any hidden meaning; the rhizome, or any other term or story within their work, is not a metaphor (1988). Yet, many published works which lean on their work use the term ‘metaphor’ to explain the rhizome to their readers. The gatekeepers of ‘being Deleuzian’ so effectively described by Strom (2017) would mostly likely condemn these works as naïve, but there is an argument to say that to take a line of flight into *smooth, rhizomatic space*, one must begin in the middle of a *striated, arborescent* place; the researcher–author themselves is moving from point to point, taking their readership with them. We are all *becoming*.

Engaging with rhizome as theory and method is to step into a contested space, opening oneself to accusations ranging from naïveté, bastardisation and ignorance to over-intellectualism. A small flurry of Anglophone scholarly work employing rhizome in the decades following the translation of *A Thousand*

*Plateaus* into English, emerging rhizome-like within educational research in areas such as teacher training (Strom, 2015), thesis writing workshops (Jusslin & Hilli, 2023), virtual reality (Keskitalo, 2011), curriculum development (Sidebottom, 2021), sustainability in HE (Le Grange, 2011), and as previously discussed, student transitions (Gravett, 2019; Gravett & Winstone, 2021; Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). An interesting and accessible off-shoot was Cormier's proposition of rhizomatic learning, which framed a type of learning where there are no correct answers, no curriculum, and no pre-defined end point (2008) although he has since questioned it as an all-encompassing learning theory (Bali & Honeychurch, 2014). Rhizomatic learning was an antidote to the reduction of online learning to controlled, hierarchical and, for the most part, quite solitary experiences for the learner, as exemplified with the didacticism of extended massive open online courses (xMOOCs). The embodiment of rhizomatic learning were experimental online courses where 'The community is the curriculum' (Honeychurch et al., 2016). These brought a lighter interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas to a wider higher education audience although a rupture within those cohorts between those who wanted to engage with Deleuze and Guattari's writings and those who did not is a lesson in how theory within higher education contexts can prove divisive (Bell et al., 2016).

## CONCLUSION

In the decade since the development of these online communities, rhizome has subsided in higher education research, with the exception of continued lines of flight from the work of Strom (Strom, 2015, 2017; Strom, Haas, et al., 2018; Strom & Martin, 2013; Strom, Mills, et al., 2018) in particular and some more recent new generative shoots (Jusslin & Hilli, 2023; Sidebottom, 2021). Paradigm-shifting theoretical lenses such as posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019), agential realism and entanglement (Barad, 2007), post-qualitative approaches (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013), sociomaterialism (Fenwick et al., 2011b, 2012) and feminist pedagogies (Beetham et al., 2022) present equally exciting opportunities for research. In many respects, rhizome theory within higher education research has yet to reach a maturity of debate and critique, and this chapter is intended to contribute to, and provoke, such discussion. Indeed, how rhizome sits in alignment or misalignment with other philosophical positions and theories can be difficult to discern for the novice researcher and is an area crying out for contributions from experienced thinkers.

An informed use of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas is an opportunity to de-centre essentialist assumptions and open up opportunities for 'nomadic subjectivity that allows thought to move across conventional categories and disturb "settled" concepts, signs, and theories' (Gough, 2007, p. 282). This chapter has shown how the use of rhizome theory and a 'light touch' rhizoa-analysis can lead to profound and generative lines of flight within a research project. Higher education research is developing (Tight, 2019, 2020, 2023), and rhizome can challenge and expand our understanding of what can be known



within in this field and the methods we use to explore and question those boundaries. As methods and theories pass in and out of vogue and educational researchers cast about for the new, the rhizome has lain dormant, challenging the very idea of *newness* in a world in which all can only be seen as *becomings*.

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