

Rhizomatic pedagogy in higher education

A comparative analysis

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Abstract

Rhizomatic learning doesn't always align with formal higher education structures and processes perhaps because of its heavy emphasis on nonlinear and community-based approach. In this chapter, we discuss this tension based on our experiences using rhizomatic pedagogy in higher education and identify points for pedagogical praxis. We first provide a review of the literature describing rhizomatic learning with an emphasis on applications in open and networked learning. We then present and discuss two cases of rhizomatic learning in British and Turkish higher education institutions in the context of academic development and educational technology. The case studies demonstrate that rhizomatic learning in higher education should be considered in relation to the macro context of the institution and the disciplinary practice, the meso context of the classroom ecology, and the micro context of the individual learner. We particularly highlight the extent to which teachers may need to facilitate rhizomatic learning in formal higher education for inclusive participation. We also argue that the notion of an independent, or individual, nomadic learner enjoying educational freedom is an imaginary construct that needs to be critically analysed in rhizomatic pedagogy.

Keywords: community building, higher education, inclusion, learning subjectives, nomadic learning, non-hierarchical learning, rhizomatic learning, unstructured learning

Introduction

Rhizomatic learning, as a pedagogical approach and vision, draws from the post-structural philosophy of rhizomatic thinking (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In Deleuze and Guattari's work, rhizome is used as a metaphor to highlight nonlinear and horizontal connections, heterogeneity, and multiplicity in knowledge construction. The strong influence of rhizomatic philosophy in higher education is evidenced by the rapid emergence of educational research (note 1) exploring rhizomatic learning both as a theoretical lens and a topic of inquiry (e.g., Connell-Whitney, 2020; Costandius et al., 2020; Maioz-Basterretxea, 2015; Samson et al., 2022). This is perhaps because, as Bozkurt et al. (2016) argued, "rhizomatic thinking, and by extension rhizomatic learning, is a philosophy, a heutagogical approach, a critical approach, and a combination of all these" (p. 7). Similarly, Kang (2007) uses "rhizoactivity" as a heutagogical framework for describing lifelong learning in the age of postmodernism (p. 217) and a method and philosophy for critiquing traditional approaches in adult learning. In Kang's work, rhizoactivity is diverse in character or content, nonlinear, and relational (p. 207), because it reflects our experience in this world. Kang writes:

Rhizoactivity sprouts or props up at any place in any time of one's life to make connections to whatever is available. It is not a linear activity. It opens itself to any possibility. There is no beginning and ending. ... The image of a postmodern learner, who is a nonunitary being that has multiple subjectivities, cannot be singular. (p. 216)

The rhizomatic direction in learning, or the multi-directional aspect of it, that there cannot be clear beginnings and ends in the learning experience, is an important concept to understand in rhizomatic pedagogy. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain the rhizomatic direction by contrasting rhizomatic structures with arborescent structures:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, "and ... and ... and ..." This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be." Where are

you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions. Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero, seeking a beginning or a foundation-all imply a false conception of voyage and movement. (p. 25)

Rather, rhizomatic thinking proposes “another way of traveling and moving: proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). This concept should be considered in connection with the “nomadic” planes of thinking, or in the context of our discussion, of learning. Nomad space is “smooth or open ended” in comparison with “striated” or “gridded” space, as in striated spaces, movement is confined to “paths between fixed and identifiable points” (p. xi). For example, in traditional higher education, the starting point to an educational programme is typically the identification of learning outcomes, which are then validated and tested via assessment. In rhizomatic learning, however, because learning is viewed as a nonlinear, unstructured (Cormier, 2015), and constantly evolving process (Bissola et al., 2017; Phillips, 2017), the identification of intended learning outcomes and modular arrangement of content or standardized assessment are not always desirable or viable.

We would like to give some context to this discussion using a well-known application of rhizomatic learning in education in an informal context. Rhizomatic Learning: The Community is the Curriculum (Rhizo14) and Rhizomatic Learning: A Practical View (Rhizo15) were two massive open online courses (MOOCs) designed with a rhizomatic pedagogy and vision. Led by Dave Cormier (a prominent voice in rhizomatic learning), these courses demonstrate how rhizomatic pedagogy might work in practice. As both courses explored rhizomatic learning at a meta-level, these courses are also good resources to understand the philosophy of the approach and identify possible barriers or challenges. In both Rhizo14 and Rhizo15, “learning within communities and from communities” was a key principle, as curricula was not designed around predetermined educational content but instead around social connections. After an initial introduction, new topics emerged from the weekly discussions among active participants (Bozkurt, 2016; Mackness & Bell, 2015) (see Tables 9.1 and 9.2). There was no predefined content, learning objectives, or assessment. The course convenor encouraged participants to consider their *learning subjectives* instead; these were the learning goals identified by the learners themselves.

Table 9.1 Emerging topics addressed during Rhizo14 and Rhizo15

<i>Rhizo14</i>	<i>Rhizo15</i>
1. Cheating as Learning	1. Learning Subjectives – designing for when you don’t know where you’re going
2. Enforcing Independence	2. Learning is not a counting noun ... so what should we count?
3. Embracing Uncertainty	3. The myth of content
4. Is Books Making Us Stupid?	4. Can/should we get rid of the idea of “dave”? How do we teach rhizomatically? ¹
5. Community as Curriculum	5. Is community learning an invasive species?
6. Planned Obsolescence	6. Rhizomatic learning, a practical guide
7. The Lunatics are taking over the Asylum	
8. Demobbing Soldiers	
9. Why do We Need Lurkers?	
10. Creativity: The art of thriving in arid Environments	
11. Powerful thoughts	
12. 1/2 MOOC Missionaries	

¹ Note: “dave” refers to Dave Cormier, who was the course convenor in Rhizo14 and Rhizo15.

In these examples, rhizomatic learning is used to describe a model of learning that is networked and emergent (Cormier, 2008). In relation to this, Cormier (2008) notes,

in the rhizomatic model of learning, curriculum is not driven by predefined inputs from experts; it is constructed and negotiated in real time by the contributions of those engaged in the learning process. This community acts as the curriculum, spontaneously shaping, constructing, and reconstructing itself and the subject of its learning ...

These two rhizomatic MOOCs show how rhizomatic pedagogy can foster nonlinear and unstructured learning experiences with no clearly defined end points and predetermined outcomes. Going back to the notion of nomadic spaces, as rhizoactivity is relational and emergent, this also means that it is shaped by “emotion, intuition, spiritually, bodily feeling” (Kang, 2007, p. 217). Learners are not limited to following predefined trajectories of learning and being – knowledge “grow[s] and propagate[s] in a ‘nomadic’ fashion, the only restrictions to growth being those that exist in the surrounding habitat” (Sharples et al., 2012, p. 33). Bozkurt et al. (2016) use nomadic learning as a concept to highlight uncertainty and continuity in the learning process: referred to as nth learners, nomadic learners are motivated by intrinsic drives, identify their own goals, and choose their own paths in their learning journey.

We have described rhizomatic learning as a philosophical approach and a pedagogy of practice for adult education up to this point in the chapter. Most of the descriptions of the approach describe an ideal or a pedagogical vision, but as with any pedagogical approach, this isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. Studies show that rhizomatic learning can be complex and challenging for learners, as the approach requires learners to have a high degree of autonomy and self-regulation skills, as well as the confidence and motivation to be active in social networks (both online and in person). All of these are taught or learned skills, which means not all students will have the means to be successful in rhizomatic learning. In addition, the extent to which these skills are deemed desirable depends on the individual circumstances of the learner (e.g., why should I be motivated to learn this way?). Inclusion and sense of belonging are also shown to be problematic concepts in networked communities. Based on their research on Rhizo14 and Rhizo15, Mackness and Bell (2015) noted that it can be difficult for learners to establish meaningful connections in the learning community – the effectiveness of a decentralized and emergent course structure was questionable for some learners. In another study on Rhizo14, Bell et al. (2016), drawing from literature on community building and their own research on connectivist MOOCs, highlighted the need to provide “support for intergroup tolerance, trust, and respect” (p. 5). We shall come back to these findings in the discussion section of this chapter.

Reflective case studies

This section reports two reflective cases from Goldsmiths, University of London (UK) and Anadolu University (Turkey). In the first case, Suzan Koseoglu, the first author of this chapter, describes how rhizomatic learning is used as an overarching pedagogical framework in a postgraduate level programme at Goldsmiths. In the second case, Aras Bozkurt, the second author, describes how he incorporated rhizomatic learning in postgraduate programmes at Anadolu University in an effort to transcend the structured formal curriculum.

Reflections on rhizomatic learning at Goldsmiths, University of London by Suzan Koseoglu

Goldsmiths, University of London is a constituent college of the University of London in England, with a rich academic heritage centred on critical scholarship and creativity. Critical thinking and theory are embedded in the university's academic practice and, to some extent, institutional policies and outlook. For example, the college positions itself as “a creative powerhouse, a thoughtprovoking place” for both students and academic staff and includes equality, inclusion, and social justice as

central values to Goldsmiths's learning, teaching, and assessment strategy. This positioning, at times, sits at tension with the Goldsmiths community who seek decolonization of higher education and demand equality and equity for those who have been traditionally marginalized in higher education and in the broader society. A recent example for this would be Goldsmiths Occupation ([Guardian, 2019](#)), an activist-protest where students and staff demanded race equality in Goldsmiths's institutional policies and practice.

At the time of writing this chapter (Spring 2022), Goldsmiths was going through a major restructuring with plans to reduce all departmental budgets, cut the number of professional and academic teaching staff, overhaul some academic departments, and revise all departmental curricula to address a large deficit in the college budget. This massive restructuring of college services – of administration, teaching, and professional services – is called the Evolving Goldsmiths project or the recovery programme: it is hoped that with such interventions, Goldsmiths not only will survive, it will also be able to better compete with other institutions in an increasingly neoliberal economy, where students are often positioned as “customers” and educational institutions as “providers of service.” In response to the recovery programme, college staff have been taking strike action; strikes will have taken place for a total of 37 teaching days in the 2021/2022 academic year by the end of April (around a third of total teaching days in Autumn and Spring terms). It is within this difficult institutional context my reflections on rhizomatic learning should be understood.

Rhizomatic Learning has been used on Goldsmiths's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education programme (PG Cert) for a number of years to guide the curriculum, first implicitly arising from the idea that the practices of the Goldsmiths community could form the basis for professional development and, more recently, explicitly as a pedagogical framework along with experiential learning (hooks, 1994; Kolb, 1984) and critical self-reflection ([Brookfield, 1995](#)). PG Cert is a two-year Master's level programme designed to enhance the pedagogical practice of teaching staff at Goldsmiths. There are four modules in the programme: Module 1 is an introduction to some key learning theories and pressing issues in Higher Education (e.g., participants studied race equality, neuro-diversity, and inclusive teaching in the 2021/22 academic year). In Module 2, participants work on a case study related to an aspect of their teaching. Module 3 is a theoretical and practical study of technology enhanced learning. In Module 4, participants work independently on a pedagogical research project. During the early waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, the programme was delivered completely online. As of October 2021, a blended model was adopted with on-site and online study days, and asynchronous activities in the college's virtual learning environment (VLE).

Participant profile on the programme is diverse with early career and senior academic staff, professional staff with teaching responsibilities, and PhD students who work as associate lecturers at the college. As a result of this diversity, teaching staff enrol in the programme with different goals and expectations. Rhizomatic learning is a useful approach both for creating a curriculum that is of interest to programme participants (or colleagues) and also to show participants that we, the programme convenors, aim to build a learning community with diverse voices. In other words, it is both a philosophy we bring onto the programme and an intentional method for building a learning community. Some specific methods that have helped us bring rhizomatic learning to the programme are as follows.

An initial conversation on rhizomatic learning

We explain our collaborative and community-based approach to all participants on the first day of the programme and open it to discussion. A rhizome is a powerful metaphor for participants to see how relationships between students and teachers could be horizontal in structure, and the knowledge emerging from those relationships bi-directional, akin to Paulo [Freire's \(1970\)](#) notion of studentteachers and teacher-students. We discuss this further in the discussion section of this chapter.

Co-construction of the curriculum

We, then, explicitly and actively work on the co-construction of educational content and activities with programme participants, especially at the beginning of the programme when participants get familiar with the overall programme format. Although we have a set of broad themes to focus on in the programme (e.g., inclusive pedagogy or critical pedagogy) and curate readings and plan activities aligning with these themes, we also build flexibility and openness to the curriculum so that participants can diverge from these or put forward other study topics along with new resources and activities. One way we do this is by inviting participants to present or lead programme sessions about their work, research, or ideas. We seek contributions from the larger Goldsmiths community too and plan sessions with guest lecturers ahead of time. We also ask for contributions to the programme reading list. Participants are free to use any literature they find relevant to inform their coursework.

There are learning objectives specified for each module, however, these learning objectives are designed in a way to help participants bring their own experiences and interests into their learning. The actual learning outcomes are shaped by participants' backgrounds, motivations, along with what we study in a given module depending on what the community brings onto the module. In other words, the purpose of the learning objectives is to empower learners for meaningful, *subjective* learning outcomes.

Participant contributions often lead to unexpected directions in pedagogical debate and inquiry, which manifest itself in class discussions, shared resources, and also assessment and feedback. For example, a creative collaborative writing activity led by a colleague PG Cert participant on makerspaces and learning through play was received very positively by other participants. Few participants mentioned that they would experiment with this activity in their teaching. In another example, we observed how a participant's lecture on race equality in higher education ended with a heated debate on the meaning of free speech in higher education. Seeing the interest in this topic, we added resources on anti-racist pedagogy in our shared class resources – the lecturer who facilitated the session also suggested readings and resources on race equality and equity for the group. We then actively sought other members of the Goldsmiths community who could contribute to this important discussion and invited a lecturer with significant experience in anti-racist pedagogy in schools onto the next study day. We, both programme convenors and participants, continued to build on this theme in assessment (via coursework and feedback) and also in other modules.

Flexibility in what we learn and how we learn

Participants are encouraged to decide what to work on for the study days and how. We don't necessarily know what we will be studying on a module study day or in the VLE forums before the programme starts, as these are very much dictated by what the community decides to bring onto the PG Cert through the sharing of experience and pedagogic practice. We do provide a structure to work from (e.g., by inviting guest lecturers to the programme or by suggesting readings); however, we also recognize the fact that all participants on the programme have rich experiential knowledge through which educational theory and practice are understood and interpreted – for us bringing this diversity and richness in knowledge and practice onto the programme is more important than covering predefined “educational content.”

Table 9.2 Example for Postgraduate Certificate community contributions

10:00–10:30 Welcome; Designing community guidelines for participation (led by PG Cert Module 1 facilitators)

10:30–10:55 Chronicles of Neurodiversity: Sharing our difficult experiences as different thinkers (led by a PG Cert programme participant)

10:55–11:00 Break

11:00–12:00 Teaching into the void? The good, the bad, and the ugly in the (online) classroom (led by a member of staff at Goldsmiths)

12:00–12:10 Break

12:10–12:50 Teaching students from diverse backgrounds (led by a PG Cert programme participant)

12:50–13:00 Closing remarks and looking ahead

Here it is important to draw attention to how these strategies relate to the wider institutional context. PG Cert is not immune to the tensions or the realities of Goldsmiths (briefly described above). Coconstruction of the curriculum in our context not only means the co-construction of class resources and activities but also taking collective decisions on how to go about the educational process. These decisions can challenge wider institutional practices and policies. For example, when participants asked for online study days in Autumn 2020 when COVID-19 was still prevalent in the UK, we found ourselves in a difficult position as college policies and regulations did not allow online programme delivery in an effort to go back to “on-campus education”. On one hand, we agreed with participants and wanted to support those who wanted to have an option to study online, but, on the other hand, the college requirements prevented us from changing the educational mode without going through formal, and often lengthy and tedious, administrative processes. In the spring term, however, when the Omicron variant was spreading fast in the UK, we decided to switch to an online mode of delivery as we could not put ourselves or our participants at risk.

Another example would be how in Spring 2022 some participants protested having an online study day during strike action. Our initial reasoning was that going forward with the online session wouldn't mean crossing the picket line as all programme participants were staff members, not fee-paying students. We reflected on our decision to go forward with the study day and decided to cancel it to stand in solidarity with colleagues who had been fighting for their rights in a very difficult academic climate.

Reflections on rhizomatic learning at Anadolu University by Aras Bozkurt

Anadolu University is a state university delivering education in dual mode to both on- and offcampus students. With nearly 3 million enrolled students each academic year, the institution is referred to as a giga university (Bozkurt, 2019). A central mission of the university is to provide equity, equality, and social justice via open education in the Turkish Higher Education context (Bozkurt, 2019). In Turkey, The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) is responsible for the planning, governance, coordination, and supervision of higher educational processes (CoHE, 2022). All higher education curricula at Anadolu University accommodate the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and meet the requirements of the Bologna Process (European Commission, 2022). Such a structure mandates that all courses in the institution should be structured according to CoHE metrics, with predefined objectives and measurement through conventional assessment and evaluation processes.

In this tightly structured educational context, an experimental implementation was conducted during Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 terms in two separate postgraduate level courses: UZE605 Learning with Technology and UZE618 Trends in Open and Distance Learning. UZE605 covered topics such as

theories of educational technology, use of educational technology, and learning design for synchronous and asynchronous courses. UZE618 covered topics such as hard and soft technologies, trends in educational technology, e-learning, m-learning, and u-learning. Both courses were 14 weeklong. The first half of the courses focused on theoretical or conceptual discussions while the second half focused on applied knowledge. Due to pandemic requirements in 2020 and 2021, the courses were fully online and adopted distance education strategies. Accordingly, as the facilitator of the courses, Aras Bozkurt, I used rhizomatic pedagogy to transform some aspects of the course into a rhizomatic learning journey. In a way, I hacked the formal course curricula to give space to unstructured and nonlinear instances of learning. To do this, I benefited from the following strategies.

ALT-CV

Alternative Curriculum of Vitais (ALT-CV) was an orientation activity aimed to develop a sense of community among learners in the first week of their courses. Instead of creating traditional CVs, which typically include information on educational background, working experiences, skills, and competencies, learners were asked to share with others their favourite color, music, leisure time activities, etc. ALT-CV activity was designed to help learners liberate themselves from the expectations and requirements of traditional courses, from the dogmas of conventional learning processes, and to help learners bring their identities and backgrounds onto the programme. The main purpose of this activity was to humanize the learning experience and help build community. With this activity, I hoped students would see that they are not always expected to follow the status quo in higher education.

Thought-provoking prompts

In addition to many icebreaker and orientation activities in both courses, the first week was dedicated to a discussion forum question: “What is your purpose to take this course, and why are you here?” The purpose of this prompt question was to raise students’ awareness of their learning journey and consider their *learning subjectives*. With this activity and similar prompts, the expectation was that learners would develop critical thinking skills and begin exploring and identifying their own learning goals.

Liquid curriculum

During the first week of both courses, one discussion forum was dedicated to elicit topics that learners were personally interested in. These topics, then, were integrated into two discussion forums (in week 6 and week 12) and collectively inquired as part of the curricula. In addition to this activity, emergent topics were linked to relevant and corresponding areas in the structured curriculum. The idea and practice of the liquid curriculum helped learners shape the course content to some extent and facilitate the idea that the community was the curriculum.

“Truth is relative” as a driving motto

In each online asynchronous forum discussions and synchronous weekly meetings, learners were constantly reminded that the instructor, metaphorically, wasn’t seeking black or white but intended to explore grey areas. That is, each of the 14 modules was never meant to reach any predefined learning objectives identified by the instructor, but some learning subjectives that were unique to each learner. I constantly reminded learners that truth is a relative term and rather than seeking one specific answer, learners should pursue their own questions, demonstrate their own interpretations, and show their own perspectives. This was successful for encouraging learners to freely express themselves and think out of the box.

Wildcard sessions

Wildcard sessions were free spaces to give learners more agency and unleash their critical thinking. These were applied two times in each course. The purpose of these sessions was to allow learners to go beyond the boundaries of the structured course and express any emerging issues during the course. These sessions not only included academic discussions but also included discussions around social and socio-economic issues. This is not surprising considering that learning is a social process and we cannot isolate learning from the social world surrounding us. Most of the wildcard sessions surfaced learners' personal interests, marginal ideas, observations, and critiques regarding teaching and learning in education in general and distance education in specific. These sessions were helpful for learners to freely express themselves, share their ideas with others, and develop a critical stance.

Self-evaluations

In addition to grading through conventional methods (e.g., learning analytics, peer-evaluation, grading), I introduced peer- and self-evaluations in the courses. These were included in the summative assessment. The purpose was to help learners reflect on their learning process and to what extent they successfully pursued their learning subjectives.

In all, the formal learning and structured curriculum was bent to provide exit points, liberate learners where possible, and encourage agency at best. Inspired by rhizomatic learning, the system was *hacked* to give learners more autonomy and enable them to shape the curriculum as a community and individuals.

Discussion and conclusion

The two cases we describe here in the context of a postgraduate programme at Goldsmiths, University of London, and in two postgraduate courses at Anadolu University illustrate how variations in context – in circumstances, policies, student profiles, institutional cultures, disciplinary subjects – lead to different applications of rhizomatic pedagogy in higher education institutions. In other words, the case studies demonstrate that rhizomatic learning in higher education should be considered in relation to the macro context of the institution and the disciplinary practice, the meso context of the classroom ecology (online or on-campus, we don't make a distinction here), and the micro context of the individual learner. Rhizomatic learning, just like any other pedagogical approach, is responsive to all of these different dimensions affecting teaching and learning in higher education. Outcomes-based and performative approaches that are central to so many higher education practices create structures that resist or reject rhizomatic pedagogy, but, also, rhizomatic pedagogy emerges because of the strain such rigid and prescriptive structures put on educators and learners (Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK or CoHE in Turkey). Our view is that as the many pressures on higher education intensify, more colleagues will seek co-constructed pedagogies focusing on shared learning and agency. This is not very different from bringing play into education to “celebrate and re-energise teaching and learning” (James, 2017, p. 13). It is becoming increasingly clear that we, educators and students, need spaces away from “the metric and measurement driven culture of Higher Education” (James, 2017).

In the context of Education, we argue that it is more helpful to view rhizomatic learning as a *pedagogical philosophy* rather than a prescriptive method with rigid rules or principles for practice. Rhizomatic learning as a philosophical orientation is helpful for putting the *whole person* at the center of education; “the experiences, emotions, relationships, knowledge, and skills that shape our students as human beings” (Koseoglu, 2020). Our students – postgraduate research students, professional and academic staff – appreciate it when we see them as a whole person, and, in return, we hope that they too will see us in that way. The approach is also helpful for *building entry points in higher education curricula for critical and co-constructed approaches to education* such as engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994) or critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). As we noted above, learners connect

with the metaphor of rhizome quickly. Through this metaphor, we, course convenors or facilitators, show them that we reject a “banking model” of education (Freire, 1970) where students are passive recipients of knowledge transmitted to them by a higher authority. They also understand that we value the experiential knowledge learners bring into their education and that we are willing to learn and grow from this process. Thus, rhizomatic learning is useful to create a story of learning (Blaschke et al., 2021), to start a critical conversation around traditional, top-down, and linear models of adult education by considering nonlinear models of education with different entry points and multiple outcomes. Our observations align with Mackness and Bell (2015) who researched rhizomatic learning in Rhizo14:

“Many Rhizo14 participants valued the metaphor of the rhizome for teaching and learning. Quoting from survey responses, participants of the Rhizo14 course thought that teaching and learning based on this metaphor is ‘subconscious’, ‘subterranean’, ‘subversive’, ‘a non-linear, multi-directional underground web of connections’. Learning is ‘haphazard’, ‘messy’, ‘serendipitous’, ‘esoteric’, ‘dynamic’, ‘unbounded’, ‘unpredictable’, ‘adaptive’, ‘self-organising’ and ‘nonhierarchical’”.

However, Mackness and Bell (2015) also note that for some participants, the metaphor had a negative connotation (e.g., “a pernicious, pervasive weed”). The metaphor of rhizome spurs educators’ imaginations; it is a powerful thinking exercise to imagine different possibilities for education – *to make the social pedagogical and pedagogical social* – but, as Mackness et al. (2016) note, “metaphors need to be treated with care” (p. 81). For example, let’s consider a nomadic learner, on a nomadic plane of education. We might consider her free, unconstrained in her thinking and in the directions she takes: she is constantly in movement moving from one plane of learning to another. Now let’s consider that she is a mother and that she is travelling with her children. Let’s also add another layer to this narrative; while her fellow travelers are all young in their early 20s, she is the only mature student and working full-time. The more “ANDs” we add (a woman AND with kids AND mature AND working ...), the more the notion of a nomadic learner enjoying unlimited freedom as a self-directed “individual” or “independent” learner becomes questionable. This reminds us of feminist critiques of flexibility and self-directed learning in online education (see, e.g., Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019), as the imagined online learner is often a male with privileges (von Prümmer, 1994). To argue that rhizomatic learning should unfold according to a set number of principles would, ultimately, be a position of privilege as well. For example, although a principle of rhizomatic thinking is that any point of a rhizome can be, should be, connected to any other (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), such connections often do not happen organically for all students. Students need time to understand how things work in class, expectations and boundaries, and manage new relationships. They need time to be able to open themselves to different ways of studying or being a student. Some students prefer working with predefined educational content and perhaps more independently without necessarily tying themselves to a community. Surprises, unexpected paths or routes to education are not always welcome when students want to plan ahead and know what the outcome will be. We also need to recognize that, for many students, the educational outcomes are very much shaped by the pedagogical, social, and financial support the university provides. *Where are you coming from? What are you heading for?* These are important questions to consider for our institutions and students.

Our students *do critique* this method at times and state their preference to learn from a more structured method. For example, a PG Cert participant at Goldsmiths said in class evaluations, “I do not like the approach of anything goes.” Another PG Cert participant critiqued monocultural approaches in education in her final assessment using the interrelated relationship of corns, beans, and squash as an inspiration for collaborative and interdisciplinary higher education pedagogies (Wingfield, 2023). Wingfield’s work can also be considered as a critique of rhizomatic pedagogy. Going back to the critique of uncritical use of metaphors in education by Mackness and Bell (2015), it is a reminder that ideas from other disciplines need to be treated with care in Education (on this

topic, also see [Harris, 2016](#)). “Learning does not exist without diversity” says Wingfield, “and therefore the design of educational practices and pedagogies should not be mono-cultural.”

The case studies also demonstrate the extent to which *teachers may need to facilitate rhizomatic learning in formal higher education*, to encourage inclusive participation and to create spaces for critical reflection. When higher education teachers use the approach with care and intentionality, rhizomatic pedagogy has the potential to become a form of critical pedagogy educators can use to “shift the discourse from terms of a struggle against students to one of shared responsibility” ([Goodyear, 2021](#)). Teachers in rhizomatic pedagogy “inquire alongside students” ([Reilly, 2011](#)) and use their knowledge and skills for effective learning design ([Couros, 2009](#)). In our examples, teachers are not removed from rhizomatic planes of learning, rather their roles shift to “facilitator,” “course convenor,” or “co-learner,” but, also, we were “teachers” in a more traditional sense as well, as we used our extensive knowledge of pedagogy and disciplinary practice to create a networked model of learning and to guide participants/students in this process. In both cases we presented here, we played an important role to nurture a community with diverse voices, to initiate and sustain a working structure where students could learn from peers and colleagues.³ Borrowing from [hooks \(1994\)](#), we used our instructional authority to “affirm students’ presence, their right to speak, in multiple ways on diverse topics” (p. 84). This was an ethical imperative, as [Mackness and Bell \(2015\)](#) suggested in their critique of experimental MOOCs.

We also recognized social learning or experiential learning to encourage learner agency in class. [Bandura \(2009\)](#) defines agency as “the human capability to exert influence over one’s functioning and the course of events by one’s actions” (p. 8). Drawing from [Freire’s \(1970\)](#) critique of the banking model of education, [Hase and Blaschke \(2021\)](#) note that “when the student is a passive recipient of education with no say in process or content, then agency is removed.” They, then, argue that agency can be fostered by encouraging learners to construct meaning through direct experience, by helping them engage with “their social and cultural contexts” and make meaningful contributions to their learning. This process looked very different in the two case studies we described here (at Goldsmiths and Anadolu University) due to differences in sociocultural contexts. For example, an ice-breaker activity posing students the question “What is your purpose to take this course and why are you here?” may be standard practice in many postgraduate level programmes in the UK and US, but in the context of Turkish education, this simple activity is affirmative in nature, as students in Turkish state schools typically go through a traditional and rigidly structured education system, where the teacher and the institution are the ultimate and absolute authorities in education. Here, we need to consider the hidden curriculum to be able to understand the rhizomatic plateaus that the learning community potentially built and traversed together. Through activities like liquid curriculum, “truth is relative” motto, or self-evaluations, learners sense the power of their agency and understand that their values are respected and that they can diverge from the official curriculum – the instructor disrupts the oppressive educational system which is so familiar to Turkish students. The unspoken, but very well-known, scripts for educational practice (e.g., teacher teaches, students pay attention or appear to pay attention) are challenged by shared experience and practice. In the context of Goldsmiths, the students were professional and academic staff members of an institution

renowned in critical thinking and, as such, they did not expect a learning environment which imposed such authority on them. We might perhaps argue that one rhizomatic plateau learners traversed was on race equality and equity in higher education. As this was a topic with high relevance to Goldsmiths (see the context of Goldsmiths above), we experienced *intensity* and *momentum* in related educational activities.

Are our case studies good examples for rhizomatic learning? To what extent were we able to, or did we want to, use a Deleuzoguattarian philosophy of rhizomatic thinking in our teaching practice? Perhaps these are not very useful questions. To what extent did learners feel excitement in their cojourney? To what extent did they find inspiration from others and feel supported and included in

their development? These are questions worth exploring going forward with rhizomatic pedagogy in Education.

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Notes

1. Phenomenology, in particular, is a research methodology that has been influenced by the rhizomatic philosophy of thinking. See, for example, *Entangling a Post-Reflexivity Through Post-Intentional Phenomenology* by Vagle and Hofsess (2016).
2. Hence our decision to use the term “rhizomatic pedagogy” in this discussion.

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