Current Issues in Emerging eLearning

Volume 3
Issue 1 *MOOC Design and Delivery: Opportunities and Challenges*

Article 4

April 2016

What is it Like to Learn and Participate in Rhizomatic MOOCs? A Collaborative Autoethnography of #RHIZO14

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Recommended Citation

Bali, Maha; Honeychurch, Sarah; Hamon, Keith; Hogue, Rebecca J.; Koutropoulos, Apostolos; Johnson, Scott; Leunissen, Ronald; and Singh, Lenandlar (2016) "What is it Like to Learn and Participate in Rhizomatic MOOCs? A Collaborative Autoethnography of #RHIZO14," *Current Issues in Emerging eLearning*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/ciee/vol3/iss1/4

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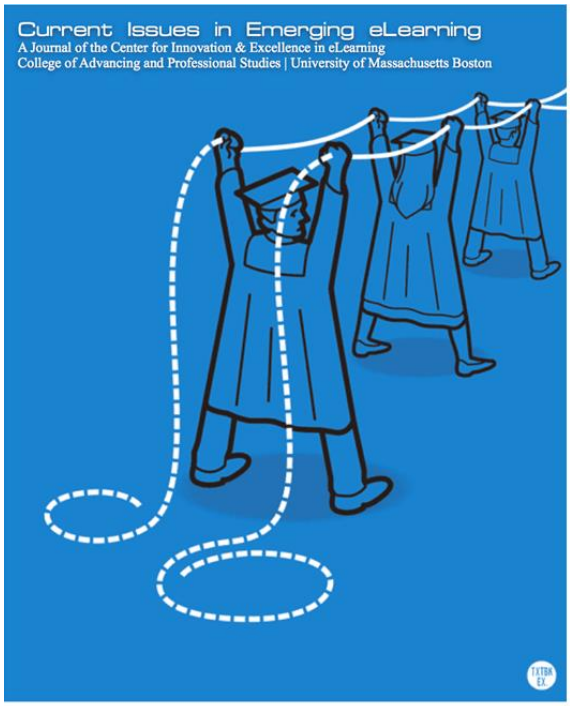
This article is available in Current Issues in Emerging eLearning: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/ciee/vol3/iss1/4

CURRENT ISSUES IN EMERGING ELEARNING

Special Issue on MOOC Design and Delivery: Opportunities and Challenges

Volume 3, Issue 1 (2016/04) ISSN: 2373-6089



Volume 3, Issue 1

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WHAT IS IT LIKE TO LEARN AND PARTICIPATE IN RHIZOMATIC MOOCS?
A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF #RHIZO14

Maha Bali	American University of Cairo
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ABSTRACT
In January 2014, we participated in a connectivist-style massive open online course (cMOOC) called "Rhizomatic Learning – The community is the curriculum" (#rhizo14). In rhizomatic learning, teacher and student roles are radically restructured. Course content and value come mostly from students; the teacher, at most, is a curator who provides a starting point and guidance and sometimes participates as a learner. Early on, we felt that we were in a unique learning experience that we wanted to capture in writing. Explaining #rhizo14 to others without the benefit of traditional processes, practices, roles, or structures, however, presented a challenge. We invited participants to contribute narratives to a collaborative autoethnography (CAE), which comprises an assortment of collaborative Google Docs, blog posts by individuals, and comments on those documents and posts. This strategy afforded insight into what many participants found to be a most engaging course and what for some was a transformative experience. In discussing the findings from the CAE, our intent is to benefit others interested in rhizomatic learning spaces such as cMOOCs. This authoethnography specifically addresses gaps both in the understanding of the learner experience in cMOOCs and in the nature of rhizomatic learning.

KEYWORDS: rhizomatic learning, MOOC, cMOOC, connectivism, rMOOC

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO LEARN AND PARTICIPATE IN RHIZOMATIC MOOCS?
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INTRODUCTION

Higher education is in transition as information technology disrupts traditional practices, processes, and organizations. In his 2014 MOOC *Rhizomatic Learning: The Community is the Curriculum* (#rhizo14), Cormier (2014) characterizes this disruption as a shift from information scarcity to information overload and abundance. It seems intuitive that traditional processes and structures will have to change when information and expertise are readily available, remixable, and republishable through mobile phones in most pockets.

Over the past seven years, MOOCs have been a rich environment for experimentation and innovation. We, the writers of this current study, participated in #rhizo14 along with about 500 others worldwide, and for us, #rhizo14 embodies this insight: learning, including higher education, can and will change in fundamental ways. Learning, especially in the form of rhizomatic, connectivist style MOOCs, can be an emergent process in the sense that Goodenough and Deacon (2006) use the term emergent to capture those phenomena that are not merely larger, greater, or richer than their constituent parts, but that are something else altogether. A functioning, engaging, rewarding course, #rhizo14 nonetheless used very different practices, processes, and structures from those envisioned by either the facilitators or the participants. The whole of #rhizo14 was not simply greater than the sum of its part/icipants. Think of a conscious mind emerging from the orchestrated firings of a cluster of neurons.

Emergence is not commonly associated with traditional college courses, or even most MOOCs, which are largely crafted toward specific learning objectives and practices that are constructed before the student ever arrives. To use terms from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the traditional student task is to *trace* a given course, not to *map* an open terrain. When a large, mostly virtual space is opened

for a class to emerge, we move to a different dimension from the traditional course, and we "encounter something else altogether," not just "something greater or more" (Goodenough & Deacon, 2006, p. 854).

The #rhizo14 course was not constructed; it emerged. It was not merely a MOOC, it was (and remains) something else altogether. We could call it an rMOOC. We do call #rhizo14 a course "out of habit, purely out of habit … because it's nice to talk like everybody else, to say the sun rises, when everybody knows it's only a manner of speaking" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 3). The course has (we use the present tense because in important ways #rhizo14 continues[1]) almost no curriculum, instructor, set readings, or exercises, and no assessments. It had given starting and ending dates (January 14 – February 18, 2014) and an online location (P2PU), but these were merely starting points as it quickly deterritorialized and reterritorialized on Twitter, many blogs, Facebook, Google+, Google Hangouts, hallway conversations, conference presentations, and classroom assignments. Ultimately, as a subset of the #rhizo14 participants[2], we arrived at this document describing our experiences of #rhizo14.

Rhizomatic learning is not easily or concisely defined, but we must try. In a post entitled "Trying to write Rhizomatic Learning in 300 words," Cormier (2012b) states:

> The idea is to think of a classroom/community/network as an ecosystem in which each person is spreading their own understanding with the pieces … available in that ecosystem. The public negotiation of that 'acquisition' (through content creation, sharing) provides a contextual curriculum to remix back into the existing research/thoughts/ideas in a given field. Their own rhizomatic learning experience becomes more curriculum for others.

[1] At the original writing of this article in late 2014, #rhizo15 had not yet existed. At the time of reviewing this article in early 2016, all of us had participated in some form or another in #rhizo15. When we speak of #rhizo14 continuing in this article, the story of how it evolved and merged into #rhizo15 but still remained something different from it is missing. This is something we may wish to explore in the future: How different iterations of MOOCs affect community, and what it means to name MOOCs by a year-specific hashtag or not.

[2] How do you count the number of participants in a cMOOC? Those who signed up? Those who blogged once? Those who participated in some form or another (Twitter, facebook, Google+) throughout? Those who watched from afar? We therefore do not include a number. Nor do we count how many of "us" remained in the community beyond the authors here, because that number seems fluid; also, as several citations show, different people are doing different research and collaborations based on #rhizo14.

Rhizomatic learning, then, is non goal-based learning; it is learning focused *not* on students tracing the teacher's lesson plans, but on students performing: ripping, remixing, and feeding content back into the course for others to manipulate. Teacher and student roles are radically restructured. Course content and value come mostly from students, not the teacher, who, at best, is a curator providing a starting point and guidance, participating sometimes as a learner him/herself.

Still, we are left with the perplexing problem of explaining #rhizo14 to others without the benefit of traditional processes, practices, roles, or structures. A collaborative autoethnography (CAE) affords insight into what many participants found to be a most engaging course and what for some was a transformative experience (see Mackness & Bell, 2015, and Mackness, Bell, & Funes 2016, for a different perspective). In this paper, we highlight positive learner experiences that expand the discussion about MOOCs in general, cMOOCs more particularly, and #rhizo14 specifically. As #rhizo14 is ever-evolving, this paper represents only a snapshot of the moment in time in which it was written. (Honeychurch et al., this issue, and Hamon et al., 2015, are snapshots of other times when some of the authors of this article collaborated with others from #rhizo14).

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the main purposes of this article is to explain in our own words the exhilaration we felt while participating in rhizomatic experiences, rather than have others speak for us (Bali & Sharma, 2015). Cormier (2012b, 2014) describes his rhizomatic courses as an attempt to deal with the "uncertainty of abundance and choice presented by the Internet." This poststructural approach to knowledge leads to facilitating learning experiences based on the belief that the "community is the curriculum" (2008, 2014). Hamon (2014) clarifies that in #rhizo14 we define concepts from the inside out, not from the outside in: i.e., we create a meaningful structure and share it among ourselves. In order to participate in this type of experience, learners need a high level of digital confidence (Kop, 2011; Brennan, 2013; Milligan, Littlejohn, & Margaryan, 2013; Waite, Mackness, Roberts, & Lovegrove, 2013). cMOOCs generally entail participant interaction on multiple platforms simultaneously (Mackness, Mak, and Williams, 2010), and this pattern was particularly true of #rhizo14.

The literature has established the need for active engagement of participants in cMOOCs (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, & Cormier, 2010; Milligan et al., 2013; Waite et al., 2013; Kop, 2011), and has shown that participating in cMOOCs requires a high sense of one's own self-efficacy and autonomy (Brennan, 2013; Tschofen & Mackness, 2012; Downes, 2010; Mackness et al., 2010). Ultimately the requirements for self-efficacy and autonomy dictate that this type of experience is not for everyone. Possible reasons include:

1. a dislike of the community aspects of the experience (Mackness & Bell, 2015),
2. a lack of skills necessary to perform as autonomous learners (Mackness et al, 2010), or
3. various access issues (Bali & Honeychurch, 2014).

However, many #rhizo14 participants welcomed the diversity of the community, and the genuine attempts made by the facilitator and other participants to foster full inclusion (Bali & Sharma, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We chose to conduct CAE research out of a collective desire to represent complex learner experiences in a concrete and comprehensible manner, rather than in an abstract and generalized way. The ethical drive behind this decision stems from a desire to have our own voices represented, to tell our own stories, rather than have others narrate on our behalf. Some of us are postcolonial non-Anglo educators, or have been disempowered in our lives for other reasons; we do not wish the stories of our experiences to be told only by others. We conclude that representing non-dominant, non-traditional voices requires a non-traditional participatory research approach

Autoethnographic research is an interpretive/critical research tradition which "challenges the hegemony of objectivity or the artificial distancing of self from one's research subjects" (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013, p. 18) and eschews positivist standards of validity and rigor.

CAE is a process in which individual write narratives that are then collectively revisited, analyzed, and related to the literature by the same individuals who wrote them (Geist-Martin, et al., 2010). In our case, a group of us who were interested in conducting participatory research on our experiences in #rhizo14 started a Google document and invited everyone in the course (via Facebook and Twitter) to participate by adding their narratives. People were free either to write a freeflowing narrative, link to particular blogposts already written, or answer some questions some of the initiators of this project had written. We received over 30 narratives, with some participants commenting on the margins of each other's narratives. After a long struggle with how to convert these narratives into a publishable paper, some of us persisted in trying to make it work (see Hamon et al, 2015 for the backstory). Eventually, we realized that:

1. it is impractical to write an article with 30 authors;
2. not all 30 narrative-writers wished to continue doing the research; and
3. it would not be participatory research if some of us wrote the article using other people's narratives and analyzed them on their behalf.

Instead, we have chosen to write papers focusing only on the narratives of each article's author (this is a dynamic group and changes slightly per project/paper/conference). Whoever is interested in participating in a particular article or other output becomes a researcher-participant in that article, and narratives are collaboratively analyzed (and sometimes extended) using whatever angle is chosen for that piece. To do otherwise--to analyze the stories of people who are not participating in the authoring--would lose the "auto" dimension of autoethnography.

CAE research is not yet widespread in the field of MOOCs, but has been conducted on MOOCs previously (e.g. Bali, Crawford, Jessen, Signorelli, Zamora, 2015 conducted it comparing different cMOOCs while Bentley, Crump, Cuffe, Gniadek, Jamieson, MacNeill, & Mor, 2014, focused on one MOOC). Our research fills a gap; to date, little has been written on in-depth analysis of learner experiences in cMOOCs. Our work here also expands the literature on the #rhizo14 course, in particular. In addition, CAE seems an appropriate methodology for studying a postmodern notion such as rhizomes; we "must redefine rigor (and find practicable alternatives to rigor) for the connected learning environment" (Morris, Rorabaugh, & Stommel, 2013).

Autoethnography "seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The goal is to help readers "keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience" (Ellis, 2004, p.30 quoted in Geist-Martin, Gates, Weiring, Kirby, Houston, Lilly, & Moreno, 2010). Practiced collaboratively, autoethnography serves to "illustrate how a community manifests particular social/cultural issues" (Ellis et al., 2011). All research is inherently interpretation and therefore subjective (Nixon, 2012). All we can do as researchers is be honest about the limitations of our points of view as individuals and collaborate to question our individual and collective interpretations and conclusions.

Unfortunately, CAE creates the risk of premature consensus-building and multivocality (Chang et al., 2013). Therefore, our measures of quality include researcher reflexivity: a thick, rich description of context that allows readers to judge transferability to their own purposes. Rather than generalizability sought by

positivist research, we seek the crystallization[3] afforded by focusing multiple lenses on the social phenomenon being studied to show divergent possibilities. We hope to provide a research narrative that moves beyond triangulation and instead seeks divergence. We also recognize that by focusing on a subset of participants in #rhizo14,we produce research that is partial (but all research is partial; there will almost always be only a subset of participants and a particular moment in time being studied, however long). As Wolcott says of ethnography, no research is fully inclusive; rather, "each of us who does it is *someone*, not *everyone* at once" [emphasis in original] (2010, p. 75). Moreover, CAE captures the responses of participants at a moment in time, making utterances in response to researcher questions. In writing this article, we researchers have ourselves been the participants and authors); , we have collaboratively edited some parts of our narratives for clarity and to fill some gaps, going beyond the moment in time captured by our initial narratives as we wrote this article. Finally, beyond our IRB approval from the American University in Cairo[4], we remain conscious of how references to individuals outside this CAE could pose ethical problems (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and so have sought to minimize details about others; however, others were part of our experience and cannot be removed completely from our narratives.

In analyzing our data, we realised that it was important to find themes that help tell our stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Therefore, we have worked to identify similarities and differences among our narratives and have written about these themes in ways that highlight key aspects of our learner experience in #rhizo14.

FINDINGS

As the authors, we represent a subset of #rhizo14ers that we deem sufficiently diverse to offer multiple angles and perspectives, although we all have one thing in common: We remained active in #rhizo14 for months beyond the course, and continued to collaborate in various ways. We are from Canada (Scott is American living in Canada, and Rebecca is Canadian living in the U.S.), Egypt (Maha),

[3] Looking at social research as a "crystal" is a notion Laurel Richardson (1997) proposes as a transgressive, post-modern view of social research validity, such that an object looks different from different angles, and the researcher can look at phenomena from each angle, shedding light on different views while recognizing the simultaneous existence of multiple alternate views. According to Richardson, "crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding... Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know" (p. 94). Crystalization is radically different from triangulation which attempts to converge toward one conclusion.

[4] Maha Bali sought approval from the IRB office of the America University of Cairo because that university requires faculty members to obtain IRB approval for any research to be published. The institutions of the other authors did not require IRB approval for autoethnographic research.

Guyana (Lenandlar, hereafter referred to by his nickname, Len), Netherlands (Ronald, hereafter referred to as Ron), Scotland (Sarah), and the United States (Keith and Apostolos, hereafter nicknamed AK as he prefers to be called). We are a mix of educators working in different sectors of higher education, some of us PhD students, others professors/lecturers. Some of us were experienced cMOOCers, some first-timers. We had different motivations for joining, different attitudes towards the course, and different approaches to engaging with the course, but similar reasons for staying with the community and valuing the learning experience. Given the richness of our experiences, we cannot capture all that we have learned in one article, and so we have chosen to focus on some broad questions.

WHAT LED US TO #RHIZO14?

Some of us joined #rhizo14 after a long-standing engagement with the ideas of rhizomatic learning or previous interaction with the course creator, Dave Cormier. Others were curious about but still relatively new to the idea of rhizomatic learning. Len and AK had encountered rhizomatic learning in previous cMOOCs, and wanted to engage more deeply. Keith had had the deepest engagement with rhizomatic learning prior to #rhizo14:

> Dave and I have been discussing rhizomatic education and the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari ever since we met online, we have followed each other's blogs and gathered from time-to-time. I have always admired his thinking and found deep resonance between his ideas and my own. His ideas make mine better, and I think mine contribute to his. More specifically, I like that he is able to convert his ideas into real-world courses much better than I, so I wanted to see what he was doing with this MOOC.

Maha and Sarah were relatively new to cMOOCs. Sarah had previously engaged deeply with Deleuze's and Guattari's ideas, but it was her first cMOOC. Maha had engaged briefly with the idea of rhizomatic learning via Cormier's blog. Rebecca (a cMOOC veteran) had heard about #rhizo14 at a conference.

WHY DID WE PERSIST IN #RHIZO14?

It is important to examine learners' approaches to engaging with a cMOOC because connectivist approaches to learning require a high degree of autonomy, flexibility, and technological skill (Mackness et al., 2010). Abstract attempts to describe connectivism do not explain to an outsider how learning occurs in connectivist settings. Participation in #rhizo14 was distributed across different online platforms, making it unfeasible to keep track of all the conversations. Len says:

> I believe in helping to organise things, locate stuff, share, help people with technology stuff... partly I join to help out wherever I think I can because I love to and because I learn a lot by doing so and because these MOOCs allow you to be you. You can become the self-appointed facilitator.

Some (including Scott and AK) blogged themselves, but also emphasized the importance of responding to other people's blogs. Scott said "After years of MOOCs I still feel a stronger urge to respond to people at blogs or Facebook entries than to blog myself." Others (e.g., Maha) felt that their own blogging was important for integrating knowledge and ideas of self and others. Keith said "I, of course, took great value from the MOOC, and I think I was able to add value" through blogging and responding.

Several of us found Facebook the main hub, while others did not. For some (e.g., Sarah and Keith) the weekly synchronous (un)hangouts were a major part of their experience, whereas for others (e.g., Scott and Maha) the asynchronous component was more important. For some, such as AK, the synchronous and asynchronous were equally important. Keith commented on the feeling that he was always missing something. A veteran cMOOCer, he knows it is not possible to keep track of everything happening in a cMOOC:

> I always feel as if I missed the most important part. This is especially stressing to good students ... and it has been one of the most difficult things for me to accommodate. I want to know it all, and I tend to get stressed when I so obviously don't.

AK says that he eventually reduced the number of platforms he was tracking to the most active (mainly Facebook). One theme running through the narratives included in this CAE involves an emphasis participants placed on responding to other people's blogs or Facebook posts: on connecting as an end in itself.

The content-lightness of the course (virtually no assigned readings, very brief prompt, and very brief video) enabled participants to focus on connecting and creating their *own* content. It is also noteworthy that other publications (Hamon et al, 2015, Hogue et al, 2015) mention participants who engaged in creative activities with a variety of media, including multimedia and poetry. All of these types of engagement were participant-initiated. Other cMOOCs (Bali et al., 2015) often have more facilitator-led content and activities.

Although we co-authors feel a strong sense of community within #rhizo14, we recognize that some feel differently (see Mackness & Bell, 2015) and some participants, as with any MOOC, did not continue beyond the first two weeks. Not all of us felt immediately included or always included in #rhizo14. We recognize how some people's experiences of community may make others feel excluded. Both Maha and Sarah (cMOOC newbies) had initial concerns that previously-existing cliques might exclude them, but they both quickly felt part of

#rhizo14, and eventually, Sarah says, "I felt very much part of the rhizo14 community, worried though that we might be excluding others by some of us shouting so loud. I still worry about that." Conversely, Rebecca felt like an outsider

> because I'm not a post modern / post structuralist researcher, nor really a constructivist / critical theory type researcher. However, I see a place in the world for multiple perspectives - and for that reason, and honestly, the awesomeness of the people in a cMOOC - I found myself drawn to be part of rhizo. I mostly lurked, but was really happy to see the Facebook group so active. I did, and I still do, feel drawn to the community.

As AK correctly points out, inclusion depends on how we define or perceive it.

> I think that the experience in #rhizo14 has been quite inclusive... There were no trolls in #rhizo14, that I could see anyway, and a sufficient amount of peers responded to my posts. I hope that I also responded to a satisfactory amount of their posts. This enabled a feeling of inclusion and continuation of the discussion so learning, and further understanding, could continue to take place.

Keith felt included even though he knew he was not involved in the discourse occurring in all of #rhizo14's spaces:

> I felt no sense of exclusion from the community at all. The exclusion I felt was from my inability to join all the conversations that I wanted. For instance, I was excluded from the Facebook conversation mostly because I don't use Facebook much and I just didn't have time to get to it, being too engaged in blog posts and Google+. That exclusion is real—I was not present in those conversations—but it is not what people usually mean by exclusion as some intentional effort to keep some people out of a conversation or space. I had no sense of that kind of exclusion at work in #rhizo14; still, Mackness (2014) makes a wonderful point that exclusion happens despite our best intentions and best efforts to avoid it.

Ron perceived that "inclusion was wonderful in this MOOC. Inclusiveness, I translate it into 'willingness to include others in my learning, willingness to take care of the learning of my peers.' Including others needs one to open up to others." He believes that the hierarchies we face in real life make us much less open to making ourselves vulnerable. This suggests that (for Ron, at least) part of the value of #rhizo14 involves the separation of the course and community experience from the (hierarchy-laden) experiences of daily life. Scott, however, says he "Occasionally feel[s] unqualified to be here" because of experiences in his life in which he felt unappreciated, excluded by his lack of formal qualifications.

> My response to #rhizo14 and cMOOCs in general was a feeling of release from being judged, ignored and disrespected over the last 8 years. I find the inclusiveness of #rhizo14 to be quite liberating.

Maha refers to events that occurred in week two when there was some tension (within #rhizo14) and how the community responded supportively and helped her "zone out" of troubling events in Egypt. (See also Honeychurch et al., this issue).

Cormier often referred to #rhizo14 as a 'party,' but Ron believes the metaphor of a 'pot luck' might be more suitable, since, in the pot luck format, each person brings something different to share at the table.

So far we have discussed our feelings and perceptions about #rhizo14 and how we chose to participate, but have not addressed specifically what we learned in this "course" or learning experience with no pre-determined learning objectives, so we turn to this next.

WHAT DID WE LEARN IN #RHIZO14?

We all noticed that we were expected to be self-directed learners, setting our own goals and learning path - all we had for guidance was a 'trickster,' the term #rhizo14 only half-facetiously applied to Cormier and his habit of starting each week with a tricky prompt such as: "Is books making us stupid?" (See Honeychurch et al., this issue, for a full list of weekly topics.). It was up to the participants to co-create all other elements of the curriculum.

AK indicates that his initial metric of success prior to beginning #rhizo14 was "the number of meaningful connections I've made with others that allow me to continue learning after the course is done" and "how much the course, and my peers, have stretched me to think outside of the box," all of which has happened for him in #rhizo14. It is still hard for AK to measure what learning success means, or meant, in #rhizo14 and it seems to him that success is the continued interaction with the topic and the community.

For Keith, #rhizo14 was "as rewarding as education gets"; he suggests cMOOCs are "among the most profound of all my formal educational experiences" because interaction within them has potential to "expand your view of reality" which he calls a "genius force." Keith feels that the great value of #rhizo14 derived from others' participation, as as facilitated through the rhizomatic approach:

> I think that in most traditional classes only the teacher is expected to add value. The students are stuck receiving [what the teacher chooses to offer], and that always becomes deadening, even if the teacher's value-add[ed] is high.

This has proven one of his strongest bonds, especially in the year since the formal close of the course, and it is perhaps one of the strongest benefits of rhizomatic,

community-based education, as a community can sustain engagement far longer than even the most gifted instructor can do. A community is richer than any curriculum.

Others in our collective also experienced this fading away of the teacher/facilitator. Maha, for instance, says, "I felt supported by the community (Dave, too, but the community became more important than Dave here)."

There were some unexpected side benefits from #rhizo14. Maha wrote that it had been "both my escape from reality, and my support network for my real life thoughts, problems (e.g., my 2-in-1 course dilemma), and a place to echo thoughts with people I trusted on all things from parenting to #FutureEd to the Arab MOOC."

The reader will likely be unfamiliar with much of what Maha is referring to above. But #rhizo14 participants knew about the course dilemma she was facing in her face-to-face teaching context, the #FutureEd MOOC which several members of #rhizo14 were participating in and discussing amongst themselves in the #rhizo14 Facebook group, and Maha's blogging about the then-new Arab MOOC platform. The #rhizo14 cMOOC helped Maha think through these interesting developments and discuss her learning with peers.

Several of us learned how to learn rhizomatically, make ourselves vulnerable, discuss our more radical/dissenting views, and learn from others' blog posts and interaction rather than books; we also all learned to conduct CAE, a research methodology new to us. And, while Sarah "didn't get to talk as much about Deleuze and Guattari as I thought I might,...it didn't really matter." She found ways to have those discussions elsewhere. Ron discovered aspects of rhizomatic learning that involve education that functions without a social contract. He writes:

> I ... did expect the organizer of Rhizo14 to play at least some kind of facilitating role. To me he fulfilled this role by starting every week of Rhizo14 with a very short introduction to get discussions going.
>
> We ... all had some kind of responsibilities, e.g., to stay polite and constructive in the discussions and to put in our own time. Since in Rhizo14 the participants shaped the curriculum into what it finally became, this responsibility felt authentic and motivating.

WHY HAS #RHIZO14 CONTINUED?

Sarah describes #rhizo14, which has become an essential part of some of our lives, in terms of tribal affiliation:

> I've made so many friends through this experience ... I've found my tribe here ... I engage with it because I've found a bunch of folk who are interested in similar things to me, they post interesting things... lively, intelligent, generous ... I can't imagine life without them now.

Maha attributes part of this to the daily contact: "Strangely, we assume building community [face-to-face] is easier, but it is less intense if you meet once a week than if you are online daily!" Maha continues:

> Rhizo14 saved me. It was my escape at a very hard time in my life on so many levels. I often escape with my scholarship and online communities, but none has been as close-knit (strange metaphor given how widespread we physically are) as rhizo14.

Many of us here are dissenters in our own contexts. In fact, Scott feels this is what connects us: "My sense is all of us in Rhizo14 don't really have allegiances beyond a tight connection to being human and not someone's stooge."

Specific undertakings such as this CAE and Hamon et al (2015) have supported the continuous engagement of our sub-group of #rhizo14 participants, our "collective," and enabled us to deepen our relationships with each other.

Working on this CAE has involved us all in hours of blogging, co-authoring proposals for conferences (e.g. Hogue et al., 2015) and journals, brainstorming, and working through process and progress in a variety of work spaces—creating and maintaining a network of thought and action. We have also actively sought other MOOCs-of-interest in which to participate together.

DISCUSSION

"We murder to dissect" —William Wordsworth

This quote describes our feelings as we prepared to dissect our narratives in order to write a 6,000-word article. Some of the life of this corpus has been lost in the process of preparing it, and it was torturous to remove some of the richness of the narratives; however, writing and examining this CAE has clarified our own thinking. Perhaps our major finding from the experience is that the community can, indeed, be the curriculum: i.e., rhizomatic learning can lead to exciting, engaging, even transformative learning experiences.

We also must acknowledge that some participants found it a negative experience (Mackness & Bell, 2015). In their exploration of CCK08, Mak et al. (2010), highlight personality clashes and barriers to participation such as people who exhibit appalling behavior, or who are patronizing and contribute "teachery" posts to the conversations. We are aware of contention within the #rhizo14 community, as well. We do not address the shadowy side here since to do so would be to speak in voices that are not part of this autoethnography. We very much recognize that more study needs to be done to bring the shadows into the light, to use the terms in which Mackness & Bell have framed the process of revealing this hidden data.

We are impressed that such a large community can emerge and function as a rhizomatic learning space, and for us #rhizo14 was rhizomatic. While

familiarity with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome metaphor is not necessary to appreciate #rhizo14, their ideas can clarify certain observable dynamics. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) point out that the rhizome is a map with "multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back 'to the same'" (p. 12); likewise, we entered #rhizo14 from multiple entryways and for many reasons, and our trajectories through the course varied wildly at times, especially as the course moved beyond its initial online space and planned time.

Deleuze and Guattari also note that the rhizome has principles of connectivity and heterogeneity: "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (1987, p. 7). Traditional classes trace most connections and interactions through the teacher and along explicit curricular pathways. A rhizomatic learning space does not. Rather, the community quickly learns to rely on itself and becomes self-organizing, a necessary condition for emergence. As in an underwater reef, we coalesced around certain coral heads and grassy spots — different blogs, Facebook discussions, and Twitter chats — and we were free to move from one to the other as our interests led us. Rather quickly, a community formed with sub-groups. Some learners stayed close to a single sub-group, others moved from group to group. Lurkers, those who watch a MOOC unfold but who do not actively participate, formed the largest group. Almost nothing is said about them in research, and this is a serious gap, for they may take and provide far more value in rhizomatic learning spaces than we suspect. Like the crowd at a sporting event, they take the game into their homes, offices, and workplaces the next day, propagating the heat of the on-field action through their extended social networks. As with all MOOCs, there were also participants who dropped out after one or two weeks; they are not represented in this paper, but are mentioned by Mackness and Bell (2015), who are commendable for making the effort to reach them and include them in their research.

Content, format, and people attracted us to #rhizo14, but this suggests more consistency than existed. While some of us joined #rhizo14 because we knew Dave Cormier, others joined because of someone else or something else. Some of us came for a discussion of Deleuze and Guattari, but others of us resisted talking about obscure French writers. Some wanted to know how to build a MOOC, build a curriculum out of a community, or understand connectivism better. Our cMOOC, #rhizo14, accommodated all these trajectories and kept the conversations going for those of us who found them engaging. The question we cannot currently answer is how a conversation can emerge and be sustained for more than a year without a sponsoring organization, a teacher, or a curriculum.

Part of the answer, though, surely has to do with a shared literacy built around technology, content, and language. We (those who completed #rhizo14 and continued to collaborate beyond #rhizo14) had the digital literacy to learn via

a cMOOC, the open attitude to work around each other's strengths and interests, and the abilities to conduct collaborative research remotely. We also had the resilience to continue trying to publish and present our work, despite many audiences' not understanding what we were proposing to describe or do; the flexibility to work with different team members on different projects; and a common interest in education. We also shared a reasonable facility with English, though it was not everyone's native language. A shared language may seem a given, but in rhizomatic learning spaces, we should not assume a language is shared equally among all as Bali and Sharma (2014) explore in their article about minority voices in shared spaces. This point should not be underestimated because, although rhizomatic learning space intends to be open and accommodating to any and all, it seems clear that shared literacy is a benefit afforded to some and denied to others. A rhizomatic learning space has a tension between rhizomatic multiplicity, on one hand, and shared literacies, on the other. This tension is problematic for all and discouraging for many.

We also stayed in #rhizo14 because of the variety of ways to engage in learning with each other. Some of us focused on original production in blog and Facebook posts, while others mostly responded with comments on others' posts, and yet others exhibited, curated, aggregated, and organized contributions to the course. We not only looked for value in the course, but we provided and continue to provide value, making the course something more than what it would have been had we not engaged in it. We embodied the core tenets of the cMOOC: aggregation, remixing, repurposing, and feeding forward (Downes, Siemens, & Cormier, 2011).

Finally, we better understand how we might begin to incorporate rhizomatic learning into more traditional, formal university courses, an issue that has intrigued many of us throughout #rhizo14. Cormier (2012a) suggests that rhizomatic learning is most suitable for open-ended explorations of the complex domain, a concept he borrows from Snowden's Cynefin framework for organizational decision making (Snowden, 2000). Succinctly put, Snowden suggests that in educational terms, instruction in the simple domain assumes one right answer with one or few pathways to that answer, or shorter yet: best practice. Instruction in the complex domain assumes many answers with many pathways to that answer. Rhizomatic learning is best suited for the complex domain, one that many assume is best reserved for more experienced, expert learners. Some of us, however, believe that the complex domain is appropriate for all learners regardless of age or expertise. Clearly, we need more research and thought here.

CONCLUSION

Rhizomatic learning alone is not for all teaching situations. Rhizomatic learning assumes the complexity of a diverse, self-organizing community that functions on continuous feedback and feedforward towards clarity, with or without conclusions or even consensus. It is open and global, but not yet all-inclusive, especially in a virtual space that smudges cultural boundaries.

Bali and Sharma suggest that #rhizo14 strives towards inclusive learning well:

> Full inclusion may be an impossible goal, not just across sociocultural and geopolitical borders but also within those borders. However, educators can and should strive for genuine attempts toward inclusion by not assuming the local to be universal, by inviting colleagues and other learners to participate on their own terms, and by developing a high sense of tolerance and openness about difference. (2014)

In this paper, we have presented key themes that outline our experiences in #rhizo14. Although the written medium can only elucidate a small portion of our learning, writing the paper itself has reinforced our belief in the power of our collaboration. For us, #rhizo14 provides a positive and transformative lifelong learning experience and has demonstrated that the community can indeed be the curriculum.

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