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Learning Happens: Incorporating a Rhizomatic Perspective into Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: This paper presents a rhizomatic perspective of teaching and learning. Data from research regarding a community leadership program will be utilized as a conceptualization of applying this perspective.

Introduction

Traditional approaches to adult learning theory tend to categorize learning into particular types, such as transformative (Mezirow, 1991), situated (Lave and Wenger, 1991), or experiential (Dewey, 1938) to name just a few. Although such learning models are valuable, these binary categorizations can have the impact of compartmentalization and exclusion of certain features of opposing theories. These traditional models may also have the impact of presenting learning as a linear activity in which educators and learners manipulate the inputs in hopes of maximizing learning output. While these learning theories are helpful for educators and learners, this paper will review a different approach, a rhizomatic perspective of teaching and learning (Kang, 2007). Data from research (Dillon, 2013) regarding learning in a neighborhood community leadership program will be utilized as a conceptualization of applying this perspective.

Rhizomatic Perspective of Adult Learning

The majority of theoretical approaches to adult learning can be described as Kang (2007) termed "adjective-plus-learning-theory" (p. 206), in which learning tends to be categorized into particular types, such as transformative (Mezirow, 1991), situated (Lave and Wenger, 1991), experiential (Dewey, 1938), and many others. Notably, the adjective is meant to identify the root of learning. Kang (2007) critiqued, "each theory approaches learning from that certain standpoint and excludes the others" (p. 206). He further suggested that such categorization indicates a certainty and universality in adult learning, and tends to fragment learners. Although these approaches are worthwhile building blocks towards our conceptualization of adult learning, they may not accurately depict adult learning.

A postmodern viewpoint, in which the certainty of a learning model is likely to be questioned, makes a different type of connection between the adjectives, the learner, and that which is learned. A rhizomatic perspective is one such alternative that embraces the multiplicity of learners and learning. Rhizoactivity is borrowed from the field of botany. A rhizome is both a root and a stem since it pushes out roots and shoots. The term was notably used by Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) to reconfigure the view of the author, the book, and the world, and reject the idea that an author can depict the world in a book. A rhizome sprouts or pops up and makes connections with whatever is available, has no fixed departure and return points, pursues heterogeneity, and starts up again on an old line or elsewhere when broken apart.

With respect to adult learning, this non-linear approach is more about making a map than tracing the root. Kang (2007) presented a postmodern view of the learner as "a nonunitary being that has multiple subjectivities" (p. 216). He goes on to say the researcher is like a detective

following leads, and drawing maps of the various figurations he or she discovers. However, these maps cannot be finalized since the object of the map is always in flux. Kang explained, "as rhizoactivity questions how learning activities shape one's life and its context, it can serve as a window to this task" (p. 217), the task being to make human life intelligible from a learning perspective. Approaching adult learning from a postmodern viewpoint does not necessarily mean disregarding traditional perspectives. As Hill (2008) suggested, "learning in the postmodern is not simply a break from the past but rather comprises the past's elements in motion" (p. 91).

Many learning episodes may come from one human experience. From a traditional learning theory perspective, we might inquire into what ways social relations prompt learning, or how experience shapes learning. This approach traces the root, whereas a postmodern rhizoactivity approach imagines a tentative map, much like "lines of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). These lines of flight have no beginning or ending, and as Kang explained, can help produce a tentative map of learning.

Analyzing Learning with a Rhizomatic Lens

In order to conceptualize a rhizomatic perspective of adult learning, data from a dissertation will be utilized. The dissertation was an action research (AR) project entitled *Grassroots Community Leaders as a Community of Practice: Utilizing Learning and Enduring Disruptive Change* (Dillon, 2014). The research involved a grassroots neighborhood leadership alumni association in the Southeastern United States. The purpose of the study was to investigate how a community leadership group learns to plan and take action on community problems. The study was guided by four research questions, which were: (1) What types of learning are taking place with the alumni as they make efforts to solve problems in the community? (2) What are the alumni learning through their leadership efforts in the community? (3) To what extent are the alumni operating as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998)? and (4) In what ways did the relative power of the researcher and the community stakeholders influence this AR project?

Original Analysis

Qualitative research methods were employed over a period of seventeen months, in the form of semi-structured interviews and observations. I followed a constant comparative method for analyzing the data (Merriam, 2009). This method entailed comparing one piece of data with another to determine similarities and differences. The findings indicated strong elements of experiential learning, formal training, past experience, and social learning. The alumni showed moderate indications of behaving as a Community of Practice (CoP). Being an AR project, we collaboratively designed organizational interventions. The eleven organizational interventions consisted of short term strategic positioning goals, medium range goals aimed at developing operational and tactical strategies, and a long term goal of regular organizational assessments. The result of the AR case was a community leadership alumni association poised to move forward as a CoP despite the disruptive leadership turnover they endured.

A Conception of a Rhizomatic Analysis

Taking a rhizomatic perspective, in which we are considering a tentative map rather than linear or binary associations, provides a diversion from our usual analysis. For example, Robert, a graduate of the community leadership program, mentioned that he learned to facilitate monthly leadership training sessions. Viewing this learning episode as a rhizome, we would create a tentative map to visualize lines of flight. These lines of flight may lead us to his past experiences,

the people involved, formal training, other learning episodes, and much more.

Although diagramming a Rhizome is problematic since it "is not amenable to any structural or generative model" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 12), the remainder of this section will make such an attempt. Ideally, doing so will be a creative activity versus a reductive one (de Freitas, 2012). The diagrams (as seen in figures 1 and 2) are meant to map potential lines of flight pertaining to a learning episode. There is no one correct representation. As de Freitas (2012) contends, "a map, like a rhizome, has multiple entry points and can be opened up for additional connections in all its dimensions" (p. 563).

The first example offered comes from a graduate of the community leadership program, Charles. He has a long history of involvement with the leadership program. In an interview he explained how the experience of working to solve community problems has taught him about people skills and leadership. Charles expressed, "I learned that anytime that you come up with a group of people you have a large number of suggestions. And you're not going to get everybody in agreement in what you trying to do." Figure 1 illustrates a conception of a tentative map of this learning episode for Charles.

Figure 1. Rhizomatic map 1

Another example comes from Veronica, who was both a graduate of the leadership program and the program coordinator for a period of time. She explained how she learned from observing other leaders over her many years of community activity and shared, "well, probably some forty years of being out here. Just experience and being in situations with so-called leaders, learning from the worst, learning from the best and somehow taking even something from the worst and saying, 'I know I don't want to do that.'" Figure 2 illustrates a tentative map of this learning episode for Veronica.
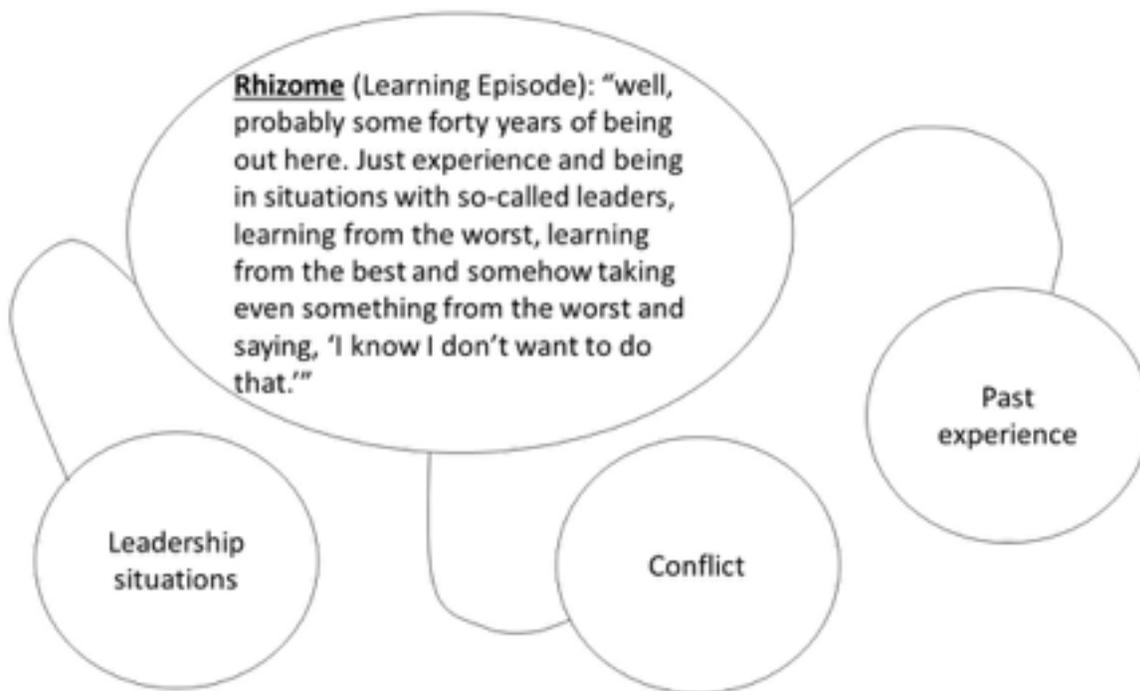
Figure 2. Rhizomatic map 2

The examples illustrate potential representations of learning episodes as a rhizome. There may be a temptation to view the figures as a positivistic reality or linear path. It is important to look at the figures as "a new real that is yet to come, a plane of creation pushing back at the regimes of signification and sundering preexisting forms of content and expression" (de Freitas, 2012, pp. 563-564). The figures can be thought of as an experiment, an attempt to allow something to emerge.

The lines in the figures depict lines of flight pertaining to the learning episode. It is not intended that a linear association is made. For example, in Figure 1 the rhizome is not necessary leading to the other three bubbles, or vice versa. Rather, some connection occurred between the three bubbles and the rhizome, and represented are the lines of flight. Additionally, there is clearly much more than three aspects to any learning episode, and lines of flight may be found between any of the circles. Due to the multiplicity of a rhizome, having many sites of entry and exit, a more complex figure would depict multiple rhizomes interconnected. As de Freitas (2012) explained, "we are always in the midst or the milieu of a rhizome, always located at one of the many middles that constitute a rhizome" (p. 562).

Implications / Conclusion

Others have utilized a rhizomatic perspective in the areas of education (de Freitas, 2012; Irwin et al., 2006; LeGrange, 2011), literacy (Leander & Rowe, 2006), complexity in organizations (Yu, 2006), information sciences (Lombard, 2008; Robinson & Maguire, 2010), research methodology (Clarke & Parsons, 2013), social science (Daskalaki & Mould, 2013), and service learning (Carrington, 2011). At the very least, experimenting with a rhizomatic conception of learning is a welcome break from predominant learning theories. At best, some

have even found a rhizomatic perspective to be transforming (St Pierre, 2004). Hopefully, this exercise gives caution to the binary and linear nature in which we often conceive of learning. Diagraming the learning episodes as rhizomes with lines of flight offers a welcome break from the hierarchical tree style diagrams that trace roots.

Combining a traditional "adjective-plus-learning-theory" with Kang's (2007) proposed postmodern rhizoactivity approach offers an alternative view of adult learning. Both approaches inform adult learning. Incorporating a rhizomatic perspective can enrich our understanding of adult learning by conceptualizing a tentative map of lines of flight. By mapping learning with linear connections, we can make pedagogical assertions regarding what factors and practices promote learning. Alternatively, approaching learning as a rhizome raises new considerations as we trace lines of flight.

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