

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2012 Conference Proceedings (Saratoga
Springs, NY)

Confronting the Postmodern Malaise: Embracing Education as “Rhizome”

Susan Birden

SUNY - Buffalo State College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Birden, Susan (2012). "Confronting the Postmodern Malaise: Embracing Education as “Rhizome”," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2012/papers/5>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Confronting the Postmodern Malaise: Embracing Education as “Rhizome”

Susan Birden
SUNY – Buffalo State College, USA

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) theorized that one of key differences between modern and postmodern thought is the understanding of “metanarratives” (see pp. xxiii-xxv). These metanarratives are the grand narratives that legitimate thoughts and actions that are directed toward bringing to pass this overarching idea. Grand narratives attempt to organize and explain great masses of events and multiple schools of thought that otherwise may appear to be unrelated. Following that, Lyotard compared what he believed to be the metanarratives of the modern versus the postmodern eras and the effect of that difference on human beings in our time. In this paper I will discuss the meanings of Lyotard’s argument for contemporary adult educators and suggest ways of thinking about our work that may help us face some of the more difficult of those challenges.

Lyotard (1992) contended that the metanarrative of the modern era was the Idea of Emancipation (see pp. 24-25). For example, the Christian narrative seeks freedom, or redemption, from original sin through love; the capitalist narrative seeks freedom from poverty and exploitation through socialization of work and technoindustrial development; the Enlightenment narrative seeks freedom from ignorance and servitude through knowledge and egalitarianism. Of course, all of these sub-narratives were fraught with debates, controversy, and sometimes, bloodshed. There were virulent arguments about which groups needed, or most needed, emancipation. But through it all, progress in the arts, sciences, and technology was seen as a tool for freeing the world from poverty, hunger, exploitation, ignorance, slavery, despotism, barbarism, and disease. Even conceding that universal freedom remained beyond humanity’s actual reach, however, the Idea of Emancipation nevertheless prompted men and women to direct their energies toward thoughts and actions, to undertake programs and movements, in order to bring humanity increasingly closer to freedom.

Furthermore, according to Lyotard, the assumption underlying the modern era’s metanarrative of emancipation was that human progress was not only necessary, but also possible and probable. Such progress relied upon education to develop in the world’s citizens the knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions necessary for producing enlightened masters of their own destiny who could contribute to even more advances in the sciences, arts, and technology. Humanity would participate in a non-ending, ever-upward march of progress.

However, the reality of the modern era’s emancipatory ideal not only fell short of success, but postmodernity has witnessed numerous ways in which the so-called “developments” in the arts, sciences, and technology have worsened our collective lives. Science and technology certainly have contributed to progress in some arenas, but they have also spawned ideologies and implements for undertaking inhumane actions, destroying vast natural resources, and annihilating human and non-human life forms with increasing levels of sophistication. Consequently, postmodernity is facing the reality and suffering the effects of many of the so-called successes of the modern era. As a result, Lyotard believed that people in the postmodern era are much less likely to believe that substantive progress toward emancipation is likely.

This decline in the belief and trust in the general progress of humanity distinguishes it from the hopeful and confident period of modernity. Modern man forged ahead with the assurance that it was both necessary and possible to break with tradition, to institute radically new ways of living and thinking, and to trust in logic and rationality. Postmoderns, on the other hand, have suffered a loss of confidence in the efficacy of logic and rationality, despairing the possibility of freedom. Lyotard claimed that this shift in thought during postmodernity may be characterized as a kind of grief. Furthermore, instead of holding out the promise of change, postmodern thought appears to be condemned to critique, substituting minor disruptions for dreams of global reconstruction.

Lyotard (1992) also was persuaded that one of the major factors contributing to the deepening malaise of postmodernity is technoscientific development itself. In fact, Lyotard claimed that instead of looking to technoscientific development to allay our fears about the future, technoscientific changes actually increase humanity's despair. In part, postmodern despondency feeds on the realization that human need no longer drives technoscientific development. Rather, technoscientific development is proceeding of its own accord. Furthermore, because capitalism has infiltrated technoscience, new "things" must be produced continuously in order to open new markets in order to produce higher profits (p. 95). We are forced to chase after the accumulation of these new objects, both in thought and practice, then adapt our lives to the demands that they place upon us (p. 78). So, rather than technoscientific development meeting the needs of individuals and institutions, now individuals and institutions must adapt to the demands of objects that are produced through technoscientific development.

And what is the greatest demand that technoscientific development places upon us as individuals, groups, and institutions? The unceasing, ever-increasing, need to save time. Whether we are talking about the gadgets we purchase or the learners we teach, the need is to expend less energy and, thus, to save time. Regardless of individual or institutional needs, as a society we have adopted what I refer to as an "Ethic of Efficiency." This Ethic of Efficiency utilizes tools, methods, and thoughts that promote efficiency and enhanced performance. In fact, the demand for saving time has become so much a part of the fabric of our society that we no longer even question its value. Rather, our culture has endorsed the amoral assumption that every technological advance is "good" if it saves time or expends less energy than another move (see Lyotard, 1992, p. 36).

Two of the best ways of expending less energy, enhancing performance, and promoting efficiencies are through wholesale adoption of standardization and control. Certainly, we have witnessed the numerous ways in which standardization and control have produced social goods that actually meet the genuine needs of users. On the other hand, many industries utilize an Ethic of Efficiency as a staple of their corporate business plans not to benefit consumers or employees, society or the nation, but to increase the dividends of shareholders. The goal of standardization and control in the fast food industry, for example, is not to provide an excellent meal or to provide a fulfilling vocational opportunity. The goal is to supply quick predictable outputs in order to reap large sustainable profits.

However, when the Ethic of Efficiency and its amoral value system move out of the manufacturing industry and into education we have the potential for tremendous social harm. Witness the ever-increasing demands placed on schools and universities by politicians and bureaucrats who are frightened by the "facts" produced through standardized tests. It does not matter if standardized tests and standardized curriculum, learning objectives and rubrics, have

failed utterly to improve education. The knee jerk response in an Ethic of Efficiency is to introduce more standardization and more invasive control systems that will serve as safeguards against difference.

These controls are exercised over schools, curriculum, teachers, and students. They have overtaken workplace teaching and are infiltrating higher education. Efficiency, speed, and performance require standardization of materials, process, and response. Consequently, it is not uncommon for teachers, trainers, and even professors, to be so busy covering all the required material, checking off the learning objectives, and scoring rubrics that teaching and learning take a back seat. An ethic of efficiency does not allow teachers to be satisfied with a day's lesson because "the student 'made a start' at learning." An ethic of efficiency leaves no time for teachers to say, "The student engaged an idea." An ethic of efficiency does not allow teachers to say, "Today, the student became interested." No. An ethic of efficiency demands that we meet objectives, which means producing quick, predictable responses to test questions. When the Ethic of Efficiency rules education, *thinking* has a single, irredeemable fault: it is a waste of time.

It would be nice to think that adult education is immune to the issues facing our public school and higher education colleagues. However, many traditional adult education arenas have been invaded by the Ethic of Efficiency. In fact, the number of adult education venues now guided by the optimistic legacies of adult educators like Jane Addams, Eduard Lindeman, Myles Horton, and Septima Clark are fewer and fewer in number. As a result, much of the youthful and hopeful activism of the last half of the century in adult education has faded. Activist adult educators believed that liberation struggles and revolutions born of righteous rage would melt social injustice. Because substantive progress has been stunted, because we see our field suffering many of the same ill effects as those born by schools and higher education as a whole, much of the fervor associated with the historic practice of adult education in the U.S. seems to have atrophied into despair and cynicism. Many adult educators now suffer from the same postmodern malaise that seems to be part and parcel of U.S. education as a whole.

In what follows, then, I would like to introduce a metaphor for rethinking our ideas about learning and growth, followed by some remarks about how scholars and practitioners alike might intervene to challenge the ethic of efficiency in various adult education arenas. My ideas are not solutions, but I do hope that they will both prompt our imaginations and open the door for dialogue.

I have suggested elsewhere (see Birden, 2004, pp.102-103) that education in activist organizations is distinctly different than the education that normally takes place in a traditional classroom. I have examined several such groups: PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), several of the Highlander Center's offspring, "Jane," the underground abortion network, the Listening Partners Project, and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. I contend that the learning and growth that take place in these sorts of activist associations might help us reconsider the ways in which we think about adult education in more traditional settings.

John Dewey conceptualized education as growth, or more specifically, as *growing*. He elaborated this concept by arguing that growth, in itself, is not enough. He said that we must ask:

Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?

. . . [W]hen and *only* when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing. (Dewey, 1938, p. 36)

For Dewey, then, the goal of education should be to supply and support conditions that ensure growth (Dewey, 1916, p.51). He further maintained that the single most important criterion for assessing the value of education is the extent to which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies the means for effectuating that desire (pp. 52-53).

Philosophers of education have developed numerous metaphors to represent the concept of growth. The classic tree metaphor equates education to the nurturing of a plant. The analogy is obvious between the growing child and the growing plant, between gardener and teacher. If the teacher provides nutritious soil, adequate water, and enough light the plant (child) who has sprung from an acorn will become a hearty oak tree and the child who has sprung from a maple seed will become a maple. In other words, conceptualizing growth through this child/plant metaphor prompts us to believe that given a proper environment and a nurturing teacher/gardener the child/plant will develop into that being prescribed by its genetic make-up.

I realize that this idea is only a metaphor. However, even though metaphor typically is viewed as only a poetic device, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have argued persuasively that our entire conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical. They further argue that these metaphors so govern our everyday functioning that, were we to change the metaphors that shape basic cultural concepts, we would fundamentally change the concepts themselves (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, pp. 3-6).

So, it is reasonable to suggest that the metaphor that governs the ways in which we think about educational growth will frame our thinking, bound our cultural concepts, and affect our actions. Viewed in this light, the numerous problems associated with the classic tree metaphor become the stuff of “real life,” not just a tease for our imaginations. The classic tree metaphor is filled with problems for thinking about the learning of children, however, it is far more suspect when we think about ourselves as “gardeners” in the realm of adult education where the “maples” and “oaks” with whom we deal are no longer wispy seedlings, but mature shade trees!

I want to suggest, then, that Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s (1987) work on abstract thought is useful for helping us reconceptualize a metaphor for educational growth. Deleuze and Guattari argued that a tree metaphor was inadequate for representing thought. Instead, they used the rhizome for critiquing representational abstract thinking.

Rhizomes come in many types that do not appear to be related: bulbs and tubers as well as plants that grow from proliferations of roots, as with the spread of moss. In all of these various types of rhizomes, however, the growth pattern extends in every direction. Irises and potatoes are rhizomes; so are crabgrass and couchgrass.

Consider “couch grass.” Couch grass spreads rapidly through underground rhizomes that grow just below the surface of the soil. The parts of the grass appear to be so unrelated as to belong to different plants: thin leaves, flowers, barbs, hollow stems, stiff bristles. Couch grass will grow in almost any soil and quickly forms a dense mat of roots. If one tries to dig it out and leaves even the smallest fragment behind, it will quickly regenerate into a new plant, thus making it exceedingly difficult for gardeners to eradicate. It is a persistent, vivacious, robust, and pernicious weed.

In whatever form, the rhizome is always an “acentered,” non-hierarchical, invasive, and chaotic mass (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 21). Yet, in spite of its chaotic appearance it is able

to grow vigorously in any and all directions because all points connect to all other points. Rhizomes are not only a mass of internal connections, however. They are intimately related to their environments. Rhizomes always grow from the middle, but they expand, conquer, capture, and send offshoots (p. 21).

Rhizomatic growth, it seems to me, represents the educational growth of activist organizations far better than the typical “tree” metaphor. For instance, learners in activist associations come together over genuine problems that are affecting them. These problems often emerge because the dominant culture has silenced, denigrated, or trivialized issues affecting these individuals. In fact, like the rhizome, the dominant culture often views activist organizations much like couchgrass: they are unwanted weeds! Consequently, there is usually no ready-made curriculum and no educator who has expertise or interest in functioning as the teacher. As a result, the learning is not based on a linear process of transmission from teacher to student. Rather, if the learners want to learn, they must investigate and compile their own content, develop their own learning activities, and teach one another. It is robust learning because the group must work collaboratively to bring their own education into being. It is learning that is in them, of them, for them, and by them. The learners learn because they “desire” to learn, that characteristic that Dewey thought to be the most important factor in learning.

Furthermore, in activist associations, the learners use their personal experiences to test expert opinions and abstract information. Consequently, the knowledge that they gather is not hierarchical or dualistic. Nor is it polarized as abstract versus concrete, fact versus feeling, or theory versus experience because knowledge is synthesized through personal experience and conversation and the learners become working theorists. Like the rhizome, the learning shoots off in every direction, so it is acentered and non-hierarchical. In addition, like the rhizome, all points of learning are connected internally and externally: not only are the body, mind, and emotions regarded as a whole, but there are intimate connections among the learners, the physical space, the environment, the subject matter, self-teaching and peer-teaching. The connections are so profuse as to make it difficult to discern where curriculum stops and learning begins, where learning stops and teaching begins.

The learning that takes place in these activist associations can be vigorous, but it is always chaotic. In fact, while educational metamorphoses tend to be relatively rare in schools, they are commonplace in activist associations. To an outside observer, it is hard to deny that learning and growth are occurring, yet, the learning is so dependent upon discussion, narrative, and experience that it confounds quantification. There are no standards by which it can be measured because the content and process are developing together. The learners themselves must collaboratively decide on direction, research subject matter, consider possibilities, ponder approaches, hypothesize outcomes, conceptualize strategies, integrate experience, and communicate insights. In other words, activist education wastes a great deal of time *thinking*.

As exemplified by activist organizations, then, rhizomatic growth is vigorous, but it is not efficient. Rhizomatic growth sends out offshoots, spreads, expands, and conquers, growing in and around established institutions and organizations, but it does not perform. It quickly establishes masses of roots, but the growth pattern is unpredictable. It follows profuse connections, but does not meet objectives. Rhizomatic growth can be described, but it cannot be quantified. Rhizomatic growth can be emulated, but it cannot be replicated.

Rhizomatic growth may seem radically different than what we see in classrooms, but that does not mean that it is a fluke. Rhizomes are replete in our society. They feed on desire, on creativity, on authentic problems. The recent protests in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya are rhizome. The spreading union-busting efforts that started in Wisconsin, as well as the protests against them, are rhizome. The Internet is rhizome.

If Deleuze and Guattari are correct that rhizomatic growth is always present, then adult educators can look for it in even more traditional classrooms. The question then becomes whether or not we can recognize such rhizomatic growth and, having recognized it, whether we will allow it some space or attempt to eradicate it like a pernicious weed growing unbidden in soil cultivated for other plants. We can ask: What purposes are driving the rhizome's chaos? Is the growth pattern working for good or for ill? We must determine whether we will celebrate and feed the desire, creativity, and authentic problems to allow it to spread, extend, and follow offshoots. We must determine if we will waste precious class time allowing students to dream, plan, consider, ponder, hypothesize, research, conceptualize, integrate, and communicate. For all too often chaos and vigor are forced into containers before the rhizome can gain a foothold. Understanding the working of the rhizome frees us to think of learners moving easily back and forth from learners to peer-teachers and creators of curriculum, to recognize and watch for the purpose that seems to be guiding the chaos.

Of course, not all chaos, not every unplanned activity, is educative, but neither are they all miseducative. The lens of rhizomatic growth helps us see differently, to appreciate the possibilities for learning to spring up unplanned, to be comfortable knowing that learning can be effective even when it is not predictable or measurable. The lens of rhizomatic growth helps us see differently, to appreciate learning that is effective even when it is not quick, predictable, or measurable. Connections can be built around, in, and between the lifeless learning objectives, rubrics, standardized test questions, assessments, and government mandates. Furthermore, the metaphor of the rhizome asserts the necessity of allowing our learners to waste time *thinking*.

Additionally, I would argue that the seemingly chaotic, but vigorous, persistent, and motivated growth of activist groups initiating, creating, and facilitating their own educations can serve as a lens for critiquing adult education in more traditional situations. For even though we may associate adult education in the abstract with transformation, the realities of contemporary adult education are often far from transformative. Yet, by recognizing, nurturing, and summoning rhizomatic growth among our learners we may indeed be able to throw off the postmodern malaise by consciously looking for examples of rhizomatic growth in our classrooms and critiquing our more traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Understanding educational growth as rhizome may help even those of us who are academics resist the ethic of efficiency that now pervades much of higher education with its demands for standardization and control. In the process we may be able to resist our own corporatization by embracing and encouraging education that is chaotic, unpredictable, vigorous, persistent, pervasive, acentered, non-hierarchical, interconnected. Comprehending education as rhizome frees us to celebrate the process of learning and teaching by wasting a great deal of time *thinking*.

References:

- Birden, S. (2004). The growth metaphor revisited: Activist education as rhizome. *Journal of Thought*, 39(3), 99-110.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone.
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1979). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1992). *The postmodern explained*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.