We Have Always Been Rhizomatic

Danah Henriksen
danah.henriksen@asu.edu

Punya Mishra
punya.mishra@asu.edu

The wisdom of the plants: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else – with the wind, an animal, human beings.
~ Deleuze and Guattari (1980, p. 11)

A 'rhizome' refers to a deeply interconnected branching network. Within the field of biology, the term denotes plant anatomy—a creeping rootstalk, or a horizontal underground plant stem that can produce the shoot and root systems of a new plant (Britannica, n.d.). But rhizomes also metaphorically point to the nature of knowledge itself, as Deleuze and Guattari (1980) used the term in regard to knowledge as a nonlinear network that connects any point to any other point. In speaking of rhizomatic networks, they speak to connections between chains of signs and symbols implicated in meaning making, organizations of power, and conditions surrounding the arts, sciences and social struggles. While this use of the term is relatively recent, the idea behind it is not, especially when we view knowledge as networked ideas that connect and interconnect through a complex and unordered array of nodes and links.

The rhizome has no beginning or end and no point of origin. Just as knowledge has no singular beginning, end, or absolute center point or origin. Even before the philosophical concept of rhizomes emerged, human knowledge was not vertically oriented in top-down linear chains— although it was often mischaracterized as linear within traditional views of education and pedagogy. In reality, knowledge has always been inextricably messy, complex, lateral, creeping, uncontrolled, and unbounded. It can produce new systems of knowledge, as a creeping rootstalk can produce systems of new plants.

Knowledge lives and breathes in the material, social, and cultural world among networks of ideas, people, elements, and circumstances. Thus, knowledge is often instantiated in particular tools, technologies and artifacts; and these tools, technologies and artifacts, in turn, influence how we think about, articulate, and disseminate knowledge. Consider a classic form of knowledge dissemination—the book. The book has often been understood as a concrete, linear, and stable form of knowledge presentation. As the central form of knowledge over a majority of recent human history, the book has influenced a traditional perception of knowledge as concrete, linear and stable. Yet, the rhizomatic nature of knowledge has always pushed against the constraints of the book.

Dictionaries and encyclopedias are old forms of rhizomatic texts. One could even argue that supposedly linear texts have rhizomatic properties, like footnotes, endnotes, and indices. There is the Talmud, with its heavy use of annotations and nested commentary; or there are Indian epics and story collections (such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Kathasaritsagara* and the *Panchatantra*), with their structure of nested stories, revealing ancient prototypes of hypertexts within a narrative framework. Contemporary authors have also used rhizomatic ideas to structure plots and narratives. *The Library of Babel*, a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, is a multi-layered parable about our attempt to make sense of the universe and a vision of a rhizomatic world (Borges, 1964). *Hopscotch,* a novel by Julio Cortazar (Cortazar, 1966) as a book, though outwardly conventional, can be read in any sequence whatsoever. Milorad Pavic's *The Dictionary of the Khazars*, published in two volumes (which differ from each other just in one paragraph) presents material to readers in a non-linear manner, allowing (or forcing) them to construct their own narrative (Pavic, 1988). Members of Oulipo (a French literary society dedicated to experimental writing) have developed various books and poems that have strong rhizomatic properties. Raymond Queaneau's, *A Story as You Like It* is a good example (Queaneau, 1986), which in its own way foreshadowed the "*Choose Your Own Adventure*" young adult fiction book series popularized in the 1980's (Jamison, 2022). Interactive texts also became popular in the 1980's with the publication of this series of books. Outside of literature, people have noticed the rhizomatic nature of Wittegenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1972).

At heart, rhizomatic texts point to a paradigm shift from conceptual schemes based on "center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity," toward acknowledging "multilinearity, nodes, links and networks." Before written language and texts came along, oral culture generally governed the production and spread of knowledge—where the telling of stories, and spread of information was typically multi-nodal and spread like root systems throughout cultures and networks, in fluidly unsystematic ways.

Knowledge within traditional texts often has often been shoehorned into seemingly linear structures, to accommodate the word-to-word, page-to-page, or chapter-to-chapter, flow of ideas in a book, article, or other form of text. Yet, some of the rhizomatic features or instances of texts that we pointed to show us how knowledge has often strained at the seams of textual structures—seeking ways to slip the structure, move around in it, and make new connections or leaps. As newer networked technologies and phenomena like the internet have emerged, knowledge has found new ways to sprawl, connect, and network itself rhizomatically. Fundamentally, the Internet and its hypertexts are almost "embarrassing literal embodiments" (Landow, 1992) of certain crucial aspects of rhizomatic texts, specifically those relating to intertextuality, narrative, creativity and complicating the power, roles and functions of readers and writers.

When we suggest that knowledge has always been rhizomatic, our point is not there is nothing new under the sun—but rather, that the metaphor of the rhizome has always been implicitly present in the nature of knowledge as an unending network of connections and interconnections. It is a powerful metaphor, and new tools and digital technologies have affordances that allow rapid,

networked, and often sprawling uninhibited communication that embodies the metaphor more powerfully than many pre-digital tools could. This has itself led to global cultural shifts in societies, and new perceptions of knowledge.

The chapters in this book speak to this new perception or re-conception of knowledge, and how it intersects with the direction and future of contemporary global society. These chapters examine the rhizomatic nature of knowledge and learning in powerful and (appropriately) branching ways, befitting the uncentered emerging global order that knowledge exists within. Across a range of chapters and connection points, the authors look at the theoretical foundations of the rhizome, examining its epistemic roots and meanings, and contextualizing the rhizome in the shifting landscape of our world, and in our use of language, tools and technologies. Importantly, they consider the meaning of a rhizomatic view of knowledge within education and learning—what it means for certain education contexts, curricula, learning ecologies, and instantiations of technologies or technological constructs like social media, artificial intelligence, predictive technologies, and others. This book offers a thoughtfully-developed understanding of rhizomatic thinking and knowledge—not as a philosophical abstraction, but within the living breathing world of learning and education—showing how it opens possibilities for seeing new connectivities, relationalities, and a more organic, ecological, and future-oriented perspective on learning and knowledge.

References

Britannica (n.d.). Rhizome. In *Encyclopedia Britannica.* Retrieved November 3, 2022, from
https://www.britannica.com/science/rhizome

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1980). *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* Vol. 2, trans. Brian
Massumi. Athlone.

Jamison, L. (2022). The enduring allure of choose your own adventure books. *New Yorker.*
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/09/19/the-enduring-allure-of-choose-your-own-
adventure-books