Rhizomic Thinking: Towards a New Consideration of Social Studies Practice

Jim Parsons
Bryan Clarke
University of Alberta

Social studies teachers engage a vast subject area within which they can enlist a wide scope of possible curriculum and pedagogy choices. Despite the opportunity to engage students with an abundance of potentially fruitful themes, topics, and ideas, social studies teaching can be captured by the need to cover specific content in particular ways. Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983), in Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, would connect such an agenda to the capitalistic machine that shrinks potential sources into what Foucault (1980) sees as tendencies to seek control rather than the openness of becoming. We contend that Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome opens new lines of flight in social studies curricula and works to revolutionize social studies as a subject area that often has been over-standardized and taught as one-size-fits-all. We also contend that rhizomic thinking can renew how students see the world and transform how they interpret events, epochs, eras, and cultures by drawing from rhizomic research’s bamboo-like qualities.

Key Words: new social studies practice, rhizomic thinking, social studies philosophy, educational research, social studies research

Introduction

In the summer of 2007 in Eugene, Oregon, Wolfgang Rehmert created the Rizomatic Orchestra. What makes the Rizomatic Orchestra so interesting is its approach to creating music. The orchestra plays and thinks like rhizomes to create music for the moment that is literally unmatched. Led by improvisational guitar virtuoso Wolfgang Rehmert, the music is not only improvised, it can never be duplicated. According to Chris Castiglione’s (2009) blog “Digital Music Becomes (more) Rhizomatic,” music mimics inherent characteristics of the Internet that can be understood using Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) work, A Thousand Plateaus, suggests how rhizomes may be used as an apt metaphor for describing how thought and work can extend in all directions and have multiple entryways. Although the concept often is used to describe how the Internet works, it can be used to better understand other areas of thinking such as, music.

This paper, however, is not about music: it is about teaching and learning in social studies. Our goal here is to suggest how rhizomic or interchangeably rhizomatic thinking (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) can be understood specifically within the context of social studies as a subject. We believe rhizomes represent ways of thinking that allow social studies students to see and interpret events and activities differently and, perhaps, transform how students come to see the world (inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s use of rhizome for texts, we are applying term rhizome to thinking). Rhizomatic thinking also offers social studies teachers both a way to encourage students to approach and understand events and to provide insights into what the future of school learning might look like. The ubiquitous nature of technology will make
rhizomatic thinking even more widespread; and who better to provide technological leadership than teachers who care about social contexts in a world of burgeoning possibilities.

We have titled this paper “Rhizomic Thinking” because we were inspired by how a rhizome like bamboo works in relationship to thought. Bamboo is a woody grass that grows mostly in Asia, but could grow anywhere. Bamboo’s unique root structures, rhizomes, grow quickly and pop up everywhere. In bamboo forests of Southeast Asia, the rhizomes network and connect, intertwining roots and nodes throughout the forests. Although becoming popular as a garden plant in North America, bamboo is a problem when it becomes invasive: lurking everywhere and connecting to anything, often appearing where it is not wanted. This invasive brilliance is the key to bamboo’s survival despite challenging environments.

It is easy to see why rhizomes have become a metaphor and concept for how the Internet works and grows. Many of us, old enough to remember a time before the Internet, marvel at the interconnecting networks one can now access. For social studies teachers, defining terms, catching the news, exploring current topics, or finding others who share our ideas is fast and easy. One’s constantly growing library is merely a search engine away. Such rhizomic thinking is almost second nature for young people. Like rhizomes themselves, the defining characteristics of youth include connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and cartography. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) imply, if young people can be thought of as rhizomes, any point of a rhizome can connect to any other point. Youth have few firewalls. They celebrate privacy, and simultaneously welcome infringement. They build barriers (think of iPods) to eliminate barriers (think of listening to music from anywhere), becoming more rhizomatic as they do; their presence is like an invasion to a newly envisioned world.

Thinking in Social Studies

What does rhizomatic thinking have to do with teaching and learning in social studies? In this section, we suggest ways that social studies teachers can help their students take advantage of rhizomic thinking woven throughout the following topics:

Think like a Rhizome – Find Helpful Information from Anywhere

For many years, social studies resources have been standardized—vetted and approved by central authorities—mostly in textbook form. Although e-textbooks exist, current social studies teachers are more likely to creatively synthesize classroom resources from a myriad of places. Although we believe it is no longer desirable in social studies to use only standard resources, our tendency as teachers is to stay close to traditional resources. Like rhizomes, useful insights can emerge in a variety of places and students should be encouraged to creatively seek those resources anywhere. An obvious rhizomatic source would be the Internet, as search engines allow students to access information widely. Although such searching carries a need for critical scrutiny, teaching such scrutiny can itself be an important social studies lesson in critical thinking.

Metaphorical differences between trees and rhizomes are noted by Deleuze and Guattari (1983). Trees, for example, organize knowledge along systematic and hierarchical principles, stemming from and flowing to one root system. Rhizomes, however, uproot the philosophy of trees; deconstruct their systematic logic; and provide unities made along lines, layers, and plateaus. In the Western world, tree-like thinking has been our tradition. Students, though, can be taught to break free of ‘tree thinking’ or staying safely close to a single knowledge root. They
can be taught to also actively seek unusual insights: conversing, creating, and moving like rhizomes along planes of immanence (ways of thinking in the now).

Social studies teachers can make it a rule to break rules about where information comes from and to work against standardized thinking. Thinking outside the box—even ignoring that boxes exist—revises how and where we obtain insights. Serendipity invites wonderful opportunities from the places we don’t usually seek, but might. Students should be encouraged to build upon rhizomatic characteristics such as connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and cartography. This encouragement comes with the caveat that teachers should establish rules and provide healthy discernment about where students should not go, based upon moral, legal, and safety issues.

**Embrace the Temporary**

The temporary nature of rhizomes is suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (1983). They believe our desire to see and create categories constrains our vision so we can observe neither individual nor contextual flows nor the intensities of life that happen at differing speeds, in different ways, within different contexts. They believe life shifts, connects, and diversifies as possibilities are produced. These processes are far from linear; and, because people constantly move from one state into another, results are far from predictable. But, these processes can be seen if searched for.

Two concepts—immanence and univocity—are explicated when Deleuze and Guattari (1983) speak about rhizomes. For them, living on the plane of immanence suggests that social studies students can learn to live fully in the moment, breaking from representational fixations that, in social studies, always seem to be past or future oriented. Students might learn to develop a seize-the-day mentality that opens them to creative thinking that does not always seek transcendental points of reference but allows each day or event to be a day or event unto itself.

Univocity suggests that social studies can creatively bring subject and object together into a novel ontological system by following Spinoza’s idea of univocity (one voice) instead of the transcendent idealist and categories-based ontology of Plato and Aristotle. Cartesian dualism continues to posit two unchanging substances: matter and spirit. Univocity discounts this classic subject and object split, bringing insight to “one voice.” Because, ontologically, substance grants existence, and for Deleuze and Guattari (1987), substance is in a continuum of change that infinitely and inexhaustibly produces different expressions of itself. These configurations are complexities of physical matter, human groups or networks, and other manifestations of multiplicities. If followed, this way of thinking could allow social studies students to conceptualize change more fluidly. Although univocity is a complex and nuanced concept, for our purposes in this paper, we define univocity as living in and being fully present to teaching and learning moments, without seeking a transcendent ideal against which to measure or compare life.

Rhizomic thinking sees the potential of developing ideas when dynamic fluidity is a given. The significance of rhizomes as a metaphor is that their growth systems are far less predictable than the growth systems of trees, which categorize knowledge into predictable patterns (like the growth rings of a tree) whose goal is to plot points and fix orders. Rhizomes situate relationships to one another dynamically and, because they do, make present fluctuating realities. The result is that new concepts grow and proliferate, coming together to create
assemblages (temporary collections of ideas and concepts, viable in particular contexts only for a time).

If social studies’ students can be taught to see the dynamic tension and fluidity in human actions, they will not fall victim to simplifying understanding, believing that what happens in one human context will necessarily happen in another. Truly, humans share characteristics and act similarly in different times, cultures, and circumstances. Humans also act differently, depending upon context, background, and a host of other factors. It is perhaps wiser as social studies students to see generalizations as helpful, but temporary, ways to understand life—scientific discovery is a good example—and to map possibilities that might exist. Useful questions for students might be: “What would happen if contexts or circumstances changed?” or “What contexts or circumstances might have changed (or could change) human actions or perceptions?”

See the Spaces In-Between: Look for New Networks of People and Ideas

The fruitfulness of better understanding the in-between spaces and dimensions of human social activities is suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (1983). They explain how networks of relationships are formed, how concepts create shapes and lines (territorialize), how these shapes and lines break down (determinitorialize), and how patterns might be observed whenever and wherever activity occurs. The resulting and temporary patterns of authentic complexity help explain connections between and across systems, people, and ideas. Rhizomes, as Amy Herzog (2000) suggests, help us see life “as an assemblage of images in flux with the world of images,” because living remains the becoming of true creation, where thought introduces the “stutters and hesitations” that help us access life’s movements so that our becoming carries us beyond ourselves (p. 16). Although she is speaking about using rhizomes to better understand film, her note that people live intermezzo and move rhizomatically rings true. Approaching social studies rhizomatically no longer makes the teacher the center of attention or the one responsible for carrying the agenda. A social studies classroom can open to students’ becoming.

While living intermezzo is no easy task for teachers who have curriculum to attend to and assessments to give, the in-between can be a dynamic space to occupy because it is so vibrant and surprising. Without seeing human activity (the content area of social studies) in its flexibility, the primary focus moves arborescently through teacher, to root system: all seeming to lead in particular, pre-determined orders. Teaching as becoming (seeing humans and contexts as constantly connecting and changing) offers a different way to consider social studies content and student involvement. When social studies teachers become intermediaries and not centers of content, the process opens to student learning and the ensuing multiplicities.

Social studies teachers teach a subject area that has always been made up of multiplicities. The premise underlying Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas (1983) is that a multiplicity of realities and possibilities are possible for any event or idea; thus, social studies becomes a matter of perspective. Our most basic concept, citizenship, has been a contested term throughout the history of our subject area. To teach social studies, one must engage many considerations: these include: the teacher's identity, experiences, and philosophical background.

Rhizomic thinking offers a revised theoretical framework as a provocative way to think about social studies as a subject area and social studies teachers’ professional learning. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concepts of difference and multiplicities—rhizomes and their ways of creating assemblages (things that connect or interact)—help us analyze and examine the nature of social studies and the way teachers learn to teach this dynamic subject area. Social studies
lends itself to considerations of multiplicities along planes of immanence. As a subject area, social studies always contests different ways of seeing and understanding knowledge from disparate human desiring machines. For Deleuze and Guattari, life as a machine means that we look at life as functions and connections instead of imagining a fixed order, purpose, or end. Deleuze and Guattari are thinkers of creation, revolution, and the actual. They are eminently concerned with the transformation of this world and its desire. They engage the in-betweens and the marginalized, productive associations that would benefit social studies teachers and students.

**Become Cartographers: Create Maps of Movement and Insights**

Rhizomes grow, but do not reproduce themselves. This means that, for social studies, one historical or social event can never truly represent another. For example, historical conditions that sparked the start of one war can never fully explain the start of another war. Another example, perhaps centers on reasons why one U.S. President or Canadian Prime Minister was elected will never be the same reasons for the election of another. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) believe that seeking similarities for comparison are never fully useful explanations for how humans or the environment act; instead, rhizome-thinking or seeking differences will help social studies’ students see and encounter the world differently. Instead of seeing the history of humans in the world as concrete—shaped and understood once and for all—students can seek to discover how the world they view is dynamically transformed as different humans engage different sites contextually. The world transforms before their eyes in ways that rule out any solid, certain reproductions they might hope to make. Instead, mapping these contexts of similarities and differences can offer social studies’ students truer insights. As noted before, linear logic represents tracing reproductions or seeing what already exists as ready-made and understandable. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the world should be mapped. Mapping is productive rather than reproductive because maps are oriented towards experimental contacts with real life. Maps can be drawn in many ways, but they are always open to reconstructing new connections. In rhizomatic thinking, cartography means mapping movements. People who use maps start from anywhere: this includes where they are, which becomes their middle; then, they consider and create paths to where they hope to go. Tracing, on the other hand, works to pursue a given path from start to finish.

If students, for example, come to think of human history as a large map, they can think of humans being in various places on that map and moving anywhere. They can extend maps to create contextual connections. Maps allow novel considerations. Simply stated, map-making allows one to ask questions like: What would happen if we added or removed an element? How would things change? Mapping would then allow students to map how whole assemblages might change as they added, subtracted, connected, opened, or modified and allow them to see plausible affects on the overall system. Finally, maps allow social studies students to see things in their worlds by living, learning, and changing in the moment.

**Share Work Openly**

In the botanical sense, a rhizome is a root system some plants (lilies, orchids, ginger, and bamboo) use to spread themselves. The roots of most plants generally point downward; however, a rhizome is a horizontal root system that runs parallel to the ground’s surface. The
plant sends shoots up from nodes in the rhizome, creating what look like many separate plants. These seemingly unrelated plants are actually all connected, through a system not immediately visible to the eye. In this way, rhizomes spread and extend territory and expand their influence and connectedness.

The Internet has allowed and encouraged rhizomatic methods for sharing information. In 1984 (2001, updated edition), journalist Steven Levy introduced the term hacker ethic in his book *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*. He believed a hacker’s ethic was based upon access, freedom of information, and improving the quality of life. Founder of the Free Software Foundation and old-school hacker, Richard Stallman, dreamed of creating free software for the people. He believed hackers should share knowledge with those who could benefit because knowledge was a resource that should be used rather than wasted. The same is true in social studies. Democracy, a core foundation of North American social studies curricula, is based upon the belief that citizens benefit when knowledge is accessible rather than when knowledge is hidden and that citizens working together are wiser than citizens working as individuals. Sharing social studies’ knowledge can rhizomatically spread ideas around and extend a rhizome’s human territory. Sharing knowledge allows insight to arise along old or new lines. One can never erase shared ideas because they rebound time and time again. This trait is defined as as signifying ruptures. When one file-sharing site is shut down, others replace it. Sharing information can go viral in seconds and change the world in ways never before possible. The exponential potential for classroom ‘ruptures’ of learning creates amazing opportunities for social studies.

**Remix Culture**

Rhizomes, as Deleuze and Guattari describe (1983) send out lines of flight. Lines of flight in music refer to the fact that a song can never be re-played exactly the same by a musician: no matter how minuscule, there will always be some variation in tempo or timbre. In addition, lines of flight encompass derivatives. For example, remix culture extends to the many derivative works sung by amateurs on social media sites. Remix culture thus expresses the rhizomatic qualities of heterogeneity as well as multiplicity. This culture is akin to the computer world of Apple® vs. Google®. Both can be critiqued, but one standout difference is their philosophy of information distribution. Google® is more rhizomatic and open source; Apple® more arboretic and locked into capital. Whether truly an example of rhizome or not, Google® promotes open source rather than locked systems. Content resonates poorly with students when it comes ‘locked’ (pre-packaged) in a binder, PowerPoint, or video from those who make curriculum for a living. Better than packaged curricula that points students along a linear path towards a predetermined end are teachers who see the richness of the culture evident in their classroom without trying to orchestrate a replication of a fixed curriculum.

Teaching from the mindset that both curriculum and learning in social studies is best developed as it is re-mixed between what one has already and where one might be going can be a liberating way to celebrate the natural diversity students bring to classrooms. When social studies teachers and students become aware of the possibilities of remixing culture and knowledge as ways of learning, the result is rhizomatic learning that does not come from kits but inherently resides in teachers developing social studies curriculum. Work on student engagement (Taylor & Parsons, 2011) suggests that students become more engaged when they talk more about what they have learned. We believe they should talk more about the content of
their learning, what learning means to them, the cultures they identify with, and the processes of their learning. “Conversational pedagogies” (Parsons, 2012) include assessment for learning, differentiated instruction, and inquiry-based or problem-based learning are productive ways to promote student engagement. When students are able to share their stories and ‘remix’ them with other circulating stories of the classroom, school, and world, they gain a glimpse of their rhizomatic existence and are able to see the importance of their connections with all things: human and environment.

**Live as a Rhizome: Connect to Build Classroom Community**

The rhizomatic environment can become a way social studies teachers actively live, display, breathe, and view the world. Living as a rhizome is not something one can rehearse, like a teacher working to establish classroom control by creating perfectly articulated lesson plans. The concept of a rhizome can help students view themselves as connected to their environment, Jasmina Sermijn, Patrick Devlieger, and Gerrit Loots (2008) suggest. Rhizomatic thinking helps turn social studies from a subject isolated and distinct from others into a subject constructed and connected by the community where one resides – including the classroom.

To think and live within a rhizomatic community helps break free from unhealthy self-foci towards a sense of connection to other students also in the process of becoming. Instead of seeing curriculum and assessment as a competitive way to set students apart and against others, students as rhizomes would be encouraged to view their lives with those around them as deeply interconnected and interdependent realities. These connections include family and relatives but also those in assemblage with them through their neighborhood, the stores where they shop, the places they hang out, and their schools. Student’s stories are no longer told with individualistic centerpieces, but include assemblages of stories of other people and other things woven together.

Finally, living like a rhizome allows teachers to relax classroom control. Classroom management seems, for young teachers, like a life preserver on a swirling ocean. The techniques taught offer a sense of stability for the challenge of hands-on practice in day-to-day classroom chaos. When teachers worry about classroom control, some days are simple matters of survival. Rhizomatic thinking encourages teachers to risk and release classroom control. This challenge is difficult for beginning teachers or those unwilling to open themselves to interconnecting with students’ lives in ways that feel risky. Alternatively, what would one envision? A classroom built upon fear and control, subjugated by a hierarchical binary of teacher over student? Is it worth allowing life to return to its original difficulty for students and social studies teachers? Could we give up the commodifying impulses that place teachers over students to see students as only economic machines looking for jobs? A ringing challenge is provided by Lara Handsfield (2007).

A key question for me as a teacher educator is how to encourage teachers to recognize and actively nurture the production of difference at the same time that they may be engaged as subjects of the state in the project of standardization. This is no small task. What might be the usefulness for teachers of rhizomatic ways of thinking about teaching and learning?” (p. 249)

**Develop New Concepts, Discourse, and Postures**

How we speak and position ourselves with the world reflects how we live in the world. Language is a powerful transformer of the reality we see or ignore. Rhizomatic thinking shifts paradigms from concepts that objectify and fall prey to reductionism to paradigms that creatively
and connectively point out difference, not to compare against but to celebrate. Deleuze and Guattari discuss what they call a rhizomatic posture that positions itself in the world in a specific way. This posture, as Peter Smagorinsky, Sharon Murphy Augustine, and Karen Gallas (2006) elaborate, “redistributes authority by sharing intellectual capital and is inclusive with respect to the stakeholders’ multiple perspectives on classroom processes, relationships, and outcomes” (p. 87). A rhizome is “binary busting” and could be used to reposition how social studies educators develop curriculum around concepts and postures open to a world of difference rather than simplifying content towards constructions of similarity (Smagorinsky, Augustine, and Gallas, p. 88). While conceptual clarity can leave students certain they understand, complexification keeps conversation going and allows perplexity to become a common classroom posture.

We recognize the challenges inherent in reframing social studies, but believe shifting from a standardized and solidified search for a shared, basic social studies knowledge is a positive shift in a changing world. Rather than continuing to add content to the curriculum, making social studies a subject area where all students gain the same foundational understandings, using rhizomatic thinking engages the study of humans and events in a world dynamic with information and possibilities. We believe rhizomatic thinking can help social studies create a curriculum that outlines ideas, concepts, and events that are important to different geographical areas, better maps globalized contexts and human networks, and encourages a freedom of daily choices teachers might use to engage their teaching as rhizomes living among rhizomes.

**Conclusion**

When we turn on the water faucet or, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983) would say, when our domestic water machine turns on, our human forms have become a translation point in a flow of water that goes from river to processing station to pipes to faucets to mouth to stomach to arteries to cells to veins to bladder to toilets to pipes to processing station to river to ocean to vapor to clouds to rain and back to the river. This is how philosophers Deleuze and Guattari would suggest we look at how life works. This paper has explored how a rhizomic way of social studies thinking can change how social studies is taught.

We have suggested that rhizomic social studies teaching can be used to create non-linear, non-binary ways of thinking about social and human phenomena. By embracing the seeming chaos of life and allowing natural orders to be seen and mapped, social studies might help students emerge from preconceived ideas that sometimes artificially control historical moments and capture historical insight within a framework of power. When control is artificially placed upon dynamic life, the flow of the moment is broken and insight is hidden. But, by studying the moment rhizomatically, social studies might help create flows of immanence and insight that open understanding more widely.

Social studies is a subject area of difference: it engages different insight and knowledge, different ways of seeing ideas or events, different values, and different semiotics. Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas can help both teachers and students learn to grapple with dynamic theories that are always open to possibilities. Teaching social studies, thus, means creating possible realities for both teachers and the students, and heterogeneous ways of explaining how the world is seen through networks of desiring machines that create temporary assemblages.
We believe social studies teachers can help open up more possibilities for observation, reaction, discussion, and critique. The ways in which curriculum discourses for social studies have been situated within disciplinary traditions tend to ignore the seemingly incoherent and unproductive possibilities of acknowledging and moving beyond notions of disciplines. We also believe that Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) ideas of multiplicities reveal new sites for exposing the ways social studies – as studies in humanity and the world – can recognize the differences among the disciplines that comprise the social studies. Social studies, thus, can become a rhizomatic, rather than an arborescent, study. We believe Deleuze and Guattari are thinkers of creation, revolution, and the actual who care about global transformation.

The interesting thing about Deleuze and Guattari’s work is that, although emerging thirty years ago with the publication of *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* in 1983, it has come to present thought generally within the past decade. Looking forward to the next ten years, teachers influenced by their concepts can embrace trends that support connectivity, heterogeneity, and multiplicities as ways to expand new ways of knowing. Because a key principle of the rhizome is connectivity, seeing things rhizomatically means focusing on the connections between and within what might otherwise be thought of as discrete entities. Multiplicity includes both the multiple and variations of the original. Difference is about intensities and flows and force, rather than about subjects. This shift in perspective could revolutionize social studies and teacher’s approaches to pedagogy as it decenters the subject and opens to the multiple.

Finally, Deleuze and Guattari (1983) see human agency differently. Subjects are not the agent; rather, agency emerges from the distribution of forces between elements in a network. Thought, desire, creativity come from elsewhere, from outside, in the tangle between mapped neurons, objects, and forces. Thinking with the rhizome means mapping connections, which is ultimately an unbounded exercise in experimentation. Deleuze and Guattari also argue that lines of flight are primary. The question becomes how matter and energy in our chaotic universe with infinite potential become drawn into organized systems, some of which become so mired in residue that they are rigid and nearly inescapable.

Shifting towards seeking to understand *difference* as a primary concept allows a release from hierarchies that restrain creativity: hierarchies of knowledge, of teachers over students, of certain epochs over others, of one ethnicity over another. Already in motion, teachers can contribute their specific competencies without embracing or reinforcing hierarchies. Thus, we become a world of “leaderless,” organizations (see *Starfish and the Spider* by Ori Brafman). Recognizing, in a world of Internet hyper-connectivity, that not every aspect of the human social milieu can be captured in the curriculum could open the potential for teachers to develop regionalized communities of knowledge while, at the same time, develop connections all over the world without heavy restraints on forcing specific knowledge on every student. Our young people are already acting rhizomatically in multiple ways; maybe, in this case, they will become our teachers.

**References**


**Web-Based References**


**Authors’ Bios**

**Jim Parsons** has been a Professor in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta for 38 years. He is engaged in social studies education and religious and moral education. He is currently Director of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement. Email: jim.parsons@ualberta.ca

**Bryan Clarke** is a doctoral student in the Department of Secondary Education and is Chaplain at the University of Alberta. His interests are in science, hermeneutics, and religious education.