RHIZOACTIVITY: TOWARD A POSTMODERN THEORY OF LIFELONG LEARNING*

DAE JOONG KANG
University of Georgia, Athens

Although the loss of certainty in the age of postmodernism is questioning knowledge production in general, the emerging discourse of lifelong learning demands a different theory of adult learning in particular. This article aims to offer a conceptual tool for describing learning in adulthood in terms of postmodern and lifelong learning conditions. It approaches the problem from the images of learning and learner that adult education scholarship has produced and identifies that adult learning theory attempts to signify foundational certainty by using binary-trapped adjectives. The author argues that insofar as we continue with the adjective-plus-learning theory, we cannot escape binary thought. The author proposes a new concept, rhizoactivity, to navigate multiplicity of learning in a postmodern world. Anticipated benefits of employing rhizoactivity in understanding learning are discussed in terms of postmodern and lifelong learning conditions.

Keywords: adult learning; lifelong learning; postmodernism; rhizome

Adult education scholarship in North America, with founding fathers such as Lindeman and Knowles, understands learning as a lifelong pursuit embedded in everyday life experience. Lindeman (1926) declares that “the whole of life is learning” (p. 6) and “experience is the adult learner’s living textbook” (p. 10). Knowles (1970) emphasizes that adults have a lot of prior experiences and can manage them in a self-directed way. Various adult learning theories thereafter have been produced by analyzing characteristics of experiences and the nature of self-direction in adulthood. If a theory provides a lens through which we can

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DAE JOONG KANG earned his PhD in adult education from the University of Georgia, Athens, in August 2006. He serves as the policy advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister, Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, South Korea (e-mail: kdaejoong@gmail.com).

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construct reality, adult learning theories help us shape images of adult learners and learning. In turn, these images are appropriated to teaching adults in various educational settings.

What is the dominant image of learner and learning that adult education scholarship has produced? What kinds of learning theory have been developed and used in teaching adults? In this article, I review key adult learning theories through purposefully posited questions of how and where the learner encounters and processes everyday life experiences. The “how” question focuses on the concept of reflection and contributes to the development of, for example, experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991). The “where” question is about the analysis of context and produces the distinction of formal, informal, and nonformal learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). It also contributes to the development of the idea of learning as a sociocultural practice, critical learning (Welton, 1995) and/or situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

It appears that prominent descriptions of learning are identified in the form of “adjective-plus-learning theory.” The adjective, such as experiential, transformative, and situated, seems to describe some essence of learning. If the adjective intends to describe a universal characteristic of learning, is it possible to say that learning is always, for example, experiential, transformative, or situated? If it is, are these adjectives compatible with one another? If, in contrast, the adjective is simply to describe a certain aspect of adult learning, then learning theory is always limited and closed by the meaning of the adjective. Whatever the adjective means, each theory approaches learning from that certain standpoint and excludes the others. Similar critiques have been raised by scholars who are working with postmodernism or poststructuralism (Bagnall, 1999; Briton, 1996; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997; Usher & Edwards, 1994). Objecting to the grand narrative that has sustained the Enlightenment project, postmodern critique rejects locating human actions, including learning, within any foundational certainty. The use of adjectives in theorizing adult learning could be read as an attempt to signify authentic certainty that leads to technological solutions in teaching whether the adjectives intend to describe universality or partiality of adult learning. This certainty is questioned. At the turn of the millennium, Wilson and Hayes (2000) diagnose the loss of certainty as one of the conditions framing adult education scholarship in their introductory chapter to the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*. The loss of certainty or the certainty of uncertainty—the so-called postmodern condition—became a point of departure in exploring theories in adult education.

The postmodern condition is closely related to the reemerging discourse of lifelong learning in the field of adult education. Although lifelong learning has been used by some international organizations such as UNESCO since the early 1970s mainly for humanitarian purposes, it did not gain much attention in the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. Lifelong learning became a popular policy slogan in the 1990s in the context of globalization, the aging society, and the rise of new
information technology (Dehmel, 2006). National governments around the world use lifelong learning to reorganize their adult education policies with an emphasis on competence development and job qualification systems (Illeris, 2004). The focus of lifelong learning has shifted from humanitarian to economic objectives. It is taken for granted that lifelong learning could enhance employability in an uncertain, risky job market. People need to acquire knowledge and skills endlessly, since knowledge and skills change so quickly. Nothing lasts permanently. The condition of lifelong learning is similar to the postmodern description of the condition of knowledge (Edwards & Usher, 1998, 2001). The discourse of lifelong learning potentially expands the theoretical exploration of adult education beyond pedagogical applicability, because there are many more things that we learn in our lives than are taught in educational settings. The discourse of lifelong learning breaks the boundary of education in general and opens up loose spaces for different metaphors and theories of learning (Edwards & Usher, 1998). Yet there is a lack of theory and scarce empirical research in lifelong learning. As a result, lifelong learning as a policy slogan would fail to achieve whatever aims it presents (Edwards, Ranson & Strain, 2002).

The purpose of this article is to offer a different conceptual tool for describing learning in adulthood in terms of postmodern and/or lifelong learning conditions. This article argues that insofar as we continue with the "adjective plus" way of understanding learning, we cannot escape the Cartesian dualism that is a pillar of the Enlightenment project. By focusing on the use of adjectives in theorizing learning in adulthood, this article adds a different aspect to the current postmodern critique of the technological tendency in adult learning theory. This critique, however, does not intend to deny the need for adjectives; as postmodern analysis of language has revealed, the adjective is inaccurate yet necessary. The critique, rather, is interested in the function of the adjective and seeks different connections with it from the postmodern perspective. This article attempts these connections with the concept of rhizoactivity. Rhizo, the prefix, is borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/1987) image of "rhizome" to capture the multiplicity of learning that always makes connections to anything else and pursues heterogeneity. Activity is borrowed from cultural-historical activity theory or the socio-cultural approach of human cognition (Chaiklin & Lave, 1996; Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Wertsch, Río, & Alvarez, 1995). Rhizoactivity is proposed as a conceptual tool to produce an image of learning/learner in a postmodern world. I will discuss this concept later in the article.

This article is divided into five parts. The first two parts examine the various adjective-plus-learning theories in terms of two major concepts—reflection and context—derived from purposefully posited questions of how and where the learner encounters and processes everyday life experiences. This examination identifies ongoing binary thought in the adjective plus way of image making of the adult learner. Then, I will discuss how the postmodern critique deals with binary thought and propose an alternative guiding question to produce a different
image of lifelong learning. In the last two sections, I will discuss how the concept of rhizoactivity helps us understand adult learning differently and posit the meaning of rhizoactivity in terms of broad adult learning theory building.

**REFLECTION**

The concept of reflection is at the core of answering the question of how we process everyday life experience. Reflection is a key to turning experience into learning (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, a prominent adjective-plus-learning theory, assumes that experience can be grasped in two ways—by apprehension or comprehension. Although apprehension grasps concrete experiences, comprehension is a way of grasping abstract concepts. Both kinds of experiences are transformed into knowledge and meaning by appreciation and criticism, which are two components of reflection. Appreciation involves a judgment of both value and fact. It is a process of affirmation based on belief, trust, and conviction, and it is governed by extra-rationalities, such as affection and intuition. In contrast, criticism is based on skepticism and doubt. It is a logical and rational process that deals with abstract concepts. Kolb acknowledges the dialectical relationship between criticism and appreciation in the production of knowledge and meaning. However, he argues that "the highest level of learning" (p. 66) begins with concrete experience followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and ends with active experiment. Active experiment is the application of meaning and knowledge that provides another concrete experience. This experiential learning cycle prioritizes criticism over appreciation by placing the role of rationality at the core. What is appreciated in the reflective observation stage must be filtered by abstract conceptualization to be reliable and applicable knowledge and meaning. Therefore, for Kolb, reflection is ultimately a rational process even though it has a component of extra-rationality.

Rationality over extra-rationality in reflection is a salient theme in Mezirow's (1990, 1991, 2000) transformative learning theory. To Mezirow, meaning schemes enable us to grasp experience. Mezirow (2000) defines meaning schemes as "sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments—that we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality" (p. 18). Meaning schemes usually operate implicitly and arbitrarily to determine what we see and how we see it. They suggest a line of action that we tend to follow automatically and constitute points of view that are expressed dimensions of a meaning perspective or a frame of reference. The childhood socialization process, often affected by emotionally charged relationships with parents and other mentors, shapes our meaning perspective. The meaning perspective is strengthened, extended, and refined by life experiences. Transformative learning theory explores how this meaning perspective can be changed. Mezirow argues that only critical reflection makes transformative learning possible. It is not easy, therefore, to foster perspective
transformation, because our meaning perspective anchors on to our values and sense of self. Learners usually dismiss challenges to their meaning perspective by ignoring them as “distorting, deceptive, ill-intentioned, or crazy” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). Therefore, to make transformative learning happen, in Mezirow’s view, critical rational reflection must overcome emotionally charged meaning schemes. The rationality must be able to control the extra-rationality in the process of transformation.

Both Kolb and Mezirow use the adjectives, experiential and transformative, respectively, with a certain assumption that rationality is at the core of reflection. What is experiential and what is transformative depend on rationality. Although they are aware of extra-rationality such as emotion, bodily feeling, spirituality, and/or intuition, they either disregard or deemphasize it. Moreover, extra-rationality is often viewed as blocking learning. This is the exact manifestation of Cartesian dualism. Mezirow’s theory has been challenged extensively in this regard (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Merriam, 2004; Tennant, 1993). Empirical studies with Mezirow’s transformative learning theory uncover the roles of extra-rational influence in fostering perspective transformation (Taylor, 1997, 2000). In the same vein, Michelson (1998) argues that Kolb’s experiential learning theory assumes the dualism of reflection and experience, which is a representation of “the mind-body split and the privileging of mind over body” (p. 218). This split body becomes the object of discipline or management and is consequently excluded from the learning process (Fenwick, 2003b).

The shadow side of Kolb and Mezirow’s theories of learning comes to the fore of adult learning theory in the name of embodied learning (Gustafson, 1999), somatic learning (Beaudoin, 1999; Kerka, 2002), and/or spiritual learning (English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; English & Gillen, 2000; Hart & Holton, 1993). These are relatively new adjective-plus-learning theories that overtly address extra-rationality and disrupt the overemphasis on rationality. Honoring the role of extra-rationality certainly opens a new way in theorizing adult learning. However, redressing the nature of reflection in these theories may fall into the same binary trap that subsumes both experiential and transformative learning privileging rationality over extra-rationality. The new learning theories, by using certain adjectives, conversely close themselves into the other end of the Cartesian dualism. The adjective-plus-learning theory developed out of the concept of reflection is under the rationality and extra-rationality binary thought at large.

**CONTEXT**

The question of where the learner encounters and processes his or her experience has produced another direction for theorizing adult learning that focuses on an analysis of the context in which the learner and experience reside. Experience as a source of learning is embedded in the context. We learn from our interaction with the other people, events, and occurrences around us. Knowledge and meaning
are always produced within a context. Our interaction within a context is always mediated by sociocultural norms. Every society has explicit and implicit norms for learning activities that define when, where, what, and how its members learn. The values and beliefs we have as learners and teachers are socioculturally constructed and transmitted. Learning is an ideological and cultural practice under the influence of socioculturally established norms. Therefore, the context is not a simple backdrop against which the learner is situated. Rather, it is something shaping the learner and shaped by the learner simultaneously. Giddens (1993) argues that “social structure [context] is both constituted by human agency and yet is at the same time the very medium of this constitution” (p. 129). Giddens referred to this double functioning of context as the duality of structure. The context is both constraining and enabling us to learn.

The given adult learning theories seem to fail to capture the dynamics of constraining and enabling characteristics. Rather, they are polarized in terms of context. On one hand, there are theories explaining the learner’s adaptation to societal norms and maintaining the ideological and cultural status quo. On the other hand, there are theories emphasizing struggles against the status quo and transforming it. Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin (2003) categorize various theories into (a) what reinforces the status quo and (b) what allows change. The former category involves single-loop learning (Argyris and Schön), banking education (Freire), pedagogy (Knowles), and instrumental and formative learning (Mezirow). The latter category includes double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön), critical learning (Brookfield), problem-posing education (Freire), andragogy (Knowles), and transformative learning (Mezirow). Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin (2003) explain this theoretical dichotomy as follows:

Learning in itself is an individual process, or set of processes. But no person is an island, and change always has social consequences. The fewer the consequences of learning for the social group, for example if the status quo is retained, the easier it may be for social harmony and cohesion. But without change, the potential of the individual learners is inhibited. When there is freedom to learn, learners have more freedom to develop their own potential—but since learning is potentially a change process, this can sometimes be problematic for social groups that might wish to retain the status quo either socially or culturally. (p. 75)

A popular adjective-plus-learning theory that adult education research appropriates in terms of the context is situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Situated learning theory is not free from the above theoretical dichotomy of maintaining/transforming the context. Situated learning theory is based on two concepts—communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation. Communities of practice imply “participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). The learner enters into communities of practice as
a newcomer, gradually becomes an old-timer, and begins full participation. The process of legitimate peripheral participation is understood as sharing enough significant learning experiences with the community to sustain mutual engagement and the pursuit of a joint enterprise. In this sense, communities of practice share histories of learning.

Regarding the above dichotomy, situated learning theory views power relations in the communities of practice in terms of control rather than resistance. Wenger (1998) discusses the politics of participation as a relational attribute between the newcomer and the old-timer. The newcomer’s peripheral situation at the beginning stage of participation is caused by the asymmetric power distribution. These politics, according to Wenger, can be both a source of stability when power differentials favor specific perspectives and a destabilizing factor when the power shifts. Wenger argues, “In order to sustain the social coherence of participation . . . control must constantly be reproduced, reasserted, [and] renegotiated in practice” (p. 93). This politics of situated learning theory has been critiqued. Engeström and Miettinen (1999) point out that the legitimate peripheral participation leaves out the learner’s movement to unexpected directions that result from criticizing authority and introducing change. Gee (1999, 2000) critiques ideological tendency of the community of practice that serve the company in a contemporary knowledge-based capitalist economy as a new form of indoctrination. Workers are tacitly immersed and tamed in taken-for-granted values, norms, cultural models, and narratives of the company throughout the participation process, and the knowledge they produce is “in the community of practice, which ‘belongs’ to the company, not in the individual” (Gee, 1999, p. 65).

Binary thought is also present in contemporary critical learning theory building. For example, Finger and Asún (2001) analyze the contemporary context and propose a theory of learning our way out. They point out that turbo capitalism in the global competitive economy, the erosion of welfare states, postmodern individualism, and the ecological crisis combine to push adult education into a dead end. Their gloomy picture depicts adult learning filled with privatization and instrumentalization, where adult learning and education have become tools for economic rationality. Although Finger and Asún do not use an adjective in their theory of learning our way out, they are not unbound by binary thought. They picture contemporary learning territory as a quadrant with two oppositional axes—one axis has top-down instruction and bottom-up learning, the other has further industrial development and deindustrialization. The former axis reflects the dichotomy between what reinforces the status quo and what allows for change. The latter axis is about the oppositional stance on the current global economic trend. Finger and Asún position the theory of learning our way out at the territory within which deindustrialization and bottom-up learning intersect. To escape the dead end, they argue that adult education should situate itself within this territory. It seems the image of learner and learning that Finger and Asún produce is enclosed within its own grand narrative that depends on binary
thought, although their theory aims to open up adult education and its contemporary context.

In summary, analysis of the context in adult learning theory building views the sociocultural context of learning more closely. However, the theory building relies on a dichotomy between maintaining and transforming the context.

GOING BEYOND

I have reviewed some adult learning theories from the perspective of how and where the learner encounters and processes everyday life experiences. These two questions, though, may not be what scholars used when they developed their theories; nor are the theories limited by them. For example, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory is concerned with both questions. It contains the analyses of both the reflection process and context transformation. The how and where questions are employed to uncover two distinct binaries of adjective-plus-learning theories in adult education: rationality/extra-rationality of reflection and maintaining/transforming of the context. These binaries affect how the adjective functions in producing the image of learning. Experiential, transformative, and situated seem to be neutral, but come to signify one pole of the binary over the other pole. They are used to describe a specific way of learning. Other adjectives, such as critical, emotional, somatic, intuitive, or spiritual also rely on the binaries. They function to signify learning that is in opposition to rationality of reflection or maintaining of the context.

The adjective aims to find out the root or fundamental of learning but it locks itself in the binary trap at the same time. The trap is, as Jacques Derrida argues, that “one of the two terms controls the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), [and] holds the superior position” (as cited in Spivak, 1997, p. lxxvii). This controlling desire makes constructing a learning theory divisive. It leads to fragmentation of adult learning theory. Thus, if theory provides a lens to construct reality, then the adult learner has been fragmented and divided. An image of the adult learner produced by a particular adjective-plus-learning theory is seldom understood by the other theories. Adult educators appropriate this fragmented image of the learner into their teaching practices. Some comprehensive tools have been proposed to overcome the fragmented image. For example, Merriam (2001) uses a mosaic metaphor that treats each learning theory as a bit and piece. Illeris (2002) adopts a triangle—cognitive, emotional, and environmental dimensions—to synthesize contemporary learning theories. Fenwick (2003a) introduces five perspectives—constructivist, situative, psychoanalytic, critical cultural, and complexity. These comprehensive tools are trying to depict the overall image of learning. However, as Jarvis (2006) suggests, it is unlikely that we can produce a comprehensive theory of human learning out of given theories.

How could we produce a different image of the learner in terms of the postmodern condition of uncertainty and multiplicity? I argue that we should begin
with rejecting the adjective that is bounded by binary thought. Adult education researchers who work with postmodernism have extensively criticized binary thought. Their way of critiquing is to deconstruct language, because language is how experience is made intelligible to the learner. Usher (1989) argued that

> Language is neither a mirror of reality nor merely a tool for understanding it but constitutes the experience of reality. Reality does not stand outside language and guarantee it with prior meanings, that is to say, it does not contain intrinsic meanings which language merely reflects. Language and within language discourses contain the meaning which allow us to interpret reality and thus our experience. (p. 29)

Postmodern critique on language reveals that there is no universal or eternal meaning. Meaning is always local and time specific. It is always already deferred. The adjective-plus-learning theory cannot escape this critique, for the meaning and function of the adjective are in question.

Rejecting the adjective and binary thought means embracing uncertainty to recognize multiplicities of learner, reflection, experience, and context. Kramnick (1995) summarized the Enlightenment viewpoint of the self as based on the belief in unassisted human reason, true perfection of humankind, and radical individualism. This self can develop rational scientific laws through the scientific method of experiment and empirical observation. Self-directed learning theory and the other prominent adjective-plus-learning theories are grounded in this notion of learner as a unitary self. This unitary self is disputed (Clark, 1999; Clark & Dirkx, 2000), for the meaning of “self” is also always deferred. Clark and Dirkx (2000) argue that “the self is understood as never fixed but always in process,” and “the personal identity is not singular but plural” (p. 109). By the same token, the meaning of reflection cannot be fixed. Many new adjective-plus-learning theories that emphasize extra-rationality actually show that meaning of reflection is plural and open to contestation.

Usher and others (Edwards & Usher, 2001; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997; Usher & Edwards, 1994) propose a map of experiential learning to explore the postmodern multiplicity of context and experience. The map is a quadrant with two continua, autonomy-adaptation/expression-application, that rely on binary thought. The former continuum references the learner and is similar to the binary, top-down instruction/bottom-up learning. The latter continuum focuses on the purpose of learning. It is a different extension of the binary between liberal and practical. In spite of the binary, each quadrant, lifestyle practice (autonomy-expression), confessional practice (adaptation-expression), vocational practice (adaptation-application), and critical practice (autonomy-application), depicts experience with different assumptions and possibilities. Experience can be used differently in different practices. This map assumes that there is no generic experience that is the raw material for learning. It is always conditioned in different quadrants. Usher and others argue that the interrelationships of the different quadrants can create more fluid dimensions of learning practice.
What is lacking in a deconstruction of the key concepts of adjective-plus-learning theory—learner, reflection, experience, and context—is a conceptual tool to navigate multiplicity. As Clark and Dirkx (2000) confess, “We have not been able to find a clearer way to describe how multiplicity is experienced in practice” (p. 174). We need something that enables us to explore the postmodern image of the lifelong learner who moves through the age of uncertainty without relying on binary thought. In terms of the quadrants that Usher and others propose, this image would move in and between the quadrants. Furthermore, this image could open the quadrants and go to another space that avoids getting frozen by binary thought. To produce this image, I put forward a guiding question: What lifelong learning activities in the sociocultural-historical contexts function in what ways in constituting the learner and his or her life context?

This question assumes learning as an activity that can be observed on the surface where the learner and the sociocultural-historical context engage with each other. This surface is a figurative space that has two closely related characteristics. First, the surface is leaking. There is a kind of perforated line between the learner and the sociocultural-historical context. They are connected somehow but not fully. Leaking happens through the torn part on the line. No contextual power can shape the learner seamlessly since it is leaking. In contrast, shaping of the context by the learner is not always predictable. Unexpected or unanticipated things always occur since it is leaking. Second, the surface is amorphous. The perforated line cannot be fixed at any time. A different surface emerges at different times. As the learner and the context are connected, they are always shaping each other. Change in the learner is change of the context and vice versa. On this leaking and amorphous surface, diverse and multiple forms of learning are ceaselessly unfolding since the learner and the context cannot help but move. I assume this unfoldment constitutes the multiplicity of lifelong learning. The term *rhizoactivity* is coined to describe this complex image of learning that the postmodern lifelong learner draws.

**RHIZOACTIVITY**

Human beings have left the trace of themselves behind. Whether it is material, idea, relation, or whatever, we participate and share the trace that is given to us. We label the trace with various names, such as culture, heritage, history, context, institution, or discourse. I call it sociocultural-historical context in the guiding question. From birth to death, human beings continuously participate in the trace in everyday life. Also, we create a difference in the trace at the same time. We were born in, live with, and will die into the trace. Learning is participating in and (re)creating the trace. To research learning is to focus on the learner’s activity in and on the trace that happens on the surface between the learner and the sociocultural-historical context. The trace is, however, “the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience” (Spivak, 1997, p. xvii). We inevitably use language to signify the trace. But the sign language of the trace cannot hold the origin of the trace because
“half of it [the origin] always ‘not there’ and the other half always ‘not that.’ The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent. This other is . . . never to be found” (p. xvii). The adjective-plus-learning theory tries to describe the originality of learning by using a certain adjective to capture the trace. In contrast, research on learning with a concept of rhizoactivity is like playing a detective role to investigate the trace. It is about playing with the trace, with the learner who played with the trace.

The prefix rhizome is a botanical term. It is neither root nor stem. It is both of them since it pushes out roots and shoots. Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) use this term to illustrate a different figuration of relationships among the author, the book, and the world. They reject the modernist assumption that the author could imitate and reflect the world in the book. This supposes a division of the author, the book, and the world and pursues transcendental unity. This assumption can be applied to conventional research methods in adult education. The researcher can produce a learning theory by imitating or reflecting the learner’s world of learning. Deleuze and Guattari abort transcendental unity and declare that “the world has lost its pivot . . . [and] has become chaos” (p. 6). The image of rhizome navigates the chaotic world by always making connections to anything else and pursuing heterogeneity. It has six characteristics. First and second, rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections and pursues heterogeneity. Third, rhizome is multiplicity that has no fixed point of departure or return. Fourth, it is a signifying rupture. Rhizome is constantly broken but starts up again. Fifth and sixth, it has to do with a cartography and decalcomania. Whereas the modernist assumption is tracing the root, rhizomatics is about making a map (pp. 7-13). To Deleuze and Guattari, the role of writing is not the representation but “always the measure of something else” (p. 4), because rhizome is “proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing” (p. 25). Educational researchers have begun to use the image of rhizome. For example, Alvermann (2000) experiments with a rhizoanalysis to look at the text used by a youth reading club. Jackson (2003) offers a concept of rhizovocality as poststructural, feminist, and postcolonial voice in qualitative research.

Activity, borrowed from cultural-historical activity theory or the sociocultural approach of human cognition, is appropriated as a unit of analysis for researching lifelong learning. Activity is a means to break the binary between the subject (the individual) and the object (the world) since it is always mediated by signs and tools in the sociocultural-historical context. Rogoff (1995) considers the use of activity as the unit of analysis to be an avenue that “allows a reformulation of the relation between the individual and the social and cultural environments in which each is inherently involved in the others’ definition” (p. 140). Fichtner (1999) explains this reformulation as follows:

Activity is not what an organism does. Rather, the organism consists in its activity. Activity is the mode of existence by which organisms establish themselves as subjects of their life processes. Equally, in this perspective the object of activity is
nothing the individual relates to, it should rather be considered as something the organism constituted by its activity. Only objects relating to its activities are actually objects for an organism. (p. 55)

Using activity in this sense allows us to go beyond the dichotomy of maintaining or transforming the context. It also opens a way to explore the “duality of structure” (Giddens, 1993), dynamics of constraining and enabling context in learning. Activity is what happens on the leaking surface, where the individual learner is constrained by and enabled to shape the context.

Rhizoactivity is still an experimental concept that needs more concretization. Here, I would like to discuss anticipated benefits of employing rhizoactivity to theorize learning in terms of postmodern and lifelong learning conditions. This discussion is also guided by the following question: What lifelong learning activities in the sociocultural-historical contexts function in what ways in constituting the learner and his or her life context? First, considering phenomena of learning as rhizoactivity intends to produce a postmodern image of learner. Rhizoactivity sprouts or pops up at any place in any time of one’s life to make connections to whatever is available. It is not a linear activity. It opens itself to any possibility. There is no beginning and ending. It is “the lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) that are drawn on the leaking and amorphous surface. The image of a postmodern learner, who is a nonunitary being that has multiple subjectivities, cannot be singular. On the surface, he or she made multiple images of rhizoactivity. The researcher, like a detective following leads, may approach one image at a time and construct as many images as he or she can. I would call this one image as a figuration. A figuration is a line of flight on the surface. Researching rhizoactivity is similar to making maps with multiple figurations in a sense that a map is produced from the real but there is no map exactly representing the real. Maps cannot be finalized, since the object of any map is ceaselessly changing. Any map has its flaws. But a good map is always a great guide. This map, as another rhizome, is “always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 21).

Second, rhizoactivity may open a new way to theorize lifelong learning. The concept of lifelong learning is rarely used as an object of theorization in the field of adult education. It does not guide a theoretical debate. Rather, it is often treated as rhetoric in policy debates (Dehmel, 2006). Lifelong learning seems to become a slogan to signify a kind of technical tool to achieve demanding tasks of individual life in the contemporary world. The concept of rhizoactivity aims to construct a theory of lifelong learning. If we acknowledge the notion that a human being is a learning animal—like we take Aristotle’s proposition of a human being as a political animal for granted—I believe constructing human life in terms of lifelong learning is a necessary task. The role of theory of lifelong learning is not limited to providing technological solutions for teaching practice. I argue that its primary role is to make human life intelligible from the perspective of learning. As rhizoactivity questions how learning activities shape one’s life and its context,
it can serve as the window to this task. One possible way to approach this task is to research the learner’s subject-positioning regarding his or her learning activities. Scott (1991) writes, “Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy. . . . These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited” (p. 793). In this sense, rhizoactivity can be understood as a series of decision making on the leaking and amorphous surface that always unfolds multiple choices. Rhizoactivity involves emotion, intuition, spirituality, bodily feeling, as well as rationality on which our decision making inevitably rests. It also involves a historical dimension, since decision making is always related to past choices. Therefore, it is a line of flight on the surface, and the researcher may construct figurations out of it.

CONCLUDING PREFACE

The field of adult learning research can figuratively be considered as a garden with various plants. Like plants, various learning theories sprout in this garden. Some theories seem to be fancy and elaborated very well, while others look crude. The learning theory in the garden is actually a rhizome. It sprouted in the garden and made its own connections and drew lines of flight. Since these lines are linked with one another at all times, the learning theory “can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 9). If it does, irruption follows. It can be said that recent interest in extra-rationality is an irruption against the rational way of theorizing learning. The concept of rhizoactivity is another irruption. It is a moving force to deterritorialize and reterritorialize the garden. It can move between the given theories and anything else in and out of the garden. Rhizoactivity already made connections with the adjective-plus-learning theory, because the concept of reflection and context is inaccurate yet necessary to describe learning. Rhizoactivity is a new rhizome in the garden, and “the question is not: is it true? But: does it work?” (Massumi, 1987, p. xv). That is, rhizoactivity does not seek to uncover any truth or unchanging essence of adult learning, which the adjective-plus-learning theories do. Rather, it pursues a useful description of lifelong learning in the age of postmodernism. Therefore, this article cannot have a conclusion. A new page needs to unfold and connect to this preface.

REFERENCES


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