

Rhizomatic learning: How appropriate is it for coach education?

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Introduction

I have a confession to make. After more than 20 years of experience I have adopted an approach to delivering coach education courses that deviates from what I should probably be doing. No longer do I adhere *to* the course programme that I'm given but rather I endeavour to work *from* the course programme. I now use the programme to explore and investigate ideas with coaches and not as a rigid, inflexible script that I auto-repeat from course to course. Yes I'm mindful of the intended learning outcomes and the assessment process, but the idea of strictly following a generic, standardised programme just seems an ineffective approach to learning.

During the course, and in conversations with the coaches, I'll explain my understanding of the content, how I interpret it and apply aspects to my own coaching. I'll explain my thought processes behind practice design and why I coach the way I coach. I'll challenge the coaches to assess the extent to which this aligns with their existing practice and coaching identity, and whether there is anything they can experiment with. This often takes us down different paths and can be far removed from what the course programme says we should be doing. As the course develops I give the coaches the opportunity to say what they want to focus on and then together we pursue these aspects. Every course becomes a different experience, not just for the coaches but for me as a coach educator. I enjoy this process, it challenges me, it makes me question and reflect on my own practice as a coach, and the innocent observations of the participating coaches can prompt my thinking in new and different ways. I'm also aware of the relative power that I have as a coach educator and the perception the coaches will have of me. This awareness is integral to my approach and at the outset of a course I explain that I can't solve every problem, how the course represents a fragment in their learning to become a better coach and therefore it might not be the transformational experience they were possibly expecting.

I have often wondered if this experience means there is a different approach to coach education. Is there a pedagogical perspective or set of principles that challenges established practice? During lockdown '1' I read *25 years of Ed Tec* by Martin Wellerⁱ where in the chapter on connectivism he describes the work of Dave Cormier and rhizomatic learning. Cormier is a pioneer in online learning, he maintains an active blog (<http://davecormier.com/edblog/>) and has designed and delivered MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course) such as *Rhizo14* which focus on rhizomatic learningⁱⁱ. Reading Dave's blog made me think - can the principles of rhizomatic learning be applied to coach education?

What is Rhizomatic Learning?

Rhizomatic learning draws on ideas developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattariⁱⁱⁱ and their use of a rhizome as a botanical metaphor to analyse post-structuralist societies. A rhizome is a type of plant (such as ginger or turmeric) that grows roots and shoots from several nodes. These grow horizontally and vertically both below and above ground but do so irregularly and in a non-uniform way. Some nodes grow more actively than others, some lay dormant for periods of time, and as the plant grows according to the conditions of its

environment a network like structure is formed as the roots and shoots intertwine with each other haphazardly.

When applied to learning the botanical metaphor of the rhizome describes an approach that is far different from established transactional models of education. Firstly, the content of a course is determined by the course participants themselves. 'The community is the curriculum' is the phrase Cormier has used to describe this. Second, there are no prescribed learning outcomes, instead courses are bounded by the intention to learn about something and each individual will evolve outcomes which are specific to themselves. Third, there is no predetermined linear order in which content is organised and delivered, there is no start or end point. Entry into the course can occur anywhere, and what Deleuze and Guattari describe as 'lines of flight', signify the process of exploring particular aspects of the course content whilst also establishing connections between these different aspects. These lines of flight also develop along their own unique trajectory. Like roots and shoots some grow and develop strongly whilst others become cul-de-sacs of thinking. Perhaps some lay dormant for a period of time only for some new insight or thinking to re-energise their development. Fourth, the network like structure of the rhizome is represented by a 'map' of the connections people make, a map that is made in real time and is constantly reconfigurable and re-written. Jenny Mackness, Frances Bell and Mariana Funes^{iv}, who participated in the Rhizo14 MOOC, have summarised the rhizomatic approach to learning as follows:

- **Connection** – encourages ceaseless connection in people, ideas and resources.
- **Multiplicity/A-signifying rupture** – design is a-centred and anti-hierarchical. It allows for break-away groups or individuals to re-organise in locations and spaces of their choice. 'Lines of flight' might get broken but re-emerge later or continue to develop within a smaller group of people.
- **Cartography** – individuals create and follow self-selected pathways and embrace the uncertainty of the learning process. Learning is creative, exploratory and unpredictable.

For me rhizomatic learning promotes an approach to learning where a self-organising adaptable group of individuals are working collectively towards a common intent - but how they realise this intent is an adventure in finding a way across an unmapped territory. Ways are found by connecting and making sense of ideas, concepts and theories that can and should be challenging to the groups existing knowledge, it also requires an openness and commitment to the hard work of learning. To what extent then could this rhizomatic approach be applied to coach education?

A Rhizomatic Approach to Coach Education

In answering this question I will outline a hypothetical example of a coach education course. The starting point for this course is the initial development of rhizomatic map. In figure 1 I have taken the summary elements of the CIMSPA professional standard for a coach and turned them into questions. Each question represents a node, I have also added in some question marks that enables coaches on the course to add their own questions. You will notice that in figure 1 there are no connections between the nodes. I envisage that the starting point for the course is a discussion as to what 'node' the group want to explore first.

This could be undertaken online, and I see the course itself blending different aspects of online and in-person interactions.

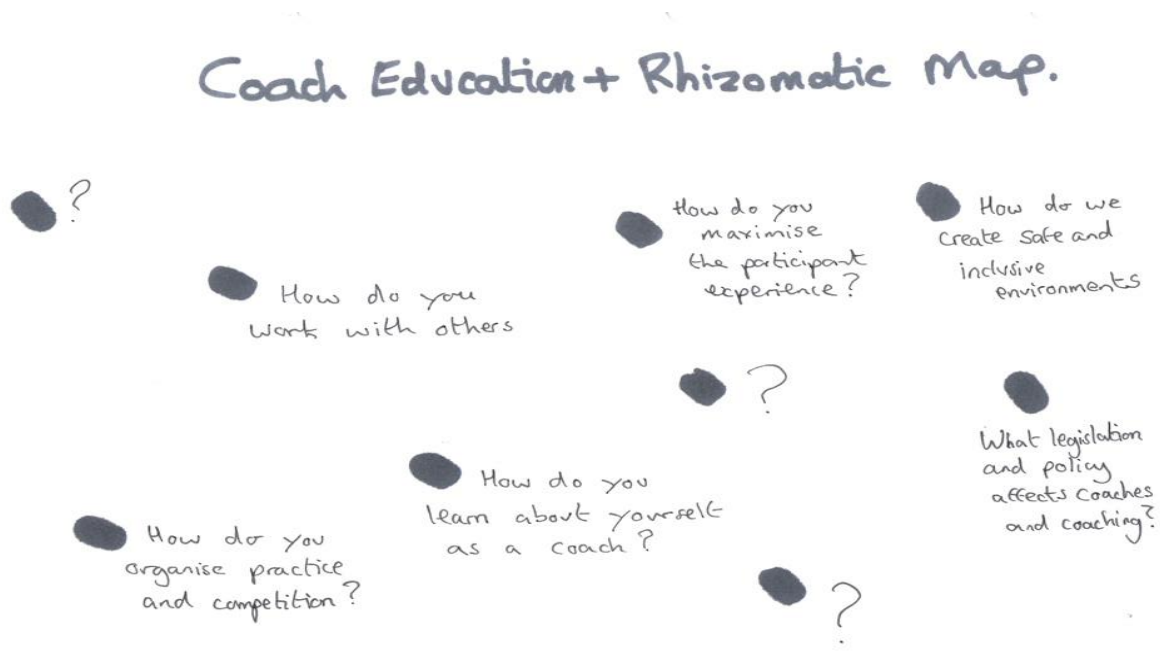


Figure 1 – An initial rhizomatic map

Once the first node has been explored the group can then decide what they want to explore next. This should also establish the first connection as this decision is made by identifying a logical connection from one node to another. This process continues through the ceaseless exploration and connection of the course content. There is not set 'standard' map of the connections – there are many different configurable pathways. For example, the starting point could be what policies and legislation affects coaches and coaching? This could lead to how we create safe and inclusive environments from where we might go to how practice and competition are organised which leads to maximising the participant experience which could then inform how we learn and what we know about ourselves as a coach. This seems a logical kind of order, but I challenge you to devise alternative orders which are just as logical. Figure 2 shows how a rhizomatic map reveals a network like structure where every node is connected to every other node and where the thicker green line represents the particular 'line of flight' outlined in the example. This line of flight is just one of the very many lines of flight that can navigated through the content.

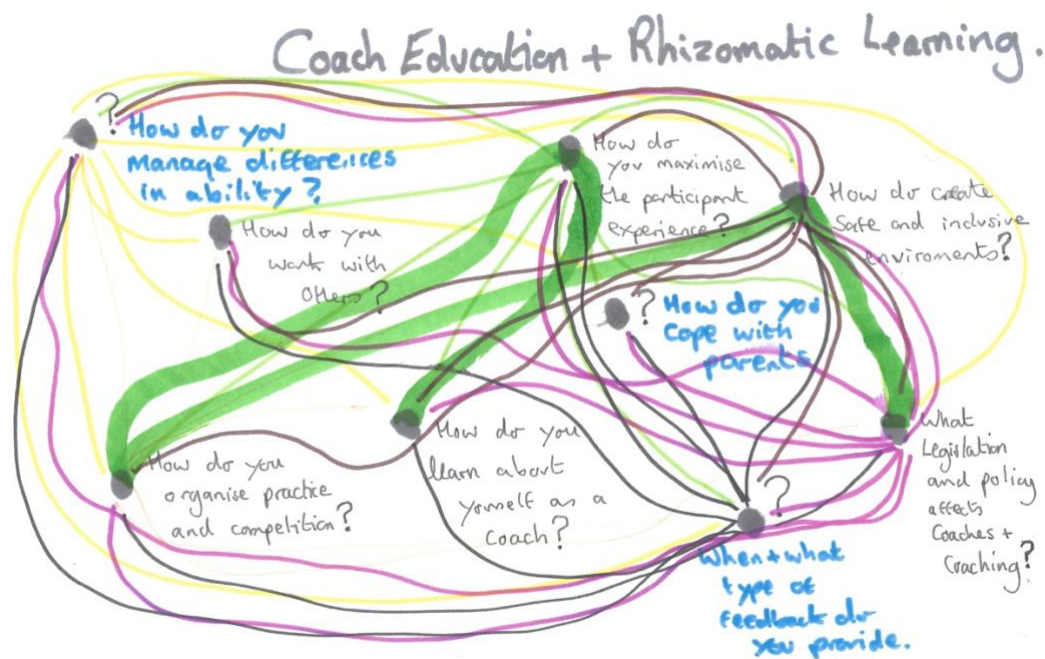


Figure 2 – A rhizomatic map for coach education

The important difference between common practice in coach education at present and an approach based on rhizomatic principles is that the group determine the order of the content and have a say in the content. The coach educator doesn't lead the way, their role is like the sweeper behind a road race, making sure no-one loses their way or the group itself loses all sense of direction. I would argue the coach educator is also part of the group and not somebody separate, they are also highly skilled in creating spaces that allow people to learn in a comfortably uncomfortable environment. I would also argue that far from discouraging individuals engaging in separate conversations these should be actively encouraged. Allow them to form Whatsapp groups or similar and pursue aspects that particularly interest them, bring material they have found on the internet to the conversations and embrace the reality of the access that modern digital technologies afford to information. The notion therefore of 'standardising' the learning experience across multiple courses seems an uncontrollable and redundant quest. Finally, why not let each individual decide their own assessment, why not assess them on their own learning outcomes framed within the parameters of the professional standard. Why not assess them against what they believe reflects their approach to coaching and their identity as a coach and not against some kind of 'standard' model.

Concluding thoughts

In this very brief outline I have merely scratched the surface of how a rhizomatic approach to coach education could possibly be developed. It would be an interesting experiment to evaluate whether such an approach had more impact on learning and subsequent practice amongst coaches than established coach education courses. Coach education in the sense of a formal approach to learning with assessment and certification will remain an important part of any coaching system. Doing it better and learning how to do it better remains an ongoing challenge. Equally we need to support and develop coach educators who are skilled

in creating *learning-centred* and not *learner-centred* environments. These coach educators, and borrowing terms from ecological psychology, have a deep knowledge of the learning environments they are situated within. They are perceptually attuned to the needs of course participants and can adopt and adapt their ways of working appropriately – they have a great sense of the group. This is arguably different to a ‘tutor’ who has a knowledge *about* learning and remains wedded to the continuous reproduction of the same programme irrespective of the environment and the different needs of the coaches within it. Put simply, for a coach educator every course is different, for a tutor every course is pretty similar. Furthermore, coach educators are the complement to coach developers, together they form the twin axis of sophisticated coach learning and development system.

ⁱ <https://www.aupress.ca/books/120290-25-years-of-ed-tech/>

ⁱⁱ For an overview of Rhizo14 see: <https://davecormier.com/edb/2016/04/13/rhizo14-the-mooc-that-community-built/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* University of Minnesota

^{iv} See Mackness and Bell at: <https://openpraxis.org/index.php/OpenPraxis/article/view/173>