Hamon, K., Hogue, R. J., Honeychurch, S., Johnson, S., Koutropoulos, A., Ensor, S., Sinfeld, S., and Balie, M. (2015) Writing the unreadable untext: a collaborative autoethnography of #rhizo14. Hybrid Pedagogy.

Version: Published

http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/107186/

Deposited on: 10 June 2015

Writing the Unreadable Untext: a Collaborative Autoethnography of

#rhizo14

JUNE 4, 2015 / KEITH HAMON, REBECCA J. HOGUE, SARAH HONEYCHURCH, SCOTT JOHNSON, APOSTOLOS KOUTROPOULOS, SIMON ENSOR, SANDRA SINFIELD AND MAHA BALI / 9 COMMENTS

In January, 2014, we participated in the MOOC *Rhizomatic Learning: The community is the curriculum* (#rhizo14) facilitated by Dave Cormier. A group of us decided to research participant experiences in this course, but not by repeating existing scholarly research on cMOOCs, which to our minds has two serious shortcomings. First, most MOOC research has not brought the connectivist experience to life for readers who have not experienced the rhizomatic swarm of open, online, connected learning. And second, most MOOC research is not participatory, is not told from inside the process. We want to write from the inside, for as Tanya Sasser says, "we have the tools and the opportunity to write our own story, rather than suffering someone else to write it for us." So following the rare example of Bentley, et al, we decided to conduct a collaborative autoethnography (CAE), which began mid-February, 2014, as an open Google Doc to which 31 #rhizo14 participants eventually added their post-MOOC narratives (officially, the MOOC had ended; practically speaking, the Facebook group and Twitter hashtag were still thriving, and still do to some extent today, especially as many of us have joined the 2015 iteration of the course, #rhizo15).

As the emerging CAE-cohort (our membership is fluid) discussed these narratives across various media, including Facebook, our blogs, Twitter, and Google+, looking for a way to frame them into an appropriate scholarly paper, a number of questions arose:

- How do we coordinate 30-odd people from almost as many countries conducting research, especially if not involving all 30 would mean the research was not an autoethnography?
- How do we speak for #rhizo14 if many of the participants did not contribute a narrative to the CAE?
- How do we conduct research about the experience of participants in a connectivist MOOC?
- How do we describe the experience in a way that is both legible to readers and yet remains true to the chaotic, nonlinear, lived experiences of participants? And how do we represent it?
- What are the main struggles of conducting participatory research about connected learning in digital spaces?
- What is the interest in framing this research as scholarly, anyway?
- What is stopping the #rhizo14 collaborative autoethnography research from "getting done"?
- Why does there have to be a final endpoint, a done-ness? Why can't our CAE remain open-ended and process-focused?

We had no definitive answers. We became distracted. Our conversation fell quiet, until the end of October 2014, when Maha Bali and Keith Hamon began jotting words, phrases, and sentences about the CAE into a new Google Doc following a conversation via Direct Message on Twitter about our difficulty writing about our non-linear experiences. Soon, eight others joined (in order of appearance: Rebecca Hogue, Kevin Hodgson, Terry Elliot, Simon Ensor, Scott Johnson, Sandra Sinfield, Apostolos Koutropoulos, and Sarah Honeychurch), and within a few days we had composed *Writing the Unreadable Untext*, a document none of us planned to write but that seemed to write itself. After the catharsis of *The Untext*, we began writing a more typical, scholarly article, but something about *The Untext* itself had captured our attention, and we recently presented a discovery session about it **(available for comment via VoiceThread)**.

Something about *The Untext* strikes us as as more scholarly, more insightful, and more in touch with the real than the traditional scholarly document we could have written and have written. We believe that *The Untext* is an accurate expression of rhizomatic learning as we experienced it in #rhizo14, and we invite readers to look through it, in all its chaotic messiness, multimedia-ness, and important marginalia. It is a glimpse into the process of rhizomatic collaborative writing, what might be called swarm writing. It might be considered illegible. Or it may have all the legibility of a swarm of bees or a murmuration of starlings. We are writing here in *Hybrid Pedagogy* to make our thoughts and ideas about rhizomatic collaborative writing more legible, but at the risk of distorting "the chaotic, nonlinear, lived experiences" of *The Untext*.

We are not considering *The Untext* as data to be mined, to be appropriated, to be sculpted. Rather than analyzing #rhizo14, *The Untext* maps it. It is a participatory handprint of #rhizo14, a rhizome written small enough that you can get through it in less than an hour. If you want to know in a nutshell what #rhizo14 was about for some of us and how it felt to be in it, to be one of us, rather than be an outsider looking in on us and analyzing us, then read *The Untext*, including the marginalia, perhaps especially the marginalia.

(jump to legible text)

How did this crazy article idea come about?

Twitter DM

Maha-Should we maybe write an article for hybridped on why the autoethnog is ta

and not getting done? Should be fun to write and May spur us on U know Nov is

digital writing month.

Do you find yourself confused? Most of us felt confused by #rhizo14 from time to time. Are you looking for ways to put all those words, pictures, videos, marginalia, and other elements together in some kind of coherent fashion? We had to put #rhizo14 together, or let it emerge. Did you find yourself following a side trail that led to a flash of insight or to nowhere, find yourself wondering who is speaking to whom about what and why, find yourself looking for the point, the thesis, the takeaway? Do you find yourself wanting to give up because making sense of it all is too difficult? Do you find yourself angry at the writers because making sense is their job, not yours as reader? Good, very good. You've now learned things about #rhizo14 that we could not have told you as well otherwise. But do you also sense the energy and engagement and collegiality and even fun underneath it all? We hope you can, because that is what keeps us going.

Perhaps *The Untext* is best understood in the context of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic concepts of *cartography* and *decalcomania*, introduced in their 1987 book *A Thousand Plateaus* (hereafter referred to as *ATP*). *The Untext* is a decal, a mapping: a pressing that echoes, or stains, one pattern (a rhizomatic MOOC) onto another surface (a Google Doc) at a different scale. Thus, *The Untext* is fractal, with patterns repeating imprecisely but recognizably at smaller scales than the original #rhizo14. Decalcomania is perhaps best known in the handprints that children make when they put wet paint on their hands and press them helter-skelter onto paper. The deterritorialization of the children's palms and their reterritorialization onto the paper is evocative and convenient, but not precise. Decalcomania omits some details in the original and adds others, but it also provides some utility: you can put the handprints of 30 children in your pocket and you can read *The Untext* at one sitting without having to spend six weeks in the MOOC.

Deleuze and Guattari discuss decalcomania and cartography, or mapping, to describe in part how engagement of reality (what we tried to do in *The Untext*) differs from analysis of reality (what other ethnographies do). They say:

What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an

experimentation in contact with the real. … It is itself a part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways … as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back "to the same." The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged "competence." (*ATP*, 12, 13)

We suspect that this kind of writing has always been possible, but modern technology makes it likely and so easy. The swarm arose from Canada, Egypt, England, France, Scotland, and the U.S. crossing ten or so timezones. We wrote synchronously and asynchronously. So *The Untext* is a map, "an experimentation in contact with the real" (*ATP*, 12), and not a tracing, or an analysis. Writing it, we were susceptible to constant modification, reworked. Our aim was performance, not competence, which may be obvious to some. Still, this performance has implications, ramifications — it multiplies and emerges. For us, it expands the field of research.

First, *The Untext* has no center, no unified voice, no author or author-ity, not in the traditional sense and certainly not in the scholarly sense. *The Untext* is an acentered voice, a swarm voice. As Deleuze and Guattari say:

To these centered systems, the authors contrast acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other, the stems or channels do not preexist, and all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their state at a given moment — such that the local operations are coordinated and the final, global result synchronized without a central agency. (*ATP*, 17)

The Untext speaks as *i*, or first-person swarm. We are all there in the text not as I, but as *i*. We lacked a word and made do with what was at hand. *We* was too unified, a coherent whole, a choir with one voice, and not a swarm. *I* carries way too much baggage from centuries of coherence and individualism and our own delusions that we exist. *i* had to do. It worked rather well. *i* also helps to remind us to check our egos at the door — something that made possible a truly collaborative experience, though *collaboration* is too stringent a word. *Swarm* is better.

Our communications ran — still run — "from any neighbor to any other" (*ATP*, 17). The text was not decided before it was composed, and no one planned to speak to anyone else. Even when we were only two writers, Maha and Keith, we had no intention of communicating about anything. We wrote over each other, past each other. We surprised, echoed, drifted.

Everything was lateral, tending toward no main point or thesis. Then others joined, and the hum grew louder. But not discordant, at least not if you are in the swarm — not a part of groupthink. Rather, local comments "are coordinated" and the final document — if there is to be a final — is "synchronized without a central agency" (*ATP*, 17) as each voice tracks its own trajectory while remaining sensitive to its immediate neighbor. Sensitivity leads to a swarm of swallows — birds, gulps, and gasps.

In terms of traditional scholarship, this lack of a unified voice is problematic. Where is the authority? What position is taken? There is no authority and no position in a swarm, at least no position with political, rhetorical, and power implications. There is only trajectory through the swarm and sensitivity to those in your immediate surround. Truth and power no longer rely on the authority of the single voice; rather, they rely on triangulation, or even beyond to crystallization "which shows multiple lenses looking at the social phenomenon being studied, a step beyond triangulation which aims at finding consistency and convergence" (**Richardson, 1997, p. 92**). The swarm doesn't focus while writing, so don't focus while reading. Absorb the hum coming from all angles and washing over you, and listen for the pockets of resonance. Triangulate to find something similar to the truth in the emergence of repetitive patterns.

The thesis statement is dead. It isn't there in *The Untext*. We really can't tell you what point *i* meant to make, though we suspect none. And don't look for a context to this text. You must bring your own context (BYOC), which guarantees that whatever you find emerging from the text will be different from what the next reader with their different context finds. If your only context is three hundred years of Western analysis, then *The Untext* will likely make no sense to you. In that case, let it go.

The Untext demonstrates that writing is a function of complex, multiscale networking as words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, marginalia, links, and images flow through and around one another to create new ideas. This has always been so, but precious, static print concealed this dynamic flow of ideas. Modern technology has made this flow of desire more apparent. Not long ago, Maha, Keith, Sarah and others participated in a **#MOOCMOOC** Twitter chat, and the swarm of ideas and the emergent iSwarm voice was obvious, graphically displayed in a Twitter stream for all to see. We have traditionally thought of English text as linear, but it is linear in the way DNA is linear. It is an expression of a genetic flow, and it's the unpacking and expression of that flow within a dynamic environment that creates meaning. We need new reading, writing, and analytical skills and strategies to handle swarm classes, swarm texts, and swarm research, as Jesse Stommel suggests in his recent article **Twitter and the Locus of Research**.

Daniel Cressey says in the title of his 2014 *Nature* article that **only ten midges [are] needed to make a swarm**. Or ten people. Maybe fewer. And you cannot swallow a swarm — not

even an eight-person swarm. **Derrida knew this when he said**, "No thing is complete in itself, and it can only be completed by what it lacks. But what each particular thing lacks is infinite; we cannot know in advance what complement it calls for" (*Dissemination*, 304). You cannot get it all, ever. **Macherey** argues that any text "says what it does not say" (**title of his essay in Walder**, 252) and that it is "useful and legitimate to ask of every production what it tacitly implies, what it does not say … for in order to say anything there are things *which must not be said* [emphasis in original]. All works have the incompleteness that reveals their birth and production… with an untext it is this very incompleteness that is foregrounded rather than smoothed away. The swarm writer is **nomos** — not logos.

We frame the swarm for clarity, but that always leaves something out, something important. Our knowledge is incomplete. This is one of the most common complaints of those in a connectivist MOOCs or Twitter chats: that they cannot keep up with all the communication flows. We need a rhetoric for this, an ethic, a logic, something to calm our anxiety about not knowing enough. The swarm voice has always been here, but now it is insistent. Next time, *Hybrid Pedagogy* or some other radical, digital journal will perhaps be able to accept *The Untext* as it emerged without this bridge, this frame of an article that leaves too much out. Soon.

But for now we see that our process of writing *The Untext* was cathartic scholarship. **Some of us valued it as an artifact itself, so much so that we did not wish to eventually convert it to legible form** (Kevin said: "If we think of writing as nourishment for the self (I write to learn), then this document, in all of its starts and ends and middle roads to the margins, has done its job for me."), as legibility entails "projecting your subjective lack of comprehension onto the object you are looking at, as 'irrationality.' We make this mistake because we are tempted by a desire for legibility," but that ends up distorting reality in favor of legibility. So we will not. And yet, getting all that energy out (even if no one considers it scholarship) has helped us focus and get one conference proposal accepted and one journal article proposal accepted — the fully written article, however, was rejected. Writing collaborative autoethnography into 6,000 double-blind-peer-reviewed words brought to mind Wordsworth's line "We murder to dissect": or if we want to be more D&G about it — it is logos murdering nomos. Or as **Rao suggests**, "imposed simplification, in service of legibility… makes the rich reality brittle." But you know, it was never those end products considered traditional scholarship that were our aim anyway. **We are beyond traditional notions of rigor**. It was the process of coming together to think and work and make beauty and chaos. It is our way of engaging in exhilarating learning and research. For us, this **is** scholarship.

Hybrid Pedagogy *uses an open **collaborative peer review** process. This piece was reviewed by **Sean Michael Morris** and **Chris Friend**.*

The original Untext (embedded in this article) was originally authored by Maha Bali, Keith Hamon, Rebecca J. Hogue, Kevin Hodgson, Terry Elliot, Simon Ensor, Scott Johnson, Sandra Sinfield, Apostolos Koutropoulos, and Sarah Honeychurch.

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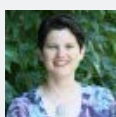
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editing online courses. Developing an interest in cMOOCs as a means of recovering his right to be curious, he is now no longer affiliated with any institution and exists pretty much online.

Apostolos Koutropoulos (@koutropoulos) is the program manager for the online MA program in Applied Linguistics at UMass Boston. He holds an MA in Applied Linguistics, an MEd in Instructional Design, an MBA with a focus on HR, and an MS in Information Technology. He is currently pursuing his EdD in Distance Education at Athabasca University.
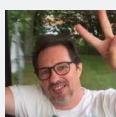
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Sandra Sinfield (@Danceswithcloud) has been a lab tech, has dabbled in copywriting and editing, made a film (unsuccessfully), produced a play, plunged into the rhizome. She is a Senior Lecturer in LondonMet's CELT. Sandra blogs at Becoming an Educationalist.

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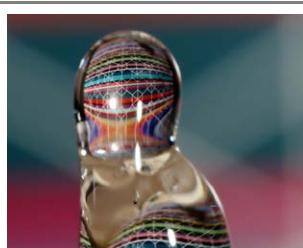
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Discussions from the Community.

Emily

June 4, 2015 at 4:47 am

what fun, well done! wish I could have joined you at the time! a great re-presentation ;)

REPLY

Sarah Honeychurch

June 4, 2015 at 1:44 pm

I'm glad you joined us this year, Emily :)

REPLY

Maha Bali

June 7, 2015 at 4:27 am

Emily, we are doing a new thing this year after #rhizo15. I make no promises as to what will emerge (Keith and I had no idea when we started this untext that it would turn into THIS) but would love to have you with us. I enjoyed getting to know you during both rhizo14 and rhizo14

REPLY

Heather Ochman

June 4, 2015 at 5:44 am

Thank you for trusting in your own perspectives to write this CAE! All too often, I find it frustrating in classes that professors (and peers in class) do not value personal experience, but tend to focus on analyzing only what others have said.

This is a fabulous start to lending some credit and credibility to ourselves and our experiences. I'll be joining this movement!

REPLY

Sarah Honeychurch

June 4, 2015 at 1:54 pm

Happy to have you swarming with us, Heather

REPLY

Apostolos K.

June 6, 2015 at 10:50 am

I hope that an autoethnographic format becomes more 'acceptable' as research as time passes. It's important to have the skills to be an external analyst, but I think personal experience and 'knowledge' need to be valued as well. It reminds me somewhat of my wikipedia-editing days where I would edit the historical section of the article of the village I grew up in (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marathea,_Elis). Wikipedia editors reverted my edits because there weren't citations, so my life experience didn't seem to matter (first hand knowledge). The sad thing is that the article link now redirects to my town due to a government re-org. The village exists but the town manages it (no village mayor any more). It's amazing to see what knowledge is priviledged even in 'open' spaces like wikipedia... I maintain that a village is not the town it's a part of :)

REPLY

Robin DeRosa

June 4, 2015 at 9:38 am

I love all of this– and you've given me new terms (I'll be mulling on "nomos") to use as I talk about these ideas, particularly in an intro literary theory course that I teach. One thing I'm interested in is how the rhizome disrupts intentionality. In most ways, I love this, and it feels in step with the idea of "emergent outcomes" in curriculum design, which is making more and more sense to me as I learn. But I'm curious about how we think about the public good in a decentered space like this. I like the refiguring of the public as a swarm that resists authoritative organizing structures. But I also wonder then how we translate this into social activism (if we do?). What model can we use to theorize how the swarm builds infrastructure to care for itself– including those on its margins or those who resist cohering at all. It's a tension I often wrestle with between my poststructural and Marxist sides. Can the revolution be illegible? Or maybe, MUST is be illegible? Thank you for so much good food for thought!

REPLY

Maha Bali

June 7, 2015 at 4:25 am

Great questions, Robin. I am also thinking a lot these days about postmodernism/poststructuralism v critical theory. In "theory" they wouldn't work together, and yet many critical pedagogues have postmodern sensibilities; or many postmodernists care about social justice and challenging status quo even if they do not believe in grand narratives.
I think this piece right here is written by all of us who are in the margins in some way or another, challenging the hegemony of traditional scholarship that wouldn't allow us to publish a peer-reviewed article on our experience (i would say don't get me started, but i think the untext is exactly what happened when "we got started" on that… Happy to be keep thinking about this together

REPLY

Simon Ensor

June 8, 2015 at 9:01 am

I have been thinking that play is not marginalia rather the contrary.

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