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### **Published version**

TAYLOR, Carol and HARRIS-EVANS, Jean (2018). Reconceptualising transition to  
Higher Education with Deleuze and Guattari. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43 (7),  
1254-1267.

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# Reconceptualising Transition to Higher Education with Deleuze and Guattari

C. A. Taylor<sup>1</sup> and J. Harris-Evans

## Abstract

This article draws on the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (1987; 1994) to reconceptualise transition to Higher Education. In doing so it contributes a new theoretical approach to understanding transition to Higher Education which largely remains under-theorised, uncritical and taken-for-granted. Drawing on data from two projects, the article activates Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of assemblage, rhizome and becoming to contest the established view of transition as a linear pathway or series of 'critical incidents'. The article illuminates how Deleuze and Guattari's (1987; 1994) concepts are of value both in theorising the multiplicity and heterogeneity of transition and in refocusing attention on the lived specificities of students' experiences within a complex web of institutional and affective practices. The article ends with a consideration of how Deleuze and Guattari recast understandings of transitions theory and practice.

## Keywords

Transition, assemblage, rhizome, becoming, Deleuze and Guattari, student, higher education

## 1 Introduction

Our purpose in this article is to use a number of key concepts from the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (1987; 1994) to reconceptualise students' transition to Higher Education. This endeavour involves us in unsettling some established notions about transition. First, prevailing accounts of transition usually presuppose that it is a linear process – this, in our view, lends itself to the production of somewhat reductive and superficial accounts of students' lived experiences. Second, where students' lived experiences are taken into account, they are still often subsumed within overt or tacit institutional goals that require students to 'fit in' to established structures (Woodhall, Hillier and Resnick 2014) – as we see it, this downplays the complex relations and webs that students forge between what happens in their lives 'outside' the institution and what goes on within it. Third, there is real concern about student attrition rates, attainment, student well-being as well as the continuing under-representation of some groups (Bowles et al. 2014; Boliver 2013), although these factors vary across national contexts. This is a social justice issue, made particularly acute in the current neoliberal higher education landscape of increasing accountability, competition and financial stringency. These concerns make the task of attending to how we theorise, think about and do transition practices both urgent and timely. We are not suggesting that re-theorising transition with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy is in any way a panacea or 'fix' for these problems.

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However, we do feel that putting some of their key concepts to work will help generate more nuanced understandings of students' experiences of transition as a more fluid, emergent and multiple process. These understandings may then be an invitation to Higher Education Institutions to adapt their transitions practices to develop more innovative and flexible ways of supporting their students.

The article originated in a desire to engage with Gale and Parker's (2012) thought-provoking three-part typology of transition which synthesizes much historical and contemporary Higher Education transition research, policy and practice. Gale and Parker (2012, 737) name the first part of their typology transition as induction (T1), which involves 'sequentially defined periods of adjustment involving pathways of inculcation, from one institutional and/or disciplinary context to another'. The second is transition as development (T2) which, in slightly more complex fashion, envisages transition as 'qualitatively distinct stages of maturation involving trajectories of transformation, from one student and/or career identity to another' (737). The third conception, and the one that most interests us, is transition as becoming (T3), that is, transition as 'a perpetual series of fragmented movements involving whole-of-life fluctuations in lived reality or subjective experience, from birth to death' (737). While they see much evidence across the sector of transition as T1 and T2, Gale and Parker (2012, 2) comment that 'T3 remains more a proposition, yet to be fully expressed in HE research, policy and practice.' They note the potential usefulness of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987; 1994) philosophy in sketching a possible outline for this proposition.

Drawing on data from two studies of students' transitions in one UK university, this article responds to Gale and Parker's proposition and develops a new and fuller conceptualisation of transition as becoming. It begins by outlining Gale and Parker's (2012) typology and explains what might be gained in using an analytical lens drawn from Deleuze and Guattari. Following that, the two projects from which we drew our empirical data are introduced, the data analysis procedures we undertook are explained, and some methodological issues around working with Deleuze and Guattari's concepts are considered. In the three main parts of the article which follow this we put Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of assemblage, rhizome, and becoming to work to rethink transitions. The penultimate section considers how a Deleuzo-Guattarian understanding might help reshape transitions theory-practice. The main line of argument throughout is that transition is a more spontaneous, connective, happenstance, affective and transversal practice than is normally thought.

## **2 How has transition been considered and why re-conceptualise it with Deleuze and Guattari?**

In the UK, in 2015, a record number of students entered Higher Education – 532,300 (UCAS 2016). This, by anybody's benchmark, is big 'business'. In total, UK Higher Education includes more than 2 million students: in 2014/15 there were 1,727,895 undergraduates and 538,180 postgraduate students (HESA 2016). However, although there has been a year on year improvements in retention, the percentage of students who do not continue their studies after the first year stands at 6% (HESA 2016). This is rather low compared to other countries. Burkholder and Holland (2014), for example, cite studies which record retention rates of 78% for both USA and Holland, and a National Audit Office (2007) technical report identifies Australia and the USA as having a much higher student drop-out rate than the UK. Whether in the UK or elsewhere these attrition rates constitute a considerable loss to all concerned: to the individual student; to the course; and to the institution. Against this background, improved understandings of the complexity of transition may help support improvements in retention, not just in the UK but wherever it is a concern.

Gale and Parker (2012, 735) derive their conceptions of transition as part of induction (T1); transition as a process of maturation and development (T2); and transition as becoming (T3) from a review of the substantive literature. They note that 'a great deal of the literature frames transition in terms of our first two categories (T1 and T2)' which they see as primarily institution and system-serving. T1 is focused on how well (or not) students are able to navigate institutional norms, how (well) they cope with the fixed institutional structures and procedures they come up against, and how (well) they deal with the shock of coming to university. T1 is a linear, time-bound, chronological 'institutionalist' view of transition which focuses on developing students' cultural capital (or ameliorating their perceived cultural deficits) in order that they may 'fit in' with prevailing institutional norms and practices. Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010, 261-262), for example, describe the transition to higher education as involving 'identity shifts concomitant with increasing participation in the valued practice of the institution'. Thus, T1 figures transition as a defined period of orientation, familiarization and information, during which time students' participate in academic development activities in order to acquire the requisite critical literacy and study

skills to enable them to work out how to cope with and ‘negotiat[e] a new academic culture’ (Pike and Harrison 2011, 55).

T2, transition as development, differs from T1 in placing greater emphasis on an individualist transition pedagogy. T2 is orientated to building up individual students’ resilience and strategies so that they are better able to navigate sociocultural norms and expectations through the cumulative acquisition of an appropriate higher education *habitus*. T2 processes are, therefore, geared to enabling students to progress more smoothly through the stages of their degree studies. T2 is based in the presumption that students achieve ‘growth’ through key moments or critical incidents, and aligns progress in study with changes in identity. Thus, Bryson and Hand (2007) talk of the need for students to make academic and social adjustments and Smyth and Banks (2012) explore how students’ agency during transition is shaped by the institutional *habitus* of their school or college. In T2, transition practices are manifest in initiatives such as peer mentoring programmes, extended work-based learning placements, career development activities, and the focus on graduate attributes.

However, transition has also been understood in more nuanced ways than T1 and T2 might initially suggest. Some studies, for example, see it as a process of change arising from the interaction of structure and agency (Ecclestone, 2009) and, moreover, one inflected by factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity, and age (see Quinn, 2010; Jackson, 2003; Boliver, 2013; Colley, 2007 respectively). Perhaps more pertinent to our purposes is work which recognises transition as a complex multi-dimensional process. Studies such as those by Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) and Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2012) are similar to ours in recognizing transition as a complex, multi-dimensional process within which educational, cultural and historical factors play a role. However, these studies differ from ours in paying greater attention to individuals’ psychological ‘make up’ in transition. Our article builds on these more complex understandings and, in taking forward a T3 conceptualisation of transition as becoming, shifts the discourse towards an understanding which sees Higher Education as part of the whole life of the student, which notices and values the granularity of students’ lived experience, and which tunes into unforeseen events which entangle themselves with other events in an emergent unfolding.

It is, then, an emphasis on transition as experiential emergence through the interplay of micro-level events that makes our approach distinct. Such an approach does not see students as vessels to be filled with appropriate cultural capital (T1), nor does it position students as

being on an forward-moving conveyor-belt punctuated by critical incidents (T2). It does not work with deficit models of transition oriented to ‘squeezing’ students into pre-existing (and often inflexible) institutional goals and established academic practices, or ‘squaring up’ students into the pre-formed identity of the viable academic subject. Such practices of acculturation and alignment, we think, fail to accord due recognition to the multiple differences of students’ lived and embodied realities of transition, and are even less able to celebrate the differences that each student brings. The approach we elaborate in this article builds on the ‘connectionist’ aspects of T3 to reconceptualise transition as an entangled, non-linear, iterative and recursive process, in which students travel in irregular ways through the various landscapes of their experience (university, family, work, social life) and bring those landscapes into relation with each other. In our view such an approach would both supplement and reshape T1 and T2 transitions practices in order to include students’ actual experiences which remain poorly understood at best and marginalised at worst. Recent years have seen an explosion of interest in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy across the field of education, from early years (Blaise 2013), to secondary schools (Larsson 2013), and doctoral education (Taylor et al. 2011). However, their work has been relatively little used in analyses of higher education and, as far as we can ascertain, there have not yet been any studies which use Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy to explore transition to Higher Education. We now introduce the two projects and discuss our approach to their use as data and example.

### **3 The two research projects: Detail, density and specificity in students’ transitions experiences**

The article draws on data from two research projects both carried out with students in the first year of their BA (Hons) Education Studies degrees in a UK university with a high proportion of non-traditional students. The first project, the Student Transitions and Experiences Project (STEP), was a longitudinal project which explored 10 students’ transitions experiences, initially through in-depth one-to-one interviews, then through the use of visual media and autoethnographic writing. The second project, the Higher Education Transitions (HET) project, was smaller in scale, having six participants each of whom participated in a focus group and an in-depth face-to-face interview early in their second semester after beginning university. Both projects obtained ethical approval from the university’s ethics committee. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and we read, re-read, discussed and listened to the recordings many times. What we were initially and continually struck by in

these readings and listenings was the variability of each student's transition experience. It became apparent that each student's experience instantiated a 'micropolitical cartography' (Semetsky 2011, 139) not of 'transition' but of an ongoing *transitioning*, in which multiple influences, events, relations and happenings became caught up. We therefore required a data analysis strategy – and an approach to writing about students' transitioning – that enabled us to tune into the detail, density and difference of each student's experiences.

The data analysis strategy was driven by Deleuze's comment that 'what interests us are the circumstances' (cited in Massumi 1987, xiii). The circumstances of students' transitioning experiences told us that our analytic strategy had to enable us to tune into specifics, into the densely textured experiences, instances and happenings that students talked about, and into the connectivities produced by these specifics. Traditional methods of coding did not work for us on two fronts: first, because coding separates data into preformed categories; and second, because it is concerned with finding patterns of occurrence. MacLure (2013) notes that conventional forms of coding work in an arborescent or 'tree-like' manner, so that coded chunks of data are subsumed into superordinate categories ('themes') based on hierarchical principles, with the overall goal being to reduce complexity by combining details under commonalities and regularities. However, given what our data was indicating, we did not want to reduce complexity or produce regularities! Our analytical task, we felt, was to attend to the density, detail and diversity of students' experiences and so it made sense to turn to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy which, with its ontology of emergence and immanence, seemed to offer a more appropriate approach to data analysis. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari (1987) distinguish between arborescent (tree-like and root-based) and rhizomic (a-centred, non-hierarchical and networked) forms of meaning-making. As already indicated, the first of these establishes hierarchical connections, traces multiple 'effects' back to singular 'causes', and works with a unitary logic. A rhizomic analysis, in contrast, works through a different and more transgressive logic, a logic driven by what St. Pierre (1997, 187) calls 'adventitious multiplicity' which begins 'in the middle'. A rhizomic logic recognises meaning-making as immanent, situated, located, embodied; it opens a way of working with data in its nuances, differences, singularities, contradictions, and difficulties; and it emphasises that we can only ever produce accounts which are indeterminate, incomplete and more open-ended. Doing rhizomic data analysis, then, meant attending to fragments, parts and bits, and refusing to impose themes, patterns or systems on these. Following MacLure's

(2010) advice, in our repeated readings of and listenings to the recordings, we sought to tune into data ‘hot-spots’, that is, those moments of data which ‘jumped out at us’ or ‘grabbed us’. MacLure (2010) speaks of data hotspots as data which seem to ‘glow’ and ‘glimmer’, which stay in your mind, touch your heart, and spark off connections with other instances or concepts. Working with data hotspots was our experimental attempt to put a rhizomic methodology into practice and enabled us to ‘work conceptual development ... at the level of singularity and specificity’ (MacLure 2010, 282).

Following on from this, the methodological practice of working rhizomically with data hotspots guided how we chose to present the data in this article. The ‘processual indeterminacy’ (MacLure 2013, 170) of the data has suggested the need to present the ‘findings’ in a way that keeps meaning-making open. Thus, the inclusion of extended quotations in a flowing, less determinate writing frame seeks to put the data in communication with the concepts of assemblage, rhizome and becoming. In this way, data hotspots function theoretically as conceptual gathering points, as nodes of resonance, and as vibrational events. Activating a rhizomic frame is not about identifying commonalities, producing analytical closure, or providing a definite authorial interpretation. It is more about opening the way to a ‘conceptual trip’ (Rajchman 2001, 22) – in this case, a trip in re-thinking transition with Deleuze and Guattari. Deploying a rhizomic analytical approach is, as St Pierre (2007) notes, transgressive and risky. It shifts how conventional social science gets done (Lather, 2007), which is why we have spent a moment making our analytic process transparent.

In the following three sections we put selected data hotspots in communication with key concepts from Deleuze and Guattari to trace students’ cartographies of transitions. All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

#### **4 Rethinking transition as assemblage: Reconsidering what matters to students**

Assemblage is a key concept for Deleuze and Guattari. They say: ‘an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from ... semiotic, material and social flows simultaneously’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 25). An assemblage is an emergent, temporarily stable yet continually mutating conglomerations of bodies, properties, things, affects, and materialities. Assemblages are not background structures, static situations or



stable entities; they are active, always emergent and changing confederations of bodies, objects, spaces, affects, forces and desires. In Deleuze and Guattari's immanent philosophy, the concept of assemblage provides a useful way of describe how things combine together in complex configurations that seem momentarily stable, even though we are aware things are always changing, or just about to change. How might this concept be useful for thinking about transition?

We were initially drawn to the concept of assemblage after encountering the following hotspots in the data:

Jen

When I told my Nan, she tried to talk me out of it, but she'd talked me into staying in the military for so long because she believed that the long-term benefits of the pension and things that they offer you, that it's better than anything that could be out here.

Gail:

They're really proud, especially my dad because he just left school and went straight into a job, so he didn't ever do anything after ... I was most surprised by like Blackboard and stuff like that because I was worried like where to look for my reading and I was scared at first to go into the library on my own ... there's so many floors.

Abebi:

And when I read things I understand it better. And just reading newspapers because, you know, I come by bus and then train so I'm sort of like, yeah, I will have time for that now because before I couldn't do it, I couldn't read newspapers. I read magazines now, well, instead of just sitting in the – that is why I don't want to drive down here, I know the stress and the parking place so I thought oh, let me just come by bus and train and then I could just read the paper, do something useful. I told you I don't know anything about policy and things like that and now when they are talking in the news, TV, when they mention it I know what it is, what they are saying.

Catherine:

I've just got as many books as I can think of to get what I need, I've got about 10-15 books at home, and I do most of the study at home, but the only problem is at home is the phone rings or something happens.

Helen:

My life revolves around university sailing. It takes up a lot of time, so time management is a key thing for me because sometimes I'm away for weekends and I've had to say no to a couple of them the past couple of weeks because I'm on placement and I just can't deal with sailing, I'm too tired.... I think that's going to be a little challenge for us all because we haven't written assignments since the beginning of January and now we've got to write four, five, of them.

Lyndsey:

You need a lot more time to get on with things, you don't have as much free time to relax and stuff. You feel like you've always got to be doing something, always reading something or researching something.

Catherine:

I need to get it more structured I think because with having... my young one, not everything turns out what you plan, but I'm quite lucky in the sense that once he's in bed, he's great, he's asleep, so I can then concentrate on the night time... sometimes on a Sunday, if my son's dad can come down and take him out for a few hours, visiting the family, it gives me a few hours.

What is transition for these students? For Jen, transition includes Nan, the military, pension, risk, maternal carer, guide, mentor, conversation, and support. For Gail, it includes parents, pride, jobs, family history, encouragement, lack of academic opportunity as well as using the university's virtual learning environment, reading, being scared, the library, being overwhelmed, physical space, happiness. For Abebi, transition includes magazines, newspapers, bus, stress, reading, worry, developing understanding, words, and concepts. We could go on ... but what comes at us from students' words is transition as a complex, sometimes confusing whirl of emotions, spaces, materialities, people, relationships, histories, affects, responses, demands and expectations.

Thinking with Deleuze and Guattari of transition as assemblage highlights *transitioning* as an active making and unmaking of the 'thing' called 'transition'. Transition is a process which draws elements into its orbit and fits them together in an 'arrangement'. This provokes us to attend to the elements that each student assembles within their individual, to how those elements work together, and how they are *put to work* via connections. In Deleuzian terms, these elements are 'singularities', that is unique points which are also points of recommencement and variation (Conley, 2005). Thus, there are relationships with people whose expectations are pulling the students away from the university or pushing them towards it; there are the material artefacts of scholarly life; there is the crucial finding of appropriate books and journal articles; there are the virtual and real spaces students have to learn to embody and inhabit, such as being able to navigate the library, develop a working knowledge of the virtual learning environment, and negotiate bus and train journeys. In addition, students' assemblages include the stuff and processes of everyday life that conventional understandings might assign to the 'outside' of the transition process: sailing, pensions, magazines, parking, phones, bed. Rethinking transition as assemblage undoes the assumed boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' bodies, courses and institutions, and

attends much more closely to students' latticed sense of both and at-the-same-time belonging to the academy and managing the competing demands of the university, their course, and their studies. Using assemblage to re-envisage transition can, we suggest, enable a more holistic appreciation of *all* the active elements within individuals' transitioning processes (and certainly much more so than T1 and T2 conceptualisations do).

Thinking with the concept of assemblage is useful not simply in encouraging a new focus on how 'components are intertwined in a multifaceted gathering' (Bodén 2015) but invites a rethinking of space and time in transitions. Spatially and temporally, T1 and T2 conceptions emphasize transition 'to' university and a leaving behind of former places and spaces (usually school or college and the family home), and transition 'to' adulthood (although such an understanding has always failed to include those students who enter university as mature students). In addition, transition 'to' university requires students to be inculcated into institutional competences, study habits, and modes of understanding which are presumed to utilize increasingly sophisticated modes of thinking, analysis and written expression. For example, Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill and Krathwohl 1956), the benchmark for the formation of university Learning Outcomes, encodes the notion that students move 'upwards' through six major classes of thinking in the domain of knowledge to reach evaluation and synthesis which is positioned at the top of the hierarchy. A Deleuzo-guattarian assemblage understanding suggests that knowledge is less linear and less hierarchical, a point we pick up in the next section.

Rethinking transition via the concept of assemblage is, then, about much more than saying that transition is complex, and that it 'mixes' the three dimensions of space, time and skills. It invites the need to rethink transition as a constitutive process, forged in and by its many and various (and not always to be foreseen and known) connections. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) contend, it becomes less a case of knowing what the different parts in the assemblage mean or 'represent', than of knowing what the assemblage's components are, how they function, and with what other things they plug into *for that particular individual*. So, while it is clear that from the above data hotspots that there are shared factors amongst students (for example, the pressure of family history, the anxiety of entering new spaces, the demands of the course, developing new study habits), each of these factors work as singularities which find different articulations within each student's transition assemblage. It is not the commonality of instances that matters, but the specificity with which those commonalities are

articulated. Thus, for example, ‘better’ time-management is not simply a skill to learn, but for Helen is an embodied and felt practice, an affective sense of something needing to be done ‘better’ or ‘more quickly’, just as bodily modes of ‘tiredness’ and ‘concentration’ are also active players within Catherine’s and Helen’s transition assemblages. And, as indicated earlier, assemblages don’t sit still: what we present here are moments, or condensed events, in the ‘living’ mutating assemblage of transitioning that evolves with the student on a day-by-day, moment-by-moment, basis. Each students’ assemblage testifies to their unique passage through and inhabitation of transition, a point we develop in more detail below when considering transition as becoming.

## **5 Rethinking transition as rhizome: Reconsidering knowledge and knowing**

The concept of the rhizome is deployed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as a means to destabilise root and branch, linear or hierarchical systems of organization. Rhizomes are forms or beings which can spread in any direction and move through levels and scales. They are non-linear, multiple, a-centred, and non-hierarchical systems without one general organizing principle. Rhizomes are characterized by intensive states, circulation, relationships, movements, ruptures and becomings of all kinds. They have multiple entryways and exits, and ‘ceaselessly make connections’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8). In this section, we activate the concept of the rhizome to rethink knowledge and knowing during transition. The need to do so emerged from data hotspots included here:

Lyndsey

I took two sets of A-levels and I didn’t think about it first time round, but then I had a lot of friends that went to uni and they seemed to have a good time, so I thought I might do the same. It wasn’t something that I didn’t exactly think about, but I just never bothered, I thought it would sort itself out.

Gail

Yeah, I don’t know, I knew I needed to stay in [Name of city], I want to move away and thought about money and I’ve got a part-time job and I wanted to stay nearby. I was a bit scared as well.

Annisa

So, yeah, basically I just went from college to doing another, like I applied for uni and then, it was a business course and I didn’t like it, so I only went for like two months ... and then after I was like, “Oh, I don’t know what to do,” and then this apprenticeship came up to work in a primary school as a teaching assistant. So I applied for that and then I thought, “Okay, I’ll see

how it goes,” and then I loved it, so I stayed there for two years and then I finished my Level 3 ... I did BTEC travel and tourism, that was at college, and when I was doing the apprenticeship it was just as a teaching assistant getting to do that qualification.

What is striking about this data is how, in a time when the notion of the student as rational, sovereign consumer has become increasingly embedded in government policy discourse (BIS 2011) and is being widely used as an underpinning rationale for the need to increase competition in the system (BIS 2015), students’ decision-making acts in our studies were conspicuously *not* based on a conscious, rational evaluation of choices, in which, as informed consumers, they weighed their options and reckoned their future benefits. Rather, their processes of knowing about transition – when to take the step, how to go about it, what course might be right for them – seemed much more of a decentred, affective, immanent and emergent process. What the students in our studies seemed to be telling us was that, for them, transition was not to do with knowing ‘about’ anything that was separate from their experience or about making ‘rational’, calculated decisions. Rather, their knowing was more of an ongoing happening, an absorption, immersion, and gathering that followed non-linear pathways and was subject to recursive iterations which produced often accidental becomings. If such modes of knowing shaped students’ transition *to* university, then what about modes of knowing during their transitions once *at* university?

Data hotspots emerging from our projects indicated that students did not separate knowledge and knowing off from other aspects of their lives but tangled knowledge and knowing up into existing webs and relationships. Rebecca, for example, talks about not seeing her boyfriend and the difficulty of maintaining relations with friends:

For literally nearly a month, nearly every weekend I've been at home studying and doing my work and when I've been at his house I'll go in his spare room on my own and just do my work and he'll sit down and do whatever. Even though I feel awful and really guilty he'll just say 'Rebecca, you've got to do it, just go and do it, it's not going to be forever, and then come back', and it is really difficult and like with all my friends I've said 'look, I can't come out as much, I can't go on nights out ... Some of them get their face on because I can't come – but a lot of them know it's really important and they know I want to do it and why I want to do it.

Nicola speaks of her Mum:

I ring my mum every day and she asks me how my day's been and I tell her what I've done and she hasn't got a clue what I'm on about ... (laughter) it's nice to know that even though my mum doesn't understand what I'm talking about she'll still listen.

And of her Dad:

[I enjoy] the theory. There is so much theory on everything and I had no idea. It's fascinating. I can now have a conversation about politics with my dad and I didn't even know who the Tories or the Conservatives were six months ago!

While Jen comments on her tutors:

I really enjoy the conversations with tutors, it's something where you actually, you can expand upon ideas that you have in your mind and they can help you direct or straighten you out if you're going wrong and I love that, it's fantastic. Whereas I've never had that and I've never been able to voice anything to someone and then really understand and say, "Well actually I think" ...'

So much of what emerged from the data about learning and knowledge was wrapped up in discussions about relationships, with very little direct reference to knowledge *per se*. Also, other than talk of 'liking' this or that particular module, there was nothing on students' perceptions of the subject/discipline/field of education.

The students in our projects saw knowledge and knowing as social, affective, embodied and relational occurrences. For them, knowledge and knowing were osmotic and absorptive, bringing peers, friends, family, social media and a multiplicity of different elements into conjunction. Knowing was about 'plugging in' different modes and emotions; about bringing diverse bodies, things and spaces together in new combinations and formations; and about making connections that forged new, fortuitous and heterogeneous mixings. Knowledge was not a body 'of' 'facts, theories and stuff' separate from the learner, something discrete and detachable as in traditional understandings; it was not something they acquired in linear fashion and 'banked', nor was it a social construction which gestured to an ideology or hidden curriculum. Knowledge and knowing were emergent rhizomic formations, organised on 'principles of connection and heterogeneity' whereby any point of a rhizome 'can be connected to anything other' (7) in an a-centred multiplicity. This does not, however, mean that students' knowledge is without order or form: rhizomes have internal structures – or 'lines of segmentarity' (9), which serve to organise them but do so according to their own internal logic. Thus, students we spoke to were intent on organizing knowledge according to their own 'internal' or affective logic, rather than according to the external logic of the modular 'package', that is, those bites of knowledge that lecturers use as building blocks to

fit sessions into modules and modules into courses and programmes. Interestingly, a rhizomic understanding makes a useful connection back with Pinar's (1975) notion of *currere*, which transforms curriculum from a noun into a verb, and places the activity of self-building via knowledge at its heart. What gives us pause for thought is how to reconcile these insights concerning students' rhizomic encounters with/in/through knowledge during their transitions experiences with the increasingly performative exigencies that shape both students' and staff experiences of module 'content' and 'delivery' throughout their degree.

Thinking of knowledge and knowing via the concept of the rhizome shifts the focus from knowing as cognitive intellection to knowing as an embodied form of (be)coming-to-know, suggestive of an ongoing, unfinishable process in which the 'self' continually emerges in each new act of knowledge-ing. While this insight undoes the notion that there is a break between what is 'internal' and 'external', and thereby complicates psychologistic and individualising notions of motivation, it also speaks back in complicated ways to Sfard's (1998) now classic distinction between two metaphors for learning – acquisition and participation. While Sfard uses this binary as an heuristic to explain knowledge growth, and acknowledges that, in fact, acquisition and participation are often mixed up together, it seems to us, based on data from our studies, that the 'mixing' Sfard speaks of might be better conceptualised via a third, alternative metaphor entirely – that of a rhizome. The rhizome, it would seem, offers a more generative concept for accounting for students' experiences of knowledge as mobile, multiple, affective, connective, heterogeneous and transient. Such a reconceptualisation might also provide a way of accommodating students' intense anxieties about having to find/ produce the 'right' answer and in supporting their (and our) risk-taking in moving beyond familiar pedagogies and curricula in Higher Education.

This section has proposed the conceptual importance of the rhizome as a means to consider knowledge and knowing as forms of knowledge-ing which link with students' emergent subjectivities in transitions processes in intricate ways. In this and the previous section, we have alluded to students' becoming and it is to the process of becoming that we now turn.

## **6 Rethinking transition: Becoming as an experimental practice of self-differentiation**

Colebrook (2002, 4) notes that ‘becoming’ is a key Deleuzian concept: it is ‘not just another word but a problem, and for this reason Deleuze ... give[s] as many nuances and senses to becoming as possible’. Gale and Parker (2012) are right to note that transition as becoming (T3) is based in a radically different set of ontological presumptions than both T1 and T2 conceptions. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), becoming is about the continual production of differentiation; it describes the immanent unfolding of the ‘self’. Becoming is about change as ongoing flux and dynamic flow, as emergence and unfolding in micro-moments and instants. Becoming is the endless play of difference and it is difference that effectuates becoming. Becoming is the working of self-differentiation. It is not change ‘within’ an entity. Neither is it a change ‘from’ something ‘to’ something else. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 9) clarify: a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination.

The ontology of becoming presumes a very different starting point from an ontology of presence. The latter is grounded in the view that subjects are sovereign agents, that their actions emanate from conscious will, intent and motivation, and that they engage in active processes of self-making in line (more or less) with neoliberal, individualized, deliberative, biographical forms of self-crafting made familiar by Giddens (1991). Such an ontology accords with T1 and T2 understanding of transition which presume that students as agents have some control over shaping the contexts, environments and structures they interact with and find themselves within. Becoming, in contrast, is not about how conscious agents act with intent to make something happen or make a change occur, nor is it necessarily a property of individuals. For Deleuze and Guattari, there is no unified ‘I’ with a centralised ego and controlling consciousness. What/ who ‘I’ am and ‘we’ are is, rather, an assemblage of intensities, forces, affects, fluxes, instants which are held together in always momentary stabilisation and which are always undergoing transmutation and differing into something else. Semetsky (2011) explains that there is both a *present-becoming* which is our present individuation, which Deleuze (1995, 44) characterises as ‘experimentation on ourselves [involving] all the combinations which inhabit us’, and a *praxis of becoming* oriented to becoming-other via ‘diversity, multiplicity [and] the destruction of identity’ which, as Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 174) explain, presupposes breaking out of our old outlived habits and attitudes so as to creatively ‘bring into being that which does not yet exist’.



Becoming as an experimental practice of self-differentiation (present-becoming) offers a much more elusive sense of ‘change’ and it was this ‘sense’ that emerged in data hotspots such as these:

Nicola

I thought it would be incredibly hard and I struggled so much in the past ‘I can’t do this!’ and then when you sit down and go through it you're like ‘Yeah, you can’. It's not that hard if you put your mind to it, you can do it. I'm enjoying it, I really am. If I wasn't I don't think I would continue doing it because I don't see what's the point in doing it if you don't like it, I would have come out and done something else. I've just learnt so much and I feel more confident. I mean I probably wouldn't have done this six months ago, I wouldn't have been able to come and talk to you, I'd be bright red and shaking by now! So it's made me more confident ... that was one of my first personal aims. All through my education it's been ‘You need to contribute more in class, you need to put your hand up, you need to share your opinion’ and I went ‘No! I can't do that, I can't talk in front of all those people’ but I think now that yeah, my opinion counts just as much as theirs.

Catherine

One of my best friends Charlotte, she's noticed a difference in my attitude and the way I'm talking to her and my terminology's changed as well. She just laughed at me, she said, ‘well what was that you said then?’ Yeah, but she sort of understood me, but not understood me. We were talking about social-economic differences and things like that.

Abebi

Well it's my husband, you know, he came here because he's a doctor, and then he got a job then I had to join him here so that's it and we thought we were going to do one year, two year and go back so that's why initially I didn't bother about it because I knew I've got my job because I started doing teaching for three months when I joined here so it was like okay, five years, it's still going! I was like okay, let me get something!

Where does ‘change’ begin and end for these students? Their becomings are utterly singular, concrete and unique to them. These hotspots gesture to the fact that an individual has many co-terminus and non-consecutive becomings; and indicates that becomings cannot be ‘known in advance’.

Becoming – seen as here as the ‘change’ wrought by transition as an ongoing an emergent event of becoming – is an experiment in individuation composed of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call lines of articulation and lines of flight. Lines of articulation are the normalizing discourses and practices which tend to produce homogeneities which keep the

status quo in place: transition in T1 and T2 might be seen as lines of articulation. Intersecting these are lines of flight, that is, flows of energy, desire and intensity which act as centrifugal forces decentering and dispersing lines of articulation. Conceptualising transition as becoming suggests that transition is a line of flight which gathers its energy from duration, an idea Deleuze got from Bergson, which describes his view that the past and the present are not two successive moments in linear time, but two elements which coexist and which give rise to a process of endless differentiation. Becomings gesture to consciousness, reality and subjectivity as nothing other than continuous, unceasing variation. For Deleuze, the virtual in duration – that which is as yet unexpressed but available to reality – actualizes moments which open possibilities for new futures, for new becomings. The actualization of the virtual in new becomings was evident in many instances of our data hotspots, as in the examples given above. Elaborating transition as becoming in this way helps tune us into students' fluid, unforeseen and unpredictable individuation – their becoming-other through self-differentiation is a praxis of becoming, a materialisation and sedimenting of time in a process of iterative becoming.

It is not just that reconceptualising transition as becoming produces a more nuanced understanding of change; the more pertinent point is that tuning into students' becomings might help us notice how the stratifying practices of T1 and T2 modes of transition with their grounding in intellectual and rational mastery produce blockages which cut off students' creative lines of flight and prevent the unfolding of their creative self-differentiations into a more open future. The word 'transition' itself may better be thought of not as 'change' but as movement – movement from/toward/between/of bodies and their affective experiences. Such an understanding activates 'transition' as a verb, not a noun, as an emergent, dynamic and constitutive event of *transitioning*. The immanent ontology of individuation requires on the one hand, attention to the details of students' transitions experiences, because 'becomings are molecular', and on the other hand, to their multiple connectivity in ever-new assemblages, because 'every becoming is a block of coexistence' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 322). Paying such attention is, we think, a good way to (begin to) recast social justice in a rhizomic vein as an ongoing responsibility throughout students multiple transitionings.

## **7 Theory becoming practical: Implications for transitions *theorypractice***

In this penultimate section, we turn briefly to the relations between theory and practice to understand how reconceptualising transition with Deleuze and Guattari might inform how transition gets done. The first thing to note is that for Deleuze and Guattari, concepts are practical matters. They assert that ‘all concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 16). As St. Pierre (2016, 2) notes:

Deleuze and Foucault (1972/1977) together wrote that “practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another” (p. 206) [...] theory and practice are inseparable— one might write them together as *theorypractice*.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy, theory and practice are not separate things; neither are they in a binary arrangement in which the former (theory) is oriented to thought and the latter (practice) to action. Theory and practice are entangled matters – concepts are material practices and practices enact thought. But thinking about theory *as* practice is unfamiliar in applied fields like education which, as St. Pierre (2016) notes, suffers from a practicalist urge to ‘leap to application.’ However, taking up the line suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 111), that ‘to think is to experiment, but experimentation is always that which is in the process of coming about’ leads us (logically!) to encourage you to experiment with doing transition differently in your institution. In Deleuzian vein, we cannot say in advance what those experiments might be or would produce, as specificities of context, singularities of events, and the in-situ emergence of particular assemblages prohibit that. What we can say is that such experimentations would be orientated to opening space for students’ becomings; that they would pay heed to the immanence of students’ experiences and their rhizomic connectivities in multiple directions; and they would provide opportunities for students’ messy, struggles with knowledge-ing. In experimenting with ways of doing ‘transition’ anew there would need to be fine-grained attention to each relation, moment, event, experience, and concern. Three examples which have emerged in our own theorypractice and serve as illustrative activations of transitioning as assemblage, rhizome and becoming have been the formation of a staff/ student choir, field trips that are not subject-based, and poetry workshops for staff and students. The primary purpose of these activities is not to support the narrow outcomes of a particular curriculum but to enable the conditions for joyful happenings and surprising connections to emerge. In such instances, transition becomes an experimental, plurivocal, emergent practice in situ: it is about what matters in *these* events and practices in *this* context. New connections are forged and established patterns are ruptured.

## 8 Conclusion

This article has argued that Deleuze and Guattari's concepts are generative in opening up more nuanced, complex and productive ways of thinking about students' experiences of transition. It has analysed how three concepts from Deleuze and Guattari (1997) – assemblage, rhizome and becoming – can be put to work to reconceptualise transition. In doing so it supports Gale and Parker's (2012) view that T1 and T2 understandings of transition are limited and limiting for students and institutions, and it takes their T3 concept of transition as becoming forward into new conceptual territory. We have suggested that there are various advantages of thinking about (and doing) transitions via Deleuze and Guattari's (1987; 1991) philosophy. First, it helps foreground the fact that 'transition' does not have an essence; it is not a neat, unifying package containing skills or competencies, and neither is it a neutral description of a temporal or spatial linear process. Second, it enables an understanding of transition as a dynamic, multiple, creative and mobile assemblage which changes with individual context, experience and instance, and is entangled with embodied, affective and cognitive ways of coming to, and becoming within, university. Third, in activating 'transition' as a verb, it constitutes transition as an emergent, dynamic event of *transitioning*, and encourages attention to the multiple ways which might help rupture the normative and normalizing discourses prevalent in institutionalist (T1) and individualist (T2) conceptions and practices of transition. Fourth, it makes a compelling case for focusing on the singularity of students' transitionings in their detail, density and specificity, and suggests that each students' transition enacts a unique 'micropolitical cartography' (Semetsky 2011, 139). Fifth and finally, it provokes a new approach to data analysis, one based on tuning into hotspots which illuminate students' entangled, variegated and heterogeneous experiences of the semiotic, material and social dimensions of transitioning more effectively than standard coding practices might. Considered in this light, our two projects may be small in their empirical scope, but they have produced data that has been theoretically generative.

Reconceptualising transition as assemblage, rhizome and becoming offers new connectionist opportunities for understanding and support students' transitionings, outside the false dichotomy between a student-focused set of enablers or a University-led set of enablers. Approaching transition as 'the contingent recommencement of a same contingent process, in different conditions' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, 98) might, we hope, help inaugurate new

transition events, happenings and instances which help students navigate an increasingly market-driven and competition-oriented higher education landscape, both in the UK and elsewhere. If Deleuze and Guattari's concepts support new ways of understanding and doing transitions in ways which recognise difference and diversity, value the heterogeneity of all students' experiences, and in any small way bolster the social justice impulse towards a more inclusive higher education system then, in the current climate, we think that can only be a good thing.

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