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Strom, Kathryn J. and Adrian D. Martin. *Becoming-Teacher: A Rhizomatic Look at First-Year Teaching*. Sense Publishers, 2017, 138 pages.

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Just before opening the door to the classroom (I teach composition at a four-year college), I pause for a moment. My heart is beating faster—partly because of the four flights of stairs I have just climbed, partly because of the joy of teaching, and partly because of the unknown before me. I have taught writing for twelve years, and yet, I have never taught this particular class to this particular group of students at this particular time and place. I am a composition instructor, and at the same time, I am not the instructor I was a semester ago or even yesterday. I am constantly *becoming* an instructor for the unique set of circumstances I find myself in every semester and every day.

Becoming is one of the central concepts of the rhizomatic approach of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987). It means constantly creating new versions of oneself; in Kathryn J. Strom and Adrian D. Martin's words, it is, "a non-normative ontology corresponding to a dynamic, constantly changing reality" (113). The rhizomatic approach has encouraged me to make peace with the messiness of teaching and learning, and even to find beauty and new possibilities in that messiness. Strom and Martin have given an excellent guide not only to view teaching through a rhizomatic lens but also to make it a tool for enacting social justice. Advocating for social justice, the authors challenge the positivist and neoliberal paradigm that has pervaded education. Several years after the publication of this work, not much has changed in the educational system, and the business-like models are still permeating it. In recent years, scholars have continued their call for social justice in education (e.g., Adams et al., 2016; Parker, 2022; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Smagorinsky, 2024; Venet, 2024), which makes *Becoming-Teacher* particularly relevant today.

By teaching with rhizomatics in mind, teachers create a social justice environment that is at odds with hierarchies and binary logic, characteristic of the traditional, transactional educational paradigms. In the traditional paradigm, engaged/disengaged students are, according to Strom and Martin, "intellectually ranked and segregated" (12) and teachers, who transmit knowledge to students, are perceived as the main factor contributing to student learning. This view disregards important variables influencing learning processes, such as educational institutions and students' socioeconomic status or access to advanced courses. Teachers need to recognize these variables and adapt to the needs of the students. Strom and Martin emphasize constructivist approaches to education, in line with the philosophies of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, or Paulo Freire, and argue that it is unrealistic to expect teachers to engage in the same practices every time, as these practices need to be adjusted to specific students and contexts.

This has implications for teacher training. Strom and Martin argue that teacher preparation should include more fieldwork, where future teachers can be exposed to different context-specific situations, and where they can "negotiate their preservice learning with all the actors, elements, and conditions in their new setting" (117). The authors cite

research studies that found novice teachers having difficulty transferring the knowledge they gained in their coursework to real classrooms. The authors also provide empirical data through three case studies of novice teachers for whom coursework was just one learning element and who continued to learn their profession on the job. Therefore, extending the period when preservice teachers engage in fieldwork where they can practice co-constructed teaching would diminish the gap between theory and practice. Lastly, those who teach preservice teachers should themselves model co-constructed teaching. As a practical guide, Strom and Martin offer a chart of “rhizomatic shifts in thinking” (113), with a list of characteristics of linear thinking juxtaposed to characteristics of rhizomatic thinking.

Once in the classroom (and outside of it, too, when I meet with my students or plan my classes) I try to practice those rhizomatic shifts in thinking. For example, over time, I have learned that it is unrealistic to expect all my students to process the material at the same pace and to the same extent. Students may not grasp immediately what we do in class; it may take them some time, but this is absolutely fine. I, the instructor, do not have full control over how and when each student will master new knowledge or skills. At any given point, each of my students is at their unique level of skill development, engagement, or maturity. Students should not be penalized for not learning the material I selected within the timeframe that I imposed on them. As an instructor then, I try to guide each student through—and normalize and celebrate students’ unique stages of their learning—their unique *becomings*.

Becoming also applies to the process of everchanging teacher identities. The authors illustrate this through three case studies of high school science teachers who are constantly evolving, creating multiple identities, oftentimes at odds with one another. The elements responsible for the multiple identities (e.g., students, colleagues, classrooms, textbooks, or computers) form *teaching-assemblages* (41). For example, one of the teachers, Mauro, taught two different classes, each with very different assemblages of student backgrounds and attitudes, class climate, relationships between students, Mauro’s own confidence and knowledge of the subject matter, experience teaching the course, and rapport with the students. Consequently, in each of these classes, Mauro *became* a different teacher, employing very different, often opposing strategies and approaches. While in one class he empowered students to own their learning and feel liberated to co-construct knowledge, in the other one, he assumed a more authoritative role, and to ensure his students’ learning, he employed strategies that challenged some of his core beliefs.

Taking a peek into the lived experiences of the teachers who shift between their multiple identities in their daily work has made me rethink my own identity as a composition instructor. We educators may feel the need to define ourselves or other educators in clear categories: authoritarian vs. student-centered, strict vs. lenient. In response to that expectation, I portray myself as a compassionate instructor, who promotes collaborative learning and who seeks connection with her students. However, the rhizomatic approach invites me to reveal a more complex and more honest presentation of myself. While I have created comfortable learning environments, in which I strive to be inclusive and accommodating for my students, I have not always succeeded in creating enough space for collaboration, and depending on the types of colleges where I taught as well as the students’ backgrounds and experiences, it has not always been easy for me

to connect with every student. I have also often fallen back on creating a linear progression of my characteristics (e.g., from less confident to more confident, or from less knowledgeable to more knowledgeable). Yet the process of *becoming* is not linear and not always predictable. I have had better and worse semesters, as I constantly reinvent myself and adapt to new variables in the classroom and outside-of-class factors that affect me as a person and a professional.

Becoming-Teacher provides a unique angle for approaching teaching and enacting social justice through recognizing the multiplicity of factors responsible for one's learning and treating each student as a respected individual. Rhizomatics can be counted among the "[e]quitable, progressive, and social justice pedagogies" and as such it has "the potential to reshuffle the ... norms of schooling" (78). The book inspires educators to reflect on their practices, regardless of the subject matter or level. The rhizomatic perspective may serve as a practical tool to help create a more equitable environment where learning and identity are understood as ever-changing processes.

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