'Experimentation in contact with the real': networking with Deleuze & Guattari

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Abstract

This paper draws on data from an longitudinal case study of a Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) instituted by a state government in Victoria in the arena of post compulsory education and training to explore the possibilities of a new approach to thinking about networks, their formation and operation, one that is inspired by 'A Thousand Plateaus' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).   Using a rhizomatic approach my focus is on the middle — the plateau — a space that is made of lines moving in multiple directions. Looking at the middle disrupts taken-for-granted understandings and perceptions of linearity; it is in considering middles and plateaus that it is possible to move beyond a concern with joining-up 'fixed' entities within existing, and constrained, ways of knowing and, in the process, finding new ways of understanding and realizing the potential of a phenomenon that is 'fast becoming a standard explanation of structure and action in both the public and private domain'(Considine, 2002).

Entering the middle

> This is a book that speaks of many things, of ticks and quilts and fuzzy subsets and noology and political economy. It is difficult to know how to approach it. What do you do with a book that dedicates an entire chapter to music and animal behaviour – and then claims that it isn't a chapter? That presents itself as a network of "plateaus" that are precisely dated, but can be read in any order? That deploys a complex technical vocabulary drawn from a wide range of disciplines in the sciences, mathematics, and the humanities, but whose authors recommend that you read it as you would listen to a record? (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. ix)

This quote, which I share for those who have yet to venture into the work of Deleuze & Guattari, forms the opening paragraph of Brian Massumi's (1987) Foreword to his translation into English of *A Thousand Plateaus* (ATP) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In this paper I want to work with the ideas conveyed in ATP, and in Massumi's subsequent work, to think about learning networks and, in particular, the take up of networks, partnership and collaboration by governments in the face of so-called 'wicked problems'(Rittel & Webber, 1973). My discussion focuses on a particular sector at a particular place and time: post-compulsory[i] education, training and employment in the state of Victoria, Australia. However, the important point is not the policy setting but more to explore the attempted use of network models within the structured institutions of government.

Any paper inspired by ATP can hardly be said to have either a beginning or an end and yet a text such as this one must commence at some point and conclude at another. My approach here will be, firstly, to provide an overview of the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) progressively implemented by the State government in Victoria since 2001. I will then provide some comment of why I selected this 'nomad-philosophy' in undertaking my research and analysis of one LLEN over the years from 2003-2006. Finally, I will take up the strategies outlined by Brian Massumi (1992) in his 'user's guide' to ATP to demonstrate how these ideas can be practically applied to help us unlock the potential of networks and collaboration in a range of policy settings.

2001: Local Learning and Employment Networks

> Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes (for examples, values or performance goals). A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance. (Castells, 2000/1996, pp. 501-502)

In 2001, subsequent to a Ministerial Review (Kirby, 2000) the state government in Victoria, Australia, began a process of implementing a blanket of 31 planning networks that would ultimately cover all of the State. The Ministerial Review had focused on the pathways of young Victorians in transition from education to employment in the globalised context and had found that their transitions were 'uncertain, unequal and poorly signposted, the transition process ha[d] become more complex and unpredictable' (Kirby, 2000, p. 7). The Kirby Report that resulted from the Review suggested that youth faced persistent and severe difficulties unknown to

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previous generations. These problems were frequently concentrated in particular groups and regions. The Report's authors argued that these 'joined-up' problems demanded 'joined-up' solutions': a 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-community' response.

In a phased process, Local Learning and Employment Networks, or LLEN as they came to be known, were implemented by government on the basis of the recommendations of the Kirby Report. This phased process recognised differences in regional 'preparedness' with the initial focus placed on regions that could demonstrate existing strong networks. While consideration was given to the view that local planning networks might continue to evolve organically (Keating & Robinson, 2003) it was not accepted that this would ensure the benefits of the networks would be available across the State.

LLEN were established as Incorporated Associations, a status that was proposed to enhance their ability to move beyond the boundaries that constrain innovation in government-administered structures of post-compulsory education, training and employment. Each LLEN was initially funded by government at AUD400,000[ii] for three years and, while accountable to the Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission (VLESC) — also established subsequent to the Ministerial Review — was managed by the Department of Education, Employment and Training[iii]. It was noted that LLEN would have implications for the way that governance worked, fostering a move towards an enabling state that governs by coordinating the actions of powerful others (Pierre & Peters, 2000).

Ten years on and LLEN have become an established component of the policy landscape in Victoria, not only surviving long beyond that initial three years but also becoming something of a template for the federal National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions (Department for Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Yet this 'victory' statement hides the tensions and challenges of those ten years. There is a wide body of research that highlights the distance between rhetoric and practice in realizing the potential of networks (Billet, Ovens, Clemens, & Seddon, 2007; Considine, 2005; Geddes, 2006; McCarthy, Miller, & Skidmore, 2004; Seddon, Clemans, & Billett, 2005; Tett, 2005). I argue that this tension, in part, has resulted from the ways networks are conceptualised and measured; a focus on formally joining-up what are seen as established, stable entities underestimates the complexity *within* network participants and the (necessarily) transitory nature of alliance. In another dimension, the tension results from the failure to understand a process of learning as inherent to the operation of successful networks.

It's all in how you think about it

> Seeing the connectedness of things is the starting point for understanding a world that otherwise appears baffling . . . Yet it is far easier to assume a world without connections, a world of fewer dimensions where simple heuristics carry us through. This is perhaps the hardest aspect of a connected world and the reason why our concepts and institutions may be doomed to lag behind the reality they seek to make sense of. (Mulgan, 2004, p.59)

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It was a process of 'seeing the connectedness' in my case study of one LLEN that first led me to engage with Deleuzian concepts. The principles of connection and heterogeneity articulated in ATP (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7) appeared to me to be the fundamental aim of a LLEN charged — in simple terms — with networking complex networks.

Rhizomatic thinking is based in an acceptance that connection and interaction are central to all life. This characteristic of connection and the style of thought that inheres in it —one that privileges experimentation (*And*) over ontology (*Is*) — is sympathetic to the action research methodology that underpinned the work of the LLEN studied in my research as 'to attain the multiple, one must have a method that effectively constructs it' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.22):

> Thinking is understood through the uses to which it gives rise, the connections it opens. But for that it needs the sobriety of a certain realism. Often it is a matter of making visible problems for which there exists no program, no plan, no 'collective agency,' problems that therefore call for *new groups, not yet defined, who must invent themselves in the process*. (Rajchman, 2000, p. 8, my emphasis)

This idea of 'new groups, not yet defined' is of central importance when we think about networking as an institutional response, whatever our policy context. Commonly, networking is conceptualised as a kind of community-join-the-dots where possibilities are framed by points that already answer to a dominant reality. However, in thinking rhizomatically we must move beyond a vision of networking as a process where we join-up existing, stable entities:

> we should no longer think in terms of lines going from one fixed point to another, but, on the contrary, must think of points as lying at the intersection of many entangled lines, capable of drawing out 'other spaces.' (Rajchman, 2000, p.100)

For Deleuze & Guattari our thinking is limited because it begins in 'being' — or 'what is' — which it then imagines as changing in some way on connection with something else. They suggest that to *really* think we need to free our thinking, a process they refer to as 'becoming-imperceptible,' to no longer seeing the world in terms of fixed and extended objects (Colebrook, 2002). 'Becoming' gives us access to transformation through a refusal of closed structures within which difference is confined (Roy, 2003). It is this focus on becoming rather than being that brings the importance of network learning to the fore.

This, in turn, means acknowledging that people themselves are always in a process of becoming — they too are assemblages of genetic material, ideas, powers of acting, affects, perceptions and relationships to other bodies (Colebrook, 2002) — and this fluidity fundamentally influences how we understand all the interactions in which people and their organisations engage. It is the category of 'multiplicity' that enables us to dispense with recourse to an original or subsequent totality; a multiplicity is a connection of parts with any 'whole' being nothing more than a part alongside other parts (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). A multiplicity is a 'potential'; it is not to be confused with 'variety'; 'it is not what has many parts, it is what is "complicated"' (Rajchman, 2000, p. 60).

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As such, we need to retain an awareness that it is from within these *already*-assemblages that multiplicities encounter the opportunity for 'becoming-other' in pursuit of joined-up community and joined-up government. Some 'pseudomultiplicities' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p.8) — including government — exhibit an arborescent formation and are predisposed to territorialize, establishing power and stability. Other multiplicities are molecular, intensive and unconscious and exhibit a rhizomatic formation, 'constantly constructing and dismantling themselves in the course of their communications as they cross over into each other at, beyond or before a certain threshold' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p.33).

Intersecting multiplicities form rhizomes that are open, heterogeneous and multiple yet they are also historically located (Gough, 2004). Given the arborescence of government, its power, and the perceived necessity for 'joining-up' there is a tension in the policy agenda. If, as was the case with LLEN, structural reform is our intention then neglecting to consider multiplicities in our conceptualisations of networks risks policy failure. In previous work (Kamp, 2009, 2010) I have portrayed the consequences of government's inability to follow through on the consequences of their policies around networking and partnership. Here I focus instead on what can be done through discussing five 'pragmatic guidelines' for becoming outlined by Massumi in his 'user's guide' to ATP. These are now presented, in the order suggested by Massumi (1992, pp. 103-106).

'Stop the World'

Massumi's first strategy is focused on the need to disconnect some of the habitual ways in which we pursue our endeavours given habit fosters an inability to change. For becoming to occur, the first step is to interfere with the habitual operation of what he refers to as 'the world as we know it'. Both 'tactical sabotage' of, and improvement in, existing arrangements are necessities of becoming — their 'combined goal being a redefinition of the conditions of existence laid down by the molar order: their conversion into conditions of becoming' (Massumi, 1992, p. 104).

How does this relate to our discussion of LLEN? This 'redefinition of the conditions of existence' speaks directly to issues of governance and the identified potential for LLEN to foster new governance arrangements (Robinson & Keating, 2005). This is no easy task: given the interconnected complexity of networks, demands for certain forms of accountability are amplified (McCarthy, et al., 2004). Deleuze concurs: 'it is when becoming-the-same begins to falter that it carries its process to a higher power' (Massumi, 1992, p. 107). For networks, a redefinition of the conditions of existence would require that government conceive a new language for governance that is developed in the process of situated learning within the rhizome/network that *includes* government.

While LLEN had been established as Incorporated Associations accountable to VLESC their contract management was handled by the Departmental staff who remained within the established bureaucratic paradigm:

> The difficulty government had was to understand what they had set up was an incorporated body, not another department . . . The bureaucrats treat the LLEN, the Committee of Management and its Executive Officer as one of its own, part of its own bureaucracy . . .. (Freya, LLEN Committee Member, 2003)

While commentators suggest that in the future, lines of accountability will be 'messy' and based on deliberative as well as procedural processes (McCarthy, et al., 2004) established, best-practice processes prevail in the present. For the LLEN tactical sabotage of and improvement in the existing order was tenuous, fraught with tension and slow to achieve (Kamp, 2009). Slowness, in and of itself, is not a concern given there is danger in 'wildly destratifying'(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 161). Rather, pacing must be determined by historical conditions and the desire embodied in them: the 'velocity of becoming' must only be different from the 'reflex speed of the existing apparatuses of molar capture . . . sometimes extreme slowness passes more easily unnoticed' (Massumi, 1992, p. 104).

'Cherish derelict spaces'

> A multiplicity is something 'one must make or do, and learn by making or doing … we must always make connections, since they are not already given … To make connections one needs not knowledge, certainty, or even ontology, but rather a trust that something may come out, though one is not yet completely sure what. (Rajchman, 2000, p.6-7)

Connection requires a style of thought that puts experimentation before ontology, thus '*And*' before '*Is*'. Deleuze suggests that imagination is the mode of thought proper to becoming-other (Massumi, 1992). It is important to acknowledge that the kinds of institutions and social structures that are now understood to be inadequate to the challenges of late modern times — including schools and other significant bureaucracies — are also in a process of becoming, albeit of a different kind: they invest in what Deleuze & Guattari refer to as 'becoming-the-same'. But cracks do appear in these social structures, cracks that are not noticed or valued: they are of no interest being seen only for what they are not (Massumi, 1992, p. 104).

Imagination requires that we be attentive to opportunity within the constraints of the existing order. Becoming 'performs an operation' on the categories we all inhabit, opening a space in the frame those categories delineate into which other bodies 'slip' and a kind of 'contagion of becoming-other' (Massumi, 1992, p. 101) occurs. In time, the forces of molarity must accommodate this contagion with, perhaps, a new discourse of governance or new Department structures that break intra-governmental barriers to joining-up.

As I noted earlier, this process of 'accommodation' by the Department was glacially slow as staff rethought how to move with the LLEN. Two points are important here: the first is that these derelict spaces should not be thought of as 'outside' the existing order; rather they are virtual spaces within the actual world and this is the right place to be:

> Bodies in flight do not leave the world behind. If the circumstances are right, they take the world with them — into the future (Massumi, 1992, p. 105).

The second is that this process of problematizing the existing order in ways that will allow becoming-other to continue must, in itself, be continuous. The moment a body 'deterritorializes' — that is, breaks through to enable something that has not been seen before — it is immediately subject to forces that will seek to bring this 'new' into existing categories. This process demands an approach that fosters ongoing becoming of the kind adopted by the case study LLEN.

Whereas on establishment most LLEN opted to proceed through a path of visibility — in various cases investing in high-profile offices, staffing, branded vehicles, one-stop points of information and, to various degrees, engaging in service delivery within the sector — this LLEN set about fostering its derelict space. What does this mean? Two indications will suffice at this stage[iv]. The first is that the network adopted a fluid, issues-based Working Party structure; in this way it would model its ambition to be 'just an opportunity to act' (Matthew, LLEN committee member, 2005) rather than an entity that would act. The second was the adoption of an action research methodology in its operation.

Thus the case study network worked, often invisibly, in *between* spaces, those spaces where any number of multiplicities came into connection and, thereby, formed a space of possibility. This contrasts those LLEN that opted to be the entity that would better join-the-dots. For Deleuze & Guattari, spaces where creation occurs are filled with *events* rather than *things*; this contrast is of consequence for governance, a discussion I will explore under the next strategy of 'camouflage'.

'Study camouflage'

> Bodies-in-becoming must be passing-persons capable of simulating the molar being assigned to them by the grid of political value judgement. (Massumi, 1992, p. 105)

In this quote Massumi suggests that to become 'apparent' in the scheme of things, that is, to reach the point where one can be taken seriously in the pursuit of reform, one has to be able to 'pass' within the molar structure that you are attempting to open. The quote below relates to a discussion in 2005 of the Performance Agreement the LLEN was attempting to negotiate with the Department:

> He wanted numbers. He didn't like practically anything I said. We had more conversations than just Schedule 1 but truly we are like this (*indicates clash*). So in the end the advice that I was getting from around the place was 'Just give him what he wants and get him out of here.' You know? So I made Schedule 1, I just invented figures from the ether and sent them off as well as all the partnership things that I'd gone to a lot of trouble to think my way through and the feedback I got was, 'Thank you, I have been through your Schedule 1 and I've counted all of the young people that the Geelong LLEN is going to be having an impact on next year and there are 275. Is that correct'? Well, I haven't answered that e-mail, I just thought 'No can do. Can not do, can not do.' (Executive Officer, 2005)

The point here is how finely balanced this 'passing' is. On the one hand, to be able to continue their work a 'passing' group, in this case the LLEN, must be able to meet the requirements of the molar, in this case the representatives of government, at a level that is sufficient for their work to be seen as part of the legitimate system. On the other hand, they must not allow themselves to be

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swept into that space where their operation comes completely framed by the terms of the existing order.

Massumi notes that it is 'all too easy' to become what you are (by molar definition) (1992, p.105). Over time, the LLEN learnt to act within and against the dominant reality: the Performance Agreement continued to exist but, ultimately, did not constrain the range of activity with which the LLEN engaged at a local level. However, there was a cost associated with such authenticity. In digging in their heels to retain their 'derelict space' — notwithstanding demands for activities that can be counted or visited or models of governance that act as a homogenising force — both energy and limited resources were expended on second-order business and this had consequences for the rigour of first-order business and therefore to the network itself in its accountability to the local community which, in the final analysis, is the measure of the success of a LLEN.

'Sidle and straddle'

> Make a rhizome. But you don't know what you can make a rhizome with, you don't know which subterranean stem is going to make a rhizome, or enter a becoming, people your desert. So experiment (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.246)

This fourth strategy builds on the recognition of the preceding strategies: if head-on confrontation risks sudden death and gradual change risks slow death then 'side-stepping' offers a way forward (Massumi, 1992, p. 106), a simultaneous coming and going that Deleuze & Guattari refer to as 'transversality' (1987, p. 298). The idea here is to weave between the actual and the possible, sidestepping between the pursuit of reform and the smoothing of confrontation. In the process of this weaving between what is, and what might be, a line of flight is drawn, one that carries the process forward to new, uncharted spaces.

For Deleuze to break out requires a form of violence — a shock or alienation affect. This is thinking: 'thinking is inseparable from a violence that problematizes or shakes up *doxa* and gives something new to be thought; and to conceive of it one needs the violence or "strangeness" of what can't yet be said in the dominant or common language' (Rajchman, 2000, p.10). Experimentation is fundamental to this process of side-stepping: our brains can always be 'remade to enable us to speak in new non-standard ways' (Rajchman, 2000, p.80). Thus a key research question for me concerned the extent to which an instituted network could function as a learning community. Thus, while LLEN were established as learning *Networks*, that is, networks of organisations engaged in the post-compulsory education and training sector, the challenge was for them to become *Learning* networks, that is networks capable of learning. This moves beyond the idea of learning as acquisition or even as participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and closer to the notion of expansive learning where radically new collaborative approaches are developed (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). The important point here lies in the idea of 'expansion':

> In expansive learning, learners learn something which is not there … the learners construct a new object and concept for their collective activity, and implement this new object and concept in practice (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 2).

Central to this kind of network learning is the sidling and straddling that happens at the boundaries of a network: the 'boundary-crossing' where community members reach into unfamiliar domains where habitual knowledge practices are challenged.
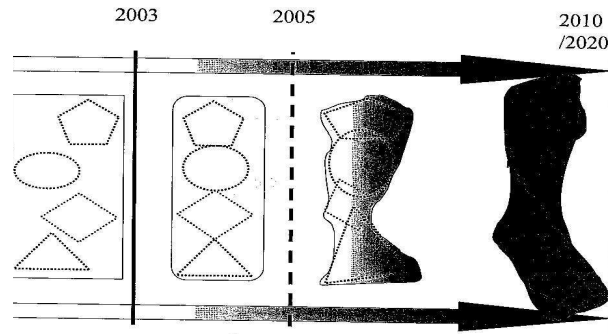
'Come out'

Figure 1: Conceptualisation of LLEN Intention by the Departmental Field Officer, 2004

Massumi's final strategy, coming out, is short and to the point. Bodies working for systemic reform must abandon their camouflage as soon as they can while still surviving; the outcome of coming out is to achieve greater transformational potential (Massumi, 1992, p. 106). My research suggested this point would be reached when the network was able to come out as a Body without Organs (BwO) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 149). Figure 1, above, was created by the Departmental Field Officer to portray his understanding of the intended evolution of LLEN; I see it as evoking a BwO. Given the limitations of space, it will suffice to note that the BwO is not opposed to 'organs' per se but to their organization in ways that stratify them.

The BwO is 'what remains when you take everything away' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.151); it is concerned with opening the body, whatever the body may be, to connections that allow intensities to pass and circulate. Becoming involves desire. Here desire is not related to the want for something that cannot be but rather accords with the idea of life as a process of striving (Colebrook, 2002, p.xxii). For Massumi (1992, p. 106) coming out is never complete, so moderate your expectations; it is about process rather than destination. But what you must not moderate is your desire, your commitment to continue becoming.

The BwO is inevitably experimental: it is made to be populated *only* by intensities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 152). In these continuous intensities lies sustainability; multiplicities are distinct in the way they continue: sustainability rests in the actualisation of a qualitative rather than quantitative multiplicity and duration

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> supposes a form of time that no longer works through succession or permanence, but rather as an open whole, constantly 'differentiating' and starting up again from peculiar points. (Rajchman, 2000, p.59)

There are two phases to the BwO, each included in the other and each using the same procedures, each a site of potential failure. The first is the fabrication of the BwO, the second is to create movement over or across it (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 152). For LLEN, this was where learning was most needed: government created the conditions for the formation of a BwO yet restrained the possibilities for movement over it and dampened the vitality for reform. In failing to see its own accountabilities *within* the network the possibilities for innovation were, to a greater or lesser degree for each of the 31 LLEN, curtailed.

2011: Non-concluding thoughts

In the process of connection, flows unpredictably change all they connect; a single connection can accelerate into dynamics that lead to a Deleuzian 'becoming.' This kind of unruliness can create profound discomfort in arborescent structures such as government departments and the institutions for which they must account. In this paper I have suggested that such thinking is the essence of the aspirations that have been asserted for networks and partnerships in policy contexts confronted with the 'wicked problems' of late modern times; successful networking — to the extent where our social structures have 'become-other' — results in an 'exponential expansion of a body's repertory of responses' (Massumi, 1992, p.99-100).

As the title of this paper suggests, this process is inherently experimental; the five strategies must also be 'submitted to experimental evaluation and remapped as needed'; they 'have no value unless they are immanent to their "object"' (Massumi, 1992, p.103). In other words, there is no one way to be a network. While becoming-other is directional — moving away from molarity —it is not directed (Massumi, 1992, p.105); the outcome cannot be known in advance. It, and the kind of thinking that enable it, is for

> those whose minds or identities are not already made up, who are willing to embark on the sort of voyage where one throws out one's hermeneutic compass and leaves one's discourse behind (Rajchman, 2000, p.5)

Deleuze's work is intended for use, not for interpretation; he was concerned with passion and process, not interests and their organisation. His work proposes an empiricism that pushes beyond judgement to an invention and affirmation, 'to that point where experimentation is inseparable from a vitalism' (Rajchman, 2000, p.27). Drawing on Massumi's 'ways of becoming', I have suggested that rhizomatic thinking offers tools for the suspension of habit and the 'pulling open' of the door of thinking to allow space for rethinking the use of networks as an institutional response to the risk and uncertainty of late modern times. There is no final word; only some final questions:

> The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xv)

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[i] At the time of the research on which this paper draws formal education was compulsory until the age of 16 in Victoria. From 1 January 2010 this was raised to age 17.

[ii] From 2005 this figure would decrease to AUD267,000.

[iii] During the course of this research the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training was restructured. Subsequent to 2003 it was referred to as the Department of Education & Training before becoming the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. My use of the term 'the Department' refers to any iteration.

[iv] For a full portrayal of the formation and operation of the Smart Geelong Region LLEN the reader is directed to my earlier work (Kamp, 2010).