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Re-considering the ontoepistemology of student engagement in higher education

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to reconsider and explore the ontoepistemology of student engagement in higher education as part of a democratic education, going beyond neo-liberal groundings. This is urgent as the concept of student engagement seems to be taken for granted and used uncritically in higher education. In addition, higher education is affected by, and under pressure from, different global and societal forces, which raises questions about the purpose of education. In our exploration, we mainly draw on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and his co-writers Felix Guattari and Claire Parnet, but also Karen Barad and writers who are inspired by these theories. We present four arguments on which we elaborate: (1) Rethinking power relations, (2) Questioning linearity and how to use goals, (3) Appreciating pedagogical relationships as multiple voices and becoming-multiple-others, and (4) Considering assemblages, rhizomes and lines in student engagement. These arguments open up, as we argue, the possibility of rhizomatic thinking about learning in higher education where multiplicities, otherness and the unpredictable are appreciated. In addition, we regard the exploration of assemblages that are intercorporeal, affective and entangled as something powerful when reconsidering student engagement as part of democratic education.

KEYWORDS
Student engagement; democratic education; higher education; posthumanism; ontoepistemology; rhizomatic thinking

Introduction
The notion of student engagement is a prominent and somewhat contested concept in higher education (Carey, 2013). Zepke (2014) argues for critical examination of student engagement, as it seems to be taken for granted and used uncritically. Student engagement initiatives have an influence on students’ learning and achievement, but the meaning and function of such initiatives in higher education needs further exploration (Kahu, 2013), and especially the underlying research perspectives (Zepke, 2014). Today, higher education is affected by, and under pressure from, different global and societal forces (cf. Ball, 2016; Barnett, 2016; Peters, 2017b). It thus becomes urgent not only to reconsider the purpose of higher education and its underlying basic assumptions, but also concepts like student engagement, as they are changing and being used with different intentions.

The aim of this article is to reconsider and explore the ontoepistemology of student engagement in higher education as part of a democratic education, going beyond neo-liberal groundings. In our exploration, we mainly draw on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and his co-writers Felix Guattari and Claire Parnet, but also Karen Barad and writers who are inspired by these theories.
We have chosen to use the concept ‘ontoepistemology’, inspired by Barad (2007, p. 185) and post-humanist perspectives as a starting point for our exploration. From such a perspective, epistemology and ontology should not be separated as a dichotomy as the concepts presuppose each other and are closely connected and intertwined (Barad, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2010). As Barad points out, practices of knowing and being are entangled. ‘They challenge our Cartesian habits of mind, breaking down the usual visual metaphors for knowing along with its optics of mediated sight. Knowledge making is not a mediated activity… Knowing is direct material engagement, a practice of intra-acting with the world as part of the world in its dynamic material configuring, its ongoing articulation.’ (2007, p. 379). In our exploration, we have been guided by questions such as: What openings regarding the concept of student engagement can be created through an alternative way of thinking about the roles of students and teachers, learning, pedagogical relationships and materiality in higher education? How can we still appreciate multiplicities, the unpredictable and what has not yet come into being in relationships between students and teachers when working in a strictly goal-oriented institution?

As a starting point for our presentation of the issues that we address in this article we would like you to consider a short part of a Bob Dylan poem and the accompanying thoughts of Deleuze and Parnet regarding it—found in Dialogues II (Deleuze & Parnet, 2006):

Yes, I am a thief of thoughts,
not, I pray, a stealer of souls…
wonderin’ an’ wastin’ time
thinkin’ of thoughts that haven’t been thunk
thinkin’ of dreams that haven’t been dreamt
an’ new ideas that haven’t been wrote
an’ new words t’fit into rhyme …
an’ not t’worry about the news rules
for they ain’t been made yet…

How proud and wonderful—also modest—is this Bob Dylan poem. It says it all. As a teacher, I should like to be able to give a course as Dylan organizes a song, as astonishing producer rather than author’ (Deleuze & Parnet, 2006, p. 6).

When following our exploration below, let them be part of the assemblages we create. When we question neo-liberalism and its effects on education and concepts like student engagement, consider stealer of souls. When we start our explorative argumentation rethinking power relations—consider teachers as astonishing producers rather than authors. When we question linearity and how to use goals—consider the new ideas that haven’t been wrote. When we plead for appreciating pedagogical relationships as multiple voices and becoming-multiple-others—consider the thoughts and dreams that haven’t been thunk or dreamt. And finally, when we reflect on assemblages, rhizomes and lines in student engagement—consider them as new words that fit into rhyme and not t’worry about the news rules for they ain’t been made yet.

Contemporary educational discourses

… a stealer of souls (Bob Dylan)

Higher education is under pressure from different global and societal forces that sometimes run together, such as neo-liberalism, globalisation and the knowledge-economy to mention a few (cf. Ball, 2016; Barnett, 2016). Within neo-liberal perspectives, education may be regarded as an investment in human capital and knowledge, a trade on the global market. Such a view has changed both conditions for, and what is valued in, education (Ball, 2016; Biesta, 2014; Sleeter, 2008). Further, students are from such a perspective often viewed as consumers rather than partners, members or active agents of the learning community of higher education (Little, Locke, Scesa, & Williams, 2009; Zepke, 2014).

In higher education, the theory and method of constructive alignment, mostly associated with the work of John Biggs (Biggs, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2011), has become a dominant discourse that often is used for neo-liberal purposes as it is argued to be effective. According to Holmes and Sutherland (2015), it is ‘one of educational development’s more pervasive and least questioned notions’ (abstract). As the
concept of alignment reveals, learning is seen as a linear process where the outcomes of the courses denote the alignment between learning activities, teaching and assessment of student performance. In addition, teachers are urged to focus on what the student does, not what they as teachers do. In such a view, outcomes mark the final destination of the journey of learning in which the higher education institution is the powerful agent, owning the design. Although we, like Holmes and Sutherland (2015), are not denying the impact or power of constructive aligned learning processes, we question what happens to education, learners and teachers in such linear and causal processes. In addition, perspectives that focus mainly on conscious effects risk to neglect the unconscious affects, and the unknown aspects of learning, i.e. ‘the forces of the unconscious’ (Cole, 2011, p.31).

Such paradigms like the ones described above, not only changes what students and teachers should do, but also how they should do it. Thus, their possibilities to act, become and develop within educational contexts are affected. If openness, flexibility and change are encouraged within a constructive alignment context, they are part of an agenda for emphasising future economic benefits rather than being conditions for and expressions of a space and place for democracy and co-operation. This implies that potential benign aspects of education are being traduced and transformed when incorporated in a linear and causal context, influenced by neo-liberalism. As Barnett (2016) cautions, the pessimism and concerns following these global forces might lead to the agency of universities being underplayed and potentials un-utilised. Instead, Barnett argues: ‘their [the global forces] very co-presence opens potential spaces… into which universities might move. They may even be multiple ‘lines-of-flight’… available to universities’ (Barnett, 2016, p. 85). It could be argued, concurring with Barnett (ibid.), that higher education lacks a philosophy to inspire, guide and challenge this work of reimagining the potentials of higher education—an assignment that he regards urgent to establish. Further, as Peters, (2017a, 2017b) urges, in times when anti-pluralist and anti-democratic views are on the rise with subordination of minorities and the launching of questionable truths, questions of educational equality are threatened and the purpose of education as the basis of criticality and scientific knowledge is questioned (Peters, 2017a, 2017b).

It takes little imagination to draw some conclusions from this melange of past examples to understand that the notion of ‘facts’ and ‘evidence’ in a post-truth era affects not only politics and science but becomes a burning issue for education at all levels. . . Criticality has been avoided or limited within education and substituted by narrow conceptions of standards, and state-mandated instrumental and utilitarian pedagogies. (Peters, 2017a, p. 565)

If the main purpose of education is to foster a qualified working force that can contribute to the global economy, Peters (2017a) presumes an attenuated focus on democratic values and instead an increase of ‘populist demagogue politicians and alt-right racist parties’ (p. 565). Therefore, he argues for promoting a participatory democracy built on critical citizenship. In this article, we pick up on Barnett’s and Peter’s calls, to bring in multiple and critical perspectives as well as democratic processes, when we argue for rethinking the ontoepistemology of higher education. Before discussing our arguments, we explore different notions of student engagement.

**Notions of student engagement**

There are a number of different understandings of student engagement. Student engagement has different characteristics: behavioural (participation in education and social activity, crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes), emotional (affective reactions involved in learning) and cognitive (motivation and self-regulation in learning concepts and skills (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Kahu (2013) adds to the description of the concept, by emphasising a sociocultural, holistic perspective. Likewise, Baron and Corbin (2012) advocate for a holistic approach where students’ experiences are taken into account as a whole.

Building on sociocultural and social constructivist perspectives, other scholars have elaborated on the concept of student engagement in higher education. For example, concepts such as student–faculty partnership, active student participation, active co-creation of curriculum, students as agents of change have been used to rethink power relations between students and teachers and teacher–student roles.
(Bovill, 2014; Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). Dimensions of power in student engagement practices, have also been critically examined by postmodernist and poststructuralism perspectives (Robinson, 2012; Taylor & Robinson, 2009).

However, there are other understandings and practices of student engagement that can be associated with the neo-liberal perspectives. Student engagement is being perceived as an important factor in quality measurements—a trend that can be connected to neo-liberal marketisation, focusing on individualisation and successful student achievements for future employability (Carey, 2013). Zepke (2014) writes:

Student engagement research seems to have an elective affinity with neoliberalism, currently the dominant political ideology in the developed world… Neoliberalism in higher education forges learners into contributors to the market economy in a knowledge society. This in turn impacts on the meaning and use of knowledge that is learnt. (p. 702)

When seen through the lens of the theory and method of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2011), student engagement could be understood and used mainly as an aligned strategy and design, as it, according to Trowler (2010), mainly aims at ‘optimis[ing] the student experience and enhanc[ing] the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance and reputation of the institution’ (p. 2).

In this article, we want to bring the focus back onto student engagement as part of democratic education, going beyond neo-liberal groundings, as we consider creating spaces for student engagement as part of promoting democratic values in higher education. Before reconsidering the ontoepistemology of student engagement, thinking with Deleuze among other posthumanist philosophers, the concept of democracy therefore need to be further outlined.

### Bringing back the focus on student engagement as part of democratic education

Historically, education has been used by countries to promote civic responsibility and engagement in order to uphold a society’s democratic values (Dahlstedt & Olson, 2013). Still, the concepts ‘democracy’ and ‘values’ are complex as they are continuously produced and re-produced, in diverse sociocultural contexts. Research describes democracy as a formal political institution, and also a continual and lifelong process or a mode of associated living of which its end is never realised (Dewey, 1916; Parker, 2003). As such, democracy is not a political system free from conflicts, but a form of living together where disagreements and differences are recognised and negotiable. As Giroux (2002) points out, democracy needs to be an issue of public good, both political and educational. In an education for democratic citizenship, personal responsibility, participation, justice orientation, dialogue, critical thinking as well as to develop as a human, socially and emotionally appear as central (Nussbaum, 1997; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Future education systems will play a critical role in preparing youngsters to cope with a society in which the prevailing value systems are in a state of flux. A new strategy for democracy and citizenship entails a view on students as explorers of the consequences of democracy: what it means to be situated in a local community in a global society where such education is experienced as meaningful and challenging, inspiring participation in the public debate (Bohlin, 2011; Burman, 2011; Dahlstedt & Olson, 2013).

In our reconsideration of ontoepistemology of student engagement, i.e. bringing the focus back onto student engagement as part of democratic education, we mainly draw on four arguments: (1) Rethinking power relations, (2) Questioning linearity and how to use goals, (3) Appreciating pedagogical relationships as multiple voices and becoming-multiple-others, and (4) Considering assemblages, rhizomes and lines in student engagement.

### Rethinking power relations

… astonishing producers rather than authors. (Deleuze & Parnet, 2006, p. 6)
Taylor and Robinson (2009), critically examine issues of power in higher education from postmodernist perspectives in which they include poststructuralism, deconstruction, and feminism. They argue that postmodernism offers three crucial qualities for reconsidering power that we find relevant from a perspective of democracy in higher education as well. Firstly, the quality they put forward is that postmodernism enables a rethinking of teachers’ and students’ subject formation beyond social categories and reduction of voices. They emphasise subject formation as ‘constantly coming-into-presence’ (p. 170) due to the fact that processes of power in this view are considered to be under ongoing (re-)construction. Secondly, these perspectives offer a different way of analysing social relations through Derrida’s concepts of difference and deconstruction and Foucault’s understanding of power as productive. Thirdly, a postmodern perspective enables, as long as theoretical tools are provided, a deep reflexive approach, in which processes of power production are analysed and their implications for students’ influence evaluated. In addition, Taylor and Robinson (2009) open an exploration starting from a posthumanist angle, drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, although they find this to be both theoretically and practically difficult.

If we consider what a posthumanist perspective entails according to Pedersen (2014) in the following, we find that the material turn has a strong bearing on how to consider learning and knowledge in higher education, thus affecting the views of student engagement.

Working from a post-humanist perspective means to expose yourself to ontological somersaults—suddenly a small dislocation of significance. When we study what is happening in the relationships, in the surfaces of contact [the plug-ins], in the interstices between organism and technology, between materiality and discourses, and between what we think of as “culture” and “nature”, we develop an attentiveness to the fact that the world may not be constituted the way we thought. (Pedersen, 2014, p. 85, our translation)

As students always have multiple voices and are not a single homogeneous group (Robinson, 2012), educators are challenged to find ways to listen to these different voices in order to be able to question power relations and include and embrace these multiplicities. Since posthumanist perspectives appreciate multiplicity, we find it fruitful to also consider relations of power from such a perspective where materiality and the material discursive are part of the power production—an issue that we will further outline in the two next arguments.

**Questioning linearity and how to use goals**

… new ideas that haven’t been wrote. (Bob Dylan)

Deleuze’s way of thinking challenges the linear thinking that we have found to be prominent in contemporary educational discourse, discussed above. In addition, he defies dualistic views of nature/culture, subject/object and process/product that have long been dominant in education. Using Deleuze’s and his co-writers’ texts, and to some extent Barad’s, we claim that we can’t separate what teachers do and what students do, as urged, for example, in the ‘constructive alignment’ approach, nor separate the process from the product since they are intertwined. Neither can we, as Lenz Taguchi (2007, 2010) stresses, separate discourses from the agency of other materials, artefacts and phenomena that intra-act and are part of the rhizomes of learning, as if they were separate units. ‘Now we can think of discourse and the material in new ways: in terms of the discursive being immanent to the material and the material being immanent to the discursive’ (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 29). Goals or outcomes could from such a perspective be regarded as active agents, part of the pedagogical relationships as much as the students, the teachers, the books, the buildings, the rooms and furniture on campus as well as the virtual rooms and the computers involved in the learning processes. The goals produce specific ways of designing teaching and learning and specific ways of examining students’ knowledge and skills. Outcomes may also limit learning—circumscribing students’ and teachers’ possibilities to act and become when regarded as the final goal, the final destination of a linear process.

As goals or outcomes are still central in education and teachers have to relate to that fact, we suggest, as discussed in earlier publications (Bergmark & Westman 2016; Westman, 2014; Westman & Alerby,
that goals therefore should be better used as entrances for teaching and learning. When considering what pedagogical relationships in the learning process may include, knowing that the relationships occurring during the process, the events and 'lines-of-flight' to use the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 9), might be even more important for the learning, a rhizomatic thinking about learning is enhanced. As such, goals could better be regarded as plateaus within a rhizome from which multiple plug-ins are made possible than the final destination. Those plug-ins enable a myriad of ideas, relationships and processes, no one knowing where they will end up—and they will never end up, as all ideas, events and processes of learning are intertwined, ongoing and in that way eternal.

**Appreciating pedagogical relationships as multiple voices and becoming-multiple-others**

... thinkin’ of thoughts that haven’t been thunk

thinkin’ of dreams that haven’t been dreamt. (Bob Dylan)

When thinking with Deleuze in research, what Masny (2013) expresses as ‘doing Deleuze’ (p. 339), and more specifically working with student engagement in teacher education, we consider pedagogical relationships to involve both human and non-human relations. These relations are perceived as active agents that intra-act, affect and are affected by each other, and as such are entangled (Barad, 2007, 2008; Lenz Taguchi, 2007, 2010). In such education, multiple voices are heard and multiple agents are included. In the introduction to ‘A Thousand Plateaus’, Deleuze and Guattari express the importance of taking multiple voices into account: ‘Since each us of was several, there was already quite a crowd. Here, we have made use of everything [that] came within range, what was closest as well as farthest away’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 3). This imply that neither thoughts (whether conscious or unconscious) nor statements are individual or personal, as subjectivity, according to (Deleuze & Parnet, 2006), is already ‘populated’ (p. 9). Rather are they like pre-personal individuations and ‘collective agents of enunciation (take ‘collective agents’ to mean not peoples or societies but multiplicities)’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 37).

In teaching, drawing upon students’ engagement rather than only on teachers’ thinking, spaces for multiple agents and intra-actions can be created. We are thus challenged to ‘treat pedagogy as uncertain and heterogeneous assemblages—not as an identifiable or prescribable event, and certainly not as the exclusive concern of a teacher’ (Fenwick & Landri, 2012, p. 5).

Deleuze’s philosophy can be seen as a philosophy of process and becoming, appreciating multiplicities, otherness and the unpredictable. Therefore, we recognise appreciation of what has not yet come into being and the unpredictable as central when thinking with, and doing, Deleuze (cf. Semetsky, 2010; Semetsy & Lovat, 2011). Semetsy (2010) explains: ‘Becoming by definition is an experiment with what is new, that is, coming into being, be-coming’ (p. 480, italics in original). Deleuze expresses this unknown becoming as a specific space signified by intensity, affection, transformation and movement (Deleuze, 2004). Elsewhere (see Bergmark & Westman, 2016), we have claimed that it is crucial to rethink student and teacher roles, within the concept of student engagement. When students partake in educational decision-making and actively participate in educational activities, as a way of working with student engagement, it may seem that the students are doing the teachers’ work. It can be perceived as an unpredictable and thought-provoking process for both the teacher and the students. These feelings can be associated with conflicting expectations and a modified understanding of teacher and student roles. Cook-Sather (2014) underlines the emotional and powerful, but also troublesome aspects that arise when teacher–student roles are negotiated.

Students moving between different roles can be regarded as students-becoming-others for a while, understanding multiplicities of different perspectives and viewpoints (Deleuze, 2004; Semetsy & Lovat, 2011). This is expressed by Semetsy (2010) in the following: ‘the possibility of becoming-other for a while by means of understanding the multiplicities of different perspectives and viewpoints up to the point of becoming affected by those experiences’ (p. 482–483, italics in original).
As Semetsky and Lovat (2011) point out, openness demands you to move beyond your ‘own comfort zones of knowing; those familial, cultural, religious and dispositional preferences that, having … so far provided a feeling of inner security, have become a part of our habitual identity’ (p. 490). Bergmark and Westman (2016) show that this aspect became crucial for both teachers and students when students were involved in decision-making and active participation. A feeling of chaos appeared for many involved due to the unpredictable process when moving beyond the well-known roles and comfort zones. For the teacher, this experience resulted in having second thoughts on the possibility to engage students in higher education due to resistance from students and the hierarchical, and sometimes restrictive, structures of the university. For the students, the experiences of moving beyond their comfort zones were related, for example, to understanding their role in the course, and getting a grip on how to influence it. To influence the education to a great extent was new to many students, thus, thought-provoking, meaning a new way of working, rethinking of normal planning, and thinking outside the box (Bergmark & Westman, 2016). Accordingly, this process of student engagement applies to what McMahon and Zyngier (2009) express as a critical transformative engagement that ‘seeks to change existing hegemonic structures’ (p. 167).

**Considering assemblages, rhizomes and lines in student engagement**

… new words that fit into rhyme

not t’worry about the news rules for they ain’t been made yet. (Bob Dylan)

In our attempt to reconsider the ontoepistemology of student engagement using a rhizomatic thinking about learning (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) we have tried to co-create assemblages that are, intercorporeal, affective and entangled (Barad, 2007, 2008; Lenz Taguchi, 2010, 2007; Westman & Alerby, 2016). We identify Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblages as ‘unexpected, disparate and productive connections that create new ways of thinking and living’ to borrow the words of Colebrook (2002, p. 76). In addition, as Buchanan (2015) has explained, assemblages, ‘is the productive intersection of a form of content (actions, bodies and things) and a form of expression (affects, words and ideas)’ (p. 390). The experience of influencing a course discussed above, could from a Deleuzian perspective be expressed as finding ways to plug in to assemblages of desire that could create lines-of-flights within quite a segmentary milieu such as higher education.

Within assemblages there is ‘a multiplicity of dimensions, of lines and directions’ (Deleuze & Parnet, 2006, p. 100). These lines form us, ‘we are made up of lines’ (ibid., p. 93). Deleuze and Parnet describe three types of lines possible in action within an assemblage, running through groups as well as individuals. First, the line of rigid segmentarity, second, the molecular line, and third, the line of flight. The rigid segmentary lines can be described as norms, regimes or taken-for-granted ways of living or acting. There are lines which are not as rigid, ‘they trace out little modifications, they make detours, they sketch out rises and falls: but they are no less precise … rather than molar lines with segments, they are molecular fluxes with thresholds or quanta’ (p. 93), thus still segmentary. The molecular lines are flexible and open for ‘micro-becomings’ (p. 93) and step beyond the segmentary lines. The third lines, the line of flight, the line of becomings, ‘is even more strange: as if something carried us away, across our segments, but also across our thresholds, towards a destination which is unknown, not foreseeable, not pre-existent’ (p. 94). The concept of lines-of-flight helps us understand the movement beyond the logic and the conscious, which opens for the thought to escape, for recognising the unconscious in the conscious. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write:

[T]he issue is never to reduce the unconscious or to interpret it or to make it signify according to a tree model. The issue is to produce the unconscious, and with it new statements, different desires: the rhizome is precisely this production of the unconscious. (p. 18, italics in original)

Still, there is no dualistic divide between the conscious and the unconscious.

Thus it does not suffice to attribute molar multiplicities and mass machines to the preconscious, reserving another kind of machine or multiplicity for the unconscious. For it is the assemblage of both of these that is the province
of the unconscious, the way in which the former condition the latter, and the latter prepare the way for the former. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 35).

As such, ‘learning always takes place in and through the unconscious, thereby establishing the bond of a profound complicity between nature and mind’ (Deleuze, 2004, p. 205).

According to Mayes (2013), who has explored students-as-co-researchers-initiatives from a Deleuzian perspective, rethinking structures of power may be regarded as molecular lines as they are ‘cracking the segmentary lines of traditional school structures, whilst still remaining close in relationship’ (p. 3). Still, these molecular lines of a sudden through a rupture are broken and deterritorialised, in a productive or destructive way, to a line of flight that experiments and creates new assemblages within the rhizome. ‘These lines always tie back to each other’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). As such, Deleuze sees events going beyond what is already known or planned for, as lines of flight. Still, events may stagnate and become stratified until new events occur or are produced—a mechanism that places high demands on higher education to appreciate states of change and develop networks of unique processes within this milieu. This means that as soon as you want to repeat a really successful process or event, something that maybe appeared as a coincidence, a mistake in your plan as a teacher, the line has already become molecular, or molar (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Deleuze & Parnet, 2006).

When rethinking the ontoepistemology of student engagement, the ambition has been to open for assemblages that bear possibilities for all actors involved to become-multiple-others for a while; for example, becoming-teachers, becoming-curriculum, and becoming-agents-of-change among others. Still, we know that teachers and students, are always part of dominant discourses and segmentary lines within higher education, and therefore may not notice, nor let themselves be carried away through the openings, disruptions, events and lines-of-flight that may occur in the rhizome developing within the assemblages. As Buchanan (2015) points out, Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory was always concerned with questions of power. Deleuze and Guattari express this in the following: ‘You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will re-encounter organisations that restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier…’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). These thoughts can also be found in Deleuze and Parnet (2006):

There is no desire for revolution, as there is no desire for power, desire to oppress or to be oppressed; but revolution, oppression, power, etc., are the actual component lines of a given assemblage. It is not that these lines are preexistent; they are traced out, they are formed, immanent to each other, mixed up in each other, at the same time as the assemblage of desire is formed, with its machines tangled up and its planes intersecting. We don’t know in advance which one will function as line of gradient, or in what form it will be barred. (p. 100)

This means that when carrying out microanalysis of educational situations with a focus on student engagement, we also need to take into account macro educational policies and politics (Cole & Masny, 2012; Westman, 2014). ‘Governmental intervention, which is often aligned with the requisites of big business and societal concern has made the educational sphere riddled with power concerns and directives that alter the practice of teaching and learning’ (Cole & Masny, 2012, p. 2). Further, they argue that it is crucial to thoroughly examine the different bodies of politics and their interference in educational practices beyond representations, in order to understand how they work, and as such engage in the politics of becoming.

Final words

As such, our views and voices in this article, as well as the voices of the students or teachers we have referred to, should be seen as a way of questioning assumptions and structures, examining and engaging in the politics of becoming, through rethinking the ontoepistemology of student engagement in higher education. From a viewpoint where we see higher education as a stratified assemblage in itself, our co-created assemblages in which events and rhizomes with different lines have appeared may also be regarded as a line of flight. In this line of flight, which has arisen from a strong desire and affect, we had to move on, had to question our own power and our possibilities to work with learning. This
means an expedition towards the unknown, a becoming-another-kind-of-teacher, becoming-explorers-of-education together with the students.

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