ROUTLEDGE

EDITED BY EILEEN KOGL CAMFIELD

JOY-CENTERED PEDAGOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

UPLIFTING TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR ALL

"If you are looking to revitalize the love of teaching that got you started, look no further than this important, passionate, and accessible volume. You will find yourself nodding on every page; then watch as your agreement turns to joy (literally) as you realize that this book is actually a practical guide to better and more meaningful teaching."

José Antonio Bowen, *Senior Fellow, American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and author of* Teaching Change: How to Develop Independent Thinkers Using Relationships, Resilience, and Reflection *among other volumes*

"We desperately need joy in higher education. We're deluged with books and articles on student deficits and disconnection, learning loss, and the like—but there's precious little to help us remember that teaching and learning can (should!) be joyful endeavors. This inspiring yet practical volume arrives at exactly the right time. The authors here—drawn from the wide spectrum of institutions and disciplines across higher education—lay out numerous paths for us to not only (re)discover joy, but to weave it throughout our practice. This isn't some empty feel-good fluff, nor does it wave away the very real crises we and our students face. Camfield and the book's contributors remind us joy is an act of resistance. In doing so, they show us how to help ourselves and our students tap into our agency and make learning spaces genuinely transformative and, yes, joyful. If you're looking to reconnect with what brought you to teaching and learning, or to find new, fulfilling paths through the difficult landscape we're navigating, this book is an essential read."

Kevin Gannon, *author of* Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto

"Our national response to post-pandemic unfinished learning in higher education is to double down on technical fixes to no avail. Eileen Kogl Camfield shows us another way to help reframe teaching and learning in the academy. She and her colleagues invite us to center joy in the midst of deep learning to disrupt a culture of fear and compliance, leaving room to build student agency and resilience. *Joy-Centered Learning in Higher Education* helps us translate science of learning principles to empowering practices."

Zaretta Hammond, *author of* Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

"What a wonderful book! By centering joy while simultaneously recognizing the complexities of higher education today, the authors critically re-frame teaching and learning as opportunities for connection, meaning, agency, and action. The book offers the inspiration and practical guidance that I – and we – need right now."

Peter Felten, *co-author of* Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College *among other volumes*

"Teaching is deeply human work. This book is an antidote to all the forces in education that would have us forget that. The authors are attentive to the many challenges teachers and students face in education, advance a clear-eyed thesis about joy-centered pedagogy, and offer the practical tools necessary to support us in this work. So many sentences here feel like a revelation: that joy is a pedagogical 'renewable resource;' that 'teaching is, to a significant extent, an act of memory;' that 'we can refuse the narrative that we must suffer to do something good for our students;' and that joy is sometimes 'still and silent.' This is necessary reading for teachers at all levels of education."

Jesse Stommel, *author* of Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop *among other titles and co-founder and Executive Director of* Hybrid Pedagogy*, the journal of critical digital pedagogy*

"This important volume will inspire a next generation of educators to bring more joy, awe and beauty into their pedagogy. For good reason: these positive emotions lead to more rigorous thought, more curiosity, and greater collaborative tendencies — vital skills to meet the challenges of our times."

Dacher Keltner, *founding director of the Greater Good Science Center and a distinguished professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, USA; author of* Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life *among other volumes*

"In an era where student-centeredness is paramount in higher education, Dr. Eileen Camfield has brilliantly centered teaching and learning around the concept of JOY. Joy is both transferable and infectious, making its incorporation into education a natural choice. The innovative *Joy-Centered Pedagogy* introduces this vital yet transformative element, redefining educational practices to be more heartfelt, student-centered, and intentional. This enJOYable read will invigorate higher education professionals and educators, reigniting their joy in teaching and learning while renewing their passion and purpose in the classroom."

Amber C. Ward, *Institutional Effectiveness/Center for Teaching & Learning, Delaware State University, USA*

"In *Joy-Centered Pedagogy in Higher Education: Uplifting Teaching and Learning for All* the reader will find a collection of chapters that will convince novice and expert teachers alike of the importance of joy in postsecondary education. By incorporating the science of learning, emphasizing embodied learning, and centering joy as an experience rather than just an outcome, this text provides rich examples of how joy can disrupt the harmful, yet all too common experience of shame and fear in the learning environment. Camfield's *Joy-Centered Pedagogy* is a welcome addition to the conversation on communal and connected teaching in higher education as we continue to navigate shifts in student and instructor interaction and wellbeing in the pandemic era."

Sydney Curtis, *Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, USA*

"This edited volume, which elevates both teaching and learning through the lens of joy, accomplishes many tasks for educators at all levels—sharing stories of students and educators, offering practical pedagogical strategies, inviting reflection on practice, and most importantly reconnecting us to the passion of learning through teaching. Addressing the current landscape of education, each chapter takes a human-centered approach anchoring us to our shared experiences in education, while also identifying various pedagogical frameworks, developing practices for immediate implementation, and encouraging reflection on action. Deeply tethering our own stories to the authors', this text invites us to explore, challenge, reflect upon, and catalyze our own joy in education. This book is a rare find and an essential read. The foundational approach of centering joy in teaching and learning offers a path forward for institutions of higher education to not only (re)activate a zest for teaching and learning, but to refocus and remember our shared purpose."

Patrick M. Green, *Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship (CELTS), Loyola University Chicago, USA*

JOY-CENTERED PEDAGOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Emerging from a rich tapestry of educational theory, practical advice, and personal narrative, *Joy-Centered Pedagogy in Higher Education* introduces joy as a catalyst for transformative teaching and learning experiences.

This text names joy as an essential source of abundance and vitality that can be intentionally cultivated in the classroom to activate a sense of mattering, resilience, and engagement. In a series of reflective essays and teaching stories, contributors explore how promoting joy shifts the learning focus from product to process and disrupts notions of rigor that suggest learning should hurt. Each chapter includes reflection questions to guide reader contemplation. The Appendix offers aggregated practitioner-focused suggestions, detailing key joy-centered pedagogies with specific callouts to chapters that directly apply the technique.

College instructors, faculty developers, and education scholars alike will find the insights and actionable solutions offered in this book invaluable for promoting deep, meaningful learning, and mutual flourishing.

Eileen Kogl Camfield directs the Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning at the University of California at Merced, USA.

JOY-CENTERED PEDAGOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Uplifting Teaching and Learning for All

Edited by Eileen Kogl Camfield

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Designed cover image: Getty Images

First published 2025
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Open Access Publishing made possible by a University of California at Merced Senate Committee on Research Grant

ISBN: 978-1-032-87353-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-87288-9 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-53222-4 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Newgen Publishing UK

This book is dedicated to our loving families, supportive colleagues, and eager students.

Your insights, enthusiasm, and generosity bring us boundless joy.

We also honor those who we lost while we wrote this book – Malcolm Andrew Johnston, Richard Kogl, Ryan Meher, and Quinton Winek – because while joy does not deny or prevent grief, it can help us find our way through it.

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PREFACE

A Joyful Welcome

Eileen Kogl Camfield

Recall a moment when you felt elevated in a classroom, when you felt a soaring sense of well-being. For teachers, this might be a moment when a lecture, discussion, or assignment really connected. For students, this might be a moment when you felt seen, heard, and valued. Alas, these experiences are often fleeting, despite being so cherished when they occur. This book is about how to make these happen more intentionally and more consistently, and about the restorative effects that ensue.

During discussions with other teachers about the challenges of "post"-pandemic college teaching, I hear laments about students not showing up to class or not turning in their work. Essentially, students appear to be nonverbally telling us that the pedagogies some of us have relied on for decades are not working. Often, these are the pedagogies of Freire's (1970) banking system, of ranking, of exclusion. Every time I witness these complaints, I suggest students need to experience more joy in the classroom. Then, it happens: a subtle shift in facial expression from the slightly pinched lips, furrowed brows, and hooded eyes of frustration and anxiety to the lifted brows, wide-open gaze, and parted lips of delight. Then, there's the follow-up question: "Wait, can you actually have joy in academic spaces?" The question is not entirely facetious. In higher education, learning and fun are not frequently thought of together; playful study is usually seen as an oxymoron. Indeed, the Academy is often a grim place and has been for some time. Those who can out-scowl the rest are frequently those with the most power and prestige, setting a cultural tone for all either to capitulate to and reinforce, or to resist and risk ostracism (perhaps in the form of denied promotion or tenure), or to leave academia altogether. Those with the audacity to talk about hope, optimism, care, and loving support may be

dismissed by skeptics of (at-best) being too "touchy-feely" and "hand-holding" or accused of (at-worst) toxic positivity or ruinous empathy. (Ironically, these are very emotionally loaded terms used to denigrate feelings!) And yet the urgency of present issues affecting our students (and ourselves) suggests we take another look at joy—joy not as fluffy "feel goodism," but as the tough fiber that binds community together and weaves a net that catches those who might otherwise fall.

This, then, is an academic book about the essential function of joy in our college classrooms and on our campuses. It is an unapologetic argument for the crafting of more pleasurable learning experiences and for better support for educators who seek to center joy in their pedagogy. We recommend this course of action not as Pollyannas promoting empty "power of positive thinking." The hard reality is that both personal traumas and the hidden norms of the Academy can trigger cascading stress responses in some students (and faculty), inducing a physiological shutdown that impedes learning. What to do when that happens? It is our contention that joy is the antidote.

Because of its intrinsic, as opposed to instrumental, value, joy allows us to focus on the present moment. We need not be defined by traumas or worried about uncertainties. Paradoxically, centering joy in the present helps us build the agency to more positively reframe the past and imagine more hopeful futures. In part, joy accomplishes this because it helps build relationships and community. (Something we desperately need in the wake of emergency remote instruction.) Learning together can become a celebration of connection. That said, joy is not something that can result from following a specific script. Because it is relational, joy depends on the social climate of the learning environment, which is shaped by the diverse humans in the room as well as the disposition, attitudes, and mindset of the teacher.

This book is not primarily a critique of academia generally or of conventional teaching practices. Instead, this book describes how designing with and for joy can happen. In a series of reflective essays and teaching stories, the authors explore how promoting joy in the classroom and other campus spaces shifts the focus from product to process and, in turn, challenges ideas of "productivity" that reduce learning into quantifiable chunks that only have extrinsic value as a means to a grade, a diploma, or a job. We talk about experiences where joy uplifts teaching and learning and provide pedagogical strategies that activate joy, supporting intrinsic motivation and honoring personal goals. Consequently, we show how these strategies, in turn, engender more joy and engagement: hence, a positive feedback loop. We are inspired in part by bell hooks' project in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). She describes her own essays as

> constructive commentary. Hopeful and exuberant, they convey the pleasure and joy I experience teaching; these essays are celebratory! To emphasize that

> the pleasure of teaching is an act of resistance countering the overwhelming boredom, uninterest, and apathy that so often characterize the way professors and students feel about teaching and learning, about the classroom experience. *(p. 10)*

To be clear, we are not necessarily recommending radically new teaching techniques as much as we are explaining how the efficacy of "tried and true" pedagogical strategies might best be understood through a joy lens. Joy is the current that runs underneath any truly effective curriculum. We are also suggesting a guiding strategy for course design, a way of "decluttering your curriculum" by asking yourself if your classroom practices and policies "spark joy." This is an intentional homage to Marie Kondo's (2014) popular book about tidying and her suggestion to ask oneself, "does it spark joy?" as the litmus test for deciding whether to retain an object. In our riff on her idea, we contend that our courses often are over-full, weighted down with content that we feel compelled to cover, and not always coherently designed. Alternatively, we invite you to choose vigor (affirming and uplifting practices) over rigor (stiff, inflexible, uncritical replications of past practices). And, just to be clear at the outset, we acknowledge joy-centered pedagogy takes some additional effort, especially when it is oh-so-much-easier to uncritically follow one's institutional norms. Unfortunately, those norms are often steeped in hierarchy and cynicism. Disrupting a negative spiral takes effort. However, we contend that the choice and effort to center joy is worth the work—because the work itself is inherently joyful. Not only do we ourselves feel invigorated by those moments of shared joy we experience in the classroom, but we see that our students do, too.

We have arrived at these beliefs out of our own diverse experiences as learners and teachers. The authors included in this volume hail from the Midwest, South, East, and West Coasts of the United States, from the United Kingdom, and from Zimbabwe. We represent various career stages, including positions as undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and staff. We also embody a range of gender identities, sexual orientations, ability statuses, and racial identities.

As part of our narratives of disruption, we will also discuss aspects of *un*learning that we have had to wrestle with and guide our students (and each other) through in order to activate joy. Here this book differs from some other "how-to" teaching guides, as we explore our own journeys as teachers-learners and also relay our students' experiences. Joy is not something we teacher-experts create unliterally to bestow on grateful students; we, too, have been transformed by those moments of joyful transcendence. Like our students, we, too, have inherited a painful educational legacy of hazing, implicit bias, and fear of judgment that we may unconsciously replicate in our classrooms. While emerging from 10 different disciplines (encompassing the humanities,

social sciences, and STEM), 11 different institutions, and 17 different authorial positionalities, the chapters in this book communicate a shared story: that centering joy profoundly uplifts teaching and learning.

Readers will notice a motif throughout the book that joy is activated by and an activator of agency and community, emerging as an equity practice that allows for healing. So, what do we mean by "centering" joy? In some cases, it has meant simply prioritizing and promoting joy, seeing it as an essential component of motivation and active learning. In other cases, it has meant keeping one's eyes fixed on joy as a navigational lodestar to help guide us through pedagogical rough waters. Together, by each contributing a different narrative, we weave a tale of how joy can disrupt fear, build student agency, heal the mind–body dualistic split, become a form of knowing in its own right, and promote access and equity. Therefore, much as readers might be tempted to peruse only those chapters aligned with their own disciplines, we urge engagement with all chapters in order to appreciate the richness and complexity of our story. We share how joy can be found and used in unexpected and (sometimes) uncomfortable places: in quiet, in difference, in failure, in (solidarity against) injustice. We showcase ways joy fosters resilience and can support long-term student success. In noting the solutions and strategies the authors describe, readers can find inspiration for their own practice.

Readers might also note that many of the authors of this book have been participating in a research group together since 2019; some have collaborated for even longer. We got each other through the long months of isolation during emergency remote instruction. This book emerges from our discussions of our reading and practice, and we now invite you to join our conversation. For ease of access, each chapter concludes with reflective questions to guide reader contemplation. Some include detailed lesson plans. In the Appendix, we offer aggregated practitioner-focused suggestions, detailing key joy-centered pedagogies we've discussed, with specific callouts to chapters that directly apply the suggestion.

Chapter 1 provides our definition of joy-centered pedagogy, embeds it in current literature, and connects it to the past work of both social activists and neuroscientists. We then offer a chapter that foregrounds our primary focus on higher education with a look back to the climate of fear that dominates many North American high schools, exploring ways joy might help mitigate its impact. Subsequent chapters acknowledge the toxic climates on many of our college campuses: of inauthenticity, inequitable access, different aspects of isolation, Western Colonialism, disembodiment, shame, imposter syndrome, and bandwidth overload. We also recount our efforts to counteract those climates using joy. And, while each chapter stands alone, there is significant thematic synergy, and readers will find that chapters are often in dialogue with and build on one another. We offer strategies for simultaneously activating student voice/

agency/autonomy and connection: arts-based pedagogy (Chapters 3 and 4), classroom and campus community-building that communicates "you matter" and "you are not in it alone" (Chapters 5–8), integration of the mind and body (Chapter 9), unlearning to combat shame and shift fixed mindsets about failure (Chapter 10), curiosity and Flow to pull us out of the excruciating self-awareness of imposter syndrome (Chapter 11), and centering through quiet (Chapter 12).

As they describe their classroom practices, many authors have also included stories about their own educational journeys to remind readers that we are not so far removed from our students. Our well-being is also inextricably tied to campus climate. To illustrate the point, the last chapters explicitly look at faculty burnout, offering a more nuanced exploration of its roots (as more than just "being overloaded") by describing how we sometimes blame and feel anger toward students for larger systemic problems and how healing rituals in the classroom can restore joy and benefit everyone (Chapter 13); by looking at the limits of what faculty can do, how faculty isolation compounds burnout, and the ways joyful networks uplift (Chapter 14); and by recognizing the ways joy can help us commit to equity and jettison inflexible attachment to one way of doing things (Chapter 15).

Finally, we want to acknowledge the topics covered in this volume do not solve or address *every* issue or aspect of higher education. However, we do suggest that centering joy when wayfinding through challenges (e.g., power and privilege, economic exigencies, and online learning) offers the best hope for finding sustainable solutions.

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1

INTRODUCING JOY-CENTERED PEDAGOGY

Eileen Kogl Camfield

Creating the context for joy-centered pedagogy, perhaps paradoxically, necessitates acknowledging aspects of higher education that might be seen as miserable. Put another way, if we seek to promote joy-centered pedagogy, we need to recognize what we must resist in higher education. Much of the culture of the Academy is shaped by traumatizing principles and practices that both directly and indirectly destroy joy: hierarchy, White supremacy, sexism, cynicism, shame, imposter phenomenon, meritocracy, individualism, grit, neoliberalism, transactionalism, and competition. All these are wrapped in an unspoken tyranny of "thinking over feeling." This is not to say no one is happy in higher education. Many professors find tremendous enjoyment in the work of scholarship, teaching, and university service. Many students have classes they love and undergraduate research opportunities that are transformative. However, the odds are stacked against us when it comes to intentionally making our classrooms spaces of joyful learning—where joy is used to sustain us as we wrestle with the "hard stuff" of difficult concepts and ideas, disagreement, and cultural conflict; where joy helps us manage the ambiguity of open-ended questions and answers. Can you imagine a course learning outcome that states: *by the end of this class, you will have an expanded capacity for using joy to enhance your learning*? Most campus assessment coordinators would revolt! They would challenge, "How can you measure that?" to imply that if it can't be measured, it is suspect or even has no value. How did we come to such a place where our most treasured experiences have no currency or academic credibility?

Nearly 15 years ago Adrianna Kezar and Jamie Lester (2009) critiqued the "structures and processes [that] represent an institutional and academic history that goes back a hundred years and reflects norms that reach far beyond the

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-1

campus walls and borders" (p. 21). They described many elements that prevent collegial collaboration: disciplinary siloing, responsibility-centered fiscal management systems, specialization, and faculty socialization into a culture of radical individualism, to name just a few. Decreased capacity for collaboration inherently cuts us off from the possibility of the connected joy that happens within human relationships. This, in turn, can manifest in our classrooms as an absence of community or damaged learning relationships. Pierre Bourdieu (1990) described the *habitus* of higher education as full of forms of symbolic violence that invisibly coerce conformity and yet which, at the surface, appear neutral. Thus, in Academia we have cultural norms that favor academic expertise over emotion. I recall many years ago a (senior, White, male) colleague telling me in a voice dripping with disdain, "I don't care if students *like* an assigned reading. All that matters is whether they can analyze it." At the time, I did not have the capacity or the courage to question this assertion, but now I wish I had asked, "Why don't you care?" Why not choose readings that students find inherently interesting? Why not see *liking* as an essential moment of opening where the mind expands? Why is an association between learning and suffering normalized?

Nowhere is joylessness on display more saliently than in current debates over rigor. Often, in my faculty development workshops, I ask professors how they define the term. Do they mean rigor as in the harshness of a New England winter? As in inflexible rigidity? As in a refreshing challenge? Too frequently I am met with blank stares. We have failed to critically examine what it even means when we talk about rigor—sometimes simply conflating rigor with learning itself, without recognizing "rigorous" as a separate modifier with its own possible meanings. Instead, we often unconsciously replicate practices that simply "felt rigorous" back when we were made to endure them (e.g., pop quizzes used to "catch" students who have not done their homework, "cold-calling" quiet students in class discussions, administering high-stakes exams). No one wants their courses to be seen as "not rigorous," because to be perceived as such means one is "soft" and thus possibly not deserving of tenure or promotion. This translates into troubling behaviors, like professors who boast about how many students fail their classes, implying that student misery is an indicator of effective teaching. In turn, these behaviors become part of a vicious cycle, further shaping institutional cultures and having a silencing effect on those colleagues who do care about how students feel. Kevin Gannon (2020, 2023) contends that many of our notions of rigor promote a form of academic hazing that values endurance over learning. In this context, it is no wonder students might appear disengaged. This is not to suggest that our classes should not be challenging, but Gannon asks us to make a distinction between logistical and cognitive rigor—to examine the hidden curriculum and the barriers we might erect by creating byzantine course procedures (e.g., requiring assignments to be submitted in multiple

formats in a variety of places) or course policies that impede student access (e.g., inflexible due dates, failing a paper for minor citation errors, or unnecessarily rigid attendance rules). Instead, he asks us to shift toward thinking about rigor as inspiring students to "question their prior assumptions or to engage with material that has a sophisticated, complex, theoretical bent." He further asks us to unpack the assumption that "logistical changes will lead to cognitive improvements."

A faculty member recently asked me when it might be okay to let up on the flexible attendance policy they developed during the pandemic: "Is it okay to expect students to come to class, even if, for example, they have family members they need to take care of?" Others in the room piped up, saying things like:

> You've definitely got to penalize them for not coming to class! You are doing them no favors by letting them off the hook. Their future employers will expect punctuality! If they have so many family obligations, they should take a semester off.

While perhaps factually true, what seemed missing in the response was an acknowledgment of the empathy that inspired the initial query as well as any discussion about what reciprocal accountability might look like. What also was missing was a recognition of the joy that can be found in a carefully constructed classroom community, a joy that might, in turn, inspire more intrinsic motivation for students to show up for class, or perhaps even an abiding joy that offers meaning and succor for those students who don't attend the occasional class. Gholdy Muhammad (2023) beautifully sums it up when she questions the emphasis on post-pandemic "learning loss" by querying why "no one really spoke of 'joy loss'." She clarifies, "No one spoke of how joy is at the center of how we move in the world of education and why we return to school each day" (p. 33). What is true in the K–12 system is equally valid in higher education.

The Kids Are Not Alright

The many sufferings of Gen Z have been meticulously documented by Jean Twenge (2017) as including isolation, insecurity, and anxiety. In the wake of the pandemic, these concerns have ballooned exponentially. We have seen epidemic levels of disconnection and despair eroding our students' quality of life and capacity to learn (Hrynowski & Marken, 2023). Existential crises create a sense of precarity, which is compounded by media-saturation (Huff, 2022). Associated with this sense of crisis may be a fundamental lost sense of agency (Ajjawi, Fischer, Tai, Bearman, & Jorre de St Jorre, 2022) that can sometimes show up as the apathy of learned helplessness, the sense of so many aspects of life being out-of-control and unpredictable that one just gives up trying to do anything. Another way of understanding this apathy might be through Daniel

Siegel's (1999) model of "the window of tolerance" through which people can optimally function in the world. When under threat, this metaphoric "window" closes. If we are forced to act outside our tolerance windows, we tend to the two extremes of hypo-arousal (where we might just want to curl up in a ball in the corner of the room) or hyper-arousal (where we might be uncharacteristically impatient and quick to anger). Both are trauma responses. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the pandemic is far from the only trauma our students have had to contend with. From a global climate crisis to myriad forms of personal trauma (including those with generational, racial, sexual orientation, and/or gender origins) to the symbolic violences encountered through myriad forms of academic hazing in our high schools, colleges, and universities, our students are stewing in a toxic brew of stressors. The statistics are alarming: rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation on college campuses have never been higher (Flannery, 2023), with 46% of faculty members saying their students come to them with a mental health concern multiple times a month or more and 55% of college students saying their mental health is their top stressor (Mowreader, 2023). Unfortunately, when trauma responses show up in our students, some instructors may feel helpless, untrained to cope with forms of psychological distress. Others might be prone to judgment instead of understanding (Bayers & Camfield, 2018), the hypo-aroused student is called lazy; the hyper-aroused student is seen as entitled or aggressive. Bottom line: joy is scarce these days.

Current Responses to Pressing Issues

Many educational researchers have proposed frameworks for better understanding and shaping pedagogy that fits today's students. It is not my intention here to provide an exhaustive summary. However, several include culturally responsive pedagogy, trauma-informed pedagogy, and healing-centered engagement. Readers familiar with these may already have noted synergies across these constructs. Each might also be seen as anchored in older bodies of research into student-centered pedagogy (Piaget, 1954). They are also linked to past work on learning and motivation as it pertains to what students value and expect to gain from their educations (Vroom, 1964), to their levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and to their needs for both autonomy and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Here is a brief overview of current recommended practices.

Scholars of culturally responsive pedagogy remind us that our cultures are the lenses through which we each see the world. In addition to forming the foundation of our identities, our cultures also contain information about knowledge systems and education that may or may not align with the dominant forms of learning required of us in school. When misalignment occurs, students may experience stress responses where cortisol levels rise to the level of what Zaretta Hammond (2014) calls an "amygdala hijack" (p. 40), where higher brain function shuts

down and learning is foreclosed by a fight, flight, hide response. Cia Verschelden (2017) offers the metaphor of cognitive bandwidth, where "persistent worry about money, including lack of regular access to adequate food, shelter, health care, safety, and so on, takes up parts of the brain that are then not available for academic learning" (p. 5). She bears witness to the fact that "members of certain racial or ethnic groups in the United States....on their worst days exist within a dusty cloud of fear, worry, isolation, and frustration that robs them of available cognitive resources." Instructors must develop culturally responsive strategies to mitigate the struggle described in these scenarios. While it might be tempting to soften one's curriculum to create a completely non-threatening classroom, such a space is virtually impossible to ensure. Moreover, Hammond reminds us that for learning to happen, students must experience "productive struggle" (pp. 12–13), grappling with challenges in ways that expand thinking and build learning muscles. Here, the teacher as "warm demander" creates "learning partnerships" with students, providing nurturance and support while also pushing students from the position of learning dependence (needing the teacher as guide) to independence and self-regulation. Verschelden also offers culturally responsive strategies for promoting students' growth mindsets, sense of belonging, and "identity-safe" (as opposed to identity-threatening) learning environments. Other scholars have critiqued specific practices, like grading, that induce shame, reinforce ranking, and replicate racist/capitalistic hierarchies, offering instead strategies for ungrading (Blum, 2020) and labor-based grading (Inoue, 2019).

Recent educational scholarship also focuses on trauma-informed pedagogy because "trauma is real..prevalent...[and] toxic to the brain" (Sours & Hall, 2016, p. 10). Hoch, Stewart, Webb, and Wyandt-Hiebert (2015) describe trauma as highly individualized experiences where a person's internal resources are not adequate to cope with external stressors. Trauma responses can be reactivated long after the initial event, and like the amygdala hijack described in the previous paragraph, once triggered, trauma responses create neurological flooding that can lead to cognitive shutdown. Henshaw (2022) notes "concentration, memory, executive functioning, information processing, language acquisition, and the socio-emotional aspects of learning may be affected." Therefore, trauma-informed pedagogy addresses "barriers resulting from the impacts of traumatic human experiences [to] create classroom communities that promote student wellbeing and learning" (Marquart & Báez, 2021, p. 64). Indeed, post-pandemic, "educators across disciplines have shifted their teaching to be more compassionate, flexible, consistent, and predictable in response to the worldwide trauma and distress" (p. 63). In the classroom, educators are encouraged to look for opportunities to empower students, to express unconditional positive regard, to maintain high expectations, to make observations instead of assumptions about student behavior (e.g., ask "what happened to you?" instead of "what's

wrong with you?"), to coach relationship skills, and to offer guided opportunities to practice academic and social–emotional skills (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). Setting appropriate boundaries and walking a line between being trustworthy and reliable *for* students while not expecting instant trust *from* students are also important aspects of trauma-informed pedagogy (Hoch, Stewart, Webb, & Wyandt-Hiebert, 2015). Perhaps at its core, trauma-informed pedagogy is about promoting post-traumatic growth (Dell'Osso, Lorenzi, Nardi, Carmassi, & Carpita, 2022) using social networks as protective factors, and utilizing social and emotional learning to promote resilience (Davidson, 2017).

While there are many proponents of trauma-informed pedagogy, some critique it as overly clinical, as deficit-focused (keeping students centered on their suffering), and as untethered from the systems that create and perpetuate trauma. Some worry trauma-informed pedagogy puts students in a dependent role vis-à-vis their teachers, who both diagnose and disseminate "treatment" for their suffering without also making students partners in their healing. In promoting healing-centered engagement, Shawn Ginwright (2018) explains, "Without more careful consideration, trauma informed approaches sometimes slip into rigid medical models of care that are steeped in treating the symptoms, rather than strengthening the roots of well-being." Instead, he asserts,

> A healing centered approach to addressing trauma requires a different question that moves beyond "what happened to you" to "what's right with you" and views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events... [it is] an asset driven approach [based on] the idea that people are not harmed in a vacuum, and well-being comes from participating in transforming the root causes of the harm within institutions.

Such an approach aligns with the work of positive psychologists who promote cognitive reframing to help us make peace with our pasts, savor pleasure in the present, and feel optimism about the future. Martin Seligman (2002) contends we do this by identifying and using our unique "signature strengths" in every facet of our lives rather than trying to "fix" what is broken in us.

Despite differences, there is significant overlap between culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and healing-centered pedagogies. Each is appropriately concerned with the emotional and cognitive impacts of students' past experiences and present-lived realities. Henshaw (2022) actually elides distinctions by calling for "culturally responsive trauma-informed approaches" at higher education institutions. Other trauma-informed pedagogy proponents aver "we need to be prepared to support students who have experienced trauma" [and at the same time they note that students] "are resilient, and within positive

learning environments they can grow, learn, and succeed" (Sours & Hall, 2016). Thus, they may support both healing-centered and trauma-sensitive approaches.

Indeed, educators can embrace all three frameworks by employing a three-step pedagogical interrogation process, exploring with students the "who are you?" of culturally responsivity, the "what happened to you" (as opposed to what's wrong with you) of trauma-informedness, and the "what's right with you" of healing-centeredness.

In other words, we need not see any profound disagreement between them, and the authors of this book have no argument with them. However, these frameworks might be seen as *incomplete.* What is less well-studied is *what* makes those kinds of emotionally sensitive and healing environments work (hint: we think it's joy) and *why* they are not more commonly found in higher education classrooms. We also need more conversation about *how* to help students reframe and move through trauma to a place of healing beyond. Another way of thinking about this is to acknowledge that trauma-informed pedagogy may be a great means to an end, but it is not necessarily an end in and of itself. Trauma-informed pedagogy helps promote harm reduction and reduces the risk of retraumatizing students in our classrooms and of the cognitive shutdown that comes from a trauma response. Thus, it is a powerful tool for preventing students from failing a class or dropping out of college, but what is the advantage of them staying in a system that coerces assimilation into misery or creates what William Deresiewicz (2014) describes as "excellent sheep?" How do we change the system?

Why Joy? Why Now?

In contrast to pedagogical practices that are used to promote a particular outcome, joy is beneficial in its own right, as an embodied classroom experience, in addition to serving as an activator of beneficial outcomes. Thus, it is both responsive and proactive. It is both a means-to-an-end and an end-in-itself. It can help us find the both-and instead of the either-or. For students, this can look like acknowledging *both* that they have suffered *and* that they need not let their pain define them. Ingrid Fetell Lee (2019) reminds us, joy is "a propulsive force... [that] creates unity... lets us reclaim our humanity... disrupts expectations... promotes resilience... [and] gives rise to hope." Indeed, psychologist Dacher Keltner (2009) describes the power of pro-social emotions as "signs of our deepest commitments. They are wired into our nervous system. Emotions are intuitive guides to our most important ethical judgments. Our pursuit of the meaningful life requires an engagement with emotions" (p. 34). Like Seligman, Keltner emphasizes our need to build our lives around positive feelings and notes the stress-relieving effects of play and laughter along with the ways it "builds cooperative bonds vital to group living…building trust...designat[ing]... a social

realm for acts of pretense, of imagination... enabl[ing] routines that allow... alternative perspectives on the world...[and serving as] the gateway to empathy and the moral imagination" (pp. 134–138). None of this dismisses or diminishes the reality of suffering. "Laughter is not a sign of denial of trauma, as widely assumed, but an indicator of a shift toward a new perspective enabled by the imagination" (p. 143). Thus, centering joy might help mitigate the unfortunate risk of pathologizing trauma. Ross Gay (2022) asks us: "What if joy is not only entangled with pain, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other *through* those things" (p. 4)? This new perspective might give students space to work together to claim agency and redefine their identities.

At its core, joy is the invisible activator of community. When Peter Felton and Leo Lambert (2020) so persuasively identified relationship-rich education as the key for student success, they noted five essential elements of the experience: genuine welcome, deep care, inspiration, webs of connection, and opportunities to explore questions of meaning and purpose. Undergirding those, joy might be recognized as the animating force. Audre Lorde (1978) asserted that "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (p. 35). The classroom community becomes an entity unified by joy. However, this is not the unity of conformity or erasure. Ross Gay (2022) declares

> joy is an ember for or precursor to wild and unpredictable and transgressive and unbounded solidarity… joy, emerging from our common sorrow—which does not necessarily mean we have the same sorrows, but that we, in common, sorrow—might draw us together. It might depolarize us and de-atomize us enough that we can consider what, in common, we love. And though attending to what we hate in common is too often all the rage (and happens also to be very big business), noticing what we love in common, and studying *that*, might help us survive.
>
> *(pp. 9–10)*

Once we allow this ember to ignite in our classrooms, we gain access to human relationships that can help us heal from trauma (Sours & Hall, 2016), deepen learning (Bowen, 2021; Felton & Lambert, 2020; Schwartz, 2019; Siegel, 1999), and build the efficacy that can allow students to overcome learned helplessness (Camfield, 2018). Far from being the fluffy stuff of cotton candy, joy is the tough connective tissue that binds a body together and nourishes the soul.

Further, joy is linked to intrinsic motivation. It sustains us through the difficult and complex work of transformation. Audre Lorde (1978) asserted, joy "can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world." Or, as Bettina Love (2019) put it:

> Joy is crucial for social change; joy is crucial for teaching. Finding joy in the midst of pain and trauma is the fight to be fully human… Acknowledging joy is to make yourself aware of your humanity, creativity, self-determination, power, and ability to love abundantly.
>
> *(p. 119)*

Are there any more fulfilling course learning outcomes than these? Courses that activate such abundance are greater than the sum of their parts, offering a feeling of uplift that transcends the acquisition of any specific content.

Joy adds a complementary fourth-step to the pedagogical interrogation process identified earlier. To the "who are you?" of culturally responsivity, the "what happened to you" of trauma-informedness, and the "what's right with you" of healing-centeredness, we add "what uplifts and inspires you?" In asking that question, educators can explore the power of positive *e-motion* to literally move us into a beneficent cycle where joy creates the *inverse* of an amygdala hijack: the activation of neurotransmitters, like serotonin, associated with learning, attention, and memory (Coray & Quednow, 2022). We can use joy to release dopamine and rewire the "salience network" in our brains away from "red alert to green;" we can use joy to produce oxytocin to help us connect with one another and reduce the stress-hormone cortisol (Hanson, 2013). Thus, negative spirals of emotional contagion can be replaced by the empathic harmony of positive limbic resonance (Lannon, Amini, & Lewis, 2000). From that place of openness and receptivity, joyful students and teachers reclaim the promise of education as the practice of drawing out what is inherent in our shared humanity. In fact, joy may be the common denominator that explains why varied forms of effective pedagogical techniques actually work.

What Is Joy-Centered Pedagogy?

Joy is a pedagogical "renewable resource" (one that can regenerate itself as quickly as it is depleted)—an authentic, embodied, connected state of uplift that educators can intentionally cultivate in their classrooms to activate for students a sense of mattering (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, A., 2004; Cole, Newman, & Hypolite, 2020; Flett, Khan, & Su, 2019), resilience (Fredrickson, 2018; Southwick & Charney, 2018), and agentic engagement (Reeve & Shin, 2020). Teachers can use joy meta-emotionally as a dispositional framing that activates other pro-social emotions and effects through experience-dependent neuroplasticity (Hanson, 20134) and limbic regulation (Lannon, Amini, & Lewis, 2000). In other words, when students are encouraged to emotionally synchronize together joyfully, their brains can expand to become more receptive and flexible (Wang, Chen, & Yue, 2017). Thus, joyful learning experiences are more powerful than pleasure, simple happiness, sense of comfort, or well-being.

Moreover, joy is essentially egalitarian (we all are experts in our own joy), activates and is activated by compassion, and calls forth courage. Because of these, j*oy-centered pedagogy* promotes intellectual vigor and disrupts those aspects of traditional notions of rigor that suggest learning should hurt. However, because those notions are baked into the culture of education, dismantling them necessities intentional design to create the conditions where joy can flourish. Joy can help disrupt and break hidden habits and cycles. Further, in a teaching context where

> 64% of faculty report "feeling burned out because of work;" where burnout is higher among women (69%) and gender minority faculty (71%) relative to men (57%); where a higher proportion of faculty at 4-year institutions (68%) felt burned out than at community colleges (54%)…where 58% felt "the job itself" had taken a toll and 47% also felt "supporting students in mental and emotional distress has taken a toll on my own mental and emotional health,"
>
> *(American Psychological Association, 2023)*

more joy could help everyone flourish (Fredrickson, 2001) and feel less depleted.

José Bowen (2021) describes a necessary shift in our conceptualization of teaching from the knowledge-dissemination of the past to the cognitive coaching that 21st-century learners need to become independent problem-solvers. In addition to helping our students learn how to think, they also need us to help them learn how to *feel* in ways that allow for positive change. When we combine joy-centered practices with culturally responsive and/or trauma-sensitive pedagogies in our classrooms, students can process anger over injustice *and* feel inspired to work to dismantle it. They can name their trauma *and* not have it define their destiny. They can challenge commodified individualism *and* build community. They can recognize the sources of burnout *and* develop re-energizing strategies. Thus, joy-centered pedagogy expands our understanding not only of what activates learning, but also of what makes it both meaningful, sustainable, and restorative for students and teachers.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- Where have you felt the most joy in a classroom? (How was your teaching and/or learning affected by that positive emotion?)
- How do you define "rigor?" Does your definition rest on the assumption that learning should be painful?
- What forms of *un*learning might you need to engage to create more joyful learning experiences?

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2

DISRUPTING THE CULTURE OF FEAR

Finding Joy for Students and Educators in a K–12 Setting and Its Implications for Higher Education

Isabella Camfield

Introduction

Note: This chapter is written from the perspective of a high school teacher. However, many of the experiences elucidated in the chapter are universal to all educators. In addition, for readers who are operating in higher education, this chapter is intended to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics that students are coming from, and what energies, assumptions, and habits they may be carrying with them.

Reflecting on all of the in-service training and faculty meetings of which I have been a part, I am struck by how many of them have been insidiously rooted in fear. These extend from the trainings about what to do if there is an active shooter in the school, to the training where we were explicitly told "teach every moment as if the superintendent were sitting in the back of your room," to the presentation of state testing data and the unspoken threat of what happens if your students do not perform well. Being in Texas, there is the added fear of teaching the "wrong thing," as we are subject to more and more censorship and legislative control.

Fear, as neuroscientists have proven, can cause an amygdala hijack, which prevents us from the higher-level thinking that is needed to create engaging and meaningful learning experiences. As Zaretta Hammond (2015), author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, states, the amygdala

> is the seat of our fear system that is involved in emotional processing. It is designed to react in less than a second at the very hint of a social or physical

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-2

> threat…When the amygdala sounds its alarms with cortisol, all other cognitive functions such as learning, problem-solving, or creative thinking stop.
>
> *(p. 40)*

Thus, a culture of fear makes it very difficult for teachers to do our job well, leading to myriad negative impacts: from the exodus of K–12 teachers from the profession and those of us staying screaming toward burnout, to, most importantly, the negative feedback loop it creates in the classroom, where disempowered teachers take out their frustration on their students, spreading their fear and cortisol to those they should be encouraging and supporting.

This leaves us as educators with an immense choice – one at many times we are not even conscious of making – do we fall into the cycle of fear that can lead to humiliation and dehumanization? Or do we push through the fear? As Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama point out in their book, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (2016), "the problem is not the existence of stressors, which cannot be avoided; stress is simply the brain's way of signaling that something is important. The problem – or perhaps, the opportunity – is how we respond to this stress" (p. 98). In my classroom, my intention is to create a *positive* feedback loop that will create sustainability and hope for both myself and my students – a classroom culture of joy built through community, agency, and creativity.

Part 1: Factors of Fear

There is no way to cover in a single chapter the many sources of fear in the school system, but let us focus on three major elements that I have witnessed in my own experience. The first is the threat to our physical safety. According to *The Washington Post*, "more than 356,000 students have experienced gun violence at school since Columbine" (Cox et al, 2023). The response of many schools to this stark reality has been to increase our daily paranoia, instead of encouraging policy changes for mental health care and gun laws. For instance, in the state of Texas, where I reside, Governor Abbott declared post-Uvalde that every school must keep all their classroom doors locked at all times. Therefore, at the high school where I currently teach, my students and I are enclosed in a windowless room with a door that is always shut and locked. Any time a student arrives late or needs to use the restroom, they are forced to knock on the door to be let into our space. Not only is this counter to the welcoming energy I hope to exude in my classroom, but it disrupts learning when someone has to go open the door. Underneath all of that, there is the unspoken reminder with each knock: *Not safe, not safe, not safe.*

The second component in our culture of fear has to do with the bane of my existence: standardized testing. There are many reasons to dislike standardized testing, from its rigid and narrow measurement of success, to its roots in racism and inequality, to the way it ranks and sorts students and erases individuality. But, I think at the root of all of these is the fear of "getting it wrong" and by extension *being* wrong. This fear is mirrored in both teachers and students. Teachers are afraid that they are not setting their students up for success, ironically on a test that is flawed in the first place. If their students do not perform well, they can easily see it as a personal failing and not a failing of the system. Students are afraid that they are not working hard enough; they are not smart enough; they are not *good* enough to understand what they are being taught.

This fear only deepens during testing season. In April and May, each teacher is expected to proctor for days at a time, and we are explicitly told we cannot grade, plan, or do anything other than stare at students for hours on end. For myself during these hours, I am constantly worrying if I did enough, if my students are okay, if they feel confident. During proctoring, we are placed in a room with students at random, so we cannot even rely on our prior relationship and presence to non-verbally communicate encouragement. What type of mentality does this foster, both for students and for teachers? What type of distrust and paranoia festers in this panoptic bubble? We as teachers are also afraid of getting in trouble, or of making a mistake that will jeopardize our students' scores.

Then, of course, there is the anxiety that comes with not knowing. After they have taken the tests, I regularly get questions from students about when they will find out their scores. I recall that on the day that scores were released, I had student after student timidly asking me if they had passed, watching as their expressions of dread softened with the news that they had passed or crumpled if they had not. In Texas, if they do not pass a state test in high school, they must undergo 30 hours of mandatory tutoring and retake the test every semester until they pass. This only exacerbates the fear and feeling of "not being good enough" and has obvious inequitable impacts on emergent bilingual students and students with disabilities. But for all students, it takes away from the joy of learning and instead makes school about gatekeeping. When we consider the low attendance numbers we are seeing post-pandemic, I wonder how much of that could be attributed to testing burnout.

Though the first two components of fear I have discussed, that of physical safety and the burden of standardized testing, are experienced by both students and teachers, the next primarily affects educators (though as I will discuss, that does not mean it does not indirectly impact students). Teaching has always been a popular target in the culture wars, as journalist Dana Goldstein highlights in her book *The Teacher Wars* (2014). She quotes teachers who tell her that "Everything I loved about teaching is extinct. Curriculum is mandated. Minutes spent teaching subjects are audited. Schedules are dictated by administrators.

The classroom teacher is no longer trusted or in control of what, when or how she teaches" (p. 3). In my own school district, there has been a push for pre-packaged curriculum, and for some grade levels that even involves a specific script. Therefore, there is a constant fear of teaching the wrong thing and being publicly lambasted for it. Of course, this is only increasing as Texas and many other states attempt to pass legislation on what can and cannot be taught in school, limiting our ability to discuss real-world issues. For English teachers this all is particularly vexed territory. What novel does not include the topics of gender, race, or class to some extent? And yet we see news story after news story where teachers who break these new rules are losing their jobs.

When I first arrived in Texas after teaching in California for four years, I was walking down the hall with a coworker I had just met, and she remarked, "You know, you're not in California anymore. Now you have to be careful about what you teach. You never know what a parent will have an issue with." I was taken aback. Though I still determine many of the texts my students read in class and do my best to diversify the authors that we read, there is always the voice of that teacher in the back of my mind. The idea that we should censor what we discuss and read in our classrooms and avoid anything potentially controversial is a recipe for students to feel even more disconnected and disinterested in school. Students are hungry to have authentic and relatable conversations, yet it often puts teachers in an impossible situation, where we must either go against the state's rules or against our own integrity as educators to serve the needs of our students.

Higher Education is not immune to the presence of these three fears either, as violence on college campuses appears to be rising (Suhail & Schermele, 2024), conservative pressures for the instantiation and deregulation of competency-based education continue (Gillen, 2021), and legislation curtailing DEI initiatives on college campuses abounds (*Chronicle*, 2024).

Part 2: Reactions to Fear

Many of us are familiar with the four "fs" when a person is confronted with a threat: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. But what about when that threat is perpetual? How might we as educators manifest one or more of these categories as a coping mechanism, and how does this impact our teaching?

First, let us address flight. Post-COVID, we have a record number of teachers fleeing education, as they see their job as increasingly unsustainable. According to an CNBC report "at least 300,000 public-school teachers and other staff left the field between February 2020 and May 2022" and those remaining "report the highest burnout rate of all U.S. professions" (Smith, 2022). This leads to students having substitute teachers, or teachers who are uncredentialed, with less support to offer. However, of the four potential responses teachers could have

to a perceived threat, flight seems to be the least harmful for the well-being of students. At least those teachers are recognizing that they can no longer serve students in the way that they deserve. The other reactions to fear can have more direct negative impacts to the entire school community.

The second possible reaction to fear is to freeze. In this case, I see freezing as those teachers who become complacent or passive. They are those who are "phoning it in." A less favorable view of these teachers would be that they "don't care." But few people go into a job as thankless as education if they do not at least initially believe they can make a difference. So, for many of these teachers, it is more likely that this freezing is a coping mechanism. They have been let down too many times by overextended administrators, a consistent lack of resources, and a constant stream of new expectations and plates to spin. They do not want to get too attached to an idea or an engaging lesson, because they do not know how quickly they will be forced to give it up for a new curriculum roll-out or test prep session. This freezing could also stem from a lack of self-confidence in their own abilities to meet what is expected of them. It is less painful to not put in any effort as opposed to trying your hardest and still not feeling good enough.

Teachers that fawn are those who curry favor to authority and become sticklers for the rules with little empathy or flexibility. Again, this is often a matter of expediency. It is easier to not question and not make waves. But how can we expect students to be independent and critical thinkers if we as educators become blind followers? Of course, some rules and expectations are for everyone's benefit, but the teachers I am calling to mind for this category are those like the one I witnessed shouting at students in the hallway to hurry up to their classrooms on a state testing day. It was as if she felt she was doing her job better by this performative and aggressive way of enforcing the rules. This type of teacher forces students into a more passive and dependent role when it comes to school expectations.

For myself, this is the category with which I typically feel least comfortable. I do not enjoy being a stickler for the "rules" and typically rely more on the relationship I build with students to encourage mutual respect. However, I did find myself "fawning" to authority during a lockdown that we had this past year, and it was most certainly a fear-coping mechanism. We had the threat of an active shooter trying to get into the building, and I was sitting in the darkness with about 26 14-year-olds for about 3 hours. I found myself continuously scolding them to put their phones away. My thinking at the time was that the light of the phones was an issue, and that they could be spreading misinformation on social media or reading things that would just make them panic more. That was true, to some extent, because some students were trying to whisper to each other some of the things that they were reading. But at the same time, some of them just wanted to get words of comfort from their loved ones. Deep down, I wanted the same thing. But in a situation where I felt extremely powerless and in the dark, both

literally and figuratively, I was responding by being a stickler to the "no phones in class" rule. I am not sharing this to debate whether what I did in that moment was right or wrong, but merely to show the range of reactions we tend to have to fear, and how easy it is to slip into what is *easy* instead of what is *right.*

The last reaction to fear, of course, is to fight. This happens in two ways. First, it more directly happens when unhappy teachers vent their unhappiness onto their students with a mentality of "if I can't be happy, no one can" or "I suffered through this when I was in school, and so will you." The phrase that comes to mind is that hurt people, hurt people. When teachers feel afraid, either that they are not doing their job well, or of the new things that are expected of them, or of failure, they take it out on their students, treating those very humans who they once hoped to nurture as their own personal antagonists. Instead of blaming a failed system, which is harder to face because it seems more impossible to change, it is easier to tell yourself that the real problem is the "darn kids these days" who do not do their homework.

This then leads to the second way that this fear-converted-to-anger plays out: the way teachers interact with each other. Unfortunately, we as educators are not often given the time, tools, or opportunities to respond to our stress and fear in a way that is useful or productive, and often just leads us to feel more stuck. I often hear teachers venting in faculty meetings, and while some of the frustration is targeted toward oppressive policies, much more is focused on ire toward students. While this may be cathartic in the moment for that teacher, it creates a culture of negativity and blame. This anger and negativity can cause a chilling effect on the entire meeting, because teachers that are not participating in the student-bashing are demoralized and disconcerted by the way their colleagues are behaving. For myself personally, I struggle with speaking out against the negativity in the moment, feeling my own imposter syndrome as someone much younger and relatively inexperienced compared to many of my colleagues. But then that means I fall into the freeze response, tacitly "okaying" their behavior because it is not being challenged or interrupted. We need to make space to actively interrogate our beliefs about students, and where those beliefs are coming from. As the authors of *Changing the Discourse in Schools* (1994) point out, "If I (we) never have time to reflect, to consider, to question, then what prevails is how we do it now" (Eubanks et al., p. 9). It is the responsibility of every educator to support this reflection in our colleagues and continuously strive for it within ourselves.

We must be able to reflect on which reaction we often fall into when we are fearful, and what the impact of this is on the people around us. Choosing joy is not always easy. In fact, in a system that is constantly undermining our mission to truly serve all students, it can often be a challenge. But joy is the only way that we can survive in this profession, and the only way that we can effectively create successful classroom communities.

Part 3: Creating a Joyful Classroom Space

But this all begs the question: what is joy, and what does it look like to experience joy in a classroom community? Brené Brown (2021), in her book *Atlas of the Heart*, describes joy as "an intense feeling of deep spiritual connection, pleasure and appreciation…[where] we don't *lose ourselves, we become more truly ourselves*" (p. 205). Using this definition of joy, to create a joyful classroom, we must have three factors: agency, community, and creativity. These three components must be inextricably intertwined to make both students and teachers joyful. If we become "more truly ourselves" through joy, then we must first feel that we have the agency to be able to be our whole selves. Next, without a sense of community, it is impossible to feel that sense of connection integral to this definition of joy. Ideally, it is not just community with those in the room, but also a stronger sense of the global community of which we are all a part. As the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu say, "It does help quite a lot to see yourself as part of a great whole…the path of joy [is] connection" (p. 99). And, lastly, creativity allows us the sense of pleasure and appreciation, both for what we ourselves and our peers have accomplished. Creativity takes us outside of ourselves and beyond ourselves.

Underlying each of these strands must be a curriculum that is culturally responsive and expansive. In *Unearthing Joy*, Gholdy Muhammad (2023) tells us that

> when a flower does not grow, we don't uproot it. Instead, we change the amount of sunlight and water, we change the type of soil, we nourish it… Yet when students do not "grow," it is because their roots have been removed from the rich soil of their existence.
>
> *(p. 18)*

Not all students are seeing themselves or seeing value in what they are being taught in the current school system. And if students do not feel both seen and heard in our curriculum and classrooms, it is impossible for true joy to be possible. Central to our working definition of joy is that it happens in community, so if this is true, in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer (in her 1971 speech), "nobody's free until everybody's free" (Hamer, 2010, p. 134). We cannot all experience true, transcendent, liberating joy until we have a space where *every* student can be welcomed and celebrated.

Agency Allows for Joy

Because of all the experiences that I have enumerated above, from the first day of class, it is important to counteract the expectation of animosity that students may

have come to expect from their teachers. When we are accustomed to spaces of fear, learners can often feel powerless. I want to establish early on that students' voices and opinions are valued and celebrated in my classroom. As such, one of the first activities I do with them is co-creating community agreements. I ask each student to think about what they need from their peers, their teacher, and themselves to have a successful learning community. Then, I ask them to condense their individual thoughts into a group list. Then, I compile the classes' list into one document, which I print and we all sign. I keep that document posted on the wall throughout the year, as a testament to what we all have agreed to follow.

These community agreements are important to set a tone of mutuality and positive incentive. I have found that students often seem surprised that I am asking what they need from me, and their initial responses have often been, "be nice to us," "don't yell at us," "be understanding" – things that all humans crave from one another, but that they have unfortunately not always gotten in previous classrooms. When I validate and sign off on those expectations for myself, I am already working toward building trust by flattening hierarchy and building student agency, the antithesis of what I described earlier in the section about teachers fawning to authority. Typically, the agreements that students produce for themselves are what I would ask from them anyway, but because they have had a role in co-creating the expectations, they are more likely to follow them. Further, instead of focusing on what *not* to do: "do not text in class," "do not arrive late," community agreements are focusing on what *will* be done. For example, three of the agreements from my fifth-period class this past year were "We agree to communicate, be respectful of each other's thoughts, and stay engaged." The positive emphasis also signals that neglecting these agreements harms everyone, therefore, giving an inherent "reason why" for the expectations, instead of focusing on punishment and fear.

In addition to setting this norm of student agency early on, I also encourage them to give me feedback at the end of every quarter. In many classroom settings in higher education, students review their professors at the end of the semester, and while that may serve that professor's overall growth, it does not do much to improve that semester's cohort's experience. Further, in the K–12 setting, in both schools that I have taught in at least, there is zero expectation of student feedback. This very directly discourages students' voice and sense of agency in their own education, and again, leads to a sense of authoritarian fear when the teacher is presented as someone who is above examination or reproach. Therefore, in my class, I distribute a survey at the end of every quarter that allows students to be both self-reflective on their own work ("What learning [about the content or about yourself] will stick with you from this unit?") and to give me feedback on my performance ("How well did you feel supported by

Ms. Camfield? What can I do differently in the next unit to help you be successful?"). This is a helpful tool for me to know what to adjust as we continue to work and grow together.

Just as importantly, on the teacher's side, feeling that I have more agency and choice in what I am teaching increases my capacity for joy on the job. At the beginning of this school year, I proposed to my department chair a new unit (described later in this chapter), in which we could still meet the state standards while also engaging with a meaningful and relatable topic. The excitement and energy of our conversation about the types of readings and activities we could include gave me more energy and confidence to start off the new year. This is just one example of the fact that the more trust and opportunity teachers are given, the more joyful we will become, and, in turn, the more effective we will be at meeting individual students' needs. If we just become robots spouting out pre-packaged curriculum, Chat GPT might as well be your child's third-grade teacher.

The solution for this issue is clear to those of us in education: trust teachers as the professionals we are. Teachers as taught that student choice increases agency, engagement, and motivation. The same can be said for educator choice. This does not mean we should not be receiving feedback and being pushed to grow – far from it – but it means that we need to feel trusted and valued in order to lessen our fear and make way for joy.

Community Cultivates Joy

As already previously implied, when we are working in cultures of fear, we often hold an "us versus them" mentality and distrust thrives. To counter this, in my classroom I am constantly striving for ways for us to dissolve hierarchy and work together. I spend little to no time lecturing to my classes but instead encourage learning through mutual discovery while I walk around the room facilitating small group work. As I mentioned earlier, community agreements are an integral part of how we establish and build this sense of belonging and validation, and how we help each other to be challenged and to grow. The more students feel they can rely on each other, the more they can learn. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) furthers this idea when she says excitement in the classroom is not just about our individual experience with the content, but rather that "our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (p. 8). Of course, joy and excitement are not necessarily synonymous, but I do feel that this communal sentiment is deeply true of both.

Community is just as essential for us as educators, and it is more often neglected. Because we are caught in the cycle of fear, we often feel that we do not have enough time to connect with our colleagues. When I first started

teaching, I spent every lunch period alone in my room, trying to grade, or sometimes just trying to decompress. Although at first it seemed to be an effective coping strategy to help me prepare for the stress of the rest of the day, it became counterproductive as feeling isolated and alone in my struggles made me feel worse. I decided to begin having lunch with a group of colleagues. Not only did this change lead me to start to smile and laugh more, but I also became a better teacher because of it. I could more naturally discuss the things that were happening in my classroom and have brainstorming partners who could give me new perspectives on what I could try, or they could give me new insight on one of my students that they had had in a previous year. We could share resources, share joys and sorrows, and together, our burdens felt lighter.

The first step toward this creating this greater sense of community could be to make more intentional spaces within departments. However, to ensure all voices are heard, deliberate steps must be taken. Just as I do with my students in our classroom, departments should co-create community agreements to have a shared sense of mission and purpose, and to agree on how to speak about important topics in a way that avoids blame and shame, fear and anger. Just as I break down hierarchy in my classroom, departments should also feel like a space where we all have an equal voice and equal value. We all have strengths and areas of growth, and the more we can authentically own that with vulnerability and honesty, the more impactful we can be and the less alone we will feel.

Something that is more difficult, but just as important, is creating ways of communicating between departments. As someone who used to teach an integrated curriculum of both English and social studies, and is a large proponent of interdisciplinary education, I feel extremely siloed in my current situation where I teach only one subject, with no sense of what other departments are doing with their students. It is, again, easy to be stuck in the pressure of content coverage, fear of standardized testing, and feeling that we do not have enough time to fully talk about our own content, let alone the content of another department. But as a learner, the times I felt the most fulfilled was in college when I could see connections between my theater class and my cognitive science class, my Italian language class with my English class. We can encourage those connections for our students, deepening their learning and awareness of the world's interconnectedness, but only if we have opportunities to talk to each other across disciplines, or even co-teach. One of the most powerful classes that I took as an undergraduate was an Intro to Cognitive Science class that was co-taught by a cognitive science professor, a philosophy professor, and a computer science professor. Making the connection between STEM and the Humanities enriched my experience of both. Imagine what could be possible if this was not the rare exception, but something that could be intentionally cultivated!

Creativity Causes Joy

When we are fearful, we become burned out quickly, which makes it difficult to find motivation as a teacher or a learner. For many students, this burnout leads to apathy or learned helplessness, because both are defense mechanisms against being hurt or disappointed. For many teachers, burnout leads us to create less and less engaging lessons, because we do not feel we have that creative spark or intellectual energy. These lessons then are less exciting for us to teach and for students to engage with, which leads to a negative feedback loop of even *more* burnout, because if a lesson is not engaging there will be more classroom management needed and less of those gratifying "aha moments" that remind us why we became teachers in the first place. Thus, one of my goals as a teacher is always to create activities that I would have enjoyed as a student.

For example, for the past two years, when my seniors have read *Macbeth*, I have had them work on a group project where they created a hypothetical production of the play, serving as a director, designer, or actor. Each role required students to collaborate, engage deeply with the text, and get a chance to be creative. Students loved it, and I felt excited to see their progress every day. I saw amazing production plans, from a version of the Scottish play set in a high school theater department, where Macbeth wants the lead role, to a stock market "*Wolf of Wallstreet*" creation, both emphasizing the theme of power being a corrupting force. In essence, learning does not need to feel like *work.* The more that we can break away from the formulaic model that standardized testing pushes, the more joyous we can be. We do not need to sacrifice the standards that encourage strong readers, writers, and thinkers in order to have a good time, it just requires some more creativity on the part of the teacher and the students. These more creative types of assessment also allow for students who have a more difficult time with traditional assessment – be it from a learning disability, a language barrier, or previous negative experiences – to have an opportunity to shine.

It is also important to consider that being more creative often requires more vulnerability for students. Thus, the aforementioned aspects of community and agency are essential. If a student does not feel welcome in a space, they will not take creative risks, because they will not feel that their unique perspective is needed or desired. If they do not feel they have agency, or choice, they will just create what they assume their *teachers* want to see, rather than what *they* authentically believe and feel. Many of us have had teachers where you know that you will only receive an A if your paper agrees with what your teacher/professor has lectured about. This is *not* joyful. Though more open-ended creative assignments may feel overwhelming at first, both to teachers and students, both can rise to the challenge and will ultimately feel more empowered, excited, and fulfilled.

Putting It All Together: A Sample Unit as Snapshot of My Practice

This past year, I was asked to teach an English class for students who have not yet passed the "Texas Success Initiative" (TSI), a standardized test that supposedly proves whether or not students are ready for entry-level college coursework. I had four sections of this class, and there were also seven other sections. If this many students are not passing the test, I would echo the words of Gholdy Muhammad (2023): "Which one needs the 'intervention' or 'remediation,' *the child or the system?*" (p. 16). My classes were disproportionately emergent bilingual students and students with disabilities – two groups who are egregiously underserved and *underestimated* in our current system. When I was told I would be teaching the class, I made it my goal that all of my students would feel empowered and capable, despite what any test is telling them.

Instead of following the suggested curriculum offered by the local community college, which focused primarily on grammar and the parts of an English class that are farthest removed from joy, I wanted to provide opportunities for students to be excited to learn. Above any specific skill or piece of content knowledge, I wanted my students to be able to think critically and be exposed to multiple viewpoints, to be able to read texts to which they could relate, and to be celebrated for what they do know, instead of shamed for what they do not. Above all, I want students to leave my classroom feeling that they have a better understanding of what it means to be human, and how we can support each other in an interdependent world.

To this end, my favorite unit focused on studying emotion from multiple angles: how we can recognize emotion in ourselves, how we can identify emotion in pieces that we read, and how we can find deeper connection with others through this emotional awareness. I have often found the mandated social–emotional learning curriculum is not what high schoolers need. It is written more for the elementary level or tries to relate to kids in ways that feel inauthentic. In response, the unit I created uses Brené Brown's (2021) book *Atlas of the Heart* as a springboard. She argues that "the ability to name [an] emotion or experience is essential to being able to process it in a productive and healing way" (p. xxv). Each of her chapters focus on a different "set" of emotions, like "Places We Go When the Heart is Open." Students read chapters in groups and completed a dialectical journal, where they map their conversations with the text and each other. Then, we supplemented the ideas in that chapter by reading different types of texts – from songs, to poems, to essays, to articles. For example, after reading a chapter that discussed grief, we then read the autobiographical essay "Crying in H-Mart" that the author, Michelle Zauner, wrote about the death of her mother and the subsequent feeling of loss of her Korean heritage. Or, after we read about

stress, we read a non-fiction article about the way stress impacts the body and some science-based strategies for counteracting the damage.

We also began each class with a free-write where students selected an emotion and described an experience where they felt its impact on their body, mind, and behavior. Later, after we had read several chapters of *Atlas*, I gave them a menu of poems, and they worked to both analyze the poem and to connect it to one of the specific emotions Brown had defined for us. Students also created an "emotion playlist," where they selected songs and practiced close reading to explain how each song connects to an emotion of their choice (one from each chapter category). Ultimately, students worked toward writing a research paper where they chose an emotion they wanted to examine in depth, and again, researched its impact on the body, mind, and our long-term health. Along the way, we also practiced meditation, wrote poetry, and conversed about how we experience various emotions. Thus, students were doing deep and complex work with a heavy cognitive lift, but they didn't have to suffer through it.

After the unit, students shared that they felt they could better express not only how they felt in certain situations, but also had a clearer understanding of what was happening in their body when they experience an emotion, a deeper sense of empathy for other's emotions, and how they could potentially help others. They also expressed how reading and working together expanded their thinking and helped to keep them motivated.

As you can see from these responses, students were able to experience the different strands of joy-centered pedagogy: agency, community, and creativity. They had choice in what they wanted to learn more about, they worked in community with their peers to reach a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what they were learning, and they had multiple creative outlets to further connect with themselves, each other, and what it means to be human more broadly. And while these examples draw from my high school classroom, this intrinsically motivating approach could be used, for example, in an entry-level college course that introduces students to research. Creating a relevant "entry point" (Bowen & Watson, 2017) and allowing students space to engage and explore a topic (Tanner, 2010) joyfully optimizes learning at any level.

In essence, joy-centered pedagogy provides a forcefield against the fear and anxiety that permeates the K–12 school system. When I am sitting through a lockdown drill with my students, or in the middle of the grueling state testing season, I can remember why I keep coming back. I can choose joy. Of course, this does not mean that every moment of every class will be joyful. But if we set up the conditions for success, we can all experience those moments where the room feels electric.

As educators who are pushing for transformational change in the education system, we are often focused on how the current system negatively impacts students. Of course, this is important to consider. But I find that, often, we as

educators are expected to martyr ourselves and neglect our own well-being in the process, which is as equally problematic as the systems that are harming students in the first place. If teachers are unwell, there is no way that they can sustainably serve students. Thus, fighting fear and working toward agency, creativity and community in the classroom serves as a salve for both teachers and students alike, creating a mutualistic relationship of connection and care. Joy, like fear, is contagious; so, as educators, let us be mindful of which we are spreading.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- What are some "fear factors" in your current position?
- How do you tend to respond to this fear?
- How are these fear factors discussed in meetings and with other faculty members? What is in your control to adjust?
- If you teach at the college level, where do you see the legacy of the high school fear culture manifesting in your students?

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3

TRANSFORMING TRAUMA

The Joy of Student-Written Stand-Up Comedy

Eileen Kogl Camfield and Josiah Beharry

EILEEN:

After many long weeks of emergency remote instruction, teaching to a wall of blank screens, learning about the epidemic levels of post-pandemic student disconnection came as no surprise. On top of long-term illness and loss of life, COVID-19 left in its wake a staggering cohort of students who were depressed and disconnected (Flannery, 2023). What to do about it? Far from an abstract question, I was determined to deliver an antidote – to design a course where the core learning outcomes would be for students to emerge feeling more connected and courageous. If the pandemic had robbed them of agency (Ajjawi et al., 2022), I intended to provide empowerment.

I didn't have to look too far to start thinking about the source of my own succor during the many months of lockdown: stand-up comedy. Be it Jim Gaffigan's voicework, Anthony Jeselnik's deadpan humor, Michelle Wolfe's biting social commentary, Taylor Tomlinson's self-mockery, or Hannah Gadsby's boundary-pushing truth-telling, each had offered me a brief escape from gloom. Could they do the same for college students?

I have the good fortune of being a writing teacher. This means I have a fair amount of latitude in terms of course structure, just so long as students are writing. But, to get them to do the kind of *healing* writing I hoped for, I needed to do some radical work.

'Hacking' Teaching Traditions and a Genre

When many people think about rhetoric (if they think about rhetoric at all), they picture ancient Roman orators or maybe modern-day political spin doctors. In

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-3

either case, they are thinking about the art of persuasive speech. Why not 'hack' the genre and teach a rhetoric class about how to persuade people to laugh? My use of that verb was intentional: in computer parlance, 'hacking' refers to breaking a code so it can be rewritten. If I hijacked a traditional trope and made it an opportunity for students to tell their stories, I anticipated not just joyful learning experiences, but a space in which students could claim their agency. Once that seed was planted in my mind, it just kept growing. However, I also knew that standing up in front of a class not just to share their lived experiences but to also try to make them funny, would require opening themselves vulnerably. I needed to help them feel both brave and safe, and that required careful and radical restructuring, based on trust and compassion.

Students First: Not Theory

First, because I knew student bandwidth (Verschelden, 2017) was maxed out, they were already experiencing tremendous cognitive and affective loads, and that the course itself necessitated risk-taking that would add to their loads, I decided to *not* assign outside reading or excessive amounts of homework. It's interesting to note that in conversation with various colleagues, in addition to getting names of comedians I 'had to share' with the class, I also got recommendations of lots of humor and performance theoreticians whose work could provide 'essential' foundations for students. While this was on par with the tendency of most professors to privilege academic scholarship, I rejected those suggestions in favor of focusing on the most relevant material likely to encourage student growth. Students were experts in their own lives, and that was enough. However, I did provide brief 'mini lectures' where I talked about the reasons behind my choices, some historical context of stand-up in the US, and the power of laughter to reduce the stress-hormone cortisol. The main work of the class would be watching recordings of stand-up comedians, analyzing the moves the professionals made, crafting their own scripts, and performing them for small groups and later to the whole class. I emphasize this as one of many instances where the Academy's insistence on using theory to ground student learning can undercut student exploration, engagement, and agency (and joy).

Labor-Based Grading

Grades are often anti-motivational, instilling fear and promoting a competitive sense of ranking (Stommel, 2023). Moreover, in this stand-up class, students would be receiving immediate feedback on their writing: did they make the audience laugh or not? They didn't need to worry about further layers of judgment and evaluation from me. So, they got credit for simply doing the work – of writing professional performance analyses, of composing their own comedic scripts, and

of writing metacognitive reflections about their own performances. In the end, they would receive evaluative grades based on final monologue performances and a final reflective paper. All of the 'upstream' work was intended to promote success on those final 'downstream' assignments.

From those who had never even watched stand-up before to those who had deep past experience in theater and performance, I also knew there would be tremendous variability in student abilities. Therefore, I explained on the first day of class that "everyone's 'A' will look different." I was deliberate in that phrasing, intending to signal the facts that I had no problem giving everyone an A and that I understood that there was a lot of invisible work that would be happening in the class. For the shy student, simply speaking in front of the group was a triumph. For the ham, crafting comedic gold was the challenge.

Also, on day one and in the course syllabus, I addressed the question that every student wants the answer to: Is this class hard? I was very clear:

> This will be one of the hardest classes you have ever taken. Not because there are a lot of hard concepts or tons of mindless busywork, but because you will have to mine your life for the narrative you want to shape into comedy. That necessitates self-awareness and courage, but you will not have to do it alone.

Modeling Vulnerability

It would not be enough to simply take the sting out of judgment by dampening worry over grades. I needed to model the kind of vulnerability that is the precursor to agency (Brown, 2012). And so, at key moments throughout the class, I participated alongside my students. In explaining basic joke structure, I told a joke I wrote about bird poop. (Yes, intentionally humanizing myself through gross humor.) In making space for creativity and play, I joined in class improv games. In asking for truth-telling, I performed a brief humorous monologue about growing up as a psychiatrist's daughter. In requesting them to provide feedback on classmates' monologues, I modeled how to offer productive asset-focused advice. In short, I did not ask of my students anything I was not willing to do myself. In so doing, I not only had an abstract *idea* of the work I was asking them to do, but I also *embodied* and *felt* it. Additionally, this allowed joyful limbic resonance (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000) to develop for all of us – not to suggest that every topic was light and joyful, but rather that speaking our stories together, being 'seen,' and recognizing shared experiences, uplifted us even in the face of somber topics.

Another essential aspect of making space for vulnerability was refraining from judgment. Students initially worried about speaking freely about their lived experiences, especially those experiences about which they felt shame. I was transparent about discussing this worry, assuring them that in my 30 years

of teaching I've 'heard it all' (and then naming a few both true and extreme examples) and that my job is "not to judge their lives but to empower their voices." My hope was that helping them feel they had at least one grown-up in their corner might make a difference.

Creating Community

Harking back to the core course learning outcome of 'feeling connection,' I knew that laughing together was a good start. However, I also knew that to create community, I need to de-center myself as the authority around which the class revolved. Thus, students spent a great deal of time in writing groups where they workshopped their material, getting feedback that would inform revised monologues. I anticipated that performing for a small group of their peers would feel much less intimidating than performing for the entire class. It was additionally exciting to see how much more natural peer review felt in the context of writing stand-up. While most writing teachers incorporate peer review in their classes, sometimes this feels artificial for students, and teachers need to spend a long time explaining the concept of 'writing for an audience.' The performative nature of stand-up inherently builds in audience. Further, because my students were drawing on a shared set of professional comedians, they directly referenced those in their feedback: "Remember how Ben Bailey did all those pauses as he built his jokes? Why don't you try doing that?" The class also organically came up with terms for their suggestions: "I think you need to 'funny it up.' Why don't you try an 'absurd analogy?'"

Instructor Unlearning

Thus far, I have described aspects of my class design that were intended to dispel the gloomy legacy of the pandemic and to promote creativity and joy. Much of this design was a disruption of components traditionally found in college classrooms: teacher as expert, grades as the primary form of feedback students receive, content driving curriculum. And, as I have a tendency toward rebelliousness, I had no problem with that disruption … until it came to one thing: student group work. There I ran into an internal pedagogical roadblock that I needed to dismantle. Because I knew students felt disconnected, I knew they needed to spend time together in writing groups. They needed me to step back. However, I initially experienced deep disquiet with relinquishing control.

I came to see that while I had always thought of myself as a student-centered teacher, I was actually an *entertaining* teacher. Students were engaged because I was charismatic, and that's a fairly surface-level form of engagement. Not unlike a carnival barker who invites folks to "step right up and ride the

merry-go-round," I offered my students the classroom equivalent of bright lights and calliope music, but my courses had really revolved around learning experiences I had carefully crafted. True student-centered courses are more open-ended, more analogous to a joy-ride in a convertible: pedal to the metal, top-down, destination unknown.

Orchestrating a joy-ride meant I had to take the backseat. I had to address inherent biases engrained over years of teaching. Beliefs like "if I am not witnessing the learning, it's not happening," and "if I don't monitor students in their groups, they'll just goof off." Unlearning these was a struggle. As an entertaining teacher, I had always received high ratings from students on course evaluations. In other words, I had been rewarded for *not* being as student-centered or deeply engaging as I could have been. To support my unlearning, I had to vigilantly adhere to my core course learning outcomes and remind myself that if students are going to develop courage and experience connection, I needed to let them be at the wheel.

Serendipity and Surprises

Teaching this class proved to be transformative *for me*, powerfully reshaping my ideas about pedagogy. I didn't need to provide extrinsic motivators when students had stories they wanted to tell. Without my prompting, they took covert notes on their roommates' bizarre behavior, rewrote their material (again and again), and watched other comedians (even arranging for a group trip to a local comedy club). I didn't need to build in formal assessment mechanisms to learn whether my outcomes were being met. I just needed to notice that one-third of the class regularly showed up *30-minutes* before class started to just hang-out together: they valued connection with one another. I just needed to observe that every student came to my office hours at least once to workshop material one-on-one: they were committed to honing their writing for optimal effect. I just had to sit back and watch as they gave pep talks and cheered each other on before their performances: they were a community. I just had to witness how many volunteered to perform publicly at a campus-sponsored arts event: they were courageous. In fact, one student told me this class was the first time she had "not felt *dis*couraged by failure:" that when a joke didn't get a laugh, she just had to keep workshopping it until it landed. I thought her word choice was apt and was struck by her tenacity and resilience, a form of courage we don't always acknowledge.

Perhaps some of the most unexpected and gratifying pieces of feedback I received came from a number of students who urged me to keep teaching the class: "I'm telling all my friends to sign up for this next year. Everyone should have this opportunity to process and heal." I was touched by such deep capacity for empathy – not just for one another's past experiences expressed during their routines but an empathy for abstract other future students.

All of this reveals the need for more joy in our classrooms and shows the way joy propagates other pro-social emotions. Learning does not have to hurt to be personally challenging and meaningfully rigorous. In addition to hard work, college students desperately need time to play well together.

However, along the way, there were some surprises. Despite the fact that I created the class as a space in which to process the months of lockdown and remote learning, very few students actually wrote about the pandemic. Instead, many of them shared *far more personal* experiences of trauma. They wrote jokes about experiencing sexual assault, bullying, parental expectations, racism, and homophobia. They riffed on self-harm, depression, hypocrisy, and drug use. So, what I thought might be a light class was actually a place where they both explored their darkest moments *and* came out on the other side controlling their own narratives. By opening the door to joy, their trauma did not have to define them.

In hindsight, it's easy to recognize some of the pedagogical theory woven into this course. These include the ideas that the best course outcomes should promote the 'right kind of rigor' (Gannon, 2020), should be loving, equitable, and humanistic as well as supported by artistic and creative inquiry (Rankine-Landers & Moreno, 2023). Further, learning should be playful (Mardell et al., 2023), feel good (brown, 2019), and promote beneficial pro-social emotions (Keltner, 2009). This course also aligns with work done on the role of relationships in deep learning (Bowen, 2021) and student success (Felton & Lambert, 2020). Not to mention supporting post-traumatic growth and healing (Siegel, 1999; Ginwright, 2018; Lee, 2019), finding joy in naming pain together (Gay, 2022).

However, theory is not really the point. The point is how the course affected students, and who better to share this perspective than a former student?

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JOSIAH:

Stand-Up as Survival Tool

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the newfound intrinsic sense of success I discovered through this class, I need to delve into the foundational elements that underpin this achievement. All too frequently, we find ourselves celebrating only at the finish line, overlooking the countless sacrifices, unwavering dedication, and rigorous practice required just to step onto the starting blocks. While the stand-up class served as both a finish line and a pivotal starting point, my journey in comedy had already begun much earlier. In fact, I wholeheartedly dedicated myself to this craft at the tender age of 3.

During my childhood, I endured both physical and emotional abuse at the hands of my father. The emotional abuse was marked by constant degradation

and reminders of my supposed stupidity. However, the physical abuse also seemed to depend on his unpredictable triggers and moods, leaving me and others as bewildered victims in its wake. This tumultuous upbringing made for an incredibly challenging journey through life, leaving me with a persistent sense of dread, insecurity, and instability. The scars of abuse ran deep, as I grew up internalizing self-hatred, believing I was the cause of the abuse, and feeling undeserving of anything better. In an effort to cope with the unbearable environment, I played the role of my family's personal stand-up comic. When apprehension escalated during fights, I would resort to performing silly routines to break the tension. Amid my parents' strained interactions, I would assume various personas and act out scenes to diffuse the angry atmosphere. Even during conflicts between my sister and mom, I would instinctively interject jokes to lighten the mood. The laughter that followed brought a temporary relief, as it meant another bad day or beating was temporarily avoided.

However, comedy itself didn't bring *me* the happiness or peace I was looking for at the time, but it did bring me the reward of the sound of other people's laughter. Being a comedian became a way for me to navigate the complexities of boyhood. Through humor, I could maintain a sense of control, temporarily escape the weight of my troubled reality, and maintain the façade of strength. This was not joy. However, to hear other people laugh after I slipped in my jokes was incredible because if I couldn't be happy myself, at least I was able to make other people feel good for a moment.

As a result, my capacity for humor became my armor, an outward expression of resilience – the kind we are all familiar with, where the low-income brown kid with multiple intersecting identities stands tall as the poster child, adorned in shiny armor, bravely confronting adversity. (The type of skin-deep resilience that gave Sandra Bullock and Hilary Swank their last blockbuster paycheck.) As a comic, I could project an image of being carefree, even if my internal reality was quite the opposite.

Rewarded at home, I also wore my comic mask at school, because it allowed me to better assimilate with my peers, with whom I often felt disconnected. In a predominantly White heteronormative school, 'fitting in' didn't come effortlessly. Therefore, by the age of 12, humor served two valuable purposes for me: it alleviated tension at home, and it helped me navigate and assimilate within the school's culture. This adaptive use of humor became an essential tool for navigating the complexities of the world around me.

Having internalized a fixed mindset narrative about myself, as I transitioned into adulthood, turning 18, nothing I did was ever good enough. I often joked about being a Type-A Virgo, but deep down, I just knew I could never attain the success everyone wanted for me. In part this was because I was keenly aware of the many hidden identities I contained: I was queer, undocumented, and had an undiagnosed learning disability. To top it off, the most visible aspect

of my identity, my gender, brought its own host of problems. As mentioned, success was an ever-moving goalpost that I, and many boys like me, couldn't access. Beneath the weight of societal expectations, we bore the burden of perfection, sculpting ourselves into flawless statues of brute composure, chiseled by the unforgiving demands of a world that deemed emotional vulnerability incompatible with true masculinity. Instead, we felt the constant drag of failure. For us, boyhood was often conflated with stoic manhood, and there seemed to be little space for us to explore *any* of our emotions freely and unapologetically but especially feelings of fragility, uncertainty, and failure. We were expected to mature quickly, put on a brave face, and always strive to represent our families in the best possible light. The pressure to bring success and honor to our families became an ingrained part of our identity, leaving little room for carefree play and vulnerability. Consequently, we carried the burden of unrealistic expectations, striving to prove our worth through academic achievements, career success, or other external accomplishments. Asking for help, even in academic spaces, was not something I could freely do. W. E. B. DuBois (1903) described a racial double-conscious, but for boys like me we are encouraged to maintain the opposite: a one-dimensional consciousness. *How do others perceive me?* Never inquiring how we feel inside.

Finding Pockets of Escape: Coping with Trauma

When we experience trauma, we often selectively focus on our external circumstances to obscure the reality we live in. This might involve excelling in school, surrounding ourselves with friends who make us feel safe, or fantasizing about a future free from trauma (filled with happiness and wealth). For me, all of these were true. We find pockets of the world to escape to in order to cope and remain stable. We think, "As long as we do well, as long as we reach this milestone, as long as we achieve this goal, we'll be fine." Yet, as we imagine overcoming trauma, it often feels like the goalpost keeps moving, making us realize that the marker has shifted further ahead just as we approach it.
This realization struck me profoundly before I joined Dr. Camfield's class.

In the fall of 2021, when everyone was returning from the global COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself retreating. After leaving home for college in 2019 as a freshman, I believed I would finally have the space to work on myself and heal. However, the goalpost kept moving, and when the pandemic hit, I had to move back home – the very place I was trying to escape, the place that hindered my healing. Despite this setback, I kept my head down, achieving all A's, making the honor roll, securing internships, and continuing to dream.

Then, in the summer of 2021, when I had the opportunity to return to school, my world came crashing down. I experienced severe mental and physical health challenges that prevented me from continuing my studies in the fall of 2021.

It was then that I realized no form of escape could shield me from what was inevitably coming.

No amount of humor could fix this situation. What was funny about having to take a semester off? I felt like a failure to myself and my family. I was supposed to be the strong one who held everything together – the gorilla glue that kept our family intact.

In an attempt to cope, I tried to ignore the problem by focusing on external factors. I internalized the belief that I would never escape my circumstances and that I was a failure. What I needed was a place to find my voice – not the voice silenced by trauma, but one that acknowledged it as a part of my experience and positively informed how I operated. This meant a shift from an internal (emotional/psychological) operating system that led me to feel ashamed to an internal operating system where I felt 'good enough.' I needed to use my voice for me, to reclaim it and let it speak for my true self.

In a relentless quest for external escapism, approval, and acceptance, I had neglected my own emotional well-being. My mindless pursuit of academic success in the form of straight-A's became both a driving force and a stumbling block, defining my sense of self-worth and impeding my ability to find true happiness. But, just like Professor Camfield had been rewarded by those stellar course evaluations, my studiousness was ultimately rewarded by college acceptance and a glowing academic record. However, I was still depressed. Fortunately, comedy class helped me challenge my fixed mindset about success and discover the joy of simply being my full self.

I realized that I had been performing comedy primarily for other people's identities, conforming to their expectations, and diffusing their animosity. It made me wonder, what would it look like to use humor for *my own needs*? How could I find my authentic voice and use comedy to express my own experiences and emotions? What would 'success' in doing that truly mean?

Comedy for Me

These questions sparked a profound introspection, prompting me to seek a deeper connection with my comedic craft and explore the possibility of using humor as a means of personal expression and healing, leading me to taking Professor Camfield's class (Writing 122). Although I was excited, I was also hesitant and wary. My tendency for overthinking and getting in my own head led me to an array of questions and imagined negative possible outcomes: *How can I be funny? What jokes should I tell? What if I am not funny? What does funny even look like?* I mean, I wasn't Richard Pryor or Eddie Murphy by any means; I was just some kid who told a couple of jokes that made a couple of people laugh. At that starting point, I thought comedy was simply entertainment and that no one would get my jokes.

Despite my worries, I entered class with and open mind, also with sweaty palms but definitely an open mind. Little did I know what was in store for me. They talk about 'transformative teaching,' but, as you will see, what happened over the course of the next five months really did completely change my life.

The Effect of Student Choice

This life-changing work started when we used joy-centered pedagogy as a form of social criticism to interrogate contemporary society, in particular with respect to perceived injustices and power relations in general. For me and my classmates (who were also predominantly first-gen, low-income, people of color), joy-centered pedagogy fostered an environment in which we could discuss social issues that were extremely important to us while also not being forced to relive the scariest and hardest aspects of these social issues. In other words, prior to this class, we simultaneously had too much experience with injustice and too little faith in ourselves to constructively discuss those experiences. In stand-up class, we developed a new kind of agency, as students were able to *choose* a 'Goldilocks' topic they personally gravitated toward, one that was not too triggering but also not empty, abstract, or meaningless.

Before this class, I had often been assigned specific topics to research, perhaps because my teachers wanted to make sure particular subjects got covered. And, while I suspect my teachers were trying to make their curriculum 'relevant,' I sometimes was given topics (like domestic abuse) that were too painful for me to objectively write a research paper on. Trauma-informed pedagogy might have prevented that kind of triggering, but in 'protecting me,' it might also have robbed me of agency.

Moreover, choosing our stand-up monologue topics still resulted in a beautiful compilation of different issues, topics, and stories. The teacher still got to assess how students analyzed issues, used different rhetorical approaches, expressed perspectives, demonstrated various writing devices, and modeled material from professional comics they took examples from.

Alternatively, some of my teachers just avoided hot-button issues. Perhaps they wanted to avoid controversy. However, it's a form of infantilization on the part of teachers who think that students aren't aware of (or care about) how they are being affected by real-world issues, like the climate crisis or health care access. Professor Camfield was the exception in that she both understood students are indeed being affected by social issues and that she was also not the authority who could tell us what was impacting our lives. All she did was ask us to somehow integrate something that mattered to us into our acts.

Professor Camfield could have taken the easy route, simply telling us to write some funny material and passing those who made her laugh. But she chose a different path, one that led to a powerful collective healing through joy-centered

pedagogy. We were given the freedom to choose the issues close to our hearts and share with the audience why these matters were vital to us, how they personally affected us. In this empowering twist of events, we became more than just students; we evolved into the teachers ourselves by the end of the year.

Modeling to Motivate

When I first stepped into that stand-up comedy class, I was a bundle of nerves and uncertainty, unsure of how to curate a compelling routine. Little did I know, crafting stand-up comedy was a lot more challenging than it seemed. In those early days, my initial routine involved sharing a mishap-filled first date experience. It had its entertaining moments, but it lacked a central theme and felt raunchy and crude without any real message or impact.

But as I continued to learn and grow in the world of comedy, I discovered that there was much more to it than just delivering jokes. Observing comedians like Hannah Gadsby, who bravely shared her experiences as a neurodivergent, queer individual, I realized that comedy could be a platform to share my own stories, too. It wasn't just about making people laugh; it was about crafting narratives, engaging with knowledge-production, and practicing introspection, just like any other good academic work. In other words, this class was incredibly intellectually challenging, but because the course was centered in joy, the rigor did not *hurt*.

With newfound inspiration, I delved into my own experiences as a queer person who had faced abuse, and slowly, a narrative began to take shape. As I crafted my story, jokes naturally found their place along the way. And something incredible happened – a message began to shine through, a powerful one about owning one's identity and being unapologetically true to oneself. This, more than any laughter, was joyful.

Comedy, I learned, was all about owning your persona and living in your truth, while also artfully shaping your stories to resonate with your audience. It became a space where I could share my journey, embrace my identity, and use humor to bring light to my struggles and triumphs. And people wanted to hear it! In the process, I had discovered the true power of comedy – not just as a means of laughter, but as a tool for connection, empathy, and understanding.

The Power of Positive Feedback

Professor Camfield's asset-focused feedback also helped alleviate anxiety and promote creativity. She always talked about what worked in a routine and pushed us to replicate our successes. Hers was also not the only opinion that mattered. Feedback from our writing groups and the classroom audience was equally valued. And yet, there, too, we were told to focus on the positive, even

if it was spotting a nascent joke and offering ideas for how to 'funny it up.' Further, we were actively encouraged to speak in our own authentic voices and languages – be they curse words or Spanglish. This had a liberating effect on me and illuminated the way grades can be paralyzing anti-motivators. By de-emphasizing grades and stating "everyone's A is going to be different because you all are starting from different places," Professor Camfield inspired us to gravitate toward topics we once felt too guilty or afraid to address. Many of us had no space at home to openly talk about 'taboo' topics like sexuality or drug use. Never before had we encountered an educator who fostered an environment where such discussions could authentically take place. Engaging in such vulnerable conversations allowed us to shed the weight of shame that had previously prevented us from openly addressing these topics.

Through this process, we practiced the Japanese art of *Kintsugi*, transforming our perceived brokenness into something beautiful, using humor as a healing force. In the practice of *Kintsugi*, something that is broken is not concealed or discarded. Instead, it is artfully repaired using gold, highlighting the very flaws and fractures that once marred it. The resulting piece becomes a testament to deep resilience, celebrating the beauty that arises from embracing imperfections. In this class, we learned that our experiences were not meant to be hidden away or forgotten, but rather to be acknowledged and cherished for the wisdom and strength they instilled within us. Like *Kintsugi*, we saw that our journey wasn't about being broken to begin with, but about transforming our pain into something uniquely beautiful and powerful.

For me this came through in my final monologue where I talked about being made fun of in school for having a feminine voice:

> Growing Up in elementary and middle school I was always bullied for my voice because people would say I talked like a girl, which honestly isn't that insulting cause the opposite of that is a man, and who the hell wants to talk like man?

I talked about being closeted:

> Before I was ready to come out, I would do all these things to prove I was straight. So, I had a 3-step plan of action. Gay people make really good P.R. people. "Like, of course we can help you cover your fifth baby Tristian Thompson, like, we've been hiding for years." Rule number one is gain control of the narrative. When I was a freshman in high school, I started this rumor that I liked this girl Abby, notice that *I* started the rumor. But no one believed me. Step number 2 is always have a response. So, my go-to line if someone asked me if I was gay, I would say, "No I'm not gay, I am

> Christian." True story, I thought that me saying I was Christian meant that I somehow hated the gays and couldn't be one myself. Step number 3: never let them see you cry or hurt. Because if you get overly defensive about it, then they say there's smoke there's fire.

Then I observed how all of this masking took my voice away. Taking a page out of Mike Birbiglia's (2017) playbook, a comedian we had studied in class, I ended on a serious note that reclaimed the pejorative that had been hurled at me:

> So, when people look at me now and say wow Josiah you are so open and proud of your identity and who you are and you're unapologetically gay, feminine, and queer. Where does that come from? And I say to them I am who I am because the 8-year-old me spent too many long nights begging God to fix me, days changing who I was, how I dressed, and how I talked, long nights crying because I believed I was going to hell for who I am... I am who I am today because that kid wasn't able to be the child he deserved to be – loved, accepted, and just fucking gay.

Community Matters

Many critics of Gen Z say we are selfish and narcissistically obsessed with our images. Others say we lack crucial 21st-century communication and creativity skills, a problem compounded by heightened social anxiety exacerbated during the pandemic and by the pervasive isolation stemming from our screen-dominated lives. This class revealed the opposite: how hungry we are for something different. By being asked to develop a heightened awareness of audience, we increased our capacity for empathy and collectively nurtured our emotional intelligence. As we critically analyzed comedic work, we found that laughter and joy were the unifying forces that bound us together as a community. In this environment of agency and empowerment, we were encouraged to embrace vulnerability, leading to authentic and meaningful engagement and participation. Together we fearlessly discussed the strategies employed by professional comedians to address issues that impacted them, drawing inspiration from their examples to craft our own narratives. Choosing writing groups that felt safe and comfortable for us, we navigated this creative journey with the support and camaraderie that truly made the process enriching and transformative.

Transformation and Legacy

A class this powerful does not just have a momentary impact. More than a year later, I am still in contact with members of my writing group and other peers

from stand-up class. As we all are now trying to navigate life after graduation, we continue to rave over this class. I recently shared with several of them that I was going to be writing this chapter and asked them to describe the legacy of joy-centered pedagogy. The dominant motif in everyone's comments: confidence. That particular brand of agency that allows for pro-social engagement with others in the world.

For me, in my professional journey, I have made it my mission to 'pay it forward' by promoting joy-centered pedagogy in every classroom setting I encounter. Having previously worked as a private tutor, I've witnessed firsthand how traditional teaching standards can hinder student development. Practices that were once considered 'normal' during my own schooling now stand out as highly problematic.

For instance, I've come to recognize how an emphasis on competition can be detrimental to deep learning, as it inherently creates division with only one winner prevailing. Alternatively, fostering collaboration allows for progress as a unified whole, where success is achieved only when the entire group crosses the finish line together.

The weight of grades has also become all too apparent to me. Students confide in me, expressing feelings of inadequacy or giving up because their grades seem to define them, disregarding the hard work they have invested just to reach the starting point. For some, merely showing up and trying is an accomplishment in itself. The one-size-fits-all approach to measuring success cultivates fear and shame, amplifying the challenges that students face.

Now, I firmly believe in the necessity of acknowledging the intersectionality of intelligence. Our identities are multifaceted, and so is our knowledge. It is crucial to make room for diverse wisdoms to flourish, embracing the unique strengths and perspectives that each student brings to the learning environment. By embracing joy-centered pedagogy, we can create spaces where all students can thrive and cultivate a genuine love for learning. Where everyone feels 'good enough' and capable of positively contributing to class.

Perhaps most importantly, I've come to know that operating from an awareness of trauma without an intersection with joy creates an echo chamber in which we can identify our source of suffering, but never start to heal and process it. We can create an armor around ourselves and seemingly appear resilient, but that means nothing if we do not heal from trauma and break the cycle and sources from which these toxic environments are created. We may appear to have 'snapped back' from adversity but what we've really learned to do is hide it. That is not true resilience because it rests on fear and shame. True healing requires self-assured authenticity, the capacity to say 'I deserve better.' This is a version of confidence that comes from 'doing the work,' wading through the trauma, embracing it as part of oneself, and not letting past circumstances define you.

Joy, Confidence, and Courage

As reflected in the comments from my classmates, a common theme that emerged from the stand-up class was a profound increase in confidence. This was not the false confidence of masculine bravado, the 'firm handshake' that hides internal doubts. By centering joy, eliminating the fear and shame surrounding our lived experiences, and reevaluating how success is measured, we learned to see our strengths and access them. This newfound self-assurance empowered many of us to tackle situations and opportunities we would have previously shied away from. At the end of this journey, the boy who once doubted his own ability to be academically successful has begun to blossom into a young man seeking healing and self-discovery. Through joyfully owning his identity and being unapologetically true to himself, he gradually came to realize that his worth and intelligence were not determined by others' perceptions. He discovered a capacity to dream big and apply for graduate school and subsequently seek a position on the state board of regents. And so, with determination, confidence, and a newfound sense of purpose, I am now set to embark on an exciting new chapter in my life. In August 2023, I started a Ph.D. program in Interdisciplinary Humanities. Envisioning myself as Dr. Josiah Beharry is something I would never have had the courage to aspire to had I not allowed joy into my heart. Founder of the positive psychology movement, psychologist Martin Seligman (2002) contends we need not concern ourselves too much with 'fixing' what we perceive as broken inside ourselves. Instead, he argues we must draw on our 'signature strengths' to find authentic happiness. This same logic pertains to joy: when we dwell in more joyful narratives about ourselves, we find our version of 'good enough.'

Thus, the true measure of success for the stand-up comedy class transcended mere grades and performances, although they were undeniably remarkable. Its profound success lay in the transformation of a group of college students into efficacious adults who embarked on a journey of healing, learning, and emotional growth within the safety of a support network. In this space, we discovered validation not only from our teacher and one another but, most importantly, from ourselves.

This pivotal experience illuminated a powerful truth: to create genuine success in our classrooms (and, in my case, to foster a diverse professoriate), we must harness the extraordinary force of joy to nurture student agency. By embracing joy-centered pedagogy, teachers empower students to interrogate their own narratives, discover their strengths, and unlock their potential to become architects of their own destinies. In this way we can pave the way for a generation of individuals, who might otherwise reside in the margins of society, to confidently navigate the complexities of life, and in doing so, become change agents for good.

Questions for Reader Reflection

1 What disciplinary course structures and 'traditional' content exist in your field that could be 'hacked' (reframed) to be more student-centered?
2 In what ways might success be measured differently in your course? (How might you design assignments, articulate expectations, and evaluate assignments to convey to students that they are 'good enough?' That the external performance of course outcomes is separate from their worth as human beings.)
3 How might you encourage the interplay between authentic resilience, confidence, and agency?
4 What do you need to unlearn or resist for these changes to happen? (Perhaps this might include interrogating your own sense of what it means to be a 'good enough' teacher.)
5 How might you create opportunities for open-ended/emergent outcomes and/or play in your classroom?

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4

CHOOSING JOY OVER DREAD

Bringing Art, Playfulness, and Agency to Learning

Tara Mason and Marisella Rodriguez

Introduction

The absence of joy in learning

Recall a time when you were a student learning in a classroom. What are you, as the student, doing in this memory? What is the instructor doing? How do you recall *feeling* in this moment? For many of us, recollections of our time as students surface feelings of test anxiety (Szpunar et al., 2013), exclusion (Steele & Aronson, 1995), and fears of inadequacy (Holden et al., 2024). These feelings are exacerbated for students from underrepresented and historically excluded communities. Learning is often viewed as a challenging task by design with instructors using terms like rigor or standards as justification for prioritizing higher-order learning over community building, active learning, or self-guided learning. The idea is that the harder one works to learn, the greater their understanding will be. Why does learning have to be hard?

Now, recall a time when you were learning as a child. We ask you again: what are you doing? What is your "instructor" (perhaps a parental figure, a sibling, or friend) doing? How do you recall feeling? Recollections of learning as children might inspire a different perception of what it means to learn and teach. Suddenly, learning as a process shifts to instances of playtime, laughter, and activity. Teaching morphs into a friendly face, someone standing or sitting at your eye level and sharing an experience with you. Learning may also feel creative and full of possibilities, with curiosity at the center. In this moment, you and your teacher may be feeling joyful. Why have we accepted the idea that to learn as (young) adults is to suffer when learning as children was playful?

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-4

Our motivation to engage with this line of inquiry stems from our experiences as students, educators, and mothers.

For Tara, learning piqued my curiosity and made me feel energized. Over time, I realized I had the privilege to enjoy these innovative contexts while other students did not. I began to wonder why our educational systems favor some students over others.

I recall feeling that learning felt like a competition when I was a student in K–12. As I grew older, I realized that, as a white person, I had been privileged to be on the "winning side" in these educational competitions because I seemed to be extended so many more opportunities for innovative learning experiences than my peers, such as project based learning. I did not fully understand the oppressive nature of the educational system while I was a student, but it was clear that it was unfair, especially as I noticed the differences in my educational experience versus the experience my peers with disabilities were experiencing. During my work as a K–12 teacher over 20 years, I witnessed how this competitive environment favored a small group of primarily white students while excluding other student groups. I observed barriers such as teacher bias, preventing certain students from educational opportunities like college preparation programs because students were assumed to not be collegebound, and punitive grading structures, causing students to internalize negative messages about their abilities and value in our school systems. I also noticed how student disability labels were used to limit educational opportunities and were disproportionately and exponentially affecting students of color.

Now, at the university level, I see these systems persist, echoing the unfairness I questioned as a young person. It's evident in higher education and my own children's K–12 experiences. I recognize that this work is not straightforward; it requires a systems thinking lens to uncover patterns and address the questions that arise. For instance, the solutions are not linear, i.e. this happened, and this thing happening before it is why. Instead, it is a complex set of systems and practices that favor some students while excluding others. It's important to be at the table, reveal these systems while answering these questions, and also notice who isn't at the table but should be there.

For Marisella, learning transformed into moments of dread during my time as a graduate student in my social science doctoral program.

Growing up, the classroom was a second home where I learned about my culture, history, and community. My teachers introduced me to new worlds and ways of thinking through the likes of Toni Morrison, James McBride, and Sandra Cisneros. It is through their writing that I learned the language to speak about my dual identity as a Mexican-American and honor the strength my great grandparents carried with them as they left their home and belongings for an unknown future. I am not certain I would have understood the gravity of their

journey without the collection of books my high school teacher would often bring to class from her home library.

I felt drawn to a profession in higher education because I wanted to offer this gift of knowledge and identity formation to other students of color. Then, as a graduate student, I was taught the meaning of "rigorous" learning: courses with 3-hour lectures and a culture of competition. I sat by as my white counterparts were achieving academic success through networking, rapport building, and other social practices that felt distinct from teaching and learning to me. I observed these colleagues leverage skills that I and other graduate students of color did not grow up learning, almost like a language barrier that presented in the form of posture, attitude, and brashness. Graduate school was a place where over six years I learned to feel excluded and "never-enough."

Now on the other side, I see my career shift toward educational development as an opportunity to identify and correct harm against students from historically underrepresented and excluded communities, to the best of my ability. I partner with educators to develop teaching strategies infused with equity-oriented principles and I help them to assess the impact of their efforts on student learning and experiences. Through this work, I have unlearned (some of) the practices ingrained in me during my time as a graduate student, many of which I can now identify as byproducts of white supremacy culture. I am grateful for the chance to explore what it means to experience and nurture joy in learning, particularly as I observe my one-year-old learn about the world around her every moment of her day.

In this chapter, we explore the misleading idea that learning demands hardship. We discuss how bringing joy back into the learning experience often requires unlearning and healing from traditional education. Ill-defined or poorly conceived notions of rigorous learning are oftentimes conflated with inaccessible or exclusionary learning practices, such as lengthy reading assignments, timed exams, and rigid attendance policies (Brooks & McGurk, 2022). These practices, and others, have contributed to the lack of joy in learning and cause harm for many students (Nieminen, 2023). hooks (2010) reminds us that "thinking is an action," (p. 9) and that "by the time most students enter college classrooms, they have come to dread thinking." What might it take to transform dread into joy? We offer a model of joyful learning that relies upon arts-based pedagogy (ABP) as a conduit for play, healing, and self-discovery in the learning process. ABP uses artistic expression and creative activities to help learners process and make meaning of learning concepts. The beauty of ABP is this: anyone can do it. As one approach to universal design for learning (UDL), ABP empowers learners to build on prior knowledge when learning new information by leveraging their own experiences and understanding of the world. To exemplify the relationship between joy, healing, and artistic expression, we present three cases that demonstrate effective learning in joyful moments particularly when a community

of learners come together around shared values of curiosity, authenticity, and self-discovery.

Arts-based pedagogy and UDL create joyful environments

Arts-based pedagogy (ABP)

ABP approaches use visual arts, performing arts, music, literature, and other creative mediums to foster critical thinking and facilitate emotional expression. Arts-based activities lead to deeper awareness and engagement due to their activation of multiple parts of the brain (Glass et al, 2013; Eisner, 2002). When we learn new ideas in a multisensory way, our brain creates multiple connections between neurons, which are like tiny communication hubs. These connections grow dendrites, branch-like structures that help neurons talk to each other better, making it easier for us to remember, integrate, and understand new information. In early research, Eisner (2002) noted a connection between learning through art-making and cognitive development, stating that knowledge and understanding cannot only be measured in what one can attach words to; instead, we need to have multisensory experiences to fully activate our brains for the ideas that cannot as easily be put into words (Eisner, 2002; Eisner & Day, 2004; Dewey, 1934).

Several research studies have examined how ABP developed deeper awareness and learning when enlisted in teaching. One example presented by Pauly et al. (2019) explained how teachers in training used dramatic play and reenactment to understand the philosophical underpinnings of culturally responsive teaching. Rieger et al. (2019) researched the effectiveness of using poetry, photo essays, and other multimedia artifacts to improve nursing educator outcomes in their upper-division nursing course. Wilson and Moffett (2017) used dance to explore the similarities and differences of racism between the United States and South Africa. In these examples, ABP aims to cultivate imagination, empathy, cultural responsiveness, and critical consciousness, offering alternative paths for self-expression and learning.

UDL and ABP share common goals

UDL and ABP share common goals of creating inclusive learning environments through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action (Rose, 2016; Cast, n.d.). They complement each other in several ways. UDL offers students multimodal materials and multiple pathways to connect and share their ideas (Cook & Rao, 2018). Similarly, ABP uses creative mediums like visual arts, music, drama, and dance, accommodating different learning modes and preferences.

UDL and ABP aim to remove barriers and create more opportunities to engage learners. This way of learning is in opposition to learners seeking "right answers" and also upends the notion of a "right answer" altogether (Cast, 2018). When there are so many diverging ways of thinking and seeing, students feel empowered with the recognition that there are multiple right answers (Rose, 2016). By integrating arts into teaching, educators can make learning experiences more playful, enjoyable, meaningful, and relevant to students. Creative activities stimulate curiosity, foster imagination, and encourage active participation, enhancing students' motivation and engagement with the material. This type of learning atmosphere can support students in unlearning traditional systems of education that force a single way of thinking and mislead them into believing that thinking is a passive process (hooks, 1994, 2010). Further, traditional systems of education prioritize and favor Western-focused and white supremacy-rooted ideas and histories, alienating students and eliminating any diverging perspective to those concepts and ideas (Merculieff & Roderick, 2013).

Community is a necessary ingredient for joy

Arts-based learning is a powerful pedagogical tool that enables educators to teach diverse student audiences with different needs and interests. Yet, we suggest, inclusive teaching practices alone are not guaranteed to foster joy. Our experiences as K–12 and higher education educators have led us to believe that a key ingredient to joyful learning is the ability to be in community with others. Note that community is not synonymous to "conversation" or "dialogue." Community invites us to extend ourselves beyond superficial interactions to surface – sometimes even excavate – the shared values, goals, and contexts that inform who we are as people (Birdsong, 2020; Felton & Lambert, 2020). ABP and UDL are well-suited for this work because they encourage holistic development, positioning student identity and experience at the core of a learning outcome. Art facilitates multisensory reflection on what students already know and where they have been, all while evaluating similarities and differences in others' experiences. This repeated practice of self-discovery and analysis advances students' empathy and awareness of the socio-political, -economic, and -cultural contexts that are so often invisible to us in the classroom. By integrating community into arts-based teaching, educators can foster intellectual growth and emotional intelligence, empathy, reduce barriers and bias, and promote advocacy.

In addition to self-discovery, experiencing arts-based learning as a small group or community of students can debunk preconceived notions and false disciplinary assumptions about what qualifies as credible sources of knowledge. Strict disciplinary standards for research, intellectual discussions, and academic success can stunt students' creativity and expression, particularly for students from underrepresented and excluded backgrounds (Merculieff & Roderick,

2013). Such standards signal to students that the knowledge and experiences they carry into the classroom are separate from their academic learning (Bayers & Camfield, 2018). Arts-based learning in community with others challenges this notion by creating space for students to communicate lessons learned from their lived experiences to their peers and instructor (Hammond, 2014). These kinds of culturally informed activities, especially when facilitated during class or treated as a course assignment, presuppose an academic value to student knowledge, signaling their worthiness for dialogue, analysis, and grounding for new ideas.

The utility of storytelling as a means of sense-making and information processing serves as an example of how arts-based activities in groups can upend disciplinary standards for learning and knowledge production. When students describe an artistic artifact and creative process to others, they are recollecting past experiences that have informed their work in a real-time demonstration of sense-making (Lewis, 2011). The result is simultaneously a presentation of a product of cognition and an exercise in cognitive processing (Lewis, 2011). For students and instructors serving as listeners, they are immersed in a moment of sense-making for themselves. Lewis (2011 p. 11) posits that "we come to know ourselves through the world and its stories [and] we come to know the world through our experiences and our stories." These moments of storytelling and listening invite both students and instructors to reflect on their experiences while exploring each other's diverse perspectives and strengthen their emotional intelligence when confronting each other's differences and backgrounds. The power of storytelling and community is timely: Wilkerson (2020) posits that we, as a society, are in need of radical empathy, a means for understanding each other's experiences and struggles and acknowledging the systemic inequalities and historical injustices that shape our experiences.

Joy in learning grows from access, opportunity, and community. It requires attention and care on the part of the instructor to facilitate an environment where students are invited to and affirmed for bringing their full selves to the classroom. Relatedly, instructors teaching with a joyful lens will need support to show up as their authentic selves as well, which may require campus Centers for Teaching and Learning and faculty wellness initiatives (McMurtrie, 2023). For joyful learning to exist, everyone in the classroom community needs to have the opportunity to feel joy. Anything less would be exclusionary and limit the healing potential joyful learning can have on past instances of harm in teaching and learning.

Using art to heal wounds in teaching and learning

For many of us to feel joy in learning and within our learning communities, we need to acknowledge and unlearn rigid academic structures that perpetuate

exclusionary behaviors and practices in learning (hooks, 1994). Dominant ways of teaching, such as standardized testing, lecturing, and curved grading, promote student perceptions of academic competition, discriminatory learning environments, and feelings of inadequacy (Feldman, 2019; Nieminen, 2023). Learners often have little experience outside of this challenging paradigm, and their voices and identities are likely buried under the pressure to academically perform or behave according to dominant standards of success. To facilitate healing, educators must strive toward a model of radical healing that positions learners' identities and experiences at the core of their learning experiences (Mason, 2022; Bayers & Camfield, 2018).

Radical healing is a scholar-activist term used to describe the relationship between critical consciousness, collective action, and justice. We look to the work of Ginwright (2016) and French et al. (2020) on the importance of empowering those in marginalized positions of power to actively resist and ultimately reshape oppressive structures. In doing so, those suffering from oppression can advance toward liberation through the process of healing (Ginwright, 2016). Healing is radical and restorative when acknowledging and actively resisting oppression as well as envisioning possibilities of freedom and wellness in the future (French et al., 2020). One connection between joyful pedagogy and radical healing is the role of community. The strength to actively counter oppressive practices and structures for sustained periods of resistance demands the emotional and social support of a community with shared experiences and values (French et al., 2020). In contrast, individual-level actions of self-knowledge and critical consciousness fall short of transformative change due to a limited scope of influence.

We suggest that ABP promotes radical healing, a necessary ingredient for joy in learning, by giving learners the tools to identify systems of oppression and hate while depicting memories, actions, or examples of justice and liberation. Artistic expression in learning has the potential to touch upon five key skills that make up radical healing: *critical consciousness, cultural authenticity and self-knowledge, strength and resistance, emotional and social support, and radical hope* (French et al., 2020). In the following paragraphs, we explore each skill in turn in the context of artistic expression and teaching and learning.

Critical consciousness asks that we reflect on the realities of our positions within a socio-political environment, which can surface deeply challenging questions about our actions, inner thought process, and the privileges and limitations of our day-to-day lives. It demands that we interrogate our identities and relationships to ourselves, others, and the spaces we embody. Arts-based learning, as a fluid form of communication, gives us the vehicle by which we can express difficult experiences and tough realizations that, on written text, may be too jarring to confront (Bell & Schatz, 2022). Centering our *cultural authenticity and self-knowledge* as a means of radical healing invites us to reject Western and dominant ways of thinking in favor of our ancestral roots and heritage.

By rejecting the worship of the written word, art provides an opportunity for learners to visually depict or evoke emotions, feelings, and thoughts that may otherwise would be uninvited in learning spaces, if not actively discouraged. What emerges from art is our identity, aspects of which are often invisible, excluded, or overlooked. Cultivating the *strength to resist* oppression indicates a community's "commitment to living joy-filled lives despite a critical awareness of racial trauma and oppression" (French et al., 2020, Strength and Resistance section). Art is a powerful tool to both cultivate and sustain resistance movements through the power of protest symbols, such as the raised fist in recognition of the Black Panther Party and, later, the Black Lives Matter Movement. *Emotional and social support* is a critical component of radical healing because it names the importance of feeling a sense of belonging to one's ethnic group. It signals a return to or strengthening of one's cultural values. Art-based learning is a method for fostering community and promoting communication across communities to help us recognize and affirm similarities and differences (Bell & Schatz, 2022). The creation of art can be both an individual and collective activity. Yet, more importantly, the sharing and discussing of art serves to bring people together by creating a shared language or symbolism when speaking across varied perspectives that honors each other's vulnerability and openness for expressing themselves. Finally, radical healing requires the capacity to envision a just future for our community. *Hope* sustains resistance and, for a community facing oppression, is a radical act "because it transcends one's ability to envision and understand what the future holds" (French et al., 2020, Critical Consciousness section). Artistic expression can cultivate radical hope because if we cannot think it or say it, we may be able to draw it. Art is a means of expressing what we do not know yet and may not have the words to express.

To practice radical healing and invite joy into learning, instructors and learners will need to explore new learning methods together, which may feel uncomfortable. The traditional education model conceives of rigorous learning as challenging and serious, while "playful" learning is leisurely or undemanding. This false dichotomy must be refuted, as play is essential for cognitive, emotional, and social development. Play can also facilitate shared knowledge-making when instructors restore students' innate ability and will to think of what is most significant about an idea, concept, or happening (hooks, 1994). In contrast, when instructors are the sole authority on knowledge, learners may feel compelled to mirror their ideas or disengage entirely if they disagree, fearing a low grade.

Many of us, including our students, may carry trauma or negative memories from previous educational experiences. These experiences can hinder a learner's ability to experience joy or be innovative in their learning. Student resistance to joyful pedagogy can surprise us: learners insisting on being told "how to do it" or feeling frustrated when instructors allow for ambiguity. They are used to a traditional educational model where there is a right and a wrong answer. Healing

from these experiences requires supportive learning environments where learners feel valued, respected, and empowered to explore and grow without fear of judgment or failure. Once this new learning paradigm is introduced, it is crucial to reassure students that they can explore free from negative consequences. Restoring joy in learning requires unlearning the fear of failure and reframing failure as an opportunity for learning, experimentation, and healing.

Common missteps and suggested strategies to find our way

A common misstep in fostering joyful learning experiences is not dedicating enough time to building community and reflecting together. Birdsong's *How We Show Up* (2020) challenges the traditional "American Dream" narrative, highlighting how it fosters isolation despite material success. Birdsong argues that true fulfillment comes from embracing interconnectedness and interdependence, countering societal norms prioritizing individualism (2020). This fragmentation also occurs in educational contexts, necessitating that we unlearn traditional modes of learning. To cultivate more care, empathy, and community in our teaching environments, we need to create spaces that encourage vulnerability and generosity. A common misstep here is when we do not allow space to create community and allow for healing, unlearning, and reflection. Often, we feel that we need to rush and get onto the next activity in class. But instead, open, honest communication and mutual support among students and faculty are essential.

Moreover, promoting accountability by developing systems that reinforce trust and reliability within the community is crucial. Embracing diverse narratives that reflect the experiences of various cultures and communities, rather than focusing solely on individualism, helps create inclusive partnerships. hooks (2010) shares how, for several years she was made to believe that telling stories was not "hard science" but later shifted to believe stories are truer and they "...enchant and seduce because of their magical multidimensionality" (p. 50). These stories are counter to the practiced beliefs that people fragment and practice "rugged individualism" in order to thrive. The true story contrasts with that, it is the story that exemplifies strong, inclusive, and supportive partnerships in communities that explain how people thrive and feel whole (Birdsong, 2020), i.e. the true story is that no one *really* is successful only due to their own efforts. Another important component of community building is through intentional connection opportunities such as, peer mentoring, community service, and study groups, fosters trust among students. ABP can model this by encouraging individual interpretations of shared prompts. Lastly, recognizing and supporting collective well-being ensures that students can take the time they need and access ongoing support, especially during times of grief. By prioritizing these elements, we can create more interconnected and empathetic educational communities, enhancing the learning experience and overall well-being for both students and instructors.

Why do we keep misstepping?

It is easy to feel discouraged when reflecting on mistakes we may make in our teaching practice. We may find ourselves questioning why unkindness persists in our classrooms, and educational system more broadly. While no instructor intentionally wants to be unkind or subject students to harm, addressing each student's needs in a personalized way can feel overwhelming. The labor required to support and accommodate a classroom full of students – whether that is a class of 10 or 500 – is a non-trivial task. We can look to campus resources and student services offices for support; however, it is likely that the true source of inequality stems from the systemic barriers preventing us from adapting course and curricular plans to meet individual needs. Where does that leave us in our quest to promote joy and healing? Does that mean we should not do better? Perhaps we can look to Maya Angelou's (1997) wisdom by suggesting, "...now that we know better, do better."

While it is crucial for individual instructors to take action in our respective spheres of influence, transformative shifts in educational structures and practices demands that we stand in solidarity with each other. We must look toward our community of educators to collectively practice and model joyful learning. We must also extend our hearts and minds to the voices of students seeking refuge from disciplinary standards and norms. The responsibility may begin with the instructor; however, the ongoing work of joyful learning requires the attention and focus of every community member.

Case studies cultivating arts-based learning and UDL

In this next section, we offer a series of case studies to demonstrate ways to produce and, in some cases, sustain joy in teaching and learning. We highlight perspectives from K–12, higher education, and faculty training contexts. Each case offers a spotlight on the key ingredients discussed so far, including student-led creativity and art, community, and radical healing. While ABP and UDL learning environments are certainly not the only pathway toward joy, these cases serve to demystify the labor and complexities behind joy.

Case study #1: The ripple effect of heart-centered teaching

Lara is a professional development provider promoting harm-reduction pedagogy for K–12 teachers working with students impacted by trauma. In her workshop, Lara aims to model a safe, restorative environment for her teacher-learners, hoping they will create similar spaces for their students.

One participant, Sonya, a special education teacher with over 10 years of experience, has seen how trauma affects their students' ability and desire to learn. They recognize the compounded challenges from disabilities, race, and

low socio-economic status. Sonya learns to use arts-based activities to help students express their struggles, develop identity, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. A particularly impactful activity was a **self-portrait workshop project** adapted from Guzman (2020) where Sonya was instructed to create three portraits (1) how I see myself; (2) how others see me; (3) how I wish for others to see me. It was notable when they discussed the final one, how they wish others would see them, which conveyed their desire to be seen as both caring and a fierce ally who stands up for their students, even when it is uncomfortable to do so. They felt emotional, lamenting that it can be hard to keep teacher colleagues as friends when they assume their ally role to support one of their students.

Another participant, Tariq, teaches high school students who have failed grades, face learning and behavioral challenges, and are students of color. Tariq believes the school system disables his students, mirroring his own experiences in K–12. He wants to use UDL-framed ABP to restore his students' identities and help other teachers see their humanity. He starts his classes with mindfulness techniques and incorporates arts-based activities into STEM content. Tasked with helping students make up credits, he questions the value of rote learning and seeks to create engaging, joyful experiences.

Lara empathizes with Tariq's struggles, both as a teacher and for his students. He processes his trauma using a project called **"letting in and letting go,"** adapted from Guzman (2020) the activity is meant to be calming for anxiety by releasing hateful comments and actions aimed at his students. In this activity, Tariq lists what he wants to "let in" on one side of the paper and what he is "letting go" of on the other side. He tears the paper into two halves and shreds what he wants to "let go" into smaller pieces. As a way to document his process, Tariq photographed the "letting in" list alongside his shredded "letting go" list presenting the photograph on the overhead projector in the group discussion. What resonated with Tariq was how he calmed his own anxiety by telling the group that he was going to "let that shit go" as he described hateful and discriminatory experiences he endured while in the teachers' lounge at his school. After connecting emotionally with this activity, Tariq notes how much he wants to enhance his students' collective consciousness through art, music, poetry, and video, fostering joy and a heart-centered culture in his classroom.

Case study #2: Mapping our journeys to create a community of care

Elena is a fifth year Ph.D. candidate leading a professional development teaching program for graduate student instructors (GSIs). She partners with other GSI Fellows in the program to facilitate teaching workshops and one-on-one consultations for the GSI community. Through this work, Elena discovered that many GSIs struggle to find a sense of belonging in their roles as teachers and future faculty. Elena hopes to help mitigate these feelings by asking GSI Fellows

to complete a **journey map exercise** documenting how they became teachers. She asked them to consider: what life moments or milestones led you to teaching? Where in your journey have you struggled? Where have you experienced joy and felt affirmed? Fellows were asked to use these questions to guide the design of their maps, marking their progression with different cartography symbols, like mountains, forests, villages, and swamps.

When Xavier sat down to draw his map, he found himself thinking back to his childhood and how those early moments led him to care about education. He grew up in a small village in Columbia and spent most of his day riding on horseback to and from school. When Xavier was very young, his dad would ride with him, and Xavier remembers telling his dad everything he learned that day. Although his dad was likely bored to hear every detail, he always listened patiently and asked questions about what Xavier was looking forward to learning tomorrow. As Xavier reflected, he realized how these moments sparked a curiosity for learning at a young age. He drew a figure riding on horseback on a dirt road on his map and shared his awe for how far he has come – sitting with other PhD students talking about teaching in an air-conditioned room. This exercise fills Xavier with pride and accomplishment for the rest of the day.

Leila felt emotional hearing Xavier's story. His experience of navigating two worlds resonated with her as a second generation Iranian-American. When drawing her map, Leila recalled having to explain to her parents why she is still in school as an adult and often misses out on family dinners to write her dissertation proposal (which her parents refer to as "homework"). Leila thinks about ways to draw her feelings about her graduate program, a place she finds uninviting. Her advisor is pushing her to extend her research on public policy and human rights beyond Iranian borders, but Leila is not interested in political structures beyond her heritage home. Her coursework is faring even worse. Leila finds it difficult to share her perspective in class and hates that she must speak louder than her classmates, most of whom are white, to have her voice heard. On her map, Leila represents feelings of fatigue and burnout with storm clouds and isolation with a single flower surrounded by empty space on the page. Elena reaches out and holds Leila's hand once she is done sharing her map with the group.

Case study #3: Faculty development when teaching in difficult times

Sasha, a consultant for faculty development at a large research institution, recently addressed the impact of a tragic incident in Washington, DC that resulted in several deaths and destruction of a government building. Concerned about the community's well-being, Sasha gathered the faculty development team to discuss supporting faculty and students affected by the trauma. They want to empower the team to take action while remaining sensitive to the complexity

of the situation. The team, simultaneously grappling with their own emotions, needed to come together to process their feelings and prepare a teaching guide for faculty.

To achieve their goals, Sasha proposed a meeting focused first on restorative activities, following a three-step model: understanding the event, creating a non-judgmental space for discussion, and developing a well-being plan. Sasha recommended the **"Head, Heart, and Conscience" exercise** from *Facing History*, where participants consider their thoughts, feelings, and the broader impact of the crisis. Using a **carousel gallery walk** (Ahmadifar, Shangarfamm, & Marashi 2019) the team used post-it notes, butcher paper, and illustrations to explore their own emotions about the events unfolding with categories noted on the butcher paper, creating space for thoughts related to the "head, heart, and conscience" themes. The team shared their perspectives and reflections in each of these categories. After the discussion reached a comfortable pause, the team established norms for their next steps in this work, and a timeline for creating the teaching guide. Recognizing the emotional intensity, they scheduled extra Zoom check-ins to support each other and share moments of joy.

Because research indicates that students want instructors to address such incidents, Sasha and the team curated faculty resources emphasizing the importance of acknowledging current events. The team agreed that faculty must find ways to bring comfort and connection to the classroom, promoting safety, belonging, and joy even in difficult times. These qualities promote joy because they are safe and supportive. They build human connections in the most challenging situations. They recommended using the *Courageous Conversations* model (Social Equity Working Group Curriculum Committee, 2022), which includes norms such as staying engaged, speaking truth, experiencing discomfort, and accepting non-closure, to guide reflective writing or deep discussions about the incident. The team offers guidance on a variety of activities that faculty can use with students to address the anxiety and uncertainty caused by recent events. These activities can range from facilitating discussions about the events or providing space for quiet reflection activities at the beginning of class to providing students with time to process and transition into the learning environment.

Conclusion

We would like you to return to a similar line of inquiry that we began this chapter with, but instead of looking back, look toward the future: imagine a student learning in your classroom in the next five years. What is the student doing and what are you, as the instructor, doing? How do you hope this student is *feeling*? How do you hope to feel? As you reflect on this potential future, we hope words like *lightness*, *curiosity*, *expression*, and *creativity* come to mind. We hope that you and your student feel unburdened in your respective teaching

and learning and can acknowledge each other as having shared values and goals in the classroom.

As you return your focus to the present, we leave you with some questions for cultivating a joyful learning environment through ABP and UDL frameworks. We have found success with ABP as a strategy for facilitating self-discovery and finding common ground across groups of students and educators with diverse experiences, histories, and positions within higher education systems and cultures. More critically, we have learned that ABP, and creative expression more broadly, has the potential for helping those harmed by oppressive structures reclaim their voice and prepare a toolkit to subvert these realities. ABP reminds us that learning does not have to hurt. The opposite, in fact: learning can be restorative and joyful.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- Based on the case studies presented, what challenges do educators face today and how might these challenges be exacerbated by the various positionalities and professional roles represented?
- How might incorporating restorative and creative activities in teaching development programs help educators enhance their ability to meet student needs?
- Consider the impact of incorporating ABP in adult professional learning contexts, particularly in promoting reflection, empathy, and collective growth. How might the experience of professional learners differ from student learners, if at all?
- Consider how aspects such as cultural background, previous educational experiences, and personal challenges shape your perspectives, goals, and approach to learning. How might recognizing and exploring these influences contribute to your growth and development as a graduate student and future professional?

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5

JOYFUL JUSTICE

Alexandra Kogl

I didn't expect to find joy in the classroom when I started teaching political science 20 years ago. Satisfaction, yes; fulfillment, yes; but joy? We wrestle with heavy, painful topics—some of the worst of human behavior—but joy happens anyway in my classes. Over time I've come to see that not only is joy possible in the political science classroom, it may even be necessary. As a professor, I can't make joy happen for my students, but maybe there are ways I can open the door to joy, set a place at the table for it, and hope it graces us with its presence (Gay, 2022). Maybe opening the door to joy will make us more able to wrestle with those topics we want to understand, including horrific injustices such as genocide, slavery, and sexual violence. Maybe experiencing joy through wrestling with injustice together will help us understand justice. And maybe joy is also an end in itself. Joy may not always be adjacent to fun in my classes; it may sometimes be closer to solidarity, hope, flow, or even grief. But feeling connected, feeling that things might get better, realizing that not only can we tolerate each other but we can get good work done and enjoy each other's company doing it, are feelings that happen regularly in my classes. They happen not despite the painful topics, but because of how we wrestle with them. Feeling good in the course of tackling difficult topics is not hedonistic or self-indulgent. As Audre Lorde (2007) taught us, joy sets the standard for how all work should feel: meaningful and beautiful.

Grounding my teaching of heavy topics in compassion is key for opening the door to joy. When we practice compassion for victims of injustice in class, when I model compassion for those victims and for all my students, when students practice compassion for one another, and when I allow them to show me compassion, we all immediately experience embodied, pleasurable forms of

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-5

justice: the justice of feeling seen, that we matter, that we are equal members in a community, and that we have a future. Justice isn't merely an academic project; it's a democratic project that all of us work toward together as equals, and so I invite students to share their stories of justice and injustice. This involves a certain amount of complaint and commiseration, but as students listen to one another and develop agreements about what is just, they produce immediate, embodied knowledge of how justice feels. Spoiler: it feels good.

My students rarely seem to expect to feel good in a university classroom. If anything, they seem to expect discomfort. I teach at a regional comprehensive public university, where the students are overwhelmingly public school graduates and primarily white, but otherwise come from divergent backgrounds. Some of their parents are doctors, lawyers, or professors; more of them are custodians, hairdressers, or public school teachers. Many of these parents did not attend any college; a few didn't attend high school. A few are in prison. Some families moved to Iowa to escape political violence in Vietnam, Burma, Bosnia, the Congo, Sudan. But many more of my students come from small towns across the Midwest. Diversity in some of these towns means that there's both a Missouri Synod Lutheran church and an Evangelical Lutheran church. Some of the students from places like these have never interacted with a person of color, or refer to the "one Black family" in their hometown. Some students come from that "one Black family." Some come from places like Chicago, Minneapolis, and Des Moines, and a few have never spent time in a place as white as Cedar Falls, Iowa.

All this is to say that it's difficult and maybe pointless to generalize about who my students are—to substitute statistics for stories. It would be a mistake to assume that all my students have trauma in their background—intergenerational trauma, social trauma, or personal trauma—but it would be a bigger mistake to assume they do not have experience with suffering. If "trauma" is a clinical term, necessary in therapeutic settings and perhaps most useful when precisely defined, "suffering" is much broader. It's old-fashioned, I know, but bear with me; we have to deal with suffering before we can turn to joy.

This chapter tells a story about how joy comes about in speaking and thinking with others about justice in a political theory classroom. This story revolves around two heavy topics—(hetero)sexual violence and white supremacy—and suggests that there is an important relationship between compassion, justice, and joy. When we practice microcompassions in class, when we see and hear each other in certain ways, we experience moments of justice that are also, often, moments of joy.

Meeting Iphigenia's Gaze (Sexual Violence and Joy)

We begin with an ancient human sacrifice. It's a way to ease into a semester in which we'll talk about sexual violence, white supremacy, human trafficking, and

the Holocaust. We may also talk about the banning of gender-affirming care or the 1619 Project, depending on what the state legislature is up to. As everyone knows (wink), politics is no fun. Politics, and the study of politics, is not "the nursery," as Hannah Arendt put it; there is no snack break or nap time.[1] And my students don't expect fun or creature comforts; they expect gravitas, even evil. They expect ancient Greeks, with their cannibalism, incest, and human sacrifices.

In *The Oresteia*, Iphigenia is murdered by her father and uncle because the men want to go to war and must placate a capricious goddess to do so. Beginning with an ancient, semi-fictional victim eases my students into one of the most important tasks I will ask of them: practicing compassion. So we begin by reading these words (which I'm about to make you read, too), Aeschylus' description of the last moments of a teenage girl:

> Her pleading, her terrified cries of "Father!"
> her pure young life, counted for nothing
> with the chiefs, they were too hungry for war.
> Her father prayed to the gods, then ordered
> his men to raise her up over the altar,
> face down, like some sacrificial goat.
> She fell at his feet, clasping his robes,
> begging for mercy with heart-rending cries.
> He ordered her beautiful mouth to be gagged,
> to stifle a cry that would curse the House….
> Her eyes threw a last pitiful glance at her sacrificers,
> but like a figure in a painting,
> she could not call to them for help.

I ask my students, how does this description make you feel? Next, why does a play that's all about justice start with this scene? Why does the chorus—a group of men who were too old to fight in the Trojan War—pause the action for a flashback to an event that happened a decade ago? Why do they want us to feel sad in response to this girl's suffering? Students always get it. We have to care, they say. We want justice because we feel sad for people who experience injustice. There's no motivation for working for justice otherwise. We have to care, not necessarily in the sense of caring *for* Iphigenia, but in the sense of caring *about* her. At this point students usually bring up compassion: the decision not to look away from suffering. We have to meet Iphigenia's gaze before we can think about what justice for her might look like. If she's voiceless, and therefore we might find ourselves speaking *for* her, we have to feel *with* her first, not as rescuers but as equals, fellow human beings who, in some sense, share in her helplessness.

At this point, dear reader, you may be wondering what this gloomy essay is doing in a book about joy. What does suffering have to do with joy? What do brutal injustices have to do with joy? How does forcing students to confront suffering lead to joy? For me, after years of teaching this play, Aeschylus' words are still a meat-mallet to the soul. I'm still troubled by Iphigenia's eyes, by her forced silence. If we sit with the ancient words, if a professor or classmate reads them aloud, inescapably in class, we can't stay numb. We needn't act, but something in us responds. We feel something.

The opposite of joy isn't suffering; it's numbness. For students and teachers alike, numbing is a reasonable human response to the world we live in, and it's easier to numb than ever (to watch TV, shop, scroll, eat, drink, smoke … even all at once). We do sometimes experience compassion fatigue and need to avert our gaze. But it has always also been the case that we numb selectively, and therefore we empathize selectively. The most powerful members of any political community direct our empathy and attention toward some people and away from others. Now, with our lives so permeated by the internet, we still experience selective empathy, but with the added element that the internet's knack for eliciting both sentimentality and outrage functions to reassure us that "we" are good people who really do care. But selective empathy isn't justice, and it gets in the way of joy.

Before I can expect students to practice a more fair, inclusive, or just compassion, I have to consider their attitudes toward victims—including themselves. Sometimes we numb ourselves not because others' suffering is unbearable, but because our own is. It's hard to face our own pain if we have no name for what we've experienced, or we've been told to ignore it, or that it doesn't matter. Many forms of suffering and certainly political suffering (racism, antisemitism, islamophobia, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, sexism and misogyny, economic exploitation and poverty, and so on) involve an element of shame or humiliation (e.g. Bartky, 1990). If we experience these things, but doubt that others understand, we may not speak about our experience and feel isolated as a result. Rather than consistently responding to these feelings of shame, humiliation, and isolation with compassion, mainstream U.S. culture tends instead to dislike "victims": many of us victim-blame, self-blame rather than admit victimization, or hate a "victim mentality." We may turn away from our own suffering because at its core is helplessness. We may sense that being a victim means being "just the nobody" that a bad thing happened to, in Chanel Miller's phrase.[2] So, while suffering is not always about power, it often feels like it is, and sometimes it really is. Another way to say "helpless," after all, is "powerless." This is where suffering can bleed into injustice, and, conversely, compassion can grow into joyful justice.

For my students to think deeply with me about justice, we must first learn to meet the gaze of the suffering victim, which requires tolerating helplessness

in the face of pain: our own and others'. We want to look away from Iphigenia because we know her story's ending is unhappy, but we can't work toward justice without understanding injustice, and we can't understand injustice without facing the suffering it causes. If *The Oresteia* makes one clear claim about justice, it's that justice is more than a reaction, more than the immediate impulse to invert the balance of power, to get revenge, to substitute violence for helplessness. This implies a certain orientation toward time: patience (the ability to outlast the rage), plus the awareness that what is done cannot be undone, and therefore, our orientation in justice work has to be toward the future. But it also requires a certain orientation toward victims.

In *The Oresteia*, Iphigenia is, in some horrific sense, traded for her aunt Helen (who was abducted by Paris and taken to Troy). Iphigenia is not literally raped, but the possibility, the parallel between her and her aunt, hangs over her sacrifice. So, a backdrop of possible sexual violence is present in the class from the outset. Of course, on college campuses across the United States, this backdrop is always already present, albeit invisibly to some students while glaringly to others. For me, treating the systemic injustice often referred to as "rape culture" as a *political* concern is professionally and personally important, and I tell students this. In discussing these issues I take care to keep my affect fairly flat; I do not want students' focus to be on me, and I do not want my emotions to overwhelm or trigger theirs. I do want to model having our feelings but also holding them at arm's length, to create a space where we can *think* about the events that provoke the emotions, and also listen to others' stories. Perhaps because I tell them that I research sexual experiences that are adjacent to violence, but I approach the topics in a matter-of-fact way, more and more students have come out to me over the years as having experienced sexual violence, abuse, and unjust sexual power dynamics. For some it happened in childhood; for others, the previous weekend. They have told me their stories, sometimes in private and sometimes in front of entire classes, because they know that I take seriously the reality and the pervasive quality of both brutal and subtle forms of sexual domination. They trust me to meet their gaze.

Looking away from others makes it possible, in Audre Lorde's (2007) words, to "use each other as objects of satisfaction" (p. 59). Looking toward each other, by contrast, is charged with possibilities. Here is where, in my experience, things get interesting. The door cracks open a bit to let joy in. One semester, when we were beginning to read selections from Miller's victim impact statement, I was making introductory comments about sexual violence and offering suggestions about how to talk about it in class, including the suggestion that as you think and speak, assume that there are people in this room who are rape survivors. One student—I'll call him E—calmly told the class that he had been raped when he was 15. I was so grateful that E helped his non-survivor classmates see that sexual violence is not something that happens only to people far away, but to

people just like them (including boys and men). And it's not typically something that "ruins" people or destroys them forever. I can't remember everything I said in response, but I mirrored his matter-of-fact affect and thanked him for trusting us. I said something about how the trauma involved in sexual violence varies a lot, but it is always significant. For better or worse, I added "but people are resilient as fuck." As I recall, we had a good class discussion that day, but what was striking was the next few class meetings: the students were almost giddy. After we began talking about rape, and E told us his story, the classroom seemed filled with magical happy gas. E's words didn't make the topic more heavy, more oppressive; they lightened the atmosphere.

When we start to practice compassion, beginning with compassion for a "safe" other, such as an ancient, innocent teenage girl, we realize that being the victim of an injustice need not render that person invisible or abject. And if we ourselves feel victimized in some ways, we need not turn away from our own vulnerability. Pity is *not* the point; real compassion means we have set aside the safety of our numbness and our sense of superiority. We can survive the discomfort. I teach Miller's victim impact statement alongside Bryan Stevenson's (2015) *Just Mercy*, in which he claims that "each of us is more than the worst thing we've done." Most students are inclined toward agreeing with that statement. Then I ask them whether they can apply it to Brock Turner. Then I ask if Chanel Miller applied that idea to Turner, the man who left her unconscious behind a dumpster.[3] When we move from Iphigenia's story to Miller's, we begin thinking about a real member of our own political community, who meets not only her fellow citizens' gaze (that is, our gaze) but her perpetrator's as well.[4] Miller literally looked at the man who had raped her and told him he still had a future. Justice in her situation didn't imply vengeance but the demand that he take responsibility. In short, Miller's act demonstrates the relationship between compassion and justice: that self-compassion doesn't require vengeful retaliation, and that compassion for a perpetrator need not entail forgiveness. Moreover, if a victim can acknowledge a perpetrator's future, perhaps the justice *system* might, as well. For students this is a theoretical claim about justice, but it serves as a personal reminder as well: no matter what one has done, what mistakes one has made, one has a future, one can still choose to be responsible, to grow.

All this sounds heavy and sad, but what has been surprising to me about this process is how much joy these themes let in. In place of the anxious, zero-sum thinking that views justice as about meting out exactly the right measure of punishment, we begin to *feel* justice as restorative and inexhaustible, grounded in the realities of human fallibility, capacities for growth, and interdependence. The very fact that Miller's impact statement and (later) memoir became so popular hints at this possibility. An elated sense of connection grows out of the realization that you've been able to tell your story, and others have listened while

meeting your gaze. They have even told you their stories in turn. Hope grows out of shared recognition that your experience was unjust, shared vulnerability, and a shared need for justice. The shame, invisibility, isolation, or helpless rage one felt is softened by the feeling of being seen and restored into connection with one's fellow humans. The Combahee River Collective (1979) teaches us that "[t]o be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough"; sometimes it's also joyful. In contrast to a triggering experience (in which a seemingly small stimulus taps into a pressurized keg of emotion), compassionate recognition works as a calming, strengthening tonic. It's joyful even to participate in this process as a third party: to witness people restoring together a shared sense of goodness and rightness, in which the focus is not on raging at perpetrators but on naming injustice with clarity, and affirming solidarity between members of a community, even a community as fleeting as a class of students. For those who feel some guilt—whether valid guilt for real mistakes or not—the rejection of resentment and revenge and focus on a shared future may bring a kind of relief, even a little joy.

When those of us in relatively privileged positions think about injustice, or think about the traumas that some of our students have experienced, we want to be sensitive. Despite my coarse language, I strive to read students' emotions with care and treat them with a certain delicacy. "Delicacy" does not mean coddling; it's more like a surgeon's care to cut only in exactly the right ways. But the wrong kind of sensitivity risks interpellating our students as fragile and in need of our protection. It risks pity, with its implicit message of, "you are weak, but I am strong and will protect you. You may not understand, but I do." Pity substitutes a (seemingly) benign savior for a perpetrator but maintains the pitier's distance and supposed superiority. In pitying, we wear a tragic mask rather than meeting the other's gaze; behind that mask, we may be afraid of both their suffering and our own. Pitying our students implies that they are something that needs to be fixed, like a sick patient or a problem that needs to be solved. Many of them have suffered injustices, but our students are not problems. They are solutions.[5]

Taking a Knee (White Supremacy and Joy)

This claim that justice begins with compassion is radically egalitarian; it suggests justice isn't bestowed on the unlucky by their "betters" (presumed to have the philosophical and legal expertise to do so) but is a relation between members of a community who work together as equals, developing and affirming shared commitments. The insight applies in the classroom as well as the courtroom. When students experience even a taste of this kind of relation in the classroom, joy becomes possible.

Academia, however, is deeply hierarchical: many of us were hazed in graduate school and as young teacher-scholars, especially if we're outside the majority demographic in our field. Moreover, our formal position in relation to our students is that of elder or authority. The structure of academia, then, is hardly ideal for growing teachers with radically egalitarian instincts—much less habits of cultivating joy. Even if we consciously reject arbitrary hierarchy, we may bristle at any suggestion that we don't know everything. (Or we may over-correct by performing abject guilt.) And some of us face enough doubt about our expertise, including from some of our students, that we have to think very carefully about how to work with them in solidaristic or radically democratic ways. Regardless, depending on what we're teaching, we may need to think with care about that position of assumed expertise. This is an epistemological point about the nature of academic research—the research is never complete, we really can't know it all, and some of what we do "know" will be discarded within a few years—but more importantly, it's a point about how we relate to students, especially if we teach about topics that we approach from privileged positions. The white professor who teaches about white supremacy will be my example here,[6] but this goes for straight professors teaching queer topics, men teaching feminist topics, neurotypical folks teaching about neurodiversity, and so on. This will include many of us who teach general education or introductory level courses, especially as more institutions require content related to "diversity and inclusion."

Perhaps it goes without saying that if one has no background in an area, one might ask oneself what business one has teaching it. But teaching, after all, is not primarily about performing academic expertise; it is about building a relationship with students that enables their growth, with the assumption that their growth will look different from our own. What does that relationship look like for a white professor teaching about white supremacy to students of color and white students alike?

One approach that some white faculty take in teaching about white supremacy is to "stick to the research." I wonder, though, if what this approach gains in perceived safety, it loses in potential joy. And I wonder, whose safety is assured? What I may view at arm's length as "data," some of my students will feel as painful lived experience. At the same time, whose joy is sacrificed by this approach? Each of us experiences injustice from a different position in various, intersecting power structures, and none of us stands outside those structures. (This is a variation on Ibram Kendi's (2019) point that one can be racist or anti-racist, but not simply non-racist or neutral.) Professors who look like our European ancestors (read: white) and who are committed to teaching critically about white supremacy perhaps hope to temporarily step outside the racial caste system—outside ideology and into science—by sticking carefully to the texts

and data produced by scholars of color or about white supremacy. This may seem the safe choice, especially at a PWI like mine, in a state like Iowa, where state legislators are watching public educators closely lest we push our putative bias, and our administrators tell us to make sure our teaching of these issues is strictly in keeping with the research. Moreover, many of us (especially in the social sciences) are so thoroughly trained to stick to the text or stick to the data and are professionally rewarded for research but not emotionally engaged teaching, that the idea of bringing our own emotions into teaching about racial justice—much less letting students' emotions in—may seem like recklessly skating onto thin ice. Being unemotional seems so much safer for everybody.

The choice to make room for joy is not without risks. Making room for joy inevitably means making room for other emotions, too, and for conflict. But I remind myself of Cherríe Moraga's (1981) invitation: "I can't afford to be afraid of you, nor you of me. If it takes head-on collisions, let's do it: this polite timidity is killing us" (p. 34). Making room for joy risks collisions, but I try to accept Moraga's invitation, over and over again. I should mention at this point that I have tenure and white privilege. Each of us has to make their own strategic decisions about how to proceed based on their background, situation, and goals. For myself, I have decided to be direct with students about many aspects of my personal relationship to white supremacy. This approach serves as a reminder that whiteness is socially constructed, that the "unmarked" race is not without race, and that I am not a neutral "expert." I hope it deflates my authority a little bit, including the unjust authority conferred by my whiteness. I joke that I look like someone who'd find mayo too spicy, but I also share some of the more disturbing details of my family's history: I mention the ancestor who fought for the U.S. Army in the Dakota War of 1862, and the Austrian relative who was conscripted into the Nazi Army. Recently, a Lakota-Czech student referred to my mention of my ancestor when telling me about her psychology professor asking her students to brainstorm "stereotypes about Native Americans" (the intent, I gather, was to teach about schemas). The overwhelmingly white class proceeded to rattle off stereotypes. Realizing that her classmates didn't see her as Native, my student dryly said, "but I don't have long hair." She probably wouldn't have shared her story with me without my admission of my specific connection to white supremacy.

I also admit my agenda-setting power to students and admit that I strive to be anti-racist. I also remind the class (it doesn't go without saying) that I have no experience being a person of color. By no means am I trying to perform guilt in telling students these things; what I am trying to do is signal the honest humility of imperfect knowledge and suggest that we all have knowledge of white supremacy (and other injustices), but from different positions. Given the ways in which the knowledges of less-powerful persons are so often dismissed, denied, or simply invisible, this move helps build trust between myself and students. And trust, as we'll see, is an opening to joy.

Moreover, I don't pretend that reading these texts won't have emotional effects on myself and students. What would the consequences of such pretending be? As the person who assigns those texts, I am partly responsible for their emotional effects and have learned that feelings are (mostly) not distractions but sources of energy. One of the most passionate emails I've ever received from a student was about Hannah-Jones' (2019) original 1619 Project essay; the student was incensed that she'd never learned most of the historical material that essay covers. If I responded unemotionally to such responses in an effort at being suitably "academic," it would make the class drudgery for all. That said, I also carefully draw distinctions between emotions and intellectual judgments, suggesting that emotions give us information about what we value, but don't substitute for reliable information about reality. (I often share the Buddhist idea that our emotions are *real* but not necessarily *true*—accurate narratives about the world around us.) Admittedly, the most tense moment I've ever had in class was when a white student became angry at me for reserving the term "racism" for white supremacist prejudice, hate, and power, and refusing to call anti-white bigotry "racism" (thus disagreeing with his concerns about "reverse racism"). Opening the door to student emotions is not entirely safe. But in my experience, such reactions are almost as likely to happen when one merely cites straightforward statistics (about, say, mass incarceration and voting rights). The question isn't whether one takes risks in teaching about injustice, but which risks, and for what purposes. Again, the risks I can afford and choose to take may be different from yours; the point is to make choices deliberately. From experience it seems to me that one can't open the door to joy without opening the door to other feelings as well.

We shouldn't substitute passion for thinking. But we can assume that passion can motivate the kind of careful, sustained, patient thinking-with-others that justice work depends upon. Many academics associate passion with bias, and of course it can take that form. But my students read Lorde's (2007) "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," and, consciously or not, they practice one of my favorite ideas from her essay. In fact, they have shown me how to practice this idea. Lorde writes that the erotic provides

> the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.
>
> *(p. 56)*

It would be easy to speak of joy only in ecstatic terms, as if in joy we all flow together into the rainbow pulse of the cosmos. But, without dismissing our need for this kind of bliss, we might distinguish between it and joy, even if they're

close neighbors on a continuum. (Educators might need such a distinction if only because touching the rainbow pulse of the cosmos in our classrooms might be a tall order, and pretty hard to operationalize as an assessable outcome.) Joy, to me, is less sunshine and rainbows, and more the rich earth underfoot, bearing fruit. Joy is grounded, fertilized by death and shit, *and also* sweet and fragrant. Bliss, arguably, has no place in politics, as it involves the real or imagined dissolution of boundaries between self and other, or self and world. In bliss, we can temporarily forget injustice. Therefore, we need occasional bliss to thrive; it offers rest and recovery from conflict. But justice depends on boundaries, the recognition of both difference and interdependence, the recognition that power, like shit, happens, and our job is the work of making power democratic. If joy-centered pedagogy in courses dealing with injustice is not to become pablum, if it is not to deny difference and conflict, it has to be grounded; it has to be distinguished from bliss.

So, let's talk about police violence. Let's call that shit. (Purely for the sake of the metaphor, and not to imply it's inevitable or useful as fertilizer, like literal shit. It is neither inevitable nor useful.) Sometime around 2018, students and I were talking in class about the "take a knee" movement led by 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick. I wanted to discuss the way the movement's aims, as expressed by movement members themselves, were radically different from its aims as represented by its opponents. The former wanted to draw attention to police violence and consulted a retired Green Beret to decide how best to protest during the national anthem. Kneeling was the answer. (The humility of the gesture made it both a respectful and also tactical choice.) Opponents claimed that the movement expressed hatred for America and disrespect for military personnel and veterans. I wasn't aiming in class for a debate about police violence; the data are so unambiguous that there really can be no academic debate about the topic, even though there is a partisan one. I was aiming for a more academic conversation about power and communication, about threat perception and the positioning of Black people as anti-citizens, but I knew I was opening a box whose contents were unknown and possibly ugly.

One white student, J, spoke up about how she was troubled by the possibility that people were disrespecting the military. (I found myself gritting my teeth. It seemed she'd swallowed the "disrespect" rhetoric, hook, line, and sinker.) She told us about her father, a career serviceman. He spent months at a time away from home, and whenever he was gone, she wondered if he'd come home safely. J's voice broke and she teared up a little as she thought about her fears for her beloved father. (I found myself softening slightly; her emotion was real.) Then another student, L, who is Black, raised her hand. I knew her from a previous class and knew she didn't put up with nonsense (to be honest, I felt relieved that she was going to respond to J). L turned around in her seat so she could look directly at J and said something like,

> your dad risks his life for the country and so you worry about him. But I worry that if my brothers get pulled over, they might never come home again. We both want the same thing: we want the people we love to be safe.

I could have "protected" L by sticking to the texts and sticking to the data. I could have "protected" everyone from J's emotion by not giving her an opportunity to speak. But it would belittle L to imply that she needed my protection, and it would have taken from her an opportunity to excel and show the rest of us what excellence looks like. There are classes, especially in the social sciences, in which sticking to the data on issues such as police violence (or mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline, sexual violence, domestic abuse, and so on) is exactly what's needed. And there are times when it's essential for the professor to be very direct and very clear when *all* the research points unambiguously in one direction. In teaching and thinking about justice, though, the facts don't always speak for themselves. We have to make judgments, and our feelings matter, for better or worse. In her response to J, L taught me what justice feels like. It feels like grace. L showed that she heard J's real emotion, underlying the politics: the love of family. L didn't try to win the argument (although she absolutely did); she showed that she understood that she was stuck with J, metaphorically speaking, as we're all stuck with our fellow citizens. Because we're stuck with each other, finding real common ground is the only way to begin. L's comment to J didn't end white supremacy, but it laid the foundation for working together. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) writes that "[t]o hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition" (p. 41). This exercise in recognition can take the form of a microcompassion, or microjustice, as L showed us.[7] It was a version of the grace Miller showed Turner: not forgiveness but a future orientation that implies the question, "how are we going to live with each other?"

Compassion and justice are fractal or self-similar: a microcompassion is the same, albeit at a smaller scale, as Compassion; a microjustice is the same as Justice. If we never experience these things immediately, in the embodied presence of real other people, we'll be limited to merely intellectual commitments to abstractions. Those commitments are better than nothing. But if we experience the moment in which a fellow citizen looks into our eyes and offers us grace, teaching rather than critiquing, we'll never forget it. It will become our standard. As Lorde (2007) puts it,

> once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and our life pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning

> in our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.
>
> *(p. 57)*

Applying this to justice work, the joy we find in connection, in turning to look the other in the eye, to communicate that we see their humanity and need them to see ours, steers us in the right direction. We accept that we're stuck with this other, for whom we may or may not have high hopes, and our view is toward figuring out a future with them. We can't expect the whole process to be joyful, but for a moment it may be.

Many political theorists remind us that even "good" democratic politics isn't fun or comfortable, if only because in such politics our differences are not imagined or wished away, we don't join with others in ecstatic bliss, but instead we hash out the details of how to live together in a community, despite all being different from one another. But I can't help but notice the joy in my students when they witness an interaction like L and J's; I can't help but notice the joy in myself. I can't help but feel restored. Justice is beautiful human work. Witnessing even a tiny instance of it, or an early step in the process toward justice, can mean as much as witnessing a beautiful work of art.

It probably also needs to be said that what I see as a beautiful, joyful work may not be beautiful or joyful to everyone. I'm aware that there are students who would've called out J's "white woman's tears," and those who would've been glad to witness such calling out. Maybe L herself regretted calling J in, rather than calling her out. A perhaps even more ambiguous (but funnier) situation took place in class toward the end of one semester more recently. After reading Ijeoma Oluo's essay "Why You Can't Say the N-Word," M told the story of their white high school history teacher. (They warned me that they were about to say the n-word; I wasn't about to tell a Black student that they couldn't.) M told us that this teacher insisted on using the n-word in class even after they and other Black students asked him not to. His last name was, let's say, Schwarzenegger. (It was long and Germanic.) After trying one more time to get him to stop, and hearing one more time his defense of the pedagogical necessity of saying the n-word, M said to him with exaggerated resignation, "OK, Mr. Schwartze-n-word" (except M said the word). Our class exploded laughing, and so much heaviness evaporated and blew away. It occurred to me only later that there may have been students who didn't laugh, who were offended. I remembered specific students laughing: Black, Native, and white, but maybe there was someone I didn't notice, who stayed quiet, who felt unseen or mocked in that moment. So maybe joy isn't safe for everyone. It's certainly unpredictable. I couldn't have guessed that M would tell that specific story; I could just help define a place in which its telling made sense, and in which they felt there was a possibility of the joke landing.

"Yes" Has a Future

The most joyful (and the funniest) moments in my classes have all grown out of the words of students: words that I didn't know were coming. I can assign a text or film that I love, I can read passages with passion. I can make jokes. I can ask question after question after question to keep pushing more thinking, deeper thinking, uncomfortable thinking. I can ask students to work with each other and to be creative. But I can't make joy happen. What I can do is invite joy into the room by easing the students into compassionate responses to injustice and to each other. These tactics ask us to treat one another as true peers—fellow citizens in a community.

"Is it possible," adrienne maree brown (2019) asks, "for justice and pleasure to feel the same way in our collective body? Could we make justice and liberation the most pleasurable collective experiences we could have?" She tells us that in her facilitation work she prioritizes how people feel. "Is it a pleasure to be with each other? Does the agenda or space allow for aliveness, connection, and joy?" (p. 23) An embodied "no" is the only reasonable response to things that are "violent, offensive, unbearable," but it's oriented toward the past. "Yes! has a future. Witnessing an embodied yes in the body of a historically oppressed person is irresistible to me" (p. 24). To be clear, brown is writing in part about sex. But her approach, like Lorde's, is not narrowly sexual but erotic in a fuller sense: focused on that which makes us feel most alive, connected, and joyful. So, questions we educators might ask ourselves could include the following: When in my courses or classrooms do students have a chance to say "yes"? To feel good? To feel hopeful or alive? To feel relief from the sadness and anger of confronting injustice? To feel relief from the perennial struggle to function like well-oiled machines? To remember that they are alive, capable of growth and liberation? To imagine a future in which they are satisfied, secure, and free?

A skeptic might ask at this point, but what's the *use* of joy? Does it enable students to achieve your stated learning outcomes better? And can you *prove* it? To be honest, I haven't tried to measure my students' joy and do not plan to. (Please don't ask me to operationalize joy as a variable or measurable outcome!) I do know, though, that when students take pleasure in class, they will voluntarily attend it. (I know this because they tell me. Sometimes they say that when they're having a rough week, my class is the only one they attend). I do know that when they feel seen as "levelly human," they will tell their stories in class, and they will speak to me in private. I know that they remember their peers' stories more than they would Aristotle or Rawls' theories of justice. And I know it's not zero-sum; it's not the case that opening the door to joy means I can't teach Aristotle (I just might make fun of his belief that women had fewer teeth than men). Beyond these claims, though, I would return to Lorde's (2007) idea that in experiencing the joy of doing good work with others, we develop

higher standards for ourselves and for the world around us. Joy is not hedonism; it does not lead to self-indulgence. It can be an embodied (therefore memorable) sense of what good work feels like. I can't do better than Lorde (2007) in articulating what I most want for students, which is for them to accept the "grave responsibility…not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe" (p. 57).

Post-pandemic, the potential eros of the classroom is more apparent than ever. Being stuck in a room, in the embodied presence of others whose difference from yourself is inescapable, is terrifying for many students (and for some of us). But for our students to function as unmutilated humans, for we teachers to function as unmutilated humans, learning how to share embodied presence with others, *especially those who differ from ourselves*, is prerequisite. That learning needn't be drudgery. In classrooms in which we open the door to joy, we may decide there's nowhere else we'd rather be.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- Does the pressure to perform "expertise," "professionalism," or commitment to "rigor" get in the way of joy? What are the costs of this? Who pays these costs?
- Where can you create opportunities for "micro-compassions" in your classroom?
- Observe who speaks most in your classes, and who speaks least. Do the patterns of voice and voicelessness reproduce injustice? Do they invite joy?
- How can you make space for emotional reactions while admitting that feelings may be "real but not true"?
- How can you create opportunities in your classes for students to "say yes"; to feel good, relieved, hopeful, or alive?
- What are you afraid might happen in your classrooms if you open the door to joy? There are real risks of microaggressions as well as microcompassions; what's the plan for these? (Hint: you may not be able to avoid occasionally "taking sides.")

Notes

1 *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This idea is taken somewhat out of context, but Arendt reminds us that the political sphere is not one of coziness and relaxation.

2 *Know My Name*. Chanel Miller is the woman Brock Turner raped by a dumpster on Stanford University's campus in 2015. She agreed to publishing her victim impact statement online after Turner was sentenced to only six months in county jail for his crime. The statement went viral.

3 The section of the statement that went viral before Miller's name was public is as follows:

> You should never have done this to me. Secondly, you should never have made me fight so long to tell you, you should never have done this to me. But here we

> are. The damage is done, no one can undo it. And now we both have a choice. We can let this destroy us, I can remain angry and hurt and you can be in denial, or we can face it head on, I accept the pain, you accept the punishment, and we move on. Your life is not over, you have decades ahead to rewrite your story. The world is huge, it is so much bigger than Palo Alto and Stanford, and you will make a space for yourself in it where you can be useful and happy. But right now, you do not get to shrug your shoulders and be confused anymore….You have been convicted of violating me...Do not talk about the sad way your life was upturned because alcohol made you do bad things. Figure out how to take responsibility for your own conduct.
>
> (2019, 352–353)

4 In political theory, especially democratic theory, "citizen" has a political meaning, not a narrowly legal one. A citizen is a member of a democratic political community, empowered to participate as an equal in making decisions about justice and other political matters. Inclusive democratic citizenship is an ideal, not to be confused with unjust realities such as the violent policing of literal and metaphorical boundaries between citizen and non-citizen, and the de facto treatment of large groups of people as second class citizens, non-citizens, or anti-citizens.

5 This is a variation on a point Nikole Hannah-Jones makes about being Black in the US: "What if America understood, finally, in this 400th year, that we have never been the problem but the solution?" See also Ginwright (2018).

6 6. This essay can't thoroughly address questions around how white faculty ought best to teach themes related to white supremacy; I'm merely using my experience to frame examples of how joy can enter the classroom despite the painfulness of the topics addressed. I suggest such faculty consult Chayla Haynes' "The Susceptibility of Teaching to White Interests" as a starting point. See also Kelly Bauer and Kelly Clancy (2018).

7 Thoroughly exploring the relationship between recognition, compassion, and justice is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I explore it elsewhere (2024).

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6

THE JOY IS IN THE INCLUSIVE (TEACHING) JOURNEY

Lott Hill

"Joy" is not a word I would associate with my undergraduate experience. In college, I was taught – both directly and indirectly – that emotions like joy had little to no place in the higher education classroom, save for a few lit classes where emotion was discussed but relegated to the intellectual realm. To say that I struggled as a first-year student at a state university is an understatement. I arrived on campus with very little support as no one in my family had completed a four-year degree and very few people I knew (on or off campus) were supportive of my recent coming out as gay. I was not academically prepared and my feelings of marginalization and self-doubt were amplified by the lack of community and support on campus. I didn't find a place in athletics or Greek life, and I felt lost and confused in the large-enrollment lecture halls. I hated it. I didn't know what to do or how to get what I needed from the faculty. I felt like an imposter and that I didn't belong. During that joyless time, I sank lower and lower … until I dropped out. It seemed obvious to me that I was a bad student and that I didn't belong in a place like college.

Neither the professors nor students I encountered appeared to be experiencing joy in the classroom or to enjoy any part of the teaching and learning process. There seemed to be an unspoken consensus that the university was a space for learning, and learning did not include fun. Learning was supposed to be serious, boring, and often uncomfortable. I never heard anybody talk about positive-feeling emotions as they pertained to teaching and learning. Even today, few academics study joy or the impact it has on learning, and perhaps fewer see its potential as a part of the learning process or as relevant to teaching in their discipline. It wasn't until years later when I encountered scholars like bell hooks and Parker Palmer that I first read that joy could (and should) be experienced in

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-6

the classroom and that it could serve as a catalyst for both teachers and students alike. Yet, when I read Palmer's confession of "I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy" (1997, p. 14), I experienced a deeply instinctual resonance that inspired me to seek out ways to arrive at such moments of joy in the classrooms I was a part of.

What about you? When a class that you have been teaching ends, do you feel invigorated or exhausted? If I asked you to tell me the story of a singular moment of joy that you and students shared during the last class you taught, how long would it take you to think of one? How many colleagues do you personally know that seemed stressed, burnt out, frustrated, or angry about their interactions with students in the classes they teach?

In my current role supporting pedagogical and instructional development at a large public research institution, many of the faculty I work with are experiencing such stress. Two of the most persistent patterns that I have witnessed are a deep frustration with student behavior and the tendency toward student-blaming ("they don't read," "they don't study," "they don't come to office hours"). In the vast majority of cases, these same colleagues care deeply about the disciplines and subjects they teach, and they genuinely want their students to succeed. However, as very few college-level instructors ever receive formal training in how to teach a class, most of us replicate the same instructional practices we experienced as students without any reliable evidence that such practices are effective in the abstract – or, most importantly, work for the students who are enrolled in the classes we are teaching right now. It's no wonder that so many faculty are feeling frustrated and depleted. The absence of, or perhaps the repression of, emotion is an accepted facet of academia that students learn to navigate, if not simply endure, as evidenced in the unofficial motto of at least one esteemed university which students refer to as the place "where joy comes to die." And, over two decades of supporting thousands of faculty through instructional and pedagogical development on three campuses and consulting with dozens of others, very few faculty I've met seem to be experiencing much joy on campus or in their classrooms.

It doesn't have to be this way, and teaching doesn't have to be frustrating and exhausting. Yes, teaching and learning can – and dare I say, *should* – be a source of joy for students and teachers alike. If you are nodding along right now, then I would imagine that you have already given some thought to equitable and inclusive teaching practices, but if you can't remember the last time that you and your students experienced joy while you were teaching – or if joy has never been a part of your teaching experience – I'll go ahead and cut to the chase: get to know your students. Treat your students as if they are as important as the subject you teach and approach them with the same curiosity and engagement you hope they'll bring to your discipline. As bell hooks (1994) posits in *Teaching to Transgress*, "The professor must genuinely *value* everyone's presence" (p. 8).

This is, quite simply, what is meant by the term inclusive teaching. When we demonstrate genuine curiosity about our students – their backgrounds, their interests, their ideas – we naturally invite them into a space of reciprocal engagement and curiosity about us and the subjects we teach. This, then, is also the heart of effective teaching. With increasing evidence of the importance of relationships for teaching and learning, centering our students is not only one of the most effective teaching strategies, it has the potential to be an antidote for the anxiety, stress, and sense of distraction that seems to be overwhelming students on our campuses while also allowing us as faculty to tap into the potential our classrooms hold for personal and collective joy.

So how do we, as instructors, design our courses in such a way as to make space for joy by allowing our students to bring their full selves and learn, regardless of the personal challenges and doubts they may be experiencing? We must fully commit to sharing power with the students we teach. Equitable and inclusive teaching looks different for every class and every group of students. It requires instructors to both work on our own self-awareness and humility and to make a full commitment to our own learning with and from others in a process of trial and error. Inclusive teaching (like authentic learning) isn't always easy and doesn't result in all students experiencing joy all of the time. Like all worthwhile endeavors, inclusive teaching practices take more planning, time, and intention at first and get easier and more instinctual over time. And in the cycle of trial, error, learning, and correction, we must be curious and model curiosity about ourselves, the students, our teaching, and the discipline. As hooks (1994) reminds us, "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (p. 15). Centering joy necessitates instructors modeling vulnerability by explicitly acknowledging that feelings are a priority in order to build students' emotional efficacy in such a way that allows for caring *with* one another, as opposed to a more one-dimensional caring *for* them. This, then, is the "life-long learning" promise of joy as an equity practice: emotional agency to create human connection and to deepen and strengthen learning.

What is the relationship between classroom equity and joy? Inclusive approaches to teaching have been well-researched over the last decade, and many evidence-based practices have been documented and promoted, including relationship and community building, structure and flexibility, universal design for learning, and caring. However, typically none of these was modeled or formally taught to most of us who are teaching college today. So, if you are just getting started with these concepts, I'll point you to the work of José Antonio Bowen, Kelly A. Hogan, Viji Sathy, and Kimberly D. Tanner (see references), because here I wish to focus on the important yet underappreciated potential for joy in such practices. As Eileen Camfield asserts in Chapter 1 of this book, "Joy

may be the common denominator that explains why varied forms of effective pedagogical techniques actually work."

The potential for experiencing joy and processing a wide range of emotions is always present in inclusive strategies, and it shows up in both expected and unexpected ways in the classroom. As we get to know one another throughout the semester, the students and I feel joy when we discover that we have past experiences or current preferences that align. We experience joy during discussions because we've collaboratively built a community that allows for both belonging and respect for autonomy that encourages us to listen to each other with openness and humility. We experience joy when we have breakthroughs in understanding or master new skills because we've established a community of care and support. We acknowledge the joy when things are going smoothly, and perhaps most importantly, we consciously seek and hold on to moments of joy to sustain us through academic challenges and personal struggles. Because inclusive teaching allows students to have a voice, feel seen, and be in authentic relationships with each other, it fosters the belief that we are all in this together. Again, we care *with* and not only for each other.

Eventually, I made it back to college and graduate school (more on that below), and in my fourth year of teaching and at the end of my third semester of consciously integrating inclusive practices and structure, the students in one of my courses declared it "The Best Class Ever." In a photo taken on the last day, the students are smiling arm-in-arm – gathered together in a beautiful moment of celebration and accomplishment – genuinely beaming with joy. The course was not particularly easy, and the students had grappled with many challenging concepts alongside the backdrop of a contentious election year. I had not lowered the standards or expectations of the course, and as Camfield suggests in Chapter 1, I prioritized vigor while *not* promoting a notion of rigor that suggested learning couldn't be fun. I also centered everything around the learners with an emphasis on learning names, building relationships, and a clear and transparent structure that allowed for flexibility. That class was just the first of many "best class ever[s]," and though not every course I've taught has been met with such enthusiasm and appreciation, remaining committed to these same core inclusive practices has resulted in much joy while increasing student success across the board.

Modeling Curiosity before the First Day of Class

Right before that "best class ever" began (and every semester since), I contacted all students listed on the roster with an invitation to complete two pre-class assignments: a digital introduction to each other and a brief survey to help me understand some of their needs and perceptions as students. This can all easily be

set up and facilitated through the learning management system and allows us to begin interacting before we've even met. Modeling active curiosity in this way signals to students that they will be learning with and from each other and that I care about who they are as learners. Year-after-year I find the responses to these two activities to be both highly informative and joyful while sparking in me (and in many students, they report) an unexpected excitement and anticipation for the first day of class when we get to meet in person. On the first day, to embrace and sustain that curiosity and excitement, I don't go over the syllabus or course expectations and policies (we'll get to that later). Instead, I invite the students into structured activities that serve as conversational containers that allow them to interact with a handful of classmates while thinking about their assumptions, fears, hopes, and goals for the course. Beginning the course in this way and sustaining such structured small group interactions throughout the semester establishes space for students to exist together as humans, each with their own unique set of hopes, fears, and goals – BEFORE WE TALK ABOUT POLICIES AND REQUIREMENTS. Such a process allows for us to cultivate the classroom as the "radical space of possibility" that hooks (1994, p. 12) describes by inviting them to show up as they are, to see themselves in relation to each other, and to collaboratively build a learning environment that honors their authentic selves while supporting their academic success.

Joy Comes from Feeling Your Voice Matters

I also participate in these moments of community building (by modeling curiosity, emotional awareness and vulnerability) throughout the semester and seek opportunities to make personal connections to many of the things the students share ("I used to live in that city." "I love dogs too!" "That's also one of my favorite songs / bands / artists!"). And if you are reading this and thinking that this all sounds like a waste of time or a distraction from teaching your discipline, consider the years of research into how humans learn that José Antonio Bowen (2021) distills as: "What we do to foster relationships and make students feel welcome [is] more important for learning than any content we have to offer" (p. 177).

I'll return to the connection between relationships and learning below, but first I'd like to offer an observation about fostering environments where students are empowered and willing to speak up and engage in class discussions. Structured community building exercises (name games, getting to know you interviews, class playlists, etc.) are simple and effective ways to lay a foundation for learning by establishing rapport, building relationships and a sense of belonging, and modeling how we do not always have the "right" answer. They also give students "low stakes" practice talking and engaging in agreeable disagreement

during class. Instead of waiting until we ask a content-related question during a lecture or expect students to engage in disciplinary discussions and debates, we can "prime the pump" and ask them to share the answers to simple questions about what they like, care about, want to do, and see for themselves in the future. While answering such "personal" (and not overly intrusive) questions in structured discussions, they become both more comfortable with each other and you while gaining important experience speaking to the audience of the class. In other words, the sooner you get students talking (in a course, class, or given day), the more likely it is that they'll speak up and stay engaged throughout. As the axiom goes, the one who does the talking does the learning.

By centering students and student experience in this way, I've had the privilege of witnessing many profound breakthroughs and much joy. One instance that reinforced the efficacy of learner-centered instruction for me was with a student I'll call Teresa. In response to the pre-semester introductions and survey, Teresa emailed me directly to inform me of her "debilitating social anxiety" and to let me know that if asked to speak up in class, she would either "throw up or pass out." She thanked me for caring enough to ask students what they might need, and though she understood the class to include discussion, she insisted that she would never be able to speak in front of me or the other students. It was clear that she believed this to be true about herself. In my response to her, I thanked her for her honesty and vulnerability and affirmed how uncomfortable it can be to speak in front of others. I let her know that I was there to support her and was asking her to only do her best and try to engage whenever she felt she could while giving her explicit permission to leave the room without explanation whenever she felt uncomfortable or like she was going to "throw up or pass out." I also requested that if she did need to leave class that she take her time but return as soon as she felt she could. And I let her know that if she didn't come back, I hope she didn't mind if I checked in with her to make sure she was okay. For those readers who might think I was too "soft" on Theresa, consider how giving her the choice of what to do allowed her to not feel quite as powerless to the anxiety that had paralyzed her in previous classes. And how many times do you think she missed or left class during that semester? Zero. She not only had perfect attendance; my intentionality in building relationships, trust, and community through the containers of structured interactions allowed her to first speak with one or two other students, then four or five, and by the end of the semester, she confidently presented her work in front of the whole class. And, she recognized this transformation in her end-of-semester reflection: though she had seen herself as an outsider and that meeting new people had always been hard for her, our class had made it easy and fun for her to interact with others. Each new interactive step helped build her confidence toward not just presenting to her peers in our class, but in other classes as well. By demonstrating care and

support and focusing on students and their relationships with each other, each class meeting allowed enough enjoyment – enough joy – to incrementally build Teresa's confidence and skill set in ways that she continued to thrive though and beyond graduation.

It All Starts with Names

One of the most important and critical steps that you can take toward expressing care and fostering inclusion (and its byproduct joy) is by simply insisting that you and your students learn each other's names and how to pronounce them correctly. There are many simple, and often playful, ways to do this. Yet so many instructors, especially when teaching large classes, don't focus on learning names in a structured way during the first few classes. But, not doing so will undermine any other attempts you may be making to foster a sense of belonging in your course, and perhaps forgo the possibility of some students experiencing joy in your class, especially if you, the instructor, mispronounce a student's name without correction and a genuine attempt to get it right in the future. "What is often dismissed as one instructor's simple mistake is a hurtful act that has been repeated over and over in the students' life with the impact of saying 'you do not belong'" (Hogan & Sathy, 2022, p. 96). As Beverly Daniel Tatum writes in *Can We Talk about Race?* (2007)

> We know that how learners feel about the setting they are in, the respect they receive from the people around them, and their ability to trust their own thinking and experience, powerfully influence their concentration, their imagination, their effort, and their willingness to continue.
>
> *(p. 32)*

Students report that they feel "valued" and "more invested" "more accountable to come to class," "more comfortable seeking help from the instructor," and "that they felt as though they perform better in a course when their names are known by an instructor" (Cooper, 2017, p. 11).

It's not as important that you can remember every single student's name in a 500-seat lecture hall, but you can certainly spend a few minutes each week in class coaching students to introduce themselves in a structured way to five to six people whom they haven't yet talked to that day. You can also step away from the podium and join students in these brief moments of introduction and intentional community building. Yes, you are part of the learning community, and if you don't remember a student's name whenever you interact with them individually, model asking for, and then using their name during the interaction. Making and taking time to do this at the start of every class meeting opens a

space of engagement, curiosity, and joy that can, with intention, be sustained for the duration of the class. Alternatively, "Instructors can use name tents to call students by name and do not have to know student names in order for students to perceive that their names are known" (Cooper, 2017, p. 12). To balance the awkwardness of not remembering a student's name I use a humility-based approach by telling them at the beginning of the semester,

> If I can't remember your name when we're interacting with each other, I'm going to awkwardly reintroduce myself. It's important to me that I know your name and pronounce it correctly. So, if I'm not confident I can do that, I'm going to say "My name is Lott, what's your name again?" and I hope you'll forgive my forgetfulness because I really want to get it right!

This modeling is intentional; we all need to learn how to admit forgetfulness and to sometimes ask for information to be repeated. (We are human, after all.) And when the instructor does it, so will the students, especially if we remind them to do this with each other. Additionally, I urge faculty colleagues to practice this with each other, because if the faculty don't intentionally foster caring and belonging with each other, they will be far less likely to do so with their students. Even these reintroductions can be a source of enjoyment when we bridge the awkwardness of not remembering by embracing the joy that is felt when we acknowledge the mutuality of offering that most simple of kindnesses: making the effort to learn each other's name.

As a person who has the honor of working directly with faculty across the disciplines, I get to see most corners of the campuses on which I work. Traveling between buildings and to faculty offices, department meetings, and classrooms, I often am moving with and among groups of students between classes. Over the last 20 years, I've heard thousands of students commiserating about the classes they were just in and usually, I can't resist conducting my own "vox pop" poll by gently interjecting and asking who teaches the class they are talking about. I've not formally documented these exchanges, but through years of such interactions, here is what I observe: If students are complaining about the difficulty of a complex problem or a particular aspect of the discipline, at least some of them will remember the instructor's name. But if they were complaining about something, the teacher does or doesn't do ("He doesn't care if we come to class or not." or "She talks so fast and only the people in the first two rows ask questions." or "His lectures are so long."), then cue the awkward banter between the students while none of them can remember the name of the teacher. Whenever I hear that a student doesn't remember their teacher's name, it tells me the teacher hasn't taken the time to learn theirs.

Relationships, Joy, and Persistence

Insisting that you and your students all learn each other's names will allow for the single most important thing a teacher can focus on: relationships – yours with them and theirs with each other. And here is where the potential for learning and joy really emerges. There is nothing that instructors can do to foster the conditions for optimal learning that is more important than building relationships and establishing community. Randy Bass summarizes, "Human connection is the basis upon which learning takes place. Relationships are essential because there is no learning without relationships" (Felton & Lambert, 2020, p. 1). Bowen (2021) adds "Connection and Community are not just enhancements to health or education; they are fundamental preconditions for learning and human growth" (p. 171). Daniel J. Siegel's (1999) groundbreaking work in interpersonal neurobiology has revealed that "relationships not only shape what we remember, but how we remember and the very sense of self that remembers" (p. 341). While Peter Felton and Leo Lambert (2020) clarify, "Relationships should not occur by happenstance or only for some students" (p. 2), and "peer-to-peer, student-faculty, and student-staff relationships are the foundation of learning, belonging, and achieving in college" (p. 5).

A student I'll call "Mari" told me she had never been comfortable talking to her professors before she enrolled in a class I taught. Early in the semester she was reserved and withdrawn but through the containers of name games and structured community-building activities, and exposure to an intentionally curated set of readings and course materials representing a diversity of voices and cultures, she became more visibly engaged. After completing one of the assigned readings by Cristina Henríquez, Mari asked to speak with me after class and revealed that the text had been the first assignment from a professor that had been written by someone who she said was "like me" and "writes like I talk." Reading a text written by someone with a similar cultural background allowed Mari to feel the joy of validation, while others in the class experienced feelings of joy associated with encountering new perspectives. I was not, as "anti-DEI" critics might claim, shoving a diversity agenda down the students' throats; I was simply presenting them with disciplinary models that allowed them to each see themselves reflected in the materials I chose for the class. The experience seemed to open new possibilities for Mari, she began to speak up more in class, and a few weeks later she earned an A for a well-reasoned, well-written essay. I was surprised when she broke out in tears, telling me that "No one has ever told me that anything I wrote was good." Not wanting her to think that I was just being nice, I pointed out the strengths of her essay in order to connect the choices and effort she made to the grade she had earned. By the end of that chat, we were both in tears, tears of joy for her success as well as for the relief from the heartache

of the feelings of invisibility that she had experienced in other classrooms. The profound connection we felt as teacher and student was possible only because we had taken the time to get to know one another as humans before that moment. As the semester went on, Mari became a leader in class discussions and group projects until one day when I noticed that she kept her head down and spoke very little in class. As class ended, I asked if she could check in, and once again she was in tears. This time it was because she had been kicked out of her parent's home because they did not like who she was dating. Mari would have been far less likely to share such traumatic information with any of her other instructors, but she had learned through experience and moments of joy that I cared about her as a person. Because she felt like she was safe to share with me something that she was ashamed of, I was able to offer support and immediately connect her to the Dean of Students office where they were able to secure temporary housing so that she did not spend one night without shelter. She completed the semester with an A in my class, not because I changed my standards, but because I had intentionally structured an environment that allowed her to feel seen and the resulting joy motivated her to succeed.

Professor Paul Baker explained,

> My strongest feeling about teaching is that you must begin with the student. As a teacher you do not begin to teach, thinking of your own ego and what you know … the moments of the class must belong to the student – not the students, but to the very undivided student. You don't teach a class, you teach a student.
>
> *(Bain, 2004, p. 97)*

Lest you think I am trying to convince you that you must *like* all students, Bowen (2021) reassures us that "The point of relationships is not that I like you but that I believe in you and your ability to improve" (p. 246). He clarifies:

> In a way, relationships are a type of mindset intervention: my belief in your ability to grow and succeed can influence how you think about yourself and your potential. Even for students with a fixed mindset or a performance orientation, teacher approval is a clear win.
>
> *(p. 240)*

Felton and Lambert (2020) documented four principles of generative relationships between faculty and students: Every student must "experience genuine welcome and deep care," "be inspired to learn," "develop a web of significant relationships," and "explore questions of meaning and purpose" (p. 18). We foster such generative spaces for learning through inclusive instructional practices, including those I mentioned above. By getting to know

the students in our classes, we also are better able to support learners to discover relevance and meaning. As we do so, our choice of words, language, manners of speech, and the very ways we communicate begin to become more personal and meaningful to students.

Relationships, Learning, and "Relevance"

One valid complaint frustrated students often make about course content is that they "can't relate to it," that it does not "seem relevant" to their lives. This is code for the fact they are disengaged from the subject. Equitable and brain-based teaching tells us that we must always build from students' prior knowledge (Lovett et al., 2023). Here, too, relationships can help, as we as instructors can now free ourselves from the expectation that we must solely find the relevance of the content and make connections for our students. They will find them on their own (when invited) because they are invested in making our relationship work. When you care about someone, you try to see things from their perspective, even giving someone "the benefit of the doubt" and searching for explanations to make things make sense. Thus, the act of getting to know one another allows both students and teachers to access the neural networks that Daniel J. Siegel (1999) has indicated shape both what and how we learn and allow us to communicate in ways that support students in making connections and finding relevance for themselves – *with* you, not *from* you. This not only frees instructors from the burden of "keeping up with the young folks" and/or from the risks associated with assuming what may be relevant to them, it gives us a front row seat to the joy – the pure radiant joy – that students often experience when understanding a difficult concept or mastering a new skill for the first time.

Thus,

> the intellectual challenge of teaching involves becoming a student of your students, unlocking the wisdom in the room, and joining together on a journey of discovery and surprise. The ethical demand is to see each student as a 3-dimensional creature, much like yourself, and an unshakable faith in the irreducible and incalculable value of every human being.
>
> *(Ayers, 2010, p. 113)*

Where there is no conscious effort toward inclusion and equity, the potential for joy is diminished. Where there is no joy, the potential for learning is diminished. As many instructors have "shifted their teaching to be more compassionate, flexible, consistent, and predictable in response to the worldwide trauma and distress" (Marquart & Báez, 2021), now is an opportune time to lean in and more fully embrace and embody inclusive practices in our teaching, mentoring, and service – allowing ourselves and our students to be in healthy productive

relationship with each other and embrace and bask in the joy that results in our classrooms.

One important place to start is by acknowledging the inevitability of disagreement or even conflict in any authentic community composed of diverse individuals. It might surprise students if you reminded them that disagreement is healthy and is the birthplace of innovation. The trick is to disagree without fracturing the community. (A little like how a person can feel angry without losing their temper.) Unfortunately, our polarized society does not offer good modeling for how to "agreeably disagree" with one another. Therefore, it is incumbent on us as educators to teach that skill to our students (and perhaps to our colleagues). José Bowen and C. Edward Watson (2017) talk about the value of a "safe other" as an entry-point for conversation on potentially controversial topics. (Bowen's example is to start with talk about trucks – *what do you prefer to drive?* – before diving into conversation about racial profiling.) My colleague and I suggest using a "safe other" strategy as a way of practicing "agreeable disagreement" (Camfield & Hill, 2023). We use a particularly non-threatening scenario involving a group of kids playing ball, broken glasses, someone with good intentions, an instigator, a bystander, and a bully. The particular scenario doesn't matter; you could use a fairy tale or fable just as easily. Students are tasked with ranking the characters in the story from "best" to "worst." After deciding on their personal rankings, they then work in a small group (four to five students) to come to a shared group ranking. No one has any particular stake in the story, so it's safe to let one's personal values start to peek out. However, where it gets interesting is in the fact that the story has some significant gaps. Every reader will discover that they have filled in details and made assumptions. They generally feel delight when others point that out (especially if you have framed the activity as an opportunity to celebrate the joys of changing one's mind). They also have a richer sense of possibilities after listening to their classmates' ranking rationales. Usually there's a lot of laughter – because the story is silly but reveals so much. Discussion after the activity about assumptions (where do they come from?) and about the experience of hearing other people's perspectives reveals the gift of diversity. This is more than just performative lip service; students actually *feel* grateful to those who helped them see something different in the story. And here's the magic: starting the semester with a model for agreeable disagreement sets the tone for subsequent conversations about less "safe" topics – as opportunities for enlightenment, celebration, and community.

In Conclusion

Maybe if my professors in undergrad had implemented such inclusive practices I wouldn't have dropped out. I certainly would have kept on believing that I was

a "bad student" if I had not reconnected with Dr. Skinner, the one professor who had made an effort to get to know me while I was enrolled in his undergraduate class. The primary reason I felt like I could contact him for advice on how to go back to college was because he had made a point to learn my name and because his was the one class where I had felt a sense of joy and belonging during my first semester of college. And – a couple of years after I had dropped out of college – Dr. Skinner helped me realize that there were other options beyond the university and major I had left. He guided my thinking about what I wanted to do most and which institutions I could apply to in the future. It was in large part because of his care and support that I enrolled elsewhere and successfully earned a bachelor's degree. Flash forward to graduate school and my first real introduction to pedagogical theory and practice. For the first time I realized that my classroom struggles were not *only* the result of my lack of academic experience and preparation but also had something to do with the one-way transactional nature of instruction I had been exposed to. No one had ever shown me how to "do" college, no teacher had ever taken the time to discover what their students needed. I was left to fend for myself, and, all on my own, the more lonely and incapable I felt. Experiences like these compelled me, and so many other faculty who prioritize equity and inclusion in their courses, to try "to be the teachers we wished had engaged us when we were in college" (Hogan & Sathy, 2022, p. 24). And with increasing evidence that even more students are experiencing uncertainty, anxiety, and depression today, compassion, caring, and joy must be more central to college teaching than ever before. "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (hooks, 1994, p. 13). As Bowen (2021) reassures us, "When you can't give students more of the other things they need, you can still give them more caring" (p. 240).

Inclusive teaching centers our shared humanity and allows us to demonstrate care for our students and one another. We could all use more care, and feeling cared about increases our capacity to care for others. In our classrooms, we are able to more readily access and express authentic feelings of care through community building, relationship development, intentional structure, and modeling that allow us to recognize each other's humanity with humility and vulnerability. In a time and a world where so many students and faculty are experiencing extreme stress, anxiety, and depression, I urge us all to learn and commit to inclusive practices, not simply because they will enhance learning, improve retention and persistence, and lead to better outcomes in life for all students, but because these very same strategies are often a source of connection and joy, right now, in the moment of our classrooms. In other words, inclusive teaching is not only good for our students and their learning, it is a source of profound and motivating joy for faculty and students alike.

Questions for Reader Reflection

1 How and when might you implement structured activities for you and students to learn each other's names and get to know one another?
2 What structured inclusive strategies can you integrate to help you become a student of your students?
3 How can you help students recognize the value such inclusive strategies bring to their own personal learning and growth (Hint, see Hogan & Sathy, 2022)?

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7

STRUGGLING TOGETHER

How Activating Student Resilience Promotes Joyful Responses to Computer Coding Challenges

Taylor Fugere

Struggling Alone—The Author's Story

As I walked up to my student orientation group, I thought that I certainly must be in the wrong place. "Is this where the intended physics majors are supposed to go?" I asked. "Are you lost?" one young man snarled back. As the only girl in the group, I spent the rest of the orientation weekend feeling like the kid no one wanted on their dodgeball team—literally the odd one out, having to ask one of the reluctant pairs of boys if I could join them for an activity. I learned that day that I was unlike my peers in more ways than gender: I was not a member of a high school robotics team, and I had not been computer programming for years like they all had. "I bet you don't even code" one said, and he was right. I didn't code, and I wasn't even exactly sure what that meant. Certain that my dreams of being a scientist were gone forever, I promptly switched my major the first day of undergrad at the University of California, Berkeley.

My experience at freshman orientation was the first time I felt like I didn't belong in science or academia, but it would not be the last. Years later, after graduating with a social science degree and beginning a career in higher education administration, I applied for a master's degree at the university where I worked. Unfortunately, when I received the syllabi for the first semester of courses, my heart dropped upon reading one of my first classes was "Quantitative Analysis for Management" that I thought must include some element of computer coding. I had spent my entire academic life avoiding having to learn how to manipulate programming languages. Needing a master's degree to qualify for a promotion, I thought that maybe I could, at least, be able to scrape by if the requirement was just one coding class. "It's not even *real* coding," the professor said, trying to

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-7

reassure us on the first day. Determined to get my degree, I followed every coding exercise to the letter, attended every office hour, and did additional reading from our textbook to ensure I would pass. However, I was still struggling—clenching my fists with each error message, slamming my laptop shut when my code broke again and again. How was I supposed to learn anything when I kept hitting road blocks? Does everyone deal with this frustration? Does the code ever actually do what you want it to? Is it just too late for me to learn how to code? Were the boys at orientation right and I would have needed to start coding years ago?

What was even more frustrating than dealing with code, were the responses from friends when I asked for help. "It's a part of the process," they said, "breaking code is half the fun!" I did not find it fun, and I did not like this process. As someone with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, sitting for hours trying different solutions to the same problem was my worst nightmare. My neurodivergence has always made rejection especially crushing, and having to see near constant error messages telling me I was wrong was so discouraging. Every coding assignment involved tears and threats to my roommate about how I was going to quit grad school and run away to an island where the only Python I would have to deal with was a snake, rather than a programming language. Pounding my head against a wall, trying to get the code to obey me did not seem to be getting me anywhere. I blamed myself and as the words of the boys at orientation rattled around my head, I sighed. Maybe I truly am not cut out for this ….

I wish I had a thrilling anecdote to put here about how something clicked within me and I became an amazing programming genius. But alas, that's not what happened. I sucked at coding, but eventually … I sucked less. Once I saw the code as a puzzle that needed to be solved rather than my enemy, each syntax error became a little less devastating. My focus then became on improving my problem-solving skills. It can be hard to remember how it felt to not be good at something that now seems second nature. However, getting there should not have to be a tedious and painful journey.

Struggling Alone Is Antithetical to Joy

At all stages of the pipeline, diverse communities are underrepresented in technology fields. Women make up only 28% of all workers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM); Black and Latino populations each made up only 5% of the STEM workforce, despite being 12% and 14% of the overall population, respectively (National Science Foundation, 2020). Many proposed solutions to this inequity rely on a false premise of meritocracy—that underrepresented groups just need to work harder or be more like the other groups (Blair-Loy & Cech, 2022). This results in blaming women and communities of color for not being in the technology industry, spending immense resources on

recruiting them to a potentially exclusionary environment, and then ignoring their unique input and perspectives. Despite these tremendously time and resource consuming efforts, the number of women in computer science fields has gone down over the last 30 years (Cheryan, Master, and Metzloff, 2015), and the technology industry continues to employ communities of color at shockingly low rate (Russonello, 2021). Without utilizing a strengths-based approach (Saleebey, 1996) that views their identities and experiences as assets rather than barriers, diversity and inclusion efforts are not likely to result in a substantive change in technology products, services, and environments. Someone that does not feel welcome, valued, or included in the technology industry cannot contribute their ideas and innovations and certainly cannot experience joy while doing so.

In addition to missing out on the creativity and perspectives of these groups, the lack of inclusive technology environments has ramifications that echo throughout society due to the systemic nature of this problem (*Inclusion in Tech: How Diversity Benefits All Americans*, 116th Congress, 2019). Even if underrepresented scientists and engineers are able to gain entry into technology fields, group level norms affect their persistence and impact within the industry (Hewlett et al., 2008). Excluding the full range of humans from technology fields is not only morally abhorrent and an exacerbator of current inequities, it also limits the possibilities for innovation. Chetty et al. (2017) discusses the ways in which we as a society, by only uplifting a small percentage of potential innovators, have missed out on the "lost Einsteins" who have valuable ideas, but who have been historically excluded from social capital that would allow them to implement novel solutions. In order for their expertise and ideas to come to fruition, these innovators would need resources such as creative freedom and supervisory support (Amabile, 1998; Lempiälä & Vanharanta, 2018).

By utilizing a deficit framing that blames underrepresented groups for their own exclusion, we not only miss out on new and interesting ideas, but there are also societal ramifications that can harm everyone. The field of Science and Technology Studies discusses the far-reaching consequences of biased tech companies, such as racist search engines (Noble, 2018), data-mining on poor Americans to inform biased policies (Eubanks, 2018), and biased policing algorithms informed by past arrests (Benjamin, 2020). In other words, these algorithms picked up on and magnified the effects of biased practices until they impacted entire societies. In this way, these "algorithms of oppression" demonstrate some of the most critical characteristics of complex systems–feedback loops that self-reinforce and magnify existing trends (Meadows, 2008). Many of these shocking technological failures would be lessened or even non-existent if technology education and technology companies were supportive sites of belonging for all identities. And, given the foundational skill entry-point for these jobs, it all starts with coding.

Why We Can't Struggle Alone—the Role of Joy

Allowing students to struggle alone in the process of learning to code is not only detrimental to producing competent programmers, but it also contributes to systemic inequities in science and technology fields. Zaretta Hammond (2014) details how low-income students, students of color, and linguistically diverse students frequently receive less instruction in higher order thinking skills, resulting in more dependent learners (p. 12). She argues that dependent learners lose out on the cognitive benefits of "productive struggle" (Means & Knapp, 1991) when bias prevents diverse students from being appropriately challenged (Vygotsky, 1978). Dependent learners perform significantly worse on complex problem-solving tasks (Angeli, 2013), meaning they likely will struggle with skills that require significant problem solving such as coding. This is magnified by the effects of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) for demographics that are underrepresented in STEM including women (Cheryan et al, 2022), such as what I experienced at my own university orientation.

However, we do not have to learn to code alone, and it does not have to be a disheartening and discouraging process marked by frustration for the sake of rigor. Instead, culturally responsive coding can offer solutions rooted in community knowledge and collective problem solving (Scott, Sheridan, & Clark, 2015) to not only make content relatable and affirming, but also more likely to be joyful! Related to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (see Ladson-Billings, 1995), Culturally Responsive Computing (CRC), centers the lived experiences of participants and treats their knowledge as assets (Ashcraft, Eger, & Scott, 2017). Often studies that examine CRC connect cultural heritage lessons and STEM topics (Eglash, Gilbert, Taylor, & Geier, 2013), such as using indigenous textiles with built-in circuits to connect students' home experiences and school curriculum together (Kafai, Searle, Martinez & Brayboy, 2014). The integration of cultural references into the coding curriculum emphasizes that learners bring with them their own important and valuable community cultural wealth (Yosso & Solarzano, 2005). CRC also decenters a specific set of technological proficiencies and instead focuses on the metacognitive skills involved in coding (Scott, Aist, & Zhang, 2014).

CRC promotes motivation and engagement among groups that are underrepresented in the technology industry by using a strengths-based approach (Saleeby, 1996). This approach views student input as valuable and critical and is often the basis of CRC projects (Barton & Tan, 2017). By centering student interests in group coding projects, students are motivated to learn and achieve their shared goals (Davis & Fullerton, 2016) as well as open the door to topics that interest and excite learners. Engaging common interests can take the form of the collaborative act of "making" by designing and creating a meaningful project (Weiner, Lande, & Jordan, 2019) or through participatory design that

enables students to explore, develop, and create a game based on their own interests (Baradaran, Rahimi, & Kim, 2019). By making the process of learning to code more fun, interactive, and learner centered, there is more room for joyful exploration. A strengths-based approach to coding also requires that all learners be considered capable of engaging with all aspects of the process, such including learners in the process of developing and evaluating their own solutions to design challenges (Chiu et al., 2013) or requiring them to come up with creative solutions to technical problems under different design constraints (Worker & Mahacek, 2013). These empowering practices are inclusive for underrepresented groups but also strive to center joy and identity in a domain normally marked by exclusion.

Promoting the self-efficacy of students learning to code is also essential in adopting a strengths-based approach. Presuming learners are capable technologists is necessary for increasing self-efficacy—an individual's belief in their own capacity and abilities to attain specific goals (Bandura, 1982). This is especially important for underrepresented groups as the Expectancy Value Model of STEM Choice demonstrates that students' area of study is primarily based on how well the students think they will do in a given field (Eccles, 2005). This frequently means that qualified students of color choose not to pursue or persist in disciplines in which they are underrepresented (Anderson & Ward, 2014. Centering students as capable of learning how to code can also take the form of giving them more responsibility and autonomy, such as the opportunity to collaborate with industry professionals (Gruenbaum, 2014), encouraging them to become peer instructors (Sheridan, Clark, & Williams 2013), or by leading independent research projects (Sperling & Bencze, 2015). Treating learners as capable counters narratives of dependent learners and provides more opportunities for students to feel proud of themselves and their growth.

Coding practices rooted in individualism may further isolate diverse learners, who are more likely to persist in collaborative and collectivist learning environments. A major factor in whether students persist in STEM careers, including those that involve coding, is their social networks with others in the discipline (Pierrakos et al., 2009). This demonstrates that collaboration and engagement with peers and instructors may be helpful in promoting persistence. Additionally, first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately motivated by collaboration and interdependence, rather than students from more privileged backgrounds who lean toward independent motivations (Stephens et al., 2012). Moreover, collectivist societies value interdependence, thus making learners from collectivist backgrounds more likely to succeed in collaborative environments (Guiffrida, Kiyama, Waterman, & Museus, 2012). Such collectivist tendencies have been observed in African American and LatinX groups (Carson, 2009; Arevalo et al., 2016 within the US educational system. In this way, taking a collaborative approach when learning to

code may lead to increased social support and persistence for underrepresented groups.

By making coding a collaborative process, rooted in topics relevant to a broad range of potential programmers, we can promote resilience through joy, levity, and camaraderie in the face of challenging endeavors. In other words, while the development of resilience necessitates encounters with adversity, joyful experiences of community help make that adversity manageable. In the following case study, I will show how joy influenced the experiences of undergraduate students in their process of learning to code to offer a real-world example of how struggling together, rather than struggling alone, made learning more joyful and thus increased the likelihood historically underrepresented groups would persist.

Case Study: Struggling Together as a Pathway to Joy, Hope, and Belonging

This case study began as an exploration of how students experienced belonging and connection when joining the university during entirely remote instruction due to COVID-19. I expected to find students coalescing around shared interests, maybe favorite TV shows, movies or musical artists, which did occur. However, the richest relationships emerged from the peer relationships that involved overcoming something challenging together.

This IRB-approved study followed 36 first-year students with intended STEM majors that required at least some computer coding requirements in the Fall of 2020. Their university campus had introduced Microsoft Teams and Zoom as the primary interaction platforms for incoming students in groupings called "Dens," which is where I focused my observations initially. The "Dens" project was an intentional plan to help build student community and belonging in hopes of maintaining student persistence despite the barriers created by the pandemic and remote instruction. To further those aims, Zoom was utilized to host a weekly Friday Seminar, and Microsoft Teams was to serve as an informal student networking and discussion forum space within the Dens. I began the investigation with the Friday seminar classes. I attended several sessions of these seminar classes with instructor and student permission and took written field notes to record condensed and expanded accounts of practices and interactions for later analysis and interpretation (Spradley, 1980), which enabled me to capture crucial data in the absence of video recording of class sessions.

While the Friday seminars required attendance and occasional participation, I soon discovered that the Microsoft Teams platform was rarely used by the students. Students described the Teams platform as "clunky" and "rigid" and did not feel comfortable posting non-academic topics, such sardonic or critical memes, in a forum "controlled" by university staff. In this way, the University

could not mandate connection for incoming students—highly structuring joy did not work and did not create belonging for these isolated students.

The interviews revealed that the students preferred other platforms, such as Discord, Instagram, and Snapchat, for their interaction, which led me to re-direct observations to these spaces. Discord provided particularly fruitful data on student interactions online. Discord is a private server service that is primarily used by video game players to connect with one another via voice chat, file and image sharing, and to post about their shared interests in a forum-type environment. During the early stages of the pandemic, many students created servers specifically tailored to their interests and/or classes; for example, I conducted observations in a server called "ShoeGame" for discussing the hobby of collecting and selling high-value sneakers, as well as "Chem1" dedicated to a challenging intro-level course where students could seek and give homework help with one another. Additionally, each server would have multiple subpages dedicated to discussing specific interests such as anime or video games, as well as subpages dedicated to certain types of engagement, such as posting announcements or asking homework questions. The university did not support or endorse the use of this platform as it did not align with the university's IT security requirements; however, most students interviewed were active participants in one or more of these servers. I joined four public Discord servers with the permission of the server "hosts" (i.e., moderator/creator) and conducted observations of the ways in which participants were interacting with each other as well as page structures and features. Discord Server textual and visual data was also captured on video when several interview participants utilized the screen share function of Zoom over the course of their interview to provide examples. These student-built virtual communities created opportunities for "surface-level joy" and superficial connections based around shared interests leading to what I termed Incremental Belonging—or the sense of gradually experiencing belonging by finding points of connection over time.

In their interviews, students explained that in the absence of physical affordances for connection, such as complimenting someone's cool t-shirt or initiating small talk in line at the cafeteria, they relied on technological affordances to connect with others. In this case, students used virtual technology platforms in atypical ways to express themselves, such as through customizing their virtual profiles to demonstrate their uniqueness. One particularly salient example was of a member who described how he put a cardboard cutout of actor Danny DeVito in the background whenever he was on camera, so "*people will ask me about it and know I'm a funny guy*." These signals of self-expression enabled students to maintain their own discrete identities as well as find similarities between themselves and like-minded peers, creating opportunities for future conversations. However, much as virtual self-expression helped build a broader sense of belonging for students, they only built deeper relationships

and experienced deeper joy, with individuals in situations that required vulnerability.

Accordingly, participants described their best and strongest connections at the university as those that came from "struggling together" with known peers. For example, one participant said her best memory of her first year of college was "freaking out" about a test with her classmates in a study group. By working together to get over this challenge, she felt most like a "real college student" despite being hundreds of miles away from her classmates due to remote instruction. Tackling a challenge with others required reciprocated vulnerability, and experiencing joint success as a result validated each person's role as a part of the collective. An Intended Computer Science major I'll call Sofia stated that she did not get to know others in some of her easier classes because she had fewer reasons to talk to her peers; the challenging nature of the coding-heavy course pushed her to connect with others, seek advice and help others with problems, and thus establish shared experiences and feel connected to her peers in the process. Sofia explained that "*in those times of panic or like when someone needs help, you kind of just bond to survive through this pandemic class together*." This was especially evident when a group experienced confusion and unclear expectations—shared challenges forced them to communicate more frequently, which allowed them to learn about each other at an accelerated pace. "It sucks that we're stuck in our houses instead of being on campus, but at least we're all in the same boat and we can laugh about it," one participant explained. Similarly, a student, who previously felt very isolated as one of the only female students in her bioengineering major, said that connecting with peers in an Instagram group who helped her with debugging her code was crucial for her sense of belonging:

> *I feel pretty connected. I'm starting to make friends. And, like, last weekend, I asked for help on, like a [coding software] problem. And I was, and I just said, you know, "thank you for like, helping me." And then my peer responded. "Yeah, of course. That's what friends do". And I was like, like, "we're friends?" And I was like, so happy like that. Like, I kind of made friends. And I--we were friends? And I was like, " 'Oh, my God, I did it!"*

In addition to supporting connection, struggling together on projects promoted joyful responses to coding challenges in two important ways. First, it provides practical and emotional support for the process of problem solving. Second, it provides opportunities for levity and humor during a frustrating process, promoting resilience and collective problem solving. One participant, Melissa, describes how her group project partners supported her academic success in all these dimensions. She talked about practical help: "*Through the group project we did a lot. We were like, 'Want to see my solution?' We were really helping*

each other on that thing." Melissa's unexpected illness part way through the semester also demonstrated her group's emotional support for one another—

> *Like, I updated my group when I was feeling sick, but I didn't go into detail. I was like, "Hey, guys, I can't make it to the [homework] group tonight, because I have to go to the ER." They were like "Okay, let us know when you are free and we can help if you have questions" I ended up staying up late to do it and luckily, our team leader Chris, he was just so helpful. And he was like, "You can do it!" "Try it this way" and all that stuff.*

Melissa also remarked on some of the humorous and joyful memories she experienced in the midst of working with the group partners and how it made her enjoy the course much more, comparing it to her other more isolating course experiences:

> *We had a great group. We always had great energy every day. It was like not one of the silent Zooms--You enter in a group and no one just wants to talk and you're like, "Hello. How's everybody doing?" and then—nothing! We made a group chat on our phones with like a funny science name. We would send pictures like "Oh, look at my dog. My dog's doing my coding today." [My dog] came up on my lap and she like, looked like she was typing on my computer. So, I took a picture. Yeah, [laughs] picture of her doing my homework. Our [group] was just a good fun time. We won the lottery.*

Melissa also expressed how close she felt to this group and how optimistic it made her feel about her future in college. This deeper form of joy increased her hope in making the type of friends she always envisioned for herself in college. The group even had plans to meet at a theme park that summer once COVID restrictions loosened.

Concluding Insights on Joy

What this case study illustrates is that joy can surprise you and that campuses that seek to use joy to create belonging for Underrepresented Minority (and other) students must be open to surprise. Campuses can create the conditions where joy might flourish by encouraging collaboration and making spaces where that can happen. However, campuses cannot force connections inauthentically. Instead, they must allow for structured flow, controlled organic emergence. Yes, that sounds like an oxymoron, but really what it means is creating the conditions where trust and reciprocated vulnerability can occur. It means allowing students to simultaneously feel useful and feel supported. It means making opportunities for individual autonomy as well as playful connection in a community.

In this way, joy is a little like a shy kitten. It can be coaxed to come inside your house if you offer it a can of tuna, but it might just prefer to sit on top of the dryer instead of in the nice cat bed you bought.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- What invisible barriers can you imagine your students encountering in your class?
- What steps can you take to cultivate a culture of collaboration ("struggling together") in your class?
- In what ways can you "set the table" to invite joy into your classroom while remaining open to the organic and sometimes unexpected ways joy can emerge?

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8

RE-MEMBERING

Personhood, Joy, and the Body in Education

Tawanda Chabikwa

PART I: The Chronicles of Killjoy

In an impassioned anthology of essays, Nigerian author Ben Okri sets a challenge: "The universities of the future will do one thing we do not do today. They will teach the art of self-discovery. There is nothing more fundamental in education" (2011, p. 29). The proposition of a Joy-centered Pedagogy is a revolutionary call for sustainable, humane, solutionary education. It calls us to interrogate conscious and unconscious deployments of fear as a technology in coercive education. In an introduction to a special issue of *The Journal of Positive Psychology* published in 2020, psychologist Robert Emmons points out that "joy has been one of the least studied human emotions despite the fact that it is on everyone's list of basic primary emotions" (p. 1). Emmons asserts that while there is a long history of theologians studying joy, there could still be a broader scholarly interest in the subject from cognitive sciences to evolutionary sciences, philosophy, affective sciences, psychiatry, and psychology. I would add, in education, too.

In a volume of the same journal, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2023) makes a commendable attempt at an integrative theory of joy in which the latter is defined by "the elation of right relation." Arnett conceptualizes joy, "as an intense, temporary feeling of elation combined with an appraisal of the *right relation* between ourselves and the world, a sense that there is an ideal fit between ourselves and the world around us at the moment" (p. 1). In this sense, joy is relational, and it involves self-concept. As Arnett suggests, "Identity is the most deep-seated, core conception of our self, but it is also social" (p. 1). Arnett's definition, while valid, deploys a conception of self that is grounded

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-8

in Europeanist notions of "identity" defined by anthropocentric materialism. I enrich this insightful work by mobilizing Africana—African and African diasporic—notions of personhood: cosmocentric notions of the self. In this way, this chapter's definition of joy may diverge from some ideas that emerge later in Arnett's integrative theory on Joy simply because of differences in the cultural standpoints. One of these ways is how I understand the centrality of the body in all human enterprises, especially in learning.

Cosmo-uBuntu

Our somatic experiences are central to our experiences of self and therefore, implicitly and explicitly, central to our self-concept. As such, an education that does not deeply acknowledge, attend to, or optimize the embodied experience in learning cannot enrich or cultivate a positive self-concept. More importantly, it cannot foster joyful learning. In rethinking the centrality of embodied experience and embodied cognition to the process of learning, I have found it necessary to refigure my concept of personhood. Arnett's proposition of joy as right relation to the world can only be realized through worldviews that have long accepted that relationship *is* reality. As Bantu wisdom traditions surmise, "*uMuntu nguMuntu ngaBantu*": a person is a person because of (or by virtue of) other people. Right relation emerges from the understanding that we are already, and always have been, in relation.

Building from this understanding of *Ubuntu*, Mozambican education philosopher, José Cossa created the concept of *Cosmo-uBuntu*. In an article titled "Cosmo-uBuntu: Toward a New (Exterior to Modernity) Theorizing about the Human, the Cosmos, and Education," Cossa and colleagues (2020) argue that

> The modernistic educational systems that we inherited continue to serve as vehicles for perpetuating modernity's domination in all social systems because their theorizing and perpetuation happen globally during schooling years. Our option is to bring Cosmo-uBuntu to the current global stage and infuse our inherited wisdom that humans are connected not only to humans but also to their ancestors, land, and the overall cosmos.
>
> *(p. 756)*

This calls to mind the concept of extended self that was coined by the pioneer in Black Psychology, Wade Nobles (1976, 1991), who sought to integrate African conceptual systems into our understanding of personhood and to offer some fundamental cultural differences in how personhood was conceived of in Europeanist versus Africana worldviews. Both scholars index a radical shift in self-concept that mirrors numerous indigenous cultures, and philosophical

systems such as Buddhism. A shift from an anthropocentric concept of personhood to a cosmocentric one.

The notion of the extended self has world-changing implications when teachers use it as the lens through which we see our students. It is also a radical shift from how we conceive of our bodies and how they might be used as joyful resources in teaching and learning. Cossa (2020) coined the term Cosmo-uBuntu,

> to describe the nondiscriminatory and nonhierarchical understanding of humans that derives from African cosmology uBuntu. Accordingly, Cosmo-uBuntu is the voluntary embracing of uBuntu as a foundational value system in our participation in planetary conviviality, without forcing universality. In this value system, personhood applies to all humans and precludes individuation, classifications, and hierarchies. In other words, humans are humans because of humans, and, thus race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and ethnic or geopolitical origin are incommensurate categories.
>
> *(p. 755)*

Cossa's claim of "planetary conviviality" signals the possibility of joy, not as a "temporary feeling" as Arnett suggests, but as an ongoing mode of relationship. Also note that identitarian categories (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.) do not become irrelevant—only incommensurate as they too emerge from relationships. Joyful learning requires that teachers and learners renounce all cultural models that foster commodified individualism in the learning process. To do so we must become aware of the degree to which much of our own learning and conditioning was gleaned through *embodied* cognition.

Once we accept the degree to which we know the world through our bodies, new reservoirs are unlocked in our relationship to knowledge and subsequently to learning. Joy has corporeal and kinesthetic elements connected to individual and social experiences of learning. As a teacher of Dance Studies and Africana Studies in universities, I am interested in the corporeality of joy. Joy is known through the body, and joy can be generated through embodied practice and intentional attention to bodies. How? Through intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) we can cultivate joy-centered learning communities as the norm. But to move forward with my self-discovery, I must first re-member.

RE-MEMBERING

My high school education was in Zimbabwe—the once-called Rhodesia. It takes tremendous effort to draw from the wells of memory evidence of joy as a legitimate, accepted, or intentional element of my learning experience. Rising at five in the morning to the piercing peals of a rusty hollowed-out gas tank that served as our wake-up bell, the boarding master with a broomstick to make sure

you wake up and make your bed. Being herded from morning chores to porridge. Lining up for a uniform check and assembly. Then the day began. Scurrying from classes to meals to study time under the urgent whine of a tired-sounding siren. After nighttime prayers, silent time and lights out. Discipline and punishment were the order of the day. Corporal reprimand, hazing, manual labor, or public humiliation hung over our heads like glittering daggers on threadbare strings. A colonial social Darwinism presided over my all-boys boarding school tucked away in the beautiful green mountains of the country's Eastern Highlands. The further away joy was from the learning experience, the more "effective" it was deemed in the eyes of my schoolmasters. Rigor came in the form of dense scheduling. Discipline through coerced obedience. And assessment-oriented learning ensured that we always ranked in the top three schools nationwide.

Sankofa

Teaching is, to a significant extent, an act of memory. Our past experiences of learning influence our approaches to teaching. Much of this memory lives in our bodies as the cumulative result of our various socializing and conditioning, and it colors how we facilitate learning for others. Educators are a part of the endless chain of inherited learning methods reaching back into the past. However, we are not passive actors in this chain. Am I cognizant of my predisposition toward certain culturally idealized body schemata? Do I recognize when I am working, responding, or creating learning experiences from unsustainable conditioning or habits? Are there unsustainable habits of thought that are coloring my approach to teaching? As educators, we can be conscious agents of positive revolutions in existing paradigms of pedagogy. In this way, teaching is not only an act of memory, but an act of "futuring" too. This beautiful paradox underscores the reality of teaching. It invites educators to live in a constant state of speculative reflexivity. Joy can also be realized through a sense of the right relation between an unknown future and an ever more understood past.

Critical and compassionate reflection, in this case, on my educational past shows me a way forward. As with the meaning of the Akan symbol of *Sankofa*—a bird reaching backward to an egg on its own back—a positive future can be created by "going back" and "taking" from. Kenyan philosopher, author, and social theorist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009) coined the future-oriented notion of "re-membering." Re-membering is an act of summoning the past into the present and of re-shaping. It is an act of agency. Speaking to a postcolonial African audience, wa Thiong'o suggests that the African soul/psyche has been fragmented, dis-membered, scattered, and disintegrated through violent historical processes of oppression and the accompanying trauma of life in the terror formations that were called colonies.

The term re-membering also carries the visceral corporeal analogy/imagery of an individual gathering and grafting back onto oneself metaphoric limbs and organs that have been figuratively dis-membered through historical, sociopolitical, and psychospiritual processes. Re-membering is thus a process of self-knowing, (self-)forgiveness, healing, and re-assembling. We all share in the global inheritance of educational systems that are inherently joy-negating. Systems designed to create the ideal citizen or national subject at the expense of personhood. Systems serve to sustain patriarchy, materialism, predatory capitalism, military industrialism, and technocracy. Scholars of trauma such as Resmaa Menakem (2021), Bessel van der Kolk (2014), and Joy DeGruy (2017) tell us that both victims and aggressors are deeply affected by violent encounters. For both parties, self-concept is diminished. This chapter posits and demonstrates re-membering as a reflexive methodology for educators in restoring joyful learning.

RE-MEMBERING

Reading and studying were mentally arduous and receiving grades was emotionally devastating. Extrinsic motivators to pass revolved primarily around avoidance of shame, guilt, and humiliation. The culmination of each grading period, which we called "zero hour," was a potential walk of shame. Grades inevitably became public knowledge through gossip, or by sadistic courtesy of teachers who loudly announced each grade as they handed you your paper in class. Some teachers were kinder. They left your score unmentioned and just laughed or shook their head as they gave you your paper. This was, they said, meant to motivate us to be competitive among each other. My body shudders when I look back over my time in this all-boys, Catholic, missionary boarding school. My body shudders. My body remembers. To this day some of my stress dreams manifest as me being back in that school still studying for exams and dealing with toxic dynamics. I am convinced that, for many incoming 11- or 12-year-old boys, the embodied experiences during this first year—internalized reenactments of colonial technologies of biopolitical oppression—decided the quality of their academic performance for the remaining five years of high school. Later I would see these technologies as globally pervasive … even in the United States.

Seselelame

Education serves to enrich the entire person. The body is a function of the person. It is impossible to educate someone without implicating the body. Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon (2008) defines the concept of "body schema" as the implicit knowledge that allows

the "construction of myself as a body in a spatial-temporal world" (p. 91). In *Embodied Philosophy*, Israeli dance scholar, Einav Katan-Schmid (2016) says that body schema offers a sound basis for the application of a body-centered lens to any aspect of human being (p. 9).

All educational systems and institutions are spatiotemporal worlds. They have body schemas that are prescribed and proscribed consciously or unconsciously. It is seen in how people dress and speak, and in the social choreographies that constitute the cultures and subcultures of the institution. It is seen in how people treat others and are treated in the space. The Ewe peoples of Ghana's Volta Region use the term *seselelame* to index "knowing the world through the body or flesh." Systemic and Group Psychotherapy scholar Julia Jude (2016a,b) discusses this concept at length in the context of her fieldwork in Ghana and its application in her profession. *Seselelame* suggests a body schema in which body and mind are one, and body and world are one. In education, our capacity to honor the experience of the body offers us new inroads to serving our learning communities.

RE-MEMBERING

The cruelest aspect of the culture of shaming in the name of constructive competition, I believe, was during our first year of high school. At the end of the school term, we were lined up, single file, according to our grades in the school gym. Yes, from beginning to end, grades and names were called out in descending order and you would go take your place in a line with over a hundred other students. Our 11- or 12-year-old bodies were paraded and exposed. Vulnerable and powerless, a metaphoric label slapped on your body announcing your intellectual prowess. All the while, the older students who had gone through the same experience in their first year would be peeping through the window. They jeered and yelled snide comments as we underwent this ritual. And because just outside the gym was a row of mango trees lining the sidewalk, the joke was that the "flunkies" would be the ones whose grades were so bad that they'd be standing at the back of the line outside with the mangoes. Of course, this was just hyperbole (we were generally lined all along the walls of the gym) but the implication was not lost. When zero-hour arrived, we would be jarred from our cots, knowing a long day was ahead with all senior students yelling, "mangoooo!" at every given opportunity.

In a strange inversion of biblical mythology, the mango became the forbidden fruit from the tree of lack of knowledge. In these moments, all was not right with the world. Conditional belonging was communicated loudly. In this world, I had no agency per se*, only a "way out": pass the exam. The distance between my identity—my personhood—and my world had never been greater. I also understand that a significant aspect of joy is the experience of suffering*

transmuted, under grace, into sustainable growth, self-knowledge, and progress. That would become my story later.

Coloniality

At this point, it is important to address the root cause of the previously described fracturing. The root of the use of fear as a technology in normative education models. Effective teachers relay and build upon their students' preexisting knowledge. Thus, while they prepare students for the future, learning is also something that happens in the present, as shaped by the past. Jerome Bruner (1996) states that "choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. Pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message" (p. 63). As such, education—absent of joy—fails to facilitate the reinforcement of a positive and sustainable self-concept. It fails to improve our generative and creative capacity and to enhance our sense of belonging at multiple levels. I am particularly sensitive to the ways in which I must frequently wrestle with reiterations and remnants of coloniality—the perpetuation of legacies of and practices of European colonialism—within myself and the classroom space. It has taken—and continues to take—much conscious work on my part to heal and transform experiences of emotional violence and social Darwinist conditioning rooted in toxic and patriarchal emulations of colonial relationships to education.

It would be difficult to begin a conversation on the necessity of joy-centered pedagogy without understanding the concept of coloniality coined by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2000). Coloniality is the composite of values, principles, structures, formations, and ways of knowing that were upheld by Euro-Western colonizing societies in order to rationalize, perpetuate, and replicate their dominance. One defining characteristic of coloniality in education is the preponderance of *extrinsic* motivators to move the process along. The subtle message here is that left to their own devices, the people in question would simply never *choose* to learn. Moreover, those in power will decide, at all junctures, what is important to learn. In this way, education becomes an assembly line for the reproduction of colonial subjectivity: individuals whose singular purpose is to serve the self-replication of hegemony.

Through expectation, coercion, and demanding "obedient" bodies, educational models unconsciously perpetuate teaching models that imagine students as a body stripped or emptied of their personhood. The "empty body" is the schema that undergirds coloniality in education. An empty body is passive and ripe for the biopolitical project of reshaping, manipulation, and exploitation. It allows for the possibility of self-replication of the system and the literal (re-)*incarnation* of its ideology. Cameroonian social theorist Achille Mbembe (2006) and Indian psychologist/social theorist Ashis Nandy (2009) explain in detail one

key characteristic of colonial formation structures: self-replication. Under this framework, education becomes a metaphorical printing press. It will produce endless copies of individuals with their occasional, updated second, third, and so forth editions. This is an iterative project whose function relies on producing emptiness or nothingness in a person. However, because there is no such thing as nothingness when dealing with humans—because, as established earlier, the self is extended—emptiness must be perceived or proscribed for coloniality to function. African American historian and journalist, Carter G. Woodson (1933), made this clear in his revolutionary text, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Little did he know, perhaps, that his insights were not limited to the negative impacts of Jim Crow education on black Americans but relevant to the entire education project of Euro-American progressivist, industrialist, and capitalist imperialism.

Existence within such a schema essentially protracts psychic, emotional, and intellectual stasis and mistakes inertia for progress. The body poses a "problem" for the ideology-driven educator. It troubles the primacy of language and of disembodied social theory that is guided by symptoms of an ethnocentric cerebrality. This disembodied rationalist approach has historically favored a Eurocolonial progressivist narrative of human purpose while hiding the fact that it, like any knowledge system, is rooted in a culturally specific worldview. All knowledge systems are grounded in culturally specific worldviews that are played out *through the body* in societal life. However, in coloniality, personhood is non-essential. It is, in fact, a direct threat to the production of the colonial subject and her intellectual obedience. Thus, self-discovery and *joy* are counterproductive to such an education project.

RE-MEMBERING

A significant question that arose from my early time in boarding school was about the meaning and purpose of all of these carefully curated experiences. Experiences that were designed, it seemed, to cull, subdue, suppress, and to exert control over our young bodies. Often, I found myself at the mercy of the whim of teachers, principals, boarding masters, prefects, and older students. Being physically small, I learned a lot about surviving the space. Learned to notice minor facial expressions and subtle body language. Learned to predict signs of volatility in others and probable timelines of their eruptions so I could make myself scarce or diffuse situations. I learned to observe the peculiar egotisms that made people. I learned what bodies were safe to be around; what bodies were better avoided at all costs; who preferred eye contact, and for whom eye contact was an insult.

More and more, the meaninglessness and purposelessness of the situation became evident. What was it all for? Yes, we were getting an education, but for what—or to become what? How was this helping me grow as a human? My

self-concept, constantly under threat of being extinguished, in no way matched the majority of my experiences in this world they called "schooling." It felt alienating, violent, and demeaning. But as I was there, I also began to understand certain aspects of the country at large and of certain larger patterns at play.

This is how "men" are made, I thought to myself. And I wanted no part of it. I had seen "men" running countries, running companies, running families, and running things. And here I was, all of 11 years old, sometimes randomly woken up at 4.30 in the morning along with other freshmen to run. Just to run. We weren't part of any sports team or sports club, we weren't jogging fanatics. It wasn't part of physical education class. We were simply woken up to run in the morning chill in our shorts and T-shirts. As a boy, I vaguely knew that it had something to do with discipline, or staying fit, or eliminating weakness … or something. From day one—the moment you arrived—it was a scramble and a fight. We scrambled and fought for our cots and mattresses, we scrambled and fought for our lockers, we scrambled and fought for our chairs and desks in our classrooms … lest we end up with the most damaged or dysfunctional ones. We scrambled and fought for our place at our dining hall tables, and for our tea break, we scrambled and fought for our bread and tea. For some reason, year after year, there just seemed to not be enough of anything despite your school fees having been paid. So, after all of this survivalist maneuvering to settle in every school term, I wondered what was being achieved, an education or a socialization. What meaning was being created, and for whom was this meaningful? And most importantly, why the hell did they make us run?

Corpo-reality

These traumas (for I shall call them what they are) still flare up in my body to this day. It could be a tightening in my chest or a flexing of the jaw. It could be tension in my neck or a subtle turning of the gut. Similarly, I have seen students shrink immediately in the presence of teachers; smiles and joyful chatter evaporating like water droplets on a hot pan as soon as a teacher steps into the room. Their exuberance diminishes to an expectant silence waiting to be filled by the educator's instruction. Obedience and obeisance are mistaken for attention. These physicalized responses of learned submission to perceived authority interrupt the joy of learning in the community. I see the fear of failure muzzle their willingness to participate in classrooms. Or they shame, bully, or harass each other when an answer is "wrong"—a response of the powerless projecting and amplifying what they understand to be the desire of the presiding ideology of the institution. Often there is an audible and unanimous groan or sigh of agony when an upcoming assessment is mentioned. In education, the body is the archive and the repertoire of learning processes. Undergirding many of these behaviors is fear and trauma on all sides. The side of the teacher *and*

that of the students. To understand the nature of this fear, it is important to take a little historical detour to address the systems and infrastructures of the past that inform our society today.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2023) has a whole section on "killjoys" in his article on an integrative theory of joy. He borrows the German term *gluckshmerz* to make his point. The word refers to feeling bad or put off by other people's joy. Michel Foucault's (2003) observation of the European imperialist relationship to bodies becomes relevant here. He coined the term biopolitics: a body schema in which political and economic power is enacted through control over an individual's biophysical autonomy. History is laden with examples of the sociocultural impact of Europeans traveling the world in the 17th and 18th centuries under the spell of group moral egotism masquerading as religious clarity. They were adept at designing infrastructures, policies, and technologies to ensure the sole survival of Europeanist modalities of joy (Ehrenreich, 2007). These killjoys, failing to see value in diversity and agency, sought dominance mainly by banning, confinement, and endless codification of human existence.

They banned the dances, rituals, feasts, bodily decorations, art, costumes/clothes, literature, songs, and stories of non-Europeans (and non-Christian Europeans) everywhere they went, as discussed by Katherine Hazzard-Gordon (1996), Harvey Young (2010), and Eric Lott (2013). Extensive resources were diverted to pseudo-scientific "research" on optimal habituation of the body toward modes of learning and labor that furthered their goals. The world became smaller and smaller—a dualistic cosmos of punishment and reward. And the significance of the body became limited to playing out the ideological fantasies of patriarchy, capitalists, industrialists, colonizers, and enslavers. The fetish of bodily passivity suited for optimal economic productivity-fueled scientific materialism's obsessions with fabricating extended attentive states of mind and increasing capacities for retention of piecemeal information bytes while maintaining the minimum optimal physical health to achieve necessary physical tasks.

One such researcher is German physician Daniel Gottlieb Moritz Schreber, who published numerous works on rearing children in the late 1800s. His work prescribes the use of strict postural regimens facilitated by the use of what would nowadays be considered maniacal, if not sadistic, bondage devices that, in effect, confined children's bodies to limited ranges of motion, degrees of physiological alignments, and/or stillness. Pressure and coercion were central to Schreber's (1955) methodology in the early years of child-rearing. While the mechanical devices may have vanished, education still emulates forms of "discipline" and order that serve to bind students in "attentive" states. Writing on the topic of fear and learning in a volume on the neuroscience of adult learning, Bruce Perry (2006) observes that perceived threat (of punishment) forces a person's internal state to exist along the arousal continuum from vigilance to terror. I am

convinced that many students experience universities and colleges as watered-down versions of—to borrow Achille Mbembe's (2003) descriptor—(colonial) terror formations.

Carolyn Jackson's (2010) article "Fear in Education" makes this abundantly clear. While the research is based on high schools in the United Kingdom, the workings of fear mirror coloniality in Western-descended education globally. Jackson focuses on fear-centering notions of academic "success" and "failure," and their relationship to social "success" and "failure." These dualities are what we as teachers are implicated in wielding in the classroom. British historian Joanna Bourke (2005) puts it quite concisely by stating that "emotions such as fear do not belong only to individuals or social groups: they mediate between the individual and the social" (p. 354). In many tertiary education settings, we are all drawn into this pervasive, unspoken, destructive current of fear. Faculty must "deliver" good grades and high enrollment to meet the university's bottom line. Students fear academic failure and the future social failure it implies. Families and loved ones fear the same. There is a silence over the basic fact that scholars like Jenny Shaw (2003) underline: that fear is indeed the "social technology" that sustains the organizational structure of most schools. According to Perry (2006), the effect is the exact opposite of what we want from education. "Someone feeling threatened [, judged, or surveilled] does not spend a lot of time thinking about the future or making an abstract plan for survival" (p. 23). This persistent fear diminishes, "the capacity to acquire new cognitive information and retrieve stored information—both essential for effective functioning within our current educational system" (p. 21).

Many teachers walk daily into a subtle, pervasive, and unacknowledged historically constructed relationship of fear and enmity with our students. Bourdieu (1989) describes as this is the symbolic violence within the social space of education. We do so unconsciously, living daily in the contradictory positioning our work demands of us. Today many take for granted that the "body keeps score"—to quote the title of van der Kolk's text (1994)—of both mental and emotional stressors and traumatic events. Our bodies respond by changing the function of neural pathways and of organs to adapt, cope, and survive. Dance scholar Susan Foster (2014) uses the term "bodymind," a compound word fusing body and mind to illustrate the neurocognitive reality of the interrelationship between the two. It also invites us to consider embodied cognition, embodied knowledge, and the thinking body in our conception of the body. Bodymind refers to experience at the intersection of the sensory and the extrasensory.

I must challenge my conditioning so I can see my classroom as a learning community rather than as engaging a "captive" audience. The latter is itself harsh enough phrasing to remind us of the many ways in which the body (as an implicit captive) is imprisoned in all educational endeavors. The inner work of restoring joy in education occurs as an emergent strategy enriched by a

conscious, compassionate mindfulness of the many ways in which the body is implicated in education. The body is not just an assimilating vessel of education. Rather, education should invoke the body's agency in understanding the world of the person.

PART II: Undoing Killjoy's Assembly Line

Joy as Social Technology

Fear is a fundamental social technology that has been deployed in education for centuries. But, when I ground my pedagogy in Cosmo-uBuntu, a new world opens up—joy as a social technology that is far more effective. Joy, like fear and anxiety, is an embodied phenomenon. This means that it is experienced, shared, and manifested in our bodymind through *seselelame*. Embodied knowledge is located at the intersection of the tactile and the perceptual, between physical sensation and consciousness. Our quotidian bodily behaviors are the performance of what I call "rituals of identity." These rituals reflect our learned understanding of how to navigate and engage the world. More often than not, these embodiments are inherited and conditioned. The good news is that they can be unlearned and re-formed, too.

In learning, students and teachers connect their own embodied knowledge with that of other bodies. Education is meant to help us make sense of our very beings in the world. We also share in an experience with others. For many indigenous cultures (including premedieval European ones) social technologies for joy were abundant, and they were principally bodymind technologies with a cosmocentric conception of personhood—technologies of rhythms, dance, community, storytelling, and play.

To undo some of the harms I endured in my postcolonial schooling experience, I now regard the body as a technology for transformation, healing, and contemplation at personal, communal, and global scales. I center restorative, liberatory, and generative capacities. I leverage interdisciplinary fields of knowledge—dance and performance studies, visual arts, African studies, digital humanities, history, political science, psychology, quantum physics, literature, and more—seeking resonances and fluid constellations that serve to generate new knowledge. My teaching structure is scaffolded by a fusion of anti-racist pedagogy, decolonial pedagogy, emergent strategy, culturally responsive teaching, Authentic Relating™, Embodiology®, and joy-informed pedagogy.

My approach to joyful learning is guided by the following five principles:

Cultivate cosmocentric belonging in individuals and the learning community.

> *"Rule number one—and all my rules are Rule number one—: You belong. This is the first rule of this classroom. Simply by virtue of being born into*

this cosmos that we all share in, you belong. There is nothing you have to do, or be, in order to prove this simple reality. There is no one you must impress or explain yourself to in that regard. Do not allow the world to tell you any different. Now, tell us your name and, when you do, say it as though you belong. Your, whether given or chosen, is your legacy—it is who you are. You decide what your name will mean for generations to come. So, as you introduce yourself to this learning community—for that is what we are. Speak your name, so that we may know who you are. Speak your name knowing that you belong."

I begin each encounter with any learning community with these words. This is to promote feelings I never had during my boarding school experience. In these moments of invitation, encountering a new group of students, I feel gratitude for my ongoing resilience. I feel joy for the privilege I have each day of choosing who I want to be as an educator. In these moments, ease, quiet, and serenity flow back into my body. I re-member who I am; I recall all the experiences that have brought me here. Looking at the students, I regularly see varied signs of conditioned anxious anticipation in their bodies. Nervous giggles, subtle repetitive shifting of their center of gravity. I know my call to naming and belonging makes them uncomfortable. Too often we are not encouraged to share in the very human nature of educational relationships. It is important students know they are seen as people.

Moving forward, each class throughout the semester begins with a "check-in." Participants are encouraged to share one something about how they are feeling in that moment. These 10–15-second shares are a way of orienting ourselves in the space—a way to acknowledge each other's presence and humanity. It also allows students to offer some authenticity to the group and know that it is accepted. Check-ins are a way of saying, "Come as you are and trust the community to hold you as you are." More than once I have had the honor of watching students care for each other and positively adjust how they interact with each other in the classroom. They see each other as people first and students second. This is Cosmo-uBuntu at work.

Joy is pleasurable, but it is not defined by pleasure. It can exist amid discomfort, even suffering and pain. Physical pleasure is catalyzed by the meaning we attribute to the situation or events—with how our self-concept aligns with our world. I am asking students to consider the very nature of their place in the world and how they inhabit that space with others. This suggests that joy encompasses belonging and is large enough to hold suffering and grief, too. Grounding pedagogy in cultivating cosmocentric belonging (being a part of the cosmos) rather than anthropocentric gain (personal advancement) is a way to cultivate joy.

Encourage learners to value preexisting knowledge and experiences by being transparent about the university/college as an epistemological space.

> *"You are valuable to this learning community we are creating. Your experiences are valid. I am not here to teach you something new. Rather I am here to facilitate new knowledge-creation together* with *you. To show you how what you know is valuable and how that knowledge, which you carry in your bodymind, is your inroad to new knowing. So, while we share in this space together do not try to be like anyone else. Simply continue on your journey of becoming who you really are. Take pleasure in the effort of being, of becoming, of learning, and of growing. Look around the room and know that you are not alone. We are all here with you. Know that academia is not a neutral space. It is a culture in itself and, depending on where you are from, that is a whole learning process in itself. This experience need not overwrite who you are and what you already know. It should only serve to deepen it. Don't let your education alienate you from who you are. We need your specific knowledge and experience in our learning community. Let your education instead bring you closer to yourself—let it deepen your knowledge of who you are."*

I work in one of the United States' premier Hispanic-serving institutions on the *Frontera*, or border regions. Many students are caught between worlds and given falsely dichotomous choices on who they get to be. The shame of being associated with migrant status takes its toll in many unspoken ways as coloniality does its work. I encourage them to thrive in the plurality of each of their identities. Once a semester I conduct the class in Spanish—which I'm *not* fluent in. The fluent students then support all non-Spanish-speaking participants (including me) during that period. The simple reminder here is that (English) language fluency does not in any way correlate to intelligence or human value. These class periods are always filled with much laughter and conviviality—let's call it what it is: joy—as we walk through the new knowledge and generative misunderstandings that arise. Flattening hierarchy and aligning myself with the "not knowers" is an important part of the liberation experienced here.

Make learning meaningful within the learning community and within learners' preexisting worldviews by encouraging critical self-reflection, playfulness, and centering self-knowledge as the primary goal.

> *"All of us come from somewhere. We each carry a specific and unique way of seeing the world. We take many things for granted. Many people spend their entire lives never questioning their way of seeing the world. I am not interested in being right or wrong in how we see. Rather, I want us to spend time answering these questions : 'How do I know what I know?', 'Am I willing*

to know new things even if they contradict what I already know?', 'How do I navigate experiences of not knowing?', 'How does my experience within my body relate to knowledge?' I want you to know that you have everything you need as a person to learn and grow; to shape your path as you please. But if you do not know yourself, these vast internal resources will come to naught. True learning is only possible when accompanied by ever-increasing self-knowledge."

I balance viewing and engaging students as a community of learners with their individually driven search for academic and artistic achievement and excellence. However, students tend to be much more conscious of the latter than valuing of the former. I know education entails social meaning-making, not just the transmission of information, and I need to invite my students into the process. I know I have work to do to disrupt their preoccupation with individualistic rewards, so I create many opportunities for them to commune with fellow learners. To engage in relational learning, knowledge co-construction, and interactional support, we rely on the embodied learning processes of ethnic dances. I emphasize learning through relational and reflective interdependence between learners, instead of relying on mimicking and mirroring.

In dance studio classes, I avoid the use of physical/literal mirrors to encourage students to dance from the inside rather than perform for the outside. (Similarly, in lecture or seminar classes, I make use of handwritten journals to encourage manually generated work to remind us of the presence and value of our bodies.) In this way, physical games are also important, tapping into the wisdom of the body to address or understand specific course content and to help with memory. For example, I might ask the students to conduct some "sightless" choreography. One student is blindfolded, while their partner is tasked with teaching movement phrases using only voice and/or touch. In this exercise, we begin to question the primacy of sight in how we navigate and make meaning in and of the world, including biases. When we dance and play together, the boundaries between collective and individual perspicuity blur. We find joy in the loss of excruciating self-consciousness and the awakening of self-awareness. The body is not just a passive assimilation vessel and pedagogic methods have the capacity to invoke the body's agential capacities in knowledge production. Creative uses of the body in teaching and learning support emergent processes that lie at the intersection of the embodied and the intuitive.

Encourage making mistakes, and communal learning to recalibrate the conception of success and failure by confronting the reality of fear as a suboptimal social technology.

It's okay to play. It's even more important to make mistakes. The classroom is the place to make errors in a safe environment. I will always ask you "What

do you see?" When I do, know that I'm not seeking a specific answer. I want to know how you see the world. Don't let fear make you a passive agent in your own learning. Learn how you learn. Ask for what you need. Get a little weird! You'll be surprised what you can learn by playing. The more we all share our experiences, the more we each know we are not alone because, and I promise, more often than not, you won't be the only one feeling/seeing that way. And when you are, you teach us all something new!

Generative misunderstandings encourage creative responses to new material; responses that are part of a quest toward understanding. Unfortunately, many students have learned to hide their ignorance; it feels transgressive to celebrate mistakes. Error can become a source of joy when we see it as a source of knowledge. In teaching hip-hop classes, we often face the question of the sexualization of female bodies in certain subgenres. This section of the course is always a beautiful segue into uncovering our own deep-seated biases concerning class, gender, and race. It is always beautiful to see our shallow perceptual reflexes turn into deepened curiosity about popular culture. We discover that the uses of the erotic are deeply complex in hip-hop and tied to agency and power in numerous ways. Using the concept of Sankofa, we take time to interrogate how we "know" what we "know" and if it is true. Joyful play (breaking boundaries and exploring) produces knowledge about the responder's worldsense that is useful to the learner: "uncover your assumptions" and "learn how you learn." As African Wisdom Traditions have always insisted, self-knowledge is the highest form of knowledge (Ba, 1981).

Demonstrate how the body is a vital resource in agential learning, in self-discovery.

This suggests an engagement with one's personal, internal liminal space in which one discovers tacit resources for problem-solving and knowledge creation. This can loosely be likened to the realm of spiritual intuition in the case of some indigenous cosmologies—a process of re-membering oneself. In this sense, one is not so much accessing "new" knowledge, just knowledge that is as yet unmanifest. In remembering movement sequences or new complex terminology, I often use memory meditations—a combination of breath and relaxation exercises that give learners time to dig deep within their memory for things they have learned in the past. I guide them through recreating the learning process until they arrive at the information they need. I remind them that all learning is connected to their emotional being. Once they are present all elements of their learning—physical, mental, and emotional—they can access, recreate, or reassemble knowledge. It is through the creative practice or that of language that one wor(l)ds what is un-manifest—what I earlier referred to as "wor(l)ding."

There are many ways in which we are socialized to take cues from the outside world for a sense of who we are in every moment. My initial task in

teaching dance is to encourage students to trust in themselves and their capacity to know—through the flesh—where they stand in the cosmos. To cultivate their capacity to depend on internal reference points, I encourage knowing through sensation, followed by self-reflection.

RE-MEMBERING

Then there was Brother Legault. A heavyset French-Canadian member of the Catholic Marist order—the little brothers of Mary. I discovered later that he had been my father's French teacher when my father attended the same school decades before. An enigma of a man—bank robber turned Catholic, youth educator, and servant of God. He became a dear friend and guide in a world where the inherited violence of colonialism and the persistence of toxic patriarchy threatened to swallow me whole. He discovered that I collected stamps and that I loved to read. Some weekends I would visit the brother's quarters—a general no-go area, for they enjoyed their privacy very much—we'd sit on the veranda, and he'd give me new stamps he had gotten from his international friends. Or, he would let me sit on the same porch and read the last National Geographic, *or Time Magazine he'd received in the mail. He taught me how to chop wood. He also taught me how to weave chairs using rolls of discarded industrial elastic fabric he would collect from some factory. There were conversations about the world, about science, and theology. There was also quiet. And this quiet was a joy. A significant part of that joy was in our "I-Thou" relationship. To be treated as an equal, by an elder. To be treated as a complete human, rather than a small human-in-the-making. This contemplative quiet was also joy. A relief from the chaos of having to perform "boyhood." The beauty of the worlds I created in my mind through reading may have been the greatest pleasure of all. The quiet of the library, or the enforced silence of study time and "lights-out" time at nine pm, awakened me to my personal interiority—the time to imagine was treasured.*

There is more to joy than laughter. Being one of the "good" kids, I was able to find joy in escaping almost every weekend, beyond the fenced perimeter of the school. In the quiet of walking in the mountains, exploring, bouldering, and trail running. In looking at birds and insects, the names of which I knew not. In listening to brooks trickling down slopes to places I knew I would never visit. Often, I would just run for a few hours, meditate on some elevated spot, a hill, mountain, or cliff, and sit quietly in awe of the vastness of the landscape. The grass was golden or green depending on the season, but always lush. This stillness was joy. Being alone with the world and in the world, I knew I belonged.

May every student feel validated by a caring teacher and confident to sit in the wisdom beneath their very skin. In my re-memberings, what stands out are experiences that encouraged me to be curious about my own existence in the world. To "know my place" not in the negative sense but rather the deep-seated

understanding that I have a place. And this is just the beginning of the many places I can go. I have gratitude for my body's role in this journey. Its capacity to generate joy and the opportunities it gives me to be in right relationship with my pastas I negotiate the present.

Questions for Reader Reflection

1 Are there ways I unconsciously perpetuate biopolitical relationships with my students through my classroom expectations for "discipline," "rigor," or obedience?
2 How do I intentionally create opportunities for students to connect course materials to their own lives, experiences, hopes, and aspirations?
3 How often do I check in on how my body is feeling before, during, and after teaching a class?

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9

THE JOY OF EMBODIED LEARNING

Leslie Bayers

During your academic journey, what explicit or implicit messages did you receive about the role of the body in learning? As I reflect on mine, two representative scenarios come to mind. In one, my body is wedged into a fixed lecture hall seat under flickering fluorescent lights. The only person in the room who seems animated is the professor. The spatial and pedagogical cues signal that I should disconnect from my body and those around me. My undergraduate Spanish classes offered a refreshing contrast. Dynamic interaction among students was standard practice. Instruction was infused with an array of sensory textures, from visuals and objects to gestures, music, and laughter. Our bodies, individually and collectively, were integral to learning. In those experiences, I felt grounded, connected, and alive.

The embodied joy I felt in my undergraduate language studies eventually led me to an academic career in Spanish and Latin American literature. As a faculty member, I strove to incorporate the dynamic hallmarks of language pedagogies in all of my classes. Even so, my students certainly endured spells of stationary sluggishness, whether due to ingrained educational habits, rushed or uninspired planning on my part, or inflexible classroom spaces that encouraged us all to detach. Professional conventions took a toll on my own body, too. Prioritizing intellectual work and the grind of the tenure track over physical and mental health led me to academic burnout, illness, and a questioning of higher ed's implicit relegation of the body as separate from and secondary to the mind.

Today, I am an educational developer who promotes equity-minded, learner-centered pedagogies across disciplines. I am also a Pilates teacher. While those domains were separate when I added movement to my teaching repertoire (post-tenure and well into my 40s), they now intentionally inform

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-9

one another. I should clarify upfront, however, that this chapter will not focus on exercise in the classroom or the irrefutable evidence around the cost of increasingly sedentary lifestyles, though both are certainly relevant. Rather, I will offer evidence for and small-step suggestions toward re-centering the body in education, in any discipline and within an instructor's comfort zone, to awaken meaningful and joyful learning. Many of us know too well the negative embodied feelings that joyless higher ed practices and spaces can provoke, from the lethargy of sitting in drab classrooms to "fight or flight" stress responses prompted by rigid, inequitable, or threatening practices—all of which preclude learning and connection. Embodied educational approaches, on the other hand, set the stage for presence, community, and vitality. Departing from a working understanding of embodied cognition and drawing from the literature and my own experience, I will share strategies that can help learners tune into the body's innate intelligence to support their academic work. My hope is to spark reflection and further research into this vast field of inquiry. To that end, I will regularly pause, invite you to take a breath, and encourage you to consider ways that you already incorporate or might further engage embodied learning to foster joy.

Embodied Thinking

Try a web search for images of "thinking" or "cognition." Did it yield pictures of brains or heads, perhaps surrounded by gearwheels, lightbulbs, or thought bubbles? Collectively, these representations project a view of the human brain as the powerhouse and conductor of thought. Annie Murphy Paul (2021) describes the early inculcation of this notion:

> Beginning in elementary school, we're taught to sit still, work quietly, think hard—a model for mental activity that will prevail all the years that follow […]. The skills we develop and the techniques we are taught are those that involve using our heads: committing information to memory, engaging in internal reasoning and deliberation, endeavoring to self-discipline and self-motivate.
>
> *(pp. 3–4)*

To situate this view in a higher ed context, try a parallel search for images of "college teaching" or "college learning." This time, you may see sedentary students facing or circled around a professor, the latter perhaps standing or leaning on a desk and talking, writing, or gesturing. Here we see an implicit embodied hierarchy: while the teachers are enlivened, the students are immobile. Yet the scene still projects a certain detachment; the instructors are cliched "talking heads" (Macrine & Fugate, 2022a, p. 15) pouring their expertise into "brains on sticks" (Hrach, 2021, p. xiv).

While by no means comprehensive of the many ways that teaching and learning play out in college, these images speak to the mind/body dualism that permeates the Western imaginary and our educational spaces. The industrial age, layered atop Aristotelian and Cartesian-influenced projections of the mind as separate from and controlling the body, contributed to the efficiency-oriented, disembodied learning spaces we still see today. To be certain, influential critiques of modern schooling have condemned factory and transactional models of education and helped shift practice (e.g., Davidson, 2017; Freire, 2015; Gannon, 2020; Rendón, 2014). Throughout *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) questions academic disembodiment and centers embodiment as key to liberatory pedagogy: "We must return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others" (p. 139). Still, pedagogies that consistently acknowledge the role of the body in learning are far from widespread in Western higher education. However, embodied cognition research has gained traction and offers another lens through which to consider the place of the body in education.

Embodied cognition questions classical, brain-centric views of learning that deem the body "irrelevant to the teaching-learning event" (Macrine & Fugate, 2022a, p. 14). Rather than a singular field, embodied cognition comprises a coalescence of research in biology, language, neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, and other disciplines. What unifies this gathering of diverse and at times divergent premises are core assertions that the body plays a crucial and constitutive role in thought and that knowledge is constructed through dynamic exchanges between the body and the brain, as well as webs of interaction between humans and their environments (Damasio, 2023; Macrine & Fugate, 2022; Murphy Paul, 2021; Shapiro, 2019; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 2016). Embodied learning research foregrounds empirical evidence for and resolute focus on the centrality of the body in perception and knowledge-making, complementing constructivist and contemplative approaches to teaching and learning. As Macrine and Fugate (2022b) affirm, "with advances in neuroscience, we have evidence confirming an embodied view of cognition based on bodily and neural processes of perception, action, and emotion" (p. 2). Without question, many educators past and present have intuitively understood the centrality of the body in learning, and those instincts are supported by compelling scientific backing.

A consideration of embodiment more broadly provides context for the promise of re-embodying teaching and learning. Hillary McBride (2021) describes embodiment as "the experience of being a body in a social context" (p. 12). This may seem utterly obvious, yet consider the litany of cultural messages encouraging us to think of our bodies as something that we have or should control rather than something that we *are*. McBride (2021) emphasizes the connection

between colonialism and disembodiment, pointing out that understanding disembodiment "means grasping that our cultural views of land as an object to be used, conquered, or stolen are relics of settler-colonialist ideologies—as is the belief that we are hyper-rational individuals who can exist and thrive outside of community" (p. 23). Recognition of the powers that encourage and benefit from a disconnect from our own and each other's bodies, as well as the environments they inhabit, can help us move away from isolation and competition and toward kinder, more just, and more joyful communities.

How might our classrooms foster such collective re-embodiment? In what follows, we will explore how dynamic interactions between the brain and the body, its environment, and other bodies can be activated to support more joyful teaching and learning.

Sense and Movement

As a student, cramming myself in fixed lecture hall seats signaled that my body needed to be immobilized to let my brain do serious work (in addition to making it clear who held power in the classroom). Strict policies further communicated that my body was irrelevant to learning. The second semester of my sophomore year, I returned to campus a day late, in a cast and on crutches due to a recent injury. Since I also got sick later that semester, putting me one absence over the "two allowed absences" policy in my elective acting class, the A that my delighted engagement throughout the semester would have earned me was downgraded to an A-minus. In one of the most explicitly embodiment-oriented courses of my undergraduate career, my body had become a liability. Such messaging starts early. Even in elementary schools, where multisensory learning is more frequently leveraged, "whole body listening" protocols encourage learners to quiet their mouths, hands, feet, and bodies so that their brains can think.

Yet the brain does not work alone, nor was it designed for the primary purpose of abstract knowledge work. The brain is a component of a networked bodily system that, through continuous waves of communication, keeps us alive and generates perception. Susan Hrach (2021) illustrates this constant hum of internal activity:

> The brain acts as a site for hosting and curating conversations; bodily organs like the heart and lungs and brain communicate and respond to each other as part of a dynamic ecosystem through a variety of channels, including electrical, hormonal, and mechanical. A wide range of signals are communicated through nerve endings in our skin, through internal organs and tissues, and through hormonal balances and the state of our immune system, each of which interact with prior knowledge and experience to produce perception.
>
> *(p. 5)*

The brain may be called upon to interpret signals, make predictions, and help the body take action, but organs can and at times do talk directly to one another. Bodily systems, in other words, are innately intelligent and always in motion. While this physiological symphony often operates in the subconscious background, to different degrees, humans can perceive their own heartbeats, breathing mechanics, muscle tension, thirst and hunger cues, and other inner workings of the body. The ability to sense this inner movement is called "interoception," and greater interoceptive awareness can be an entry point to emotional agility and joyful learning.

Lisa Feldman Barrett (2021) explains how, influenced by a combination of environmental and cultural factors, a singular physiological cue can be translated into variety of emotions. Consider, for example, the butterflies that a student may feel in their stomach before joining a small group discussion, taking a test, starting a challenging project, or engaging in a novel learning experience. They might interpret that interoceptive cue as a sign of something to fear and move away from, or as an indicator of something they care about, an exciting threshold, or another positive feeling to lean into. I learned the power of interoceptive reframing after a fear of public speaking suddenly emerged in my early faculty years. Just when I should have been gaining confidence, I found myself trembling at podiums, my pounding heart and rushing blood telling me that I didn't belong there. I eventually learned to interpret those bodily signals as signs of care and excitement, to use my breath to downregulate my nervous systems, and to focus on connecting with rather than trying to impress my colleagues (the latter requiring some academic unlearning). By embracing yet reframing my body's interoceptive cues, I rediscovered joy in public speaking.

Inviting students to note and name how they are feeling at the beginning of class (or during another transitional moment) can prompt an exploration of the valence they assign physiological cues, and how those translations from sensations to emotions impact their learning. This practice also underscores that the body and affect matter to learning (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007), countering cultural messages to detach from feelings in learning spaces. To support this exploration, you might share an expanded inventory of feelings to help students move from perhaps less helpful generalizations (e.g., "stressed," "fine," "tired") and toward more informative granularity (e.g., "overwhelmed," "discouraged," "curious," "joyful"). The goal here is neither to encourage the suppression of negative emotions nor to step out of our scope of practice as educators (Costa, 2022). Instead, a moment to privately notice and name interoceptive signals can help students get better at gauging and, when appropriate, reframing their feelings, which in turn can enhance their sense of agency, safety, and emotional flexibility. Opportunities to anonymously share how they're feeling (via a poll, for example) can take the collective temperature of the room and foster mutual

care. If a student shares something that falls out of your scope of practice to support, you will have an opportunity to connect them to campus resources.

Exploring interoception and emotions in the classroom can prompt an insightful conversation about how joyful learning will not always feel blissful. The brain makes meaning through a predictive process, continually interpreting sense data from the inner body and outer world to determine what actions the body should take next (Barrett, 2021). Learning requires the brain to rewire default predictions cultivated through previous experiences, which costs the body energy and creates discomfort. Ross Gay (2022) frames joy and pain as "fundamentally tangled up with one another" (p. 4). We can help students understand that, similarly, joyful learning includes moments of both friction and elation. This discussion, in turn, can prompt an exploration of the difference between comfort and safety, and how our individual and collective practices can create an environment of care that supports the discomfort and delight that learning entails.

A short breathing practice at the beginning of class can support interoceptive awareness while encouraging the nervous system regulation that facilitates joyful learning. I invite students to try a 2-minute, minimally guided breathing practice on the first or second day of class (eyes open or closed, as they prefer), adding that they are welcome to read, write, daydream, or engage in another quiet practice that suits them instead. I share the research on how intentional breathing primes the nervous system for learning and well-being (see Nestor, 2020, for talking points) and let them know that they'll vote on whether to continue this practice in class or not. I ask them to note how they feel before we begin and then encourage them to settle into a comfortable seated position, with feet grounded on the floor and space for the diaphragm to move. We take a couple of deep, cleansing breaths first, and then allow the breath to fall into a natural, unforced rhythm. I cue them to take note of sensations in the body, including any tension that they may be able to let go of. I remind them that the goal is not to "clear the mind," but rather to allow the breath to center the body. Afterward, I once again ask them to note how they feel. In their feedback, my students have observed that this short activity helps them transition to class, relax, focus, and feel connected to one another. I have felt the same effects and, like them, more receptive to joyful learning. When I forget to start class in this way, students inevitably raise their hands and say, "wait, we need to breathe!"

If you are curious to try but don't feel prepared to guide a breathing practice in class, there are numerous options to choose from on the web. I now regularly incorporate an opportunity to pause and breathe in wide range of learning events, including educational development programs. Separately or together, activities that invite learners to note interoceptive cues, label feelings, and use the breath as a centering tool signal that the body has a place in the classroom and an innate intelligence worth tuning into. These practices underscore that rest and

reflection, too often crowded out by pressure to produce, are key to learning. They also lay the groundwork for positive emotional coregulation, as we will explore later.

Interoception operates alongside the perhaps more widely known senses of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, hearing, and proprioception (our sense of our body in space) to shape cognition. These varied sensory loops communicate with the brain to create our understanding of the world, and their intentional activation can boost intellectual work. As Kiefer, Hoffmann, and Arndt (2022) argue:

> Even fairly abstract concepts are grounded in modal systems including emotions, introspection, perception and action. […] Such a grounding in experiences is necessary for a deep understanding of abstract concepts, whereas knowledge is superficial when only based on verbal instruction. We therefore propose that abstract concepts should be taught by providing learners with meaningful visualizations or movements.
>
> *(p. 32)*

Visuals, movement, manipulatives, and other multisensory experiences are part and parcel of elementary education but—with the exception of performance, art, lab, and movement-oriented classes—wane as students progress toward college. A declining sense of joy in school too often parallels this decrease in embodied learning experiences.

If you regularly incorporate varied sensory experiences in your teaching, you may have an opportunity to help your students understand how they support deeper and more joyful learning. On the other hand, a scan of your practice or of teaching on your campus might reveal reliance verbal instruction. Many students spend more classroom time passively watching and listening than actively creating and engaging with diverse sensory textures. From simple additions like drawing, handwriting, music, active listening, and mindful observation to more prep-intensive activities like building models or tasting different foods, engaging students' senses in novel and meaningful ways can stoke attention, understanding, and playfulness.

Teaching and learning through limited sensory channels curtails not only joy, but also accessibility. Embodied learning and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) partner beautifully in creating more access points through which students can engage with knowledge and activities and demonstrate what they know (CAST, 2024). Tucker and Novak (2022) note that UDL shifts the role of the learner "from silent observer and consumer" (p. 4) to empowered co-creator of the learning, resulting in not just more accessible but also more sustainable and joyful experiences for teachers and students alike. Similarly, a classroom environment that enables bodily movement by way of fidgeting, doodling, knitting, or other embodied activities that might be seen as inappropriate in

traditional academic settings enhances learning accessibility. Suppressing the urge to move as we learn, as "whole body listening" protocols ask students to do, pulls on energy reserves and increases cognitive load (Murphy Paul, 2021). A fidget-friendly classroom recognizes that varied bodies learn differently and that many bodies think better while moving.

Bodily motions meaningfully linked to concepts, and that can be reenacted later, can be especially powerful for learning (Kiefer, Hofmann & Arndt, 2022; Murphy Paul, 2021). Research by Susan Goldin-Meadow and Sian Beilock (2010) has revealed the ways that gestures can enhance and shape cognition:

> Gesture actively brings action into a speaker's mental representations, and those mental representations then affect behavior—at times more powerfully than the actions on which the gestures are based. Gesture thus has the potential to serve as a unique bridge between action and abstract thought.
>
> *(p. 1)*

Pointing, nodding, waving, hand motions that signal size or dimension, and other physical echoes of concepts can help us articulate thinking, even before our words are able to. Additionally, the incorporation of gesture has been shown to strengthen the retention of information for those watching and enacting these movements alike (Murphy Paul, 2021). Gesture was an obvious fit in the language classes I once taught. I held an imaginary phone to my ear when I said "teléfono," drove an imaginary car for "manejar," opened my arms wide to signal "grande," and so on. Pointing forward, to the ground, or back over my shoulder were known cues for future, present, and past tense. My students and I would draw an imaginary wavy line with our hands to signal the suspension of affirmation conveyed by the subjunctive mood. Aside from supporting understanding, these movements were playful and uniting. The place of gesture may seem obvious in a language class, but to novice students in any field, new vocabulary and concepts are akin to a new language and can similarly be supported by meaningful motions. If this is something you already do in your teaching, you might share the science linking it to deeper thinking with students. If not, perhaps the evidence will encourage you to get creative and nudge students to have fun embracing gesture.

An embodied and sensory-activating strategy that works well for many teaching contexts and reaps cognitive rewards is simply getting students out of their seats, even for brief moments. The benefits of exercise on cognition are well established (Ratey, 2008; Suzuki, 2015) and should be shared with students. My focus here, however, is on light movement that can get blood and oxygen flowing to the brain in a variety of classes. Such activities should be inclusively designed, with options to accommodate differing access needs and energy levels. Additionally, given higher ed norms, students might at first resist leaving their

seats. Transparency as to why we are asking them to move their bodies can help get them on board. To that end, you might share the evidence that standing boosts executive functioning and working memory (Mehta, Shortz & Benden, 2015) and that even mild walking "substantially enhance[s] creativity" (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014, p. 1148). Metacognitive reflection can help students appreciate how thinking on their feet sparks energy, attention, ideas, and a sense of freedom in their bodies.

To enhance the cognitive benefits of standing up, I often facilitate rotating think-pair-share activities, inviting everyone to reflect on a prompt for a moment, then stand up and chat with one partner for a few minutes, and then repeat the process for as many rotations as time allows. You can also ask students to form two lines or concentric circles, with one side rotating when it's time to change partners. To build in active listening practice and equitable access to the conversation, I often cue students to talk one at a time within a specific time parameter. Alternatively, students can take their small group conversations for a "walk and talk" outside the classroom, which adds sensory richness to the activity. "Four corners" activities prompt students to move to different parts of the room based on their responses to questions. Gallery walks add writing, drawing, and/or speaking to the mix, productively tapping into multiple senses. Any activity that gets students out of their seats offers a cognitive bonus.

I regularly incorporate standing activities in classes and educational development workshops alike. As part of the reflection process, in addition to finding out what they learned, I typically ask "what did you notice? What did you feel?" Often, participants note feeling energized, engaged, and connected by the interaction and laughter that invariably ensue. Comments around awkwardness or uncertainty sometimes surface, too, pointing to the discomfort of stepping outside of educational norms and individual learning preferences. I use those notes as opportunities to add transparency and remind everyone that we will continue to engage in a diversity of activities to offer varied pathways to learning.

Pause, breathe, and reflect:

- How might you help your students appreciate and engage the innate intelligence of their bodies to support joyful learning?
- Do you have opportunities to add movement or sensory texture to the learning experiences you design?

Embodied Environments and Communities

Embodied cognition considers not only what happens within the perceived confines of the body, but also the ways that extensions of and environments around the body shape thinking. As Murphy Paul (2021) summarizes, cognition

is "an act of continuous assembly and reassembly that draws on resources external to the brain" (p. 11). Extra-neural resources can include spaces and people that shape our perception and knowledge and affordances that extend and make our thinking visible. We can help students appreciate the ways that embodied environments and communities catalyze joyful learning.

Most of us have experienced the ways that classroom spaces can encourage or hamper joy. I've taught in sun-filled rooms with movable furniture and dreary halls with fixed seating. When we're stuck with the latter, we can energize the space with activities that get students on their feet and talking with one another, as well as portable sensory inputs (for example, objects, gallery walk artifacts, and music). At the same time, we can advocate for better spaces with campus leaders and facilities teams. I've sadly witnessed classroom redesign projects that duplicated inflexible, forward-facing setups. When we can, we should rearrange classroom furniture to alternatively promote collaboration or individual reflection, depending on the session's goals. My students quickly become accustomed to—and start helping with—a quick classroom reshuffle to center attention on the learning community rather than the podium or the professor.

We can also nudge a joy response by thinking outside of the classroom. Myriad studies attest to the cognitive and mental health benefits of spending time outdoors (Murphy Paul, 2021). As Kelly McGonigal (2019) explains,

> the human brain evolved over a long period of history when humans spent most of their time outdoors, interacting with the natural world. Because of this, the human mind responds to nature in ways that bring out many of our cognitive strengths.
>
> *(p. 156)*

Despite being biologically attuned to the natural world, however, many of us are spending less time in nature than ever, at least in part because "places where people live, work, and go to school generally discourage contact with the natural world," as a 2015–2016 study in the US found (D.J. Case & Associates, 2024). The green space surrounding many college campuses is often underutilized for academic learning. There are sometimes justifiable reasons to stay inside, from accessibility barriers and inclement weather to useful tools being in the classroom. In the absence of such considerations, are we keeping students inside because it truly supports their learning, or in the name of efficiency and order?

Inviting students to walk outside for a few minutes as they engage in reflective or small-group work can boost curiosity, creativity, and connection. We might, at times, even hold class outdoors. Elon University philosophy professor Ryan Johnson (2023) shares what happened when, spurred by the pandemic, he took his classes outside:

> Without walls separating learning from environing, I became increasingly attuned to campus life—the hum of HVAC units, the white noise of fountains, the rhythms of class, the buzz of bikes, the flights of hawks, the jumps of squirrels. More attuned than ever before to the concrete details of my university, my classes changed accordingly, even as the pandemic raged. Never had I experienced classes so palpably alive.

Johnson describes how, amid the natural and permeable boundaries of outdoor classes (now his default), he has witnessed sustained energy, restored attention, increased sociality and creativity, and a greater sense of student agency. Of course, taking class outside can also be messy. Susan Hrach (2021) also recommends outdoor sessions, yet advises that "there's no guarantee of a successful learning occasion, even when students seem enthused about breaking out of the building" (p. 48). She encourages us to venture out at a scale that seems feasible, from a class in a sheltered area to an immersive field trip. We should be clear about our goals and realistic in terms of expectations. Whereas a lecture outside is likely to disappoint, individual, hands-on, or smaller-group work is well suited to outdoor settings. For his part, Johnson reframes inevitable outdoor distractions as productive diversions that can reset or reorient focus (Stachowiak, 2023).

If availing ourselves of the outdoors during class time is not feasible, we can design assignments that encourage students to explore open-air spaces and invite them to reflect on what they discovered. We might also occasionally hold class in different indoor spaces. Like the outdoors, views of nature can inspire creative thinking (Murpy Paul, 2021). I am fortunate to work in a Center for Teaching and Learning that not only has flexible seating but also overlooks a tree-lined quad. A campus leader who held demanding curriculum revision meetings in our space once told me, "We think differently here." I have held classes in the campus art gallery and different studio spaces to provide fresh sensory textures. In my experience, the key is balancing the novelty of a new setting with the routines, structures, and comfort of a familiar space.

Embodied environments also include affordances, or tools, that extend and at times offload cognitive work. In fact, affordances can quickly start to feel like a part of our bodies (Claxton, 2015). Vallée-Tourangeau and Vallée-Tourangeau (2016) call into question common educational practices—like discouraging finger counting to solve math problems or favoring seated, closed-book exams—that perpetuate the notion that cognition happens in our heads alone. The researchers argue that "our capacity to think and reason well at any given moment depends as much on our cognitive abilities as it does on the richness–or paucity–of material things with which to support our thinking and decision-making" (Vallée-Tourangeau & Vallée-Tourangeau, 2016). Pens and markers, poster paper and sticky notes, notebooks and index cards, musical instruments,

objects, furniture, and, of course, digital tools are among the affordances that can help us generate, visualize, and offload thinking.

Whether digital devices support or impede joyful learning is of course the subject of intense debate. My once restrictive policies around mobile phones in class have shifted over the years as useful applications and my understanding of inclusive design have evolved. In addition to being portals to learning, in a world that feels fraught and disjointed, screens can be critical extensions of the self that facilitate an emotional sense of security and connection to others. I now invite students to co-design technology expectations as part of our class norming discussions. We consider what purposes devices serve, how they might connect or disconnect us from learning and each other, and how we will use them to support our individual and collaborative work.

Discussing the affordances and drawbacks of devices with students offers an opportunity to examine the ways that they can siphon joy from the physical body, as well. Laine Nooney (2021) traces a historical path from the emergence of personal computing to insidious and prevalent pain in human bodies. Detailing the proliferation of eye, wrist, neck, and back strains and pains, Nooney notes, "our bodies, quite literally, were never meant to work this way." With our students, we might explore the ways that technologies reshape and remove bodily agency and comfort, and ways to mitigate those impacts. As Nooney (2021) says, "To consider the history of computing through the lens of computer pain is to center bodies, users, and actions over and above hardware, software, and inventors." We can encourage students to mindfully check in about how they are sitting, feeling, and breathing while on their devices; when I pause to do this, I often find that I'm hunched and breathing in a shallow, depleting way. We can suggest they periodically step or look away from screens and offer their bodies diverse movement snacks. We might also invite them to consider the ways that habitually opting for a device over another type of affordance might deprive them of a rich array of sensory inputs: the smell of a book, the texture of an object, the sights and sounds of nature, the feeling of our feet on the ground. What else might be getting crowded out?

Other humans are among the affordances potentially displaced by technology. While the world has changed dramatically since early humanity, the fundamental social wiring of our brains—an evolutionary adaptation that allowed our species to survive and thrive (Barrett, 2021)—has not. With increasingly sophisticated devices competing for our attention (e.g., Artificial Intelligence (AI) on-call as a frictionless collaborator) and epidemic levels of loneliness and isolation in many nations, helping students understand why and how to cultivate human connections is ever-pressing.

The importance of relationship building and a sense of belonging to flourishing in higher education is well established (see, for example, Bowen, 2021; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). Calls for collaborative learning approaches

also abound (e.g., Barkley, Major & Cross, 2014; Davidson & Katapodis, 2022). However, as Bowen (2021) notes, an individualist mindset can still creep into the teaching of even collaboration champions:

> As educators, we have almost certainly perpetuated the common assumption that individuals and not shared communities have accomplished great things. When we talk about critical thinking as an individual activity, we reinforce the popular idea that Miles Davis or Charles Darwin were just unique individuals. Each deserves great credit for their individual achievements, but each also thought with others and relied on the innovation, memory, concepts, and thinking of others.
>
> *(p. 121)*

Most of us likely have opportunities to shed light on how "great minds" benefit from resonance with other brains and bodies. Collaboration feels especially critical today, as Murphy Paul (2019) observes: "individual cognition is simply not sufficient to meet the challenges of a world in which information is so abundant, expertise is so specialized, and issues are so complex" (p. 215).

Learning to think effectively with others is a critical educational outcome, but anyone who has facilitated or engaged in collaborative learning knows that it does not always go smoothly. Though we are physiologically wired for social connection, it can be easier to conform to ideas and people that already share our beliefs than work through cognitive and social dissonance. As Hrach (2021) describes, "biased and unscrupulous brains are less demanding users of energy and therefore can override our capacity to remain open and curious—in other words, to learn" (p. 135). We can help students understand that, like learning, collaborating won't always be without bumps, but that intentionally cultivating relationships with a diversity of people helps us get better at it. By building a richer array of experiences to draw from, we can rewire the default predictions that can get in the way of connecting and learning. Here, the foundation of noticing, naming, and perhaps reframing bodily sensations around learning can be expanded to support fruitful co-thinking.

To leverage the benefits of social learning and avoid unintended harms, trust-building supported by transparency, structure, iterative practice, and metacognition is once again key. Many of the embodied approaches and environments described earlier lay groundwork for collaboration. We can help students understand that, on a profound biological level, individual actions and words impact our collective body/brain coregulation (Barrett, 2021) and shared feelings. A short breathing practice, as described earlier, can support positive emotional resonance. Drafting and regularly revisiting shared class agreements with students and asking them to adapt that process to teamwork can create collective purpose, align expectations, and foster respectful interactions. In a

soundbite-filled world inundated with one-way talking, guidelines for ways to engage in thoughtful discussion, such as the "conversational moves" cards suggested by Stephen Preskill and Stephen Brookfield (2005, pp. 99–100), can equip students with tools to collaborate well. Reflection around what gets in the way of and what supports of joyful collaboration can contribute to a positive learning environment.

Shared purpose and intention can connect us in profound biosocial ways. Collective neuroscience research has shown that "when people converse or share an experience, their brain waves synchronize. Neurons in corresponding locations of the different brains fire at the same time, creating matching patterns, like dancers moving together" (Denworth, 2023). The sense of being "on the same wavelength" with someone is more than just a feeling. Physically mirroring one another's actions has been shown to amplify our collective cognitive power. As Murphy Paul (2021) notes, coordinated movement "primes us for what we might call cognitive synchrony: multiple people thinking together efficiently and effectively" (p. 217). Kelly McGonigal (2019) elaborates on the unifying impact of moving our bodies together:

> The movements you see in others become linked to the movements you feel, and your brain interprets the other bodies as an extension of your own. The more fully the brain integrates these perceptual streams, the more you feel to those you are moving with.
>
> *(pp. 74–75)*

The 2 minutes of breathing that I start classes with can be appreciated through the lens of this embodied ripple effect. My students noted that this practice helped them feel more connected to one another. Their breathing and heartbeats may have even synced up via this shared experience. In addition to priming them for cognitive synchrony, breathing together may have enhanced their sense of agency and social comfort. As McGonigal (2019) notes, through coordinated movement, "your understanding of the part of the world that belongs to you expands, too. This feeling can translate into both self-confidence and social ease" (p. 75).

Walk-and-talk activities offer an opportunity to notice this type of physical and cognitive attunement; you might invite students to see if their steps become synchronized as they share ideas, which is not uncommon. A simple and fun way to bring coordinated movement into the classroom is to cue learners to transition out of breakout conversations using the American Sign Language (ASL) sign for applause. As part of the set up for group work, I ask everyone to pause their conversations and imitate me when they see my hands waving in the air, which creates a progressively quiet swell. Like any kind of coordinated physical activity, this can feel awkward at first. I name the self-consciousness,

layer on playful comment about "jazz hands," and explain that this cue is kinder to some sensory systems than flickering lights, shouting, or clapping (strategies I had used before my former colleague Lott Hill first shared the ASL cue with me). Once participants understand that this is an efficient, accessible way to get everyone on the same page and do it a few times, they start to have fun with it and bring it into other settings.

As you think about bringing coordinated movements into your academic classes, do you note any internal resistance? I do, even as someone who teaches movement and loves to dance. Elementary-age students embrace opportunities to move their bodies in unison. Adults often find enjoyment in doing the same outside of school—dance floors, movement classes, and stadium events come to mind. Shared movement experiences are clearly a pathway to joy. What does the awkwardness of moving in unison in the classroom tell us about perceptions of cognition and the role of the body in higher education?

Pause, breathe, and reflect:

- How can you help students leverage outdoor and novel indoor spaces and a variety of affordances to boost cognition?
- How might you support reflection around the cognitive and physical benefits and drawbacks of digital tools?
- From structured collaboration to coordinated movement, how can you help students think better together?

Embodying Change

Interrogating the role of the body in our classes prompts a larger question: what is the purpose of college? Many of higher education's built spaces and ingrained practices drive us to disconnect from our bodies in ways that may not align with our values. If our purpose is efficiency, compliance, control, or exclusion, then restricting or minimizing the importance of the body makes sense. The teachers and learners I have had the privilege of working with care deeply about learning, well-being, and liberation. They wish to foster agency, curiosity, and connection. Re-centering the body in teaching and learning can help us stay true to those joy-centered practices and values.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- Catalog the ways that you already leverage embodied learning in your classes. How might you enhance transparency and reflection around those activities to help learners appreciate their value?
- Ask students how they would like learning to feel. How might you connect your pedagogies and practices to those outcomes?

- How might you invite students to check in with how they're feeling?
- How might you design learning experiences that activate multiple senses, movement, and a variety of affordances?

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10

THE JOY OF UNLEARNING FAILURE TO PROMOTE STUDENT RESILIENCE

Ilham Sebah

Introduction

The journey through university is a transformative period characterised by intellectual growth, personal development, and the acquisition of new skills. Amidst the challenges and pressures of academia, perhaps especially post-pandemic, resilience emerges as a crucial trait that enables students to adapt, thrive, and flourish. Resilience is defined as the capacity to bounce back from adversity where adversity is also a necessary ingredient to developing resilience. However, to promote resilience, adversity must be experienced to just the right degree. The metaphor of a sapling tree helps illustrate the point: too much wind and the tree uproots and dies; too little wind and the trunk does not develop enough strength to stand on its own. University students must withstand many kinds of "winds" (see Chapter 1 for example). This chapter will focus on two intertwined challenges. For students, *the pressure to excel* academically, socially, and personally can be immense—a form of adversity. At the same time, the learning process often entails *failure*—another form of adversity, and one student often feels ashamed about. In turn, this shame response can trigger a cognitive and emotional shut-down that actually undermines student resilience. Thus, developing resilience in the face of navigating the pressure to excel and the reality of failure is both complex and essential. A key approach to developing resilience is unlearning outdated or harmful beliefs and practices. For university students, traditional concepts of success and failure must be challenged. This chapter explores the profound relationship between *centring the joy of unlearning* a fear of failure and *disrupting the shame* of failure to foster resilience among university students. In other words, through an understanding of unlearning,

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-10

both the emotional liberation it brings and practical strategies, I aim to highlight how centring the joy of unlearning is both possible and can enhance resilience.

The Pressure to Excel and the Fear of Failure

University students are at a critical juncture where their identities are forming, and academic success is often closely tied to their sense of self-worth. When students perceive that their value is contingent on academic achievements, the prospect of failure can become overwhelmingly daunting. This fear is further exacerbated by societal and parental expectations. Moreover, because university degrees are predicated on achieving a particular grade/percentage in order to be awarded a qualification and be deemed "ready for the workplace," the fear of failure is pervasive among university students, significantly impacting their academic experiences and overall well-being. "Regardless of their credentials, many freshmen doubt that they have the necessary brainpower or social adeptness to succeed in college. This fear of failing hits poor, minority and first-generation college students especially hard" (Kirp, 2016). This phenomenon is not merely a fleeting concern but a deep-rooted issue with far-reaching consequences. Early research by Seligman (1991) highlights that fear of failure can lead to learned helplessness, where students may feel that their efforts are futile and consequently give up trying. This fear can also lead to high levels of stress and anxiety, which can impair cognitive functioning and academic performance (Lee et al., 2024). At its core, the fear of failure is intertwined with one's self-concept and self-esteem. Seligman's research into learned helplessness elucidates how chronic exposure to uncontrollable stressors, such as the fear of failure, can lead individuals to develop a sense of powerlessness and lack of agency. Thus, students who experience repeated academic setbacks may start to believe that their efforts are inconsequential, fostering a mindset of learned helplessness. The fear of failure is not only an academic issue but also a significant mental health concern. High levels of stress associated with this fear can lead to various psychological issues, including depression, anxiety disorders, and burnout (Mofatteh, 2020). The constant worry about failing can create a pervasive sense of dread, making it not only difficult for students to enjoy their university experience but also at-risk for dropping out.

Failure, Shame, and Resilience

Reflecting on my own experience as both a student and educator, I myself have subscribed to traditional notions of success (as good) and failure (as bad) and have had to reflect on the role I may have played in inadvertently perpetuating such views in my teaching practice. As someone who grew up in the traditional schooling system during the 1990s and early 2000s, the words "failure" and

"resilience" were never really discussed at all, much less discussed as integrally (and potentially positively) related. Failure had, and to some extent still has, a dirty connotation surrounding it. The word often elicits shame, based on how others may have harmfully reacted to our past low achievement, to not being "a winner" or "the best." Thus, shame plays a crucial role in the experience of failure and the fear of failure (McGregor & Elliot, 2005); therefore, it is important to explore what shame is and how it relates to failure. Brené Brown (2013) defines "shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection." In this way, shame can undermine a sense of belonging, so essential for college student persistence (Strayhorn, 2018). Shame emerges when there is a disparity between one's ideal self and real self, typically occurring when an individual has a negative assessment of their own identity. This negative evaluation includes fears of being unlovable and worries that others will dislike them if they knew the true self. As a result, shame evokes feelings of inadequacy, self-contempt, embarrassment, self-exposure, and indignity.

Shame has also been referred to as "the master emotion" (Goldberg, 1991) because it plays such a critical role in cognitive, affective, motivational experiences. Shame can serve as an "interrupt signal" (Lewis, 1992), informing the self that the actions one has taken have failed, with the most direct consequences being the shut-down of current actions. An individual experiencing shame may feel compelled to withdraw and have a heightened self-consciousness that often creates a self-binding and somewhat paralysing effect—for example wanting the "floor to open up and swallow you" or "crawl through a hole." Shame can be distinguished from guilt in that shame motivates an avoidance response (Tangney, 1995). Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek (2014) highlight the detrimental impact of shame on individuals' psychological well-being. They found that shame is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. These findings are particularly relevant for university students, who are often at a critical juncture in their personal and academic development. Moreover, a larger shame culture in academia (Bayers & Camfield, 2018) can compound developmental pressures, creating another vicious cycle (on top of that created by fear of failure) that impedes academic performance and overall well-being.

Shame is also connected to the stories we tell ourselves about our successes and failures, and to what we attribute these significantly influences our future motivation. According to Weiner (1985), when individuals attribute their failures to stable and uncontrollable personal factors (like ability rather than effort), they tend to feel shame. This feeling of shame subsequently reduces their motivation to engage in similar tasks in the future. In situations where failure is possible, students might take actions specifically aimed at protecting their self-worth

by steering attributions away from their abilities. Effort, therefore, becomes a "double-edged sword" (Covington & Omelich, 1979). If a student exerts effort at something and still fails, it reflects poorly on their ability. If they personally value that thing (as valuable in itself or as a means to accomplish other goals), they may be particularly susceptible to experiencing shame. However, if they do not put in the effort, they can "save face" by attributing the failure to a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability. (We begin to see why so many students may adopt an "I don't care" attitude about their educational pursuits: to admit to caring opens the door for shame.)

This dilemma of being caught between effort, caring, risk of failure, and shame need not be a Catch-22. Shame is, after all, socially constructed. Brown (2015) emphasises that shame is often rooted in societal and cultural norms that stigmatise failure. In environments where perfection is expected, failure becomes a source of shame rather than a learning opportunity. This perspective is particularly prevalent in educational settings, where students may feel intense pressure to perform flawlessly. When failure occurs, it is not just a personal setback but a profound blow to their self-worth, making it harder for them to bounce back. But all is not lost. Brown's (2006) Shame Resilience Theory (SRT) offers higher education a structure for resilience-building that addresses the strategies and processes used to mitigate the effects and consequences of shame. Shame resilience is defined as the capacity to recognise shame, navigate it constructively, and ultimately develop greater courage, compassion, and connection from the experience. The SRT framework identifies four key mutually reinforcing elements that determine one's capacity for resilience against shame: (1) recognising and accepting personal vulnerability, (2) having critical awareness of socio-cultural expectations, (3) forming mutually empathic relationships that encourage reaching out to others, and (4) effectively communicating about emotions. Achieving skills in all four aspects has been argued as necessary to develop shame resilience. I argue here that joy is the animating force that undergirds this process. If shame is an anti-social emotion—"more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behavior than the solution or cure" (Brown, 2013)—pro-social emotions, like joy, help disrupt feelings of excruciating self-consciousness. How so?

Joy and Resilience

Joy, in contrast to shame, is a positive emotion characterised by feelings of pleasure, contentment, and a sense of connection to others. I argue joy is the inverse of shame, counteracts its effects, and promotes resilience. Past research demonstrates the importance of joy in fostering resilience, highlighting how positive emotions contribute to coping mechanisms and overall well-being. According to Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions

like joy broaden our thought-action repertoires, encouraging exploration, creativity, and problem-solving. This expansion of mental and emotional resources helps individuals build lasting psychological and social assets, such as coping skills and supportive relationships. These assets are crucial for resilience, enabling individuals to navigate stress and adversity more effectively. This perspective on positive emotions might help explain why those who experience positive emotions in the midst of stress are able to benefit from their broadened mindsets and successfully regulate their negative emotional experiences.

Joy has also been shown to reduce stress and promote mental health. A study by Pressman and Cohen (2005) found that positive emotions are associated with lower levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, and improved immune function. By reducing physiological stress responses, joy helps maintain a healthy body and mind, which are essential for resilience. Cohn et al. (2009) found that positive emotions, like joy, not only buffer against the adverse effects of stress but also help individuals recover more quickly from stressful events. This resilience is crucial for university students, who often face a myriad of academic and social challenges.

Joy Entwined with Shame Resilience

As has been discussed elsewhere in this book, joy is associated both with positive agentic self-awareness *and* with a sense of belonging or mattering within a community. Overlaying a joy lens on Brown's SRT illustrates how this pro-social emotion works to disrupt shame. If one of the first steps towards shame resilience is the ability to recognise and accept personal vulnerability, *experiencing joy through such moments of vulnerability* can help activate that resilience. As Brown (2015) puts it:

> Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.
>
> *(p. 34)*

Second, *a joyful sense of positive agency* can help promote the critical awareness to evaluate personal experiences of shame within the context of socio-cultural expectations, helping individuals understand that feelings of shame often reflect larger societal issues rather than personal flaws. Brown's research also found that individuals aware of their vulnerabilities are more likely to respond to shame with recognition—they can name it and not respond reactively (e.g. in a shame spiral). Whereas those unaware of their vulnerabilities often feel overwhelmed and confused by shameful experiences.

Third, awareness of vulnerabilities also increases the likelihood of seeking and finding support, which is crucial for building resilience against shame. Forming mutually empathetic relationships is essential for resilience-building. These relationships create support networks that help identify shared experiences of shame and foster the realisation that individuals are not alone in their feelings, *resulting in joyful feelings of connection*: a beneficent feedback loop to disrupt a shame spiral.

Lastly, the ability to talk about shame enables individuals to engage in meaningful dialogue about resilience. Listening to one another's pain may not always feel good, but *"bearing witness" and finding solidarity awakens a joy akin to awe* (see Chapter 5, "Joyful Justice"). Moreover, understanding the language and concepts related to shame allows individuals to discuss it with others and develop additional strategies for building resilience against it.

However, helpful as these strategies can be for developing resilience against shame, these may not be enough to unseat deep aversions to failure. Resilience is sometimes confused with endurance, "just getting on with it" instead of unpacking the lessons that are often buried in adversity. Failure is seen as something to endure rather than learn from. However, embracing failure is actually essential to developing resilience. If so, how can we help students (and each other) see failure as an opportunity for joy?

The Concept of Unlearning

Unlearning is not merely the opposite of learning; it is a complex and proactive process that involves critically examining and shedding preconceived notions that no longer serve us. According to Becker and Delahaye (2006), unlearning is "a process involving the discarding of old routines to make way for new learning" (p. 245). This concept is particularly relevant in educational settings where students' beliefs about failure can profoundly impact their academic and personal development. The psychological underpinnings of unlearning involve both cognitive and emotional processes. Cognitive unlearning requires students to challenge and change their existing knowledge structures, which is often a difficult task due to their deep-seated nature. Emotional unlearning involves dealing with the feelings associated with letting go of long-held beliefs, which can be equally challenging. For example, students who have internalised the idea that success and/or failure is a reflection of their inherent worth may experience significant anxiety and self-doubt when attempting to unlearn this belief. This is certainly not uncommon among my student population; many students enter a higher education environment with their own past experiences and preconceived ideas about what academic success looks like—ideas that are intricately linked to the absence of failure. The traditional education system also often perpetuates a binary view of success (high grades and academic achievements) and failure

(the inability to meet these standards). Letting go means entering a grey area where learning is a messy, non-linear process. As, indeed, it is.

Implementing Unlearning about Failure: The Resilience Enhancement Programme for Students

Understanding the connections between failure, shame, joy, and unlearning has practical implications for enhancing resilience among university students. Joy does not just happen by accident; it can be fostered and focused in specific dimensions to disrupt learned helplessness, activate agency, build connections, and improve persistence. Several universities have successfully implemented programmes aimed at fostering joy and resilience among students. For example, the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center offers courses and workshops on resilience and well-being, teaching students how to harness positive emotions to cope with adversity. Similarly, Stanford University's Resilience Project provides resources and support for students dealing with failure, encouraging them to view setbacks as integral to the learning process.

The programme that I co-developed as part of my Ph.D. is the Resilience Enhancement Programme (REP-S), a biopsychosocial intervention designed to bolster resilience among higher education students. Developed in response to the rising levels of stress and mental health issues in university populations, REP-S aims to provide students with tools to better manage stress and enhance their overall well-being. The programme's comprehensive approach includes psychophysiological as well as social and cognitive resilience techniques to address the multifaceted nature of stress and resilience. As with Brown's (2006) SRT, joy might be seen as the animating force that makes the programme effective.

The physiological component of the REP-S intervention includes breathing techniques where students learn the physiological aspects of diaphragm breathing and square breathing to manage stress. This component also includes meditation, which introduces the theory and benefits of mindfulness, with practical exercises like a 5-minute body scan to promote relaxation and awareness. Such exercises connect with the research on joy and embodiment (see Chapter 9). The social resilience element of the intervention includes exercises on effective help-seeking. This involves discussions and exercises focused on identifying potential sources of support and overcoming barriers to seeking assistance. (The role of social media in both supporting and undermining help-seeking behaviours is also explored.) Students experience joy when their sense of isolation is disrupted. Cognitive resilience is central to unlearning toxic ideas about failure. It involves developing mental frameworks that support positive adaptation to stress and adversity. Within the REP-S programme, cognitive resilience is enhanced through various techniques that promote flexible thinking

and problem-solving skills. These techniques help students navigate setbacks more effectively and maintain a positive outlook even in the face of difficulties. This includes opportunities to reconsider their beliefs about failure. Exercises involve identifying unanticipated beneficial outcomes of what (at the time may have) felt like disaster. By seeing these as the "gifts of failure," we use positive emotions to blunt the sting of failure.

One of the most effective ways to unlearn the negative connotations of failure is to redefine it as feedback. According to Dweck (2006), adopting a growth mindset—the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and learning—can transform how students perceive failure. Failure-as-feedback becomes a stepping stone for growth rather than a judgement of one's abilities. In the REP-S we help students develop a growth mindset by exploring the concept of performance and mastery goals. Performance goals are oriented around demonstrating competence and receiving favourable feedback from others. They focus on achieving measurable outcomes, such as obtaining high grades, winning competitions, or earning promotions. While performance goals can drive individuals to excel, they often tie success to external validation and comparison with others. This external focus can sometimes lead to anxiety and fear of failure, as individuals may feel pressured to constantly prove their worth. Mastery goals, on the other hand, emphasise personal growth, learning, and self-improvement. These goals are intrinsically motivated, focusing on the process rather than the outcome. Individuals with mastery goals strive to develop new skills, deepen their understanding, and improve their competence over time. This orientation fosters a growth mindset, where challenges are viewed as opportunities to learn rather than threats to one's self-worth. By prioritising mastery goals, individuals shed the dismal burden of external expectations and embrace the joy of intrinsic engagement, of unselfconscious Flow, which helps them cultivate resilience as they become more adaptable and persistent in the face of obstacles. In turn, intrinsic satisfaction derived from learning and self-improvement provides a stable foundation for subsequent motivation, reducing the fear of failure and enhancing the ability to recover from setbacks. During REP-S, students are taught how to set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) goals and distinguish between performance and mastery goals, focusing on the process of improvement rather than solely on outcomes. This shift helps reduce the fear of failure, as students recognise that setbacks are part of the journey towards achieving their goals. The emphasis on mastery goals, in particular, encourages a long-term perspective where learning and development are valued over immediate success.

The REP-S process of unlearning also helps students uncover hidden (because they are shameful) beliefs about failure. In one of our core activities, students are encouraged to reflect on a past time that they received a grade that was lower than what they had expected and to lean into the emotional, behavioural, and

social consequences of the experience. Students are asked to reflect on questions such as the following: "what feelings did you have during this experience?" "how did you behave during this time—did you seek help or withdraw?" "how did you feel you were perceived by others during this time?" "what did you learn about yourself during this time?" These are the so-called grey areas of growth mentioned earlier in this chapter. It is in what Brené Brown (2015) refers to as the "arena" in which understanding and, in turn, growth takes place. One of the most striking commonalities among the responses to these questions was the negative valence of words that were associated with their experiences.

Because the process of unlearning adverse reactions to failure is pivotal in cultivating resilience among students, the next steps in REP-S encourage a paradigm shift by helping students positively reframe their understanding of failure. This reorientation involves viewing failure not as a definitive endpoint but as a critical component of the learning process. By changing the narrative around failure, students can unlearn the automatic association of failure with negative self-worth and instead see it as an opportunity for growth and learning. Positive reframing exercises include activities that encourage them to identify and challenge their negative beliefs about failure. For instance, the ABC (Activating Event, Belief, Consequences) technique helps students dissect their responses to failure and reconstruct their thought patterns to focus on potential positive outcomes. For example, in reflecting on those past failures, we ask students to reflect on whether their feelings, beliefs, and feared outcomes were actually *accurate*: Did that one failure have the kind of catastrophic effect in your life that you feared it would? Did other people actually see you as less-than? Generally, the answers are "no," and students come to realise there were proactive help-seeking behaviours they could have taken to prevent or mitigate the failure in the first place. Most importantly, students recognised there was a lot to learn from failure. Far from being a fiend to flee from, failure could become a friend. This cognitive restructuring is crucial in shifting from a failure-averse mindset to one that joyfully embraces challenges as a path to personal development.

Linking the REP-S to Joy and Unlearning Failure

Experiencing joy in learning and personal growth is a powerful antidote to the negative emotions associated with failure. Joy arises from the recognition of progress, the accomplishment of goals, and the intrinsic satisfaction of engaging in meaningful activities. In the context of REP-S, joy is fostered through various components that encourage students to celebrate their successes and appreciate their efforts. Mindfulness practices within REP-S, such as body scan meditation, play a crucial role in cultivating joy because they foster an embodied appreciation for the present moment. Further, by focusing on their current experiences without

judgement, students learn to find joy in the process of learning and growing, regardless of external outcomes. This helps counteract feelings of shame and self-doubt, promoting a more positive and balanced emotional state. There is something of a paradox here: healthy self-awareness helps reduce neurotic self-consciousness.

The long-term impact of REP-S on students' resilience and well-being is a critical aspect of the programme's effectiveness. While the immediate benefits of reduced stress, increased self-esteem, and decreased neuroticism are significant (Robinson et al., 2021), the enduring effects of unlearning failure and embracing joy are equally important. By instilling positive coping strategies and fostering a resilient mindset, REP-S equips students with the tools they need to navigate future challenges successfully. Follow-up assessments and booster sessions can help reinforce the skills learned during the initial intervention. This ongoing support helps ensure that students continue to benefit from the programme and apply the resilience techniques in various contexts. Additionally, integrating REP-S into the broader curriculum and offering it to students early in their academic careers can maximise its long-term impact, helping students develop resilience from the outset and throughout their educational journey.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- What kind of relationship do *you* have with failure?
- How might you share your own "recovery from failure(s) story" as a model for students to emulate?
- How might you create a supportive classroom community that can disrupt "shame spirals" with joyful authentic (vulnerable) connection?

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11

OVERCOMING STEM IMPOSTER SYNDROME THROUGH JOYFUL CURIOSITY

Jackie Shay

Introduction

"I don't know what I am doing. I am not made to think this way. I can't do this. I faked my way here, and everyone is going to find out that I am not a scientist." Can you relate? This was my inner monologue for many years. I had a fixed mindset about my ability to do science (Dweck, 2006; Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). I was certain you had to be born with the left brain on fire to be a scientist, a natural gift, a static characteristic that I was not granted. I convinced myself I did not belong, and I found myself saying, "I am not smart enough" as I troubleshooted a polymerase chain reaction by raising the annealing temperature on a thermocycler, or "I don't belong in academia" as I crawled around in the jungle, discovering new species of mushrooms in Madagascar, or "I am a fraud – if anyone asks me a question, they will know how little I know" as I walked across the stage to accept my master's degree in fungal systematics and evolution and eventually my doctoral degree in quantitative and systems biology. I was a first-generation college student, and like many, I suffer from imposter syndrome, a psychological phenomenon when you feel like a fraud, even if you are successful (Clance & Imes, 1978; Ramsey & Brown, 2018). It can affect anyone, from anywhere, and lead to perfectionism and burnout (Breeze, 2018; Parkman, 2016). While it is a mindset I will always need to manage, I have found an antidote to the *fear* generated by the imposter voice in my head – *joyful curiosity*.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-11

What Happens to Our Joy?

When I reflect on my journey toward my Ph.D., I realize I was motivated by significant moments of curiosity that inspired me to ask questions and explore the unknown. As a child, I remember the unknown was normal. I would naturally gravitate toward the unfamiliar, sparked by curiosity that helped me learn and grow. This is authentic exploration and discovery, the first stages of scientific thinking (Jirout, 2020) – like building a tower of blocks and knocking it over to see how it collapses (physics), blowing milk bubbles through a straw to see how many will pile on top of each other (chemistry), or taking apart a machine to understand how it worked (engineering). What made you curious? What questions did you ask? How did you answer them? Did you predict what would happen?

Curiosity is a form of wonder held by many living creatures (Berlyne, 1966). It motivates us to learn and grow (Berlyne, 1978). It can make us more open to new experiences and ideas, and more willing to ask questions and explore – sparking creativity to discover innovative ways of solving complex problems (Hardy et al., 2017). For me, I experienced joy through curiosity – digging up flowers, dissecting seeds, uncovering rocks, and watching insects (biology and geology). In the summer months in New Jersey, our yard would be overgrown with dandelions, and I would revel in kicking the seedheads, known as achenes for the botanically inclined, and watch the seeds float away with their fluffy umbrellas, known as pappus. I would wonder about that fluff. What is it? Why is it there? I would watch the wind carry it in different directions and find it stuck to my clothes. What a joy it is to be a curious child at play! Isn't this intrinsic motivation what we hope our students will feel? These playful moments were like nascent science experiments, because everyone is a scientist at the start, making observations, asking questions, and testing hypotheses as we push the limits of our understanding. If we all have these natural propensities, then why don't we have more people becoming scientists and working collaboratively to help solve our world's biggest problems, like climate change, hunger, pollution, water deficit, energy capture, and more? Instead, we have a retention problem in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), in part due to the fear of failure (Sithole et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2019).

As we continue to learn through experimentation, we naturally encounter failure and pain. We learn to avoid these results. Hot pans burn. Soap stings the eye. The fall is more painful when you run. Our natural joy from exploration, curiosity, and discovery gets clouded by the fear of getting hurt, making a mistake, disappointing others, or not being able to succeed according to other people's expectations (Lester, 1968). Eventually, "I won't" becomes "I can't," and now the mindset has shifted. The normalcy of dwelling in the unknown of childhood has worn off and is replaced with anxiety, apathy, and fear. This

process is amplified in school where the focus on getting the right answer overwhelms the process of learning through experimentation and failure, and soon enough the intuitive practice of science fades and is replaced with rote memorization for the sole purpose of "winning" a good grade (Lindholm, 2018). Learning turns into a form of pain, so clearly articulated in the overuse of the word "rigor" in academia (Gannon, 2020).

When Academic Rigor Diminishes Joy

My relationship with rigor is complicated. In one way, my rigorous schooling helped me learn discipline and structure, but it stifled my natural ability to think creatively and speculate independently. The rigidity of the content, the schedule, and the superficial outcomes all demonstrated a priority for the teacher, not the students. My experience with the content did not matter. Like many, I quickly discovered that STEM was not the place for me. Throughout K–12, I was seen as the class clown and was not taken seriously by most teachers. I was loud, and I liked making jokes. I would personify science or make humorous analogies to connect concepts to my ways of knowing about the world, like how plants and fungi can be friends. My teachers were not amused by my approach as it distracted from their teaching, and yet, we were encouraged to use nursery songs and irrelevant mnemonics to remember content, like the quadratic formula with *Pop Goes the Weasel*. Imagine if we were, instead, encouraged to create our own stories or songs, how joyful and memorable that would be! I was regularly reminded, "your way is not the way we do things," as if there was no room for agency, laughter, or spontaneity in STEM, only the formula, only the exact wording of the textbook, only the correct labeling, only the way it has always been and always will be. Sit. Be still. Don't innovate. I would get easily bored with the sterility of the classroom and would look out the window. Queue the "Jackie! Pay attention – you are daydreaming again!" In fact, in elementary school, I was sent to the principal's office for daydreaming … twice. Punished for marveling at the genius engineering of a spider's web.

I responded to STEM rigor accordingly. I found comfort, meaning, and connection in theater, creative writing, and journaling where I would express the curiosities of my mind through stories, characters, and doodling. This was how I moved through schooling, leaning into my writing as a safe place while enduring the mental and emotional abuse from STEM teachers who tossed me aside. By the time I entered high school, I was completely committed to a career in acting and theater, convinced the stage was where my skills and interests best intersected, and I begrudgingly took science classes to get by. Then something happened. I was a few weeks into my ninth-grade algebra class when the teacher handed back a quiz with a huge "A+" on it. I was baffled. My teacher, Mrs. Morrison, approached me during class and said, "Jackie, I was impressed with

how you solved this problem. You didn't do it the way I was expecting you to, but you still got the right answer and I want to reward you for your creativity." I stared back at her in disbelief. She must have made a mistake. There is no way I was getting a good grade in math. I sucked at math! What happened here? Mrs. Morrison didn't confine my learning to a strict process. She was flexible and recognized that students may use different methods to understand the problems – she allowed for student agency. After this example, she was more explicit in class about choice as process inspired by my responses!

My hidden math skills continued to emerge slowly, like a butterfly breaking free from its chrysalis. In my tenth-grade trigonometry class, Mrs. Takiguchi validated my fear in ways that made me feel seen. She acknowledged how brave I was for offering an answer on the white board and discussed mistakes as opportunities to engage in supportive class discussions. I became more confident, telling myself, "Hey, maybe I am good at math!" But this butterfly didn't get to fly far when my 11th-grade pre-calculus teacher ridiculed me in class, calling me stupid, and publicly saying that I would never be capable of taking a college-level calculus class. He crushed the butterfly with his strict process, inflexible grading policies, and misdirected philosophy that public humiliation would force students to do better. I failed that class and had to retake it with him a second year for another round of scrutiny. That class squashed any hope I had that I was good at math.

Infuriated by years of feeling like I was incapable of doing STEM, I did something unusual – I developed a deep motivation to prove the nay-sayers wrong. During the summer between my junior and senior year in high school, I decided I would apply for a pre-medical hospital internship at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles. I spent that summer talking with doctors about their experiences in various departments while learning the trade, including neonatal intensive care, radiology, and oncology. Not one person had the same pathway to their career in medicine, and they valued diverse backgrounds and perspectives. At one point, a doctor told me that my time as an actress and doing improvisation would come in handy for providing care to patients, adapting in fast-paced environments, and expressing empathy for others. I decided right there that I would major in biology, become a medical doctor, and prove I could do science! I put on my tunnel vision goggles and focused, now I needed to go to a good college that was going to help me get there, and I was determined to take advantage of every opportunity to make my medical school application as strong as it could be. Wait … college? How do I do college?

Being First Is Terrifying ... and Wonderful

My mom is a total badass – she is strong and independent and taught me everything I needed to know to succeed in life. But, the day I asked for guidance

about applying to college, her mood changed. She was lost for words, a rare moment for her. She looked at me and said, "Jackie, I love you, but I can't help you. You are on your own. I don't know what to do." It was the first time she had ever told me she didn't know what to do. My mom had not had the opportunity to go to college; she did not have the college cultural capital to share her insights with me. How do I get started? What do I do? How do I know if I am doing it right? Who can help me? I didn't know the term at the time, but I was experiencing some of the fears and anxieties of being a first-generation college student. As that fear of not knowing what to do started to creep in, something else, something much more meaningful, overwhelmed me, and it is best described as wonder. What *can* happen? In that moment, I found something beautiful in this opportunity to discover, create, and grow something entirely new – to be part of something much bigger than myself. The joy I unearthed in that wonderment has defined how I have (and still do) approached fear in the face of uncertainty as a first-generation scientist.

Looking back, I really had no idea what I was doing when I applied to college. Can I also take a moment to acknowledge that all the applications were still on paper?! I lived in California and knew the UC system by reputation, so "I guess that's a good school?" Unsure, I fought back the fear and reached out for help from a high-school advisor. She heard my story and asked me if I had heard of the University of California, Merced. It was the newest UC, opening the next year, and she was jazzed about the potential for me to be part of an inaugural class. What a unique opportunity! I was convinced it was the best fit for my creative and eager personality, so I applied and was accepted. Lucky me, they accepted all who met the minimum criteria. My mom and I took the weekend to drive out to the campus a few hundred miles north – an experience I will never forget.

The sun was beaming down on us, my mom and I looked in complete awe at the chaos of lumber and tractors surrounding a sprinkling of bungalows and a library. She stood next to me, unusually silent, as she waited patiently to see my reaction. My fingers reached out to grip the chain-link fence separating me from my future. I still remember that feeling of the metal, the heat, and dust on my skin as I tightened my grip and said, "I have to go here." My mom looked at me with a slurry of shifting emotions that she held back for my advantage: pride, concern, worry, anticipation, unease, and excitement. There was nothing there, no classrooms, no upper-class mentors, no student organizations, no accreditation, no culture, nothing. It was a blank canvas, and the vastness of uncertainty was terrifying … for both of us. Oh, the wonder of possibilities!

First-Generation Imposter Syndrome

UC Merced proved to be one of the best decisions I have ever made in my life. In this playground of uncertainty, I became aware of my crushing imposter

syndrome and learned how to navigate through it (Breeze, 2018). Naturally imposter syndrome and first-generation experiences go hand in hand (Holden et al., 2024). Not knowing the hidden curriculum of higher education makes you feel like you are not supposed to be there (Gibbons et al., 2019). In all honesty, I did not know I was a first-generation student until I was at the end of my college experience. I was not sure what being first-generation meant, and it is not always easy to classify. However, UC Merced is home to over 65% first-generation students and felt like a safe place for me to explore these feelings – being first was normal here. In this climate, I learned to recognize when I felt disconnected or confused and I trained myself to act and ask for help whenever that happened.

Outside of class, I was a collegial entrepreneur, building the first research institution of the 21st century from dirt. I built student organizations, student government, pre-health professional fraternities, and even a clinical volunteer program at the local hospital for pre-medical students like me. I did everything I could to push past the fear of not knowing what to do and instead focused on doing it. However, the classroom was a different story. My STEM courses in college were highly traditional. Read, listen, regurgitate, repeat … you know the routine. STEM fields continue to be places that deter the diverse minds it sorely needs (Sithole et al., 2017). What a missed opportunity! For a first-generation student with massive imposter syndrome, the doors are already shut, and I needed help to open them. I had tunnel vision and limited myself to doing what I thought I needed to do to get into medical school. Period. I did not realize what I was ignoring along the way, and over time my curiosity plummeted and so, too, did the joy of learning. So how did my curiosity, a strong force in my life, get fed? What supported my learning? Certainly not the pedagogy I was enduring.

Keeping Curiosity Alive and Well

When I was a child, I would explore the mountains behind our home with my sister, trying to make meaning from what I observed. Which flowers did the bees visit most? How many different types of rocks could I find? I would pretend to be camping in the wilderness, healing our wounds with the wild aloe plants and eating the wild blackberries. As an ecologist today, I realize these moments cultivated my curiosity for and connection with nature. These lessons were amplified during the summer months I spent in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, where I learned to appreciate biodiversity and evolution. I learned to identify native montane plants in the high-elevation tundra and marveled at how life persists in the harshest climates. How did these tiny flowers endure nine months of winter only to burst through the snowmelt in spring? Awesome.

In the Rockies, I had the freedom to explore. Learning was a low-risk activity, not paired with punishment, grades, or expectations. A place where I could learn the name of a plant because I wanted to. Being outside helped me feel connected to something much bigger than myself, especially when I could share that experience with others. As Mirna Valerio puts it in her interview on *The Science of Happiness* podcast, "you're immediately in community with other people – I think they refer to it as deep hanging out" (Keltner & Valerio, 2023; Walmsley, 2018). Combined with the ability to self-direct my learning, a positive feedback loop of increased endorphins, feelings of connectedness and purpose made it feel good to learn! I did not realize this at the time, but I was experiencing the first stages of "flow state," a concept conceived by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi that describes that feeling of losing yourself in the moment and finding a place of productive learning almost unconsciously (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). My environment inspired deep awareness and wonder – a state of awe that would later be the driver of my academic curiosities, leading me to a Ph.D.

Unfortunately, the summers were temporary, and I would eventually return to the classroom. Return to the chair I would sit in all day, listening with no exploration, no agency, no room to tap into my intrinsic motivation to discover more about the natural world. In school, the natural world was limited to the pages of the dense textbooks and assessed with concept check questions at the end of each chapter and unit. Curiosity once again stifled by artificial "rigor." Then, something life-changing happened: I found flow state again, this time in class! It happened sporadically, but each time was memorable and accelerated my science identity and skills. Two classes in my fourth and final year as an undergraduate changed the way I saw myself as a possible researcher.

In anatomy, the instructor secured a human cadaver and asked if anyone in the class wanted to volunteer time to work on the body. I and one other student excitedly raised our hands. I couldn't believe among all the pre-med students that only two wanted this opportunity. Each week, we would adorn our gloves and gowns and dissect the body of a 72-year-old man. All the concepts from class sunk in deep as I peeled ligament away from skin tissue and saw how different the stomach tissue was from everything else – so much surface area to absorb nutrients, of course! Here, I found flow state as we worked together for hours discovering the intricate organization of the human body and valuing the relationship between all the parts to each other. Anatomy and physiology clicked into place.

In astrobiology, a class beautifully co-taught by a microbial evolutionary marine biologist and an astrophysicist, I experienced flow state again, this time with an entire research project. The professors made a bold choice – they gave students agency! They asked us to choose any valid research direction that could

lead to the discovery of extraterrestrial life. I teamed up with a friend of mine in class to develop a proposal I am still proud of to this day. We proposed Saturn's sixth-largest moon, Enceladus, as a candidate for life. Based on the evidence provided by Voyager and Cassini, we wrote about how the icy moon's venting of water vapor and surface topology suggested subsurface oceans which could harbor the right ingredients and environment for life. We lost ourselves in this research, digging deeper into biochemistry, history of life in the primordia of Earth, and philosophizing different ways of defining life beyond our Earth-bound understanding. In that moment, we were scientists as we effortlessly connected ideas from across disciplines to build a research project. I began enjoying science writing and was valued for it when I was asked to contribute an article I wrote about HPV vaccines for the inaugural undergraduate research journal at UC Merced – my first publication.

My journey toward science was driven by a deep desire to learn more about the way nature works. It was not necessarily nurtured in school nor promoted by pedagogies that included me in the definition of what it means to be a scientist. It was driven by my own innate curiosity and cultivated by my self-directed learning style. I fed my hunger for more and it brought me immense joy. Imagine if all of my schooling had been a place where my curiosity was nurtured instead of punished, where my personal experiences were invited into the classroom, so I could draw connections between my strengths and careers in STEM, where being outside was part of the curriculum, or where rigor was replaced with vigor.

I managed to push past the barriers and gain the skills and expertise needed for STEM to take me seriously. I will always have imposter syndrome, but now when those insecurities creep into my thoughts, I smile and welcome them like an old friend. Being first-generation ended up being a gift! It takes courage to push past the fear of not knowing, and I became resilient over time, just like the tundra flowers. I have reframed fear into opportunities for learning, growth, and teaching, reprogramming my senses to embrace the unknown with excitement and wonder, knowing that there is always more to do, see, know, and share. Fear is a chance to connect with others through a shared vulnerability and commitment to life-long learning. It is where I find wisdom and power to withstand and overcome obstacles. It is all about mindset! Now, the unknown is where I thrive – it is my place of joy!

Joy-Centered Pedagogies that Promote Joyful Curiosity

My story is a case study of how curiosity can inspire joy in the face of uncertainty, and beyond my experience. This is a real phenomenon (Hsiung et al., 2022) that can be nurtured and validated with intentional pedagogy. The following joy-centered pedagogical strategies are inspired from my personal journey, discovering how curiosity can serve as a bridge between the world of fear and

joy. Each section includes evidence that supports their use and strategies for how to incorporate them into class.

Awe and Mindfulness

Awe and mindfulness are transformative pedagogies that can deeply enrich teaching and learning. Experiencing awe can promote academic success through curiosity (Anderson et al., 2020) and greater agency and resilience through reduced stress (Monroy & Keltner, 2023). This emotional state cultivates an appreciation for learning by boosting motivation, connection, and belonging (Cuzzolino, 2021; Keltner, 2024). Because awe is infinitely variable and unique to everyone's experiences, it offers diverse pathways to finding meaning and purpose. Sharing awe-inspiring moments with others enhances these connections, highlighting what we find meaningful together (Szekely, 2021). Community and connectedness are further strengthened through activities like "awe walks," where students can explore their surroundings with a sense of wonder and curiosity (Keltner, 2024). Experiencing awe drives the search for explanations and promotes scientific inquiry, as exemplified by Einstein's quote (1935): "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science." Awe can also bring about a heightened level of self-awareness and mindfulness. Practicing meditation or integrating quiet time for reflection in class can ground students in the present moment and enhance their ability to experience awe (Chen & Mongrain, 2021).

Dacher Keltner (2024) describes eight types of awe that can be cultivated. Here, I acknowledge four as excellent candidates for instilling awe-based curiosity in STEM courses, though all are worth exploring. Collective effervescence is the feeling of connectedness from a group flow experience. Think about a time when you solved a problem with a group and how good that felt – that is collective effervescence, and it can emerge from meaningful and successful group-based learning experiences. Design meaningful outcomes when incorporating group work into class and take the time to set up group dynamics so students can find this flow together. Nature is an obvious source of awe in STEM, but so rarely do students get a chance to experience STEM outdoors. Consider assigning an awe walk with guiding questions to help students connect the content from class to observations in nature, such as the physics involved in bee flight. Visual design and art are underutilized in STEM and can be a great entry point for students. Consider including more images that express the beauty of science and take time in class to appreciate beauty or ask students to create scientific art as part of an assignment. Epiphany is a moment of being awe-struck by the truth, and science is a wonderful method for creating these moments. Ask students to share their "Ah-Ha!" moments in a written reflection or with each other in groups and watch the awe fill the classroom.

Inquiry, Discovery, and Research

Curiosity's connection to motivation and learning is garnering more attention in the academic community, invigorating pedagogical strategies that inspire independent thinking, inquiry, and self-directed learning (Ješková et al., 2022; MacKinnon & Archer-Kuhn, 2023; Qablan et al., 2024). The strategies I will outline include course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs), inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, and discovery-based learning. To successfully implement these strategies, it is first important to embrace the discomfort of not knowing what will happen. That uncertainty is part of the joy! Second, consider activities that are challenging and relevant to the students. For example, in the Central Valley of California, infection from the Valley Fever fungus, *Coccidioides*, is rampant and students are interested in understanding the cause and solving the problem. Third, all these forms of learning are highly collaborative. Help your students get comfortable with learning together and build community. Provide ample feedback to support student-driven curiosity.

CUREs embed research experiences directly into STEM courses, allowing all students to engage in authentic science and contribute to a broader understanding of the discipline (Auchincloss et al., 2014; Bangera & Brownell, 2014). This approach is beneficial for first-year students who might not consider research opportunities otherwise, transfer students whose only chance at research could be a CURE, and first-generation students who might need a soft entry into research before joining a formal lab. Many students are not aware they can seek out research experiences, and even if they do, there is certainly not enough space for all students to get into a research lab. Engaging in a CURE that addresses real-world problems, like local water treatment, allows students to break free from imposter syndrome and work collaboratively with others to conduct real research that matters to their local community (Bangera & Brownell, 2014).

Inquiry-based learning fosters joyous exploration and social curiosity, as students engage with each other to seek answers to their own questions through hands-on activities and experiments (Abdi, 2014; Dewey, 2024; Qablan et al., 2024). To begin, think about what inquiry looks like in your classroom. Start small with a favorite lesson and build out to the other lessons over time. Project-based learning is another type of inquiry learning and lets students investigate a real problem and incorporate concepts from class to attempt to solve the problem, inspiring creative solutions, critical thinking (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006), and increased scientific comprehension (Shay et al., 2020). Give students agency to guide the process and learn from their approach to the problem. Discovery-based learning is another type of inquiry learning that emphasizes student-led exploration, promoting a sense of ownership in the process of discovery (Bruner, 1961; Chase & Abrahamson, 2018). All these pedagogies encourage instructors to limit instruction, step back, and let students be joyfully curious!

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that supports mattering and belonging by inviting students' stories, experiences, and backgrounds into the classroom (Gay, 2018; Johnson & Elliott, 2020). This approach recognizes and values the diverse cultural assets that students bring to the learning environment, fostering an inclusive and supportive atmosphere (Hammond, 2014). By incorporating diverse cultural perspectives and representation in science from literature, history, and a breadth of scientific contributions, students can broaden their understanding of who does science and validate their own identity in STEM. Resources like Scientific Spotlights offer assignments centered on engaging with representation in science. Asset-based activities paired with reflective questions around science identity and belonging can help students feel seen in STEM (López, 2017, 2023).

Strategies for incorporating culturally responsive teaching include creating a classroom environment where all students feel valued and respected. This can be achieved by establishing norms for respectful dialogue and encouraging students to share their perspectives and experiences. Educators can build strong relationships with their students, showing genuine interest in their lives and backgrounds. Additionally, incorporating collaborative learning activities can promote a sense of community and allow students to learn from one another's diverse experiences. Personal reflection on assumptions and continued professional development on cultural competence, implicit bias, and inclusive teaching are crucial for educators to effectively implement culturally responsive teaching.

Growth Mindset

A growth mindset emphasizes the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through dedication and hard work (Dweck, 2006). In the context of science education, embracing a growth mindset allows students to view failure as a natural and valuable part of the learning process. Growth mindset not only enhances persistence and resilience in the face of challenges but also cultivates an appreciation for failure, a critical skill in real-world science (Zarrinabadi et al., 2022), especially when paired with positive work reflection (Karpagavalli & Suganthi, 2024). Failure is transformed into a positive experience that builds self-efficacy from an opportunity to learn from mistakes and achieve success. Pedagogical strategies that promote growth mindset include reflective assignments where students can self-assess their work, submit homework before class to improve upon during class, creating multiple opportunities for students to receive feedback and improve, and designing space to make mistakes to normalize the feeling of failure (Sahagun et al., 2021).

Student Choice and Agency

Pedagogies that emphasize student choice and agency in the classroom empower students to take ownership of their learning, fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement (Patall et al., 2010). When given the opportunity to make decisions about their learning, such as selecting topics for projects or choosing how to demonstrate understanding by a podcast or essay, students become more invested in their work and take greater responsibility for their education (Klemenčič, 2017). This sense of agency can be particularly effective when paired with creative, student-led problem-solving activities, such as the strategies mentioned above. By encouraging students to explore their interests and take the lead in their learning processes, educators can cultivate a classroom environment that supports autonomy, critical thinking, creativity, and thus, joy.

Final Thoughts

Reflecting on my journey as a first-generation STEM student who struggled with imposter syndrome, I have come to realize the profound impact that these joy-centered pedagogies can have on student success and retention. However, imposter syndrome is a barrier for most students, not a motivator. We cannot expect our students to overcome failure on their own. By fostering awe and mindfulness, promoting curiosity through research and inquiry-based learning, embracing culturally responsive teaching, nurturing a growth mindset, and providing students with agency in their own learning, we can create educational environments that are not only inclusive but also deeply motivating. These pedagogies empower students to see their potential, overcome challenges, and find meaning in their studies. My personal experiences have fueled my passion for advocating these approaches, which have the potential to retain bright and gifted students who might otherwise be deterred from pursuing STEM out of fear. Through joy-centered teaching, we can ensure that every student feels valued, inspired, and capable of contributing to the scientific community. Joy is for all!

Questions for Reader Reflection

What curiosities motivate your learning?

Where do you experience awe in your discipline or research? How might you share that with your students?

What does inquiry look like in your discipline and/or pedagogical practice and how can it be intentionally supported through joyful curiosity?

In what ways can awareness of imposter syndrome, especially for first-generation students, be fostered?

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12

CELEBRATING SILENCE

Making Space for Quiet Joy in the Classroom

Angela Winek

Joy doesn't always need to be loud and boisterous – sometimes it is still and silent. My own personal pedagogical journey has led me to understand a relationship between joy and quiet. This chapter will discuss how space for silent reflection led to meaningful classroom reforms and will reflect on what these reforms truly mean, what they don't mean, what it means to defend them, and how they connect to my own-meaning making of past schooling experiences.

I used to think that only a loud, joyful buzz fostered success in the classroom, with students actively discussing, engaged in meeting learning outcomes. I now know that a silent, joyful calm can also foster success in the classroom, with students actively brainstorming, engaged in meeting learning outcomes. While the connection between joy and silent spaces in the classroom may not be an obviously intuitive one because of conditioning from Western society's extroverted norms, my discovery of the relationship between the two has been revolutionary to my own teaching. What started as a practice of "quiet time" at the start of my classes, to accommodate online Zoom learners during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, has officially evolved into a beloved teaching practice that helps define my commitment to student success and promoting equity, long after returning full time to the in-person classroom. Starting my classes with carefully curated quiet spaces has helped benefit both my undergraduate students and myself as their instructor, fostering joy in the classroom through silence.

Centering Quiet to Make Space for Joy

The start of my university classes now usually feels like this: students stride in quietly, hopefully with their bodies beginning to ease at the end of their long

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-12

journey to the classroom and with their thoughts being positive ones about the class to come, the rest of the day to come. Because we follow the same structural agenda for each class, they know that they will have silent time to settle in, to adjust to the classroom (versus the outside environment), to settle their bodies in their desks and arrange their personal items, to read a message from me on our class learning management site, to re-review the materials for the class meeting, and to prepare for their upcoming peer group meeting by engaging with my opening prompt. People arrive with light smiles, with sleepy eyes, with bright faces …. They enter slowly, quickly, sometimes they meander in … I smile back, I sit comfortably in my chair and feel my feet on the ground, I greet them mostly silently. We all settle in, they log onto our class learning management site and begin addressing the prompt, knowing that we are silently supporting each other with this time, this space, and that the time to be heard and to listen will come later. I often pose a reflective question regarding course reading for students to respond to. Oftentimes, students will be asked to select a "golden line," a quote from a reading that stood out to them, in order to later be able to discuss why they selected it as a way of navigating the piece with their peers. (Interestingly, over time each semester, the quotes that students choose on their own begin to line up with quotes chosen by classmates; this always delights the students and me as the instructor, as it means that students are on track and meeting learning outcomes related to effective selection of evidence.) Or, sometimes, we will use the quiet time to compose something that brings joy, like writing about a happy memory of a rainy day, on a stormy morning when students may have undergone more hardships than usual to get to class. Sometimes we use the quiet time in a metacognitive manner, to reflect and write about our strengths and our gaps of understanding. However, the quiet time is used, it ultimately serves to help students settle into their bodies and gather their thoughts as they enter our classroom space. These silent minutes at the start of the class are for us – for our minds, our bodies, to honor ourselves and the class that we are about to engage in.

After 20-plus years of collegiate teaching, I have come to realize the reality that my undergraduate students carry so much stress and anxiety in their bodies as they enter the classroom that their thoughts upon entering are flooded with worry and fear, related to a whole range of often uncontrollable contributing factors. Over the years, students have arrived to class on time after car accidents, bike injuries, long unexpected sprints in the rain after missed busses, casted and on crutches from sports injuries. They have arrived with fevers from illness, sharp pains in the stomach from food insecurity, dehydrated from extreme heat, queasy in the stomach from fear of an upcoming exam. They have arrived with worries and anxieties over challenging classes, academic standing, family problems, economic concerns, medical emergencies, relationship struggles, immigration litigations, housing insecurities, homesickness, lack of belonging, and imposter

syndrome. On a biological level, they have arrived with high cortisol levels and feelings of amygdala threat. In short, they have often arrived to class when their bodies and minds are screaming at them to not be there – to instead go rest and recover. Yet, they have arrived to class none-the-less, eager to show how ready they are to succeed, to engage in the academic challenges I will pose. I commend and honor all of these students, and I dedicate my quiet classroom spaces to them and their perseverance.

Curating quiet classroom spaces takes intentionality that runs resistant to some notions of university-level academic rigor. Eager instructors want each minute of class to be impactful. Eager students want to learn as much as possible and to meet the expectations of their instructors. Sometimes the combined eagerness of both the instructor and the students can lead to a very full class agenda, with not a moment of time spent without someone talking, engaging in discourse related to the subject matter. While I had long since flipped my classroom to be truly student-centered and put myself on the agenda for just a brief lecture during each class meeting, with high-impact learning activities and collaborative work reigning supreme in my classes, there was still very little quiet time. Students were always talking and we were always engaging with one another, which all felt very normal; the way I knew students were engaged was because they were always talking. This pedagogical status quo went on in my university classes for many years, and I was very proud that I helped facilitate an environment where so many voices were heard. Yet, looking back, I question whether *all* students were *always* talking, or if some voices were louder than others in the general buzz of the class; perhaps not all students felt the same degree of joy in that constant classroom buzz. In 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the murder of George Floyd changed everything and showed me that my pedagogy needed to change too.

The Deafening Silence of the Pandemic

COVID-19 took our lively, in-person classes and changed them into online spaces where people, instructors and students alike, were confused by the new terrain and methodology. Not only were we all dealing with the fear of an impending deadly virus that had disrupted the ongoings of our daily lives, but we were also dealing with the pain brought on by injustice and systemic racism. We were trying to adjust to a new life, enclosed indoors away from the spreading virus that was lurking to strike against us, but knowing that racism was out lurking in our nations' streets, ready to strike against another person of color (and the majority of my students are persons of color). Everything felt very fragile. No one knew what to say in the online classroom. Should they talk about the COVID-19-related loss of their parent's job, or the COVID-19-related loss of their grandparent's life? Should they talk about their writing assignments

while simultaneously internally brainstorming about how their family would make rent next month? Should we discuss scholarly articles on issues of social justice while simultaneously watching (and sometimes participating in) protests erupting all around the nation? What should we talk about? What could we talk about? It turned out, none of us really knew, so many students took to talking about nothing at all. They had been silenced by the pain of it all. I was silenced by the pain of it all. And the silence was deafening.

The sudden silence of my students was distressing and disorienting as an instructor. It felt like there could be no joy without my students' voices. I knew they were struggling, and I wanted to work though it together, for them to name the struggle aloud and push through with resilience. But wanting it wasn't enough. Their authentic voices were not coming through like they seemed to have done, in semesters gone by, with my effective, student-centered class seemingly operating like a well-maintained machine. The whole machine was now operating with different mechanisms, the blueprint had shifted, and it was time for a new machine. I may be a composition instructor, not an engineering instructor by trade, but by the close of 2020, it was palpably obvious that the engineering of my classroom would have to be redesigned to accommodate the current student circumstances.

I wanted students to feel the joy of having something important to contribute during class but knew that their capacities were limited due to being overloaded with concerns related to both abiding and immediate circumstances. From observing my students, I saw that time was more of a precious commodity than ever. Students at my Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) university – the only public research university in the US with a Pell Grant-eligible student population over 60% *and* graduation rate over 60% (Diversity @ UC Merced) – were taking on extra work to support their families economically, tutoring young family members who were now attending school remotely, and caring for loved ones with high-risk medical conditions. As many readers may recall, during the start of most online classes, most students would log in to class via Zoom a few minutes late, muted, with no camera on. Starting class seemed impossible, as it essentially meant me talking to a sea of faceless students, with just their names or perhaps if I was lucky, their static photos, representing their presence in class. Certainly, they had oh-so-many reasons for not turning their cameras on, for staying muted during class – staying muted during the most challenging and "unprecedented times" of the 21st century. However, this was the beginning of the "joy loss" (Muhammad, 2023, p. 33) we all experienced during this time. Against a computer screen of silent blank boxes at the start of each class, I knew that I had to do better for my students, that I had to offer more. I knew that for my early morning classes their cameras were off and devices muted to offer quiet to provide needed sleep to whole households. And, in the afternoon, they were muted to offer a noise buffer from the clamor of families hungry for lunch or

from siblings who were also trying to engage online learning. These were indeed "unprecedented times," characterized by very specific forms of joylessness.

Instead of resisting, I decided to embrace the silence of the start of each class. I knew that the silence would likely continue to exist regardless of my interventions, so I chose to maximize the time and to ultimately give it back to my students. A re-read of bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) helped me consider the joy of giving students the freedom that is needed in the moment, with her words, "This is one of the joys of education as the practice of freedom, for it allows students to assume responsibility for their choices" (p. 19). My students were choosing to be silent, and I should respect their choices. A re-read of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* (1990) reminded me of the kind of classroom I wanted to curate, whether online or in person, one grounded in "...a pedagogy that encourages us to step back and consider the treat of the standard classroom and that shows us, having stepped back, how to step forward to invite a student across the boundaries of that powerful room" (p. 102). Indeed, the standard of a classroom should be joyful, and university life should be a treat accessible to all. The remote classroom environment was new to my students, yet I knew that it was my role to foster an online classroom environment in which they felt safe and comfortable. A re-read of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) helped me tap into the fundamental type of instructor I have always wanted to be, one who advocates for students from marginalized backgrounds through accessible pedagogy, offering

> liberating education [which] consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors – teacher on the one hand and students on the other.
>
> *(p. 79)*

I needed to spend more time problem-posing. Students needed more time to actually engage in cognition, within the time and space of the classroom. The solution came to me quietly through listening to the mentoring voices of my past and centering my own need for silent time and space. My students' silence had been heard loud and clear, and it was time to respect what they needed.

Students needed even more time and space in class to process the material and to formulate responses to the material than they had before the pandemic. They needed more time and space to reduce cortisol levels and feelings of amygdala threat. They needed a class space and environment in which they felt they truly belonged, with no feelings of imposter syndrome slowing them down. Like always, they needed specific questions to answer and specific deliverables to work toward, but now because of the cognitive loads (Verschelden, 2017) they were carrying, they needed *more* time in class to prepare for sharing their

responses and their work. I decided to embrace the silence and use it to our advantage by posing specific questions about material for students to mull over and to prepare answers about that could later be shared during their collaborative discussion time in Zoom break out rooms. I also began instituting 10 minutes of quiet "Personal Check in Time" at the start of each 1 hour and 50-minute writing class, with a prompt posted on our class instructional website for how to use the time quietly at the start of each class. Now, this quiet start-up-time has grown to feel like a respite from the hectic start-up transitional frenzy that traditionally comes at the beginning of a class. Students comment on the quiet openings of class in course evaluations, noting that they like starting the class with a quiet task and having time to settle in because it helps them feel more prepared and helps them better transition into the class.

While the start-of-class quiet takes up less than 10% of our class time, this brief period helps maximize student engagement and ultimately helps foster student success at meeting learning outcomes. Now in my 4th year of using quiet spaces to engage students, I see how much is leveraged in just 10 minutes at the start of class. Taking some time for quiet contemplation has successfully led to the return of the joyful interactive chatter of student contributions and engagement during class discussion. Moreover, the payoff has been even greater as more voices are heard from. A few weeks into a new term and I have students expressing their appreciation with comments like: "I'm usually very anxious about speaking in class, but the opening framing topic and quiet time to consider what I want to say makes me more confident in sharing during class." Encouraging all student voices is what being student-centered truly means, and the methods of encouraging these voices resonate differently for different students, making it necessary for instructors to employ a variety of methods to work toward true equity in the classroom.

Silence as an Equity Practice

Now that I have more fully engaged in critical reflection about my teaching, I have come to consider more deeply the unique positionality of my students and their relationship with labor. Teaching at the University of California at Merced, my students are often people of color who come from historically marginalized backgrounds, whose bodies and whose family's bodies have often labored for little compensation, sacrificing their health, simply to be accepted in and to succeed in America. This labor is exhausting. A student once shared with me that a scar on his arm was from the factory line where he had worked the previous summer – the same factory line that his mother had worked on to support his family for as long as he could remember. Many of my students have worked multiple jobs in order to be able to send money to their families back home, working hard so that their hungry siblings can have enough to eat.

These pressures, plus those of historic systemic racism, all manifest themselves in their bodies and take a toll over time. As Resmaa Menakem notes in *My Grandmother's Hands: Healing Racial Trauma in Our Minds and Bodies* (2017), "The body is where we fear, hope. and react; where we constrict and release; and where we reflexively flight, flee or freeze" (p. 5). Giving 10 short minutes of rest and time for reflection and critical thinking about course material is no longer just a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now it feels like the least I can do to try to help my students combat the racialized socio-economic traumas and stresses in their bodies in order to succeed in university life.

Restful time at school is a social justice and equity issue, valuable and well-deserved by all. It should not be the purview of only those privileged enough to not have to maintain a job and familial responsibilities outside of school. I now see one way that I can attempt to "even the playing field" for students, both those exhausted by long work hours and those more well-rested due to less required labor outside of school, is to offer them all quiet time for processing important course content in class. Offering a silent time for students to settle in, review materials, and consider what they want to contribute can be a "great equalizer" in the classroom. It affords opportunity for all students to center, regardless if they are from the group of students who got up early to walk to the bus stop to get to campus, or if they are from the group of those students who were able to have the extra sleep because they are able to drive to campus. It affords equal opportunity to review course materials for all students, regardless if they are from the group of students who worked late the night before, only having time to quickly review the materials for class, or if they are from the group of students who don't have to work to support themselves, with additional time to thoroughly review the course material (and/or hang out with friends and enjoy collegiate fun). It affords equal opportunity to consider what to contribute to class discussion, regardless if they are from the group of students who are introverted, inexperienced, hesitant to express themselves in English, and/or have anxiety related to public speaking, or if they are from the group of students who are extroverted, native English speakers, and confident in public speaking. All of these are examples of increasing student access and "embracing fairness and inclusion, responding to students' individual needs, providing structures, systems, and practices that enable all students to reach their highest potential for personal and academic success" (Muhammad, 2023, p. 33). This is also inherently joyful. Stress, fear, and time pressures undercut joy, so developing strategies to blunt those joy-stealers opens space for more celebratory classroom spaces.

As much as having space to catch their breaths and center to prepare for class benefit students, it can also support instructors. After several semesters of opening the class with quiet time, I know that spending more time transitioning into class helps me better regulate my body, to be the best instructor I can be; just like it sets my students up for success in the classroom, it sets me up for

success in the classroom. I am able to notice complexities and disjunctions with students that I might not otherwise have noticed if I just jumped right into the subject matter. Sometimes students' body language will indicate illness, anxiety, or sadness, and I can then engage and follow up as needed. Regardless of how well-prepared I am to teach a class, the intersectionality between what I want to teach and what the students bring to the table dictates that their frames of minds matter for my delivery. The quiet time at the start of class allows me to "read the room" and learn more about my students as we sit in silence. We all deserve to honor and regulate our bodies and to feel joy in the classroom.

Spreading (Joyful) Silence across the Curriculum

In practice, while it may seem ideal for the composition classroom, quiet time at the start of class has far-reaching applications for any university classroom, independent from disciplinary-specific focus. I also stress to my students that this practice of quietly preparing for class is critical to success in all of their classes and encourage them to always prepare with a few minutes of quiet time if possible – this is a habit of mind that transcends disciplines (McGuire, 2018). In a math class, students can contemplate a shared equation and come up with short descriptors to share during times of peer collaboration. In an engineering class, with much quiet time already in use for computer applications, directives can be set at the start, with time to brainstorm with pen and paper before diving into the computer. In a biology lab, students can use the time to review and engage the pre-lab materials, so that everyone understands what is needed for the session. In a political science class, students can be provided with relevant case study scenarios to later respond to in a group setting. The application of the start-up class quiet time can be successful in any collegiate classroom, even if just for a very short time. Our students, and we as instructors, all deserve to be provided time to settle into our bodies at the transitional time of the start of class.

Responding to Silence Skeptics

Still, I worry that some readers may perceive my period of classroom quiet as "a waste of time." Certainly, when I first started engaging in the practice, putting actual quiet work time on the class agenda felt a little revolutionary and certainly resistant to some ideas of academic rigor I had been indoctrinated with. But, after a few semesters of engaging in my silent classroom spaces, I discovered Tricia Hersey's *Rest Is Resistance*. The messages of this text brought me much needed personal insight into the importance of spaces of rest for all, particularly for those coming from historically marginalized backgrounds, like many of my students. Hersey's resistance to "grind culture" and her highlighting of labor as a culturally situated practice historically used against Black people both helped

aid in my "unlearning" and validated my classroom practices. As Hersey (2022) asserts,

> Our everyday behaviors and false beliefs about productivity drive us into behaving in a robotic, machine-like way. The way we hold ourselves and others to the lie of urgency is white supremacy culture and we will never be able to rest or be liberated from oppression while we are honoring and aligning with it.
>
> *(p. 25)*

Breaking the cycle of performative rigor (i.e., busywork for the sake of being busy) and instead endorsing effective reflective resting as a valid form of rigor is something that instructors can do to help students find balance, meaning, and deeper learning as they navigate their undergraduate experiences (Bowen, 2021).

Some skeptical colleagues ask, "shouldn't all class time be spent on dissemination of content and creation of quantifiable student deliverables?" Or, "shouldn't students arrive ready to go for class and complete their work for the course outside of class time?" Some people may also make deficit-based assumptions that students will not utilize the quiet time wisely, either simply arriving late to class or being "off task" on their devices during the quiet time; however, this has not proven to be true. There has been no statistical increase in late arrivals since I initiated this practice several semesters ago, and students consistently complete the start-of-class instructions. Moreover, when colleagues comment that they find it hard to believe that students actually stay on task during the quiet time and ask how I can confirm that students are indeed working on the assigned prompt during the class time, my response is always the same and always two-fold. First, while it is true that some students may in fact use some of the quiet time in class to engage in other activities, working on things for another class or maybe even scrolling social media or cat videos, it is not my place to really worry about how they are using the time. I am not there to police my students; I am there to motivate them to want to engage. I want to trust in my students and provide them with the needed autonomy to be successful independently, so enforcing "approved" content use during quiet time is impossible and counterproductive. Second, I can confirm anecdotally that students are indeed on track during the quiet time because they generally engage in the group discussions that take place during each class meeting, and they do so more (with higher frequency and from a greater range of voices) than they did before I started incorporating silent time. The whole point of giving the silent space is for students to have time in class to thoughtfully consider what they want to contribute during discussion time. Sometimes during small group discussions, I also will hear comments like these: an honest student reporting to their group, "I didn't read the whole assigned article, but during silent reflection,

I pulled a quote to share." Or, another student admitting, "When I struggled to respond to the start-of-class reflective prompt, I realized I didn't understand an aspect of the assignment. So, I was looking forward to hearing from the rest of the group." I actually commend the joyful authenticity of these responses, that the students are engaging in metacognition, and that they feel comfortable being vulnerable with their peers – breaking the silencing that steals the joy. In summary, I report back to colleagues that the silent time belongs to the students, and that I believe students are indeed on track because they follow up from the opening silent-work instructions by sharing their views during discussion time. This autonomy and agency are where the joy comes from. And, joy, in its core, provides the person who feels it with an essential motivation: the goal of working toward a joyful life. We should promote and find joy in as many places as possible because joy also fosters motivation. Shouldn't the motivation of joy actually help balance the grind of academic life?

Some Caveats: Quiet ≠ Meditation ≠ Silence ≠ Punishment

Curious colleagues have also inquired as to whether I ever use my quiet classroom spaces in meditative ways, and this question is always a curious one to me, one that requires follow up. As someone who attempts to regularly engage in the practice of meditation, I know how challenging it can be and what extreme focus is needed to truly enter a meditative state. I also understand the importance of honoring authentic ancient traditions, so it is important that I am clear that we are *not* engaging in traditional meditation during class time. While quiet time to choose a quote from a reading, to draft a response to a question posed about course material, or even to compose a memory of a spring day is indeed meditative in that it encourages deep and reflective thinking, it is not meditative in the spiritual sense of the word, as eyes are open and scanning texts, with fingers often traveling across keyboards or screens as well. That said, a recent occurrence made me realize that while perhaps not truly meditative in form, the silence is welcomed and valued by students as their personal time, to which they rightfully feel entitled. A student with ear buds in had loud music coming through his device. The silent room, paired with the loud volume of his lively music, made his earbuds a sort of soft speaker in our classroom. While I was fine with the student enhancing their quiet time with music, it was clear that it was unwelcomed by other students. After catching eyes with a peer who smiled and pointed to his ears with a laugh, the student quickly shut off the music with a "my bad" gesture. I was pleased how the respectful and collegial negotiation played out silently and that students had so quickly and peacefully restored their own silence. So, while there are not spiritual meditative practices taking place in class during these silent times, the scheduled quiet periods are to some students sacred.

Moreover, quiet silence and "silencing" should not be confused or conflated. Silence can indeed be a double-edged sword, one that has historically been wielded as a weapon and forced on marginalized groups. Long-time systemic silencing of people of color through legislation has helped keep racist power structures in place, and the long-time virtuous stereotype of the polite silent woman has helped keep patriarchal power structures in place. My beloved American-born-citizen Japanese grandmother, who was characterized as a potential traitor and spent her childhood under lock and key in an internment camp during WWII, and my beloved Italian-born-immigrant other grandmother who boldly and loudly spoke "broken English" can both attest to the pressures to be silent, obedient, and accept your place as less-than in a society not designed for them. Two generations later, an elementary teacher once told my mother during parent–teacher conferences that I was the most talkative student she had ever encountered. My mom immediately smiled and thanked her for the compliment, noting that she believed my social skills would indeed take me far in life. The teacher went on to explain that she hadn't intended the comment as a compliment, but fortunately my mother continued on the path of insisting to take it as such.

Quiet spaces in K-12 school are also often punitive ones, where joy is banished. Quiet desks in the back of the room in elementary school classrooms evolve into detention rooms in middle schools and high schools, all designed to weaponize quiet classroom spaces against students. I myself spent many wasted hours in detention during a period of rebellion against school hours, which further fueled my resistance against the school system. Detention involved silent reading and writing, weaponizing reading and writing in the minds of many an unsuspecting student. Quiet spaces for reading and writing should be framed as ones of joy and contentment for students, not as punitive ones, breeding resentment toward critical academic endeavors.

Because I have spent more time in quiet reflection, I can now look back at my own educational experience growing up in California's central valley with new perspective. Like many professors, school was my happy place. Yet, for some of my friends who did not share my same positionality, I came to understand that school was an often-desolate place, a completely different terrain from what I operated in, structured to impose misery in ways that I was lucky to not have to experience. Even as a young girl, I wanted to understand why. In grad school, I found the theorists and academics who had made their ways by rebelling against and calling out the negative hierarchal structures of school. I made these strangers *my* people, and they uplifted me from afar. It was as if Patricia Bizzell, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Mike Rose, and Victor Villanueva spoke straight to me; they helped me learn the language to describe the structures that stifled joy in school. And now getting to work with students in the college classroom is the source of joy, whether it is loud and boisterous or quiet and still.

Conclusion: Full-Circle on Silence

As more research comes out about the behavioral patterns and challenges related to COVID-19, my decision to give students more silent space to think about what they want to contribute to class becomes even more justified. I knew that I had always been an instructor full of hope, despite understanding the many negative elements of higher education. I was an instructor like Kevin Gannon (2020), who asks us to "reject the 'agreements' that inform the dominant narrative in favor of asserting our own ethical stance" (p. 21). Yet, COVID-19 led to a new set of operating values for the institution, for instructors, and for students alike. In my classes, these changes led to a silencing of students, and it seems that this was also the case in others' classrooms as well. As Gannon (2023) writes in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,

> One of the most confounding problems we face as faculty members is the "stunning level of student disconnection" that grew out of COVID and continues to characterize our classrooms today. Students "ghost out" of courses by week six. Discussion topics that used to trigger lively conversations now simply earn us blank stares and awkward silences.
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> *(p. 2)*

Indeed, with trends of student disconnection in the classroom, it is critical for us to examine the narratives of our classrooms and to make changes as needed. I have found that moments of intentional silence and space to consider direct prompts allows students to prepare for the lively, engaged conversations that we as instructors so desire. Embracing joyful silence may paradoxically be the most effective way of actually combatting desolate silence.

I never imagined that in my lifetime, a deadly virus would change the world and the face of higher education (despite being a history lover who was well aware of the litany of past deadly viruses). I have always been aware of the traumas that racism, poverty, and extreme nationalism bring, but I could not have imagined how the COVID-19 pandemic would exacerbate these problems. Living in California, we now routinely face climate-change-related disasters in the forms of fires, storms, droughts, floods. Life is indeed unstable, and yet we drive on in the pursuit of higher education, hoping that students will be empowered to change the future world through their experiences at the university. We push on, through hardship after hardship, promoting academia as an uplifter, an equalizer, a game-changer. I am hopeful and joyful in believing that receiving a college degree can indeed change a life, making it my driving force to help students meet the goal of graduation. I know that in service to my students, I must listen to them and provide an environment where they can grow as needed. Students

thrive with some space to breathe in their academic routines, so I will continue to embrace the silence to foster the loudening of their true voices.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- What have your experiences with silent spaces in the classroom involved, as an instructor and as a student? (What biases, either for or against classroom silence, do you carry?)
- When is a time you remember feeling joyful in total silence? What did that period of silence allow you to subsequently do (or avoid doing)?
- What is the time-breakdown of your class agenda? How much time are you talking as the instructor and how much time are your students talking? How much time is reserved for quiet contemplation, reflection, or silence?
- What are some good disciplinary-specific prompts that could be used in the first silent 10 minutes of your class to foster subsequent engagement?

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EMBRACING ANGER TO FIND JOYFUL AGENCY

Experiments in Communal Vulnerability

Jamie Lulamae Moore

We were in that tough space in the semester, the slog of time right after midterms, when the end is not quite in sight. It was also a few weeks into a pattern of only receiving a handful of completed assignments from a full class. I felt the churn of upset building in my stomach, but I was trying to hold off on bugging them too much, considering my flexible submission policy for small assignments and that they had an upcoming big deadline that I figured might be stressing them out and consuming their time. And then, deadline day was here. I checked our online portal. Out of 26 desired submissions, I had received 7. Two of the seven were missing vital information, though they were attempts. Disappointing. Additionally, the way I had structured the semester, I had given myself a narrow window of providing feedback in order for them to receive detailed notes on at least two iterations of their drafts. I felt like my students had pulled the emergency brake on our smoothly running train, and as our wheels skidded to a stop, my ears tensed as if hearing metal on metal grinding on the tracks – I felt the sparks fly up and singe me one by one as I listed out all my accommodations for this class in my head.

Didn't they know how much time I spent designing this class for them? *Burn.* How deeply I'd researched inherited trauma and imposter syndrome and systemic oppression to give them curriculum that aimed to help them understand themselves and the institution? *Burn.* Didn't they see I was one of the "good" teachers who gave them more time to move through assignments? *Burn*. More office hours? *Burn.* More personalized feedback? *Burn.*

Feeling abused and unappreciated, I reached out to colleagues, most of whom could only validate my anger and place it beside their own. They too were experiencing a huge drop in student participation and submissions. Pass rates

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-13

were down. And perhaps most noticeable, difficult to move through, and burnout-inducing was the general feeling of weariness, even malaise, that plagued our classroom spaces, in person and online. Many of us chocked it up to the ongoing higher ed dialogue about our students being less socially equipped, more easily distracted, and more likely to be dealing with one or more mental illness factors, such as anxiety or depression. Institutionally, we were trained to refer them, which, especially in the community college spaces, meant encouraging students to find resources that we didn't often have or ones that were underfunded. Counseling services (overbooked and unstaffed), Access Centers (that codified student disabilities to only a specific number of accommodations), and Student Clubs (social hubs but not formal spaces for addressing issues and which required time commitments) were the platter of solutions we tended to offer.

On the curriculum end, many professors, including myself, were joining communities of practice to talk through student success strategies, resilience, and retention. The buzz words were in play – "student ready" vs "student centered" was a favorite on my campus. In the California community college transition from using standardized testing and placing students in pre-transfer level composition courses to making transfer level courses open access, many colleges added a one-to-two-unit corequisite support class. These corequisite courses required their own course outline, curriculum, and grades. Maybe with good intentions, but lack of foresight regarding the collective exhaustion we were all experiencing in the midst of national and global crises, we made more things for the students to do, a new hoop to jump through, a new way to prove themselves when they already questioned their belonging and ability. The first-level composition and corequisite courses were packed with new student-ready practices; however, in practice for me, it just looked like more assignments. Assignments that meant to inform and fix whatever deficiencies we saw in our students, to better prepare them (Perhaps if we were being honest, with the intention to mold them into our ideal students. And in my case, the kind of student or person I never actually was in practice!). I felt stuck in this "solution," following new course requirements, but watching students continue to struggle. "Well look, we're doing what we can to make it easier for them," was the general sentiment on campus, "even taking class time to ask them how they are feeling or helping them make a schedule." We were all walking around steel-jawed and sore from the performance. We were as weary as our students as we keep pretending it was okay.

Part of my newfound anger is that I thought I was escaping some of the weariness and disconnect my colleagues were experiencing because I was teaching in a cohort program called The Puente Project.[1]. My careful curriculum and extra dedication were in service to a special group of students: mostly first-generation, all students of color, all aiming to transfer and finish their bachelor's degrees. We spent extra time together in both on- and off-campus

activities, focusing on community building, goal-setting, and belonging. One such event invited the students' families and included making verbal and written commitments to this journey together. My trauma-focused curriculum featured voices I hoped would echo the students' experiences, including Latinx and Black activists. My Puente co-coordinator, Dr. Ambar Alvarez Soto, and I started the semester strong, with a boisterous group of students who were eager to be there and to be with each other. The light that these students exuded in community with each other was so bright that it was painful to watch it dim. It was frustrating to watch such brilliant, ready students face the realities of their lives – new adulthood, financial and familial responsibility – on top of the dangerous social and political realities we were facing together.[2]

I knew all of this and felt all of this with them – and yet, we were gathered to do this academic work together. Even as the malaise seeped into my own bones and heavied my shoulders as I stood at the front of the classroom, I was practicing allegiance to the expectations of the institution's version of the classroom and to the "rigor" of the course outline. I knew we each longed not for a way out but for a way back to the initial connection/spark we had felt as a community, but my posturing and the current class structure were not allowing for it. As Rendon (2014) reveals in *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy*, invisible agreements shadow our classroom interactions and curriculum, capping the potential for connection, feeling, and joy in community with each other:

> We need to change the agreement that good teaching and learning evolved from a model that distances teachers from students, separates teaching from learning, alienates students from what is to be learned, and is focused on non-collaborative non disciplinarity. [An] example of a newly constructed agreement: the agreement to embrace connectedness, collaboration, and transdisciplinary.
>
> *(p. 36)*

The more I leaned into the external ideas I had been given about "what a classroom should look like," the more I not only abandoned my own imagination and potential as a teacher but also fed the disconnect from my students. Working to understand trauma and healing together in an English composition space, we were doing just a tiny part of what Rendon suggests, breaking the rules of disciplinarity by reading work across the humanities and social and medical sciences and bringing in community voices. But in my impulse to keep us on track (an institutionally determined pace that was out-of-touch with the humans in the room), I had stepped back more firmly into the teacher role rather than positioning myself to learn with my students in this moment.

The anger I woke up with was deeper than the missing submissions. The anger had several layers. First, the recognition that something was not working despite all my good intentions, and that this meant I needed to find more time

to figure this out when I felt the most spent I ever had in my career. Second, it emerged from the tension of wrestling with my own assimilationist ideas about the classroom, progress, and rigor (after I thought I had done a lot of this work, there was still so much more to do, internally and externally). And third, perhaps most importantly in this moment, was a deep heartbreak at encountering this anger with *this class*, my *special* class. I struggled with many of my other classes with students who questioned me personally and professionally (from challenging my authority to claiming I was racist against white students for talking about systemic oppression, etc.). My Puente Project class was my safe space, a refuge for me as a Black biracial, queer teacher, as much as I desired it to be a refuge for my students. A space in which I knew I was not just respected but trusted. Not only that, but we produced the data, the success rates, to show this cohort model and curriculum worked; we were committed to "a legacy of educational practices grounded in empathy, feminist pedagogy, [and] community care" (Moore, 2022). I felt like my best teaching self here – and what was happening if my best teaching self was suddenly resulting in both failure and disconnect?

In my personal life, I was leaning deeper into vulnerability after a lifetime of having been the dependable, steady, and stoic eldest daughter. Hiding from my personal traumas and triggers (including the trauma of my education and survivor's guilt as I began my professional career) was significantly affecting my burnout. I restarted my therapy journey, finding myself most supported by a mix of somatic practices, naming/feeling emotions, and bibliotherapy. As I read and experimented with somatic practices, including breathing, meditation, and intentional movement, I encountered the work of Lama Rod Owens, specifically his book *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation through Anger*. The title itself spoke to my current positioning in my faculty role: the conflicting emotions of deep care for my students (especially my Puentistas) and for knowledge-sharing fighting with my loathing of institutional processes. Owens (2020) explains that the way to healing and happiness is not to bypass anger but rather to understand and embody its lessons:

> Anger is actually trying to tell us something. Anger is confessing it's not the main event. There's tension arising from my unwillingness to be with this deep sense of being hurt when I begin to look at that. One of the hardest things I could ever admit to myself was that I wasn't just hurt, that I wasn't just pissed off…this realization just made me feel weak. And never in my life had I ever been told and ever been supported in touching deeply into this woundedness. I call it heart brokenness. To sink beneath the anger or to move through the anger was to recognize the anger for what it was: an indicator that my heart was broken. When I allowed myself to experience my heart brokenness, my activism began to change.
>
> *(p. 20)*

Like Owens, recognizing that anger was the pathway to the root feeling of heartbrokenness was essential for finding a way through this moment with my students. First, I had to become okay with expressing it as heartbrokenness (to myself and to trusted colleagues) in the context of my professional life – a space I had been taught was supposed to be emotionless. Next, I had to become comfortable expressing this vulnerability with my students, which meant stepping fully into the belief that it was imperative to "do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives – risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract" (Palmer, 2007). As my therapy process taught me, what I had assumed was emotional safety wasn't; I had not been protecting me; I had been protecting an idea that not only did not serve us but rather acted as a detractor from our connection to each other. Luckily, because of the exceptional space of the Puente classroom, taking risks was not foreign to me, as my Puente team and I took up the daily fight that:

> Building community…is almost antithetical to academia… it is through engaging with one another and through difference – through theorizing from our own flesh, as Latina feminist writer Cherrie Moraga invites us to do – that we become better scholars, better teachers, and wiser human beings.
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> *(Peña, 2022, p. 25)*

The potential rewards that awaited us of my personal venture into vulnerability and my invitation for my students to join me included rebuilding our community, engaging in personal and collective healing, and deepening our scholarly practice. I could not resist the potential joy I knew could emerge from changing our classroom standards, from "rebelling as a communal process" (Peña, 2022).

In the following sections of this chapter, I want to share with you my experiments in expressing and building activities focused on sharing vulnerability and reaching for this rebellious joy. Each section includes a narrative about the experience, design, and result of the activity, followed by a brief sample lesson plan to jumpstart your own vulnerable joy experiments.

Student Recovery Circles

Before this moment of anger, at the beginning of our semester, we studied inherited trauma as our main course theme. My Puente class read several selections that introduced the topic and aimed to provide healing strategies. One such text is Resmaa Menakem's *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, which describes the physical effects of trauma on the body and the complexity of healing. Menakem (2017) tells us:

> We tend to think of healing as something binary: either we're broken or we're healed from that brokenness. But that's not how healing operates, and it's almost never how human growth works. More often, healing and growth take place on a continuum, with innumerable points between utter brokenness and total health.
>
> *(p. 27)*

From this shared understanding, it became a class norm to share brief check-ins with each other at the start of each class, giving space to voice a quick frustration, a feeling of exhaustion, or a recent moment of achievement. While they started for the first week or so as full-class check-ins, we had moved the practice to small groups and made it less formal. Unfortunately, while students still appreciated the transition time as we began our class sessions, the meaningfulness of the activity faded away, as students were more likely to show each other memes or share a snack than talk about their feelings. The class got quieter and quieter over the semester during the check-in times.

My first strategy in reclaiming our community and unpacking the collective anger/anxiety/sorrow was to re-formalize our check-in times. Designed with my Puente Co-coordinator, Ambar, we decided to put on hold all our pre-planned material for a class session and return to the extended check-in model, sensing that it could be an opportunity to recalibrate the community. It would also give us the space to change the power dynamics: to sit with the students instead of being at the front of the room and give us space to process our grief as well. We moved the students' desks into a circle. Ambar and I sat down in the desks as students came in and got settled. I opened the class with my observations about our emotional atmosphere and what I had realized about my own frustrations. I shared that I was not angry with them but deeply sad by the missing assignments – that I felt like a failure, not just in this class but in a general "can't keep up with life" way. I shared that I felt burnout and wanted to explore that with them, that I missed and believed in the energy we had together. Ambar shared her perspective as well, as academic counselor and teacher, and her personal mid-semester struggles. I invited them to write about whatever they were feeling, but particularly about how they felt themselves carrying these emotions into the classroom with them. I made it clear this was okay and something I was doing too. There was space for us to be and bring our full selves. And this was us taking time to honor that full self. We wrote together.

After the writing time, I asked students to share their most impactful lines, providing whatever context they felt was important for us to understand and for them to feel heard. I asked everyone to be active listeners, affirming and visually supporting each peer. I also gave them permission to pass, though no one did. Each student shared and honored each other's space. It took us the

whole class period, and for the first time that semester, afterward the whole class walked together to our student study center to spend additional time talking and supporting one another.

Part of my inspiration to do this came from reading and sharing the work of Ross Gay with previous classes. His work challenges readers to move through the world with wonder, delight, and awe, especially during difficult times. Gay had recently published a poetry collection, *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*, and had a new essay collection, *The Book of Delights*, excerpts from which we read as self-reflection prompts. Gay's work never turns away from grief or frustration but tries to see a light inside of it. As I reflect on and revise this activity, I turn to his newest book of essays, *Inciting Joy*, in which Gay gets more direct about his approach and mindset and joy and sorrow:

> But what happens if joy is not separate from pain? What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another? Or even more to the point, what if joy is not only entangled with pain, or suffering, or sorrow, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other *through* those things? What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks?
>
> *(Gay, 2022, p. 4)*

As students shared their heartbreaks with each other – from lost jobs, to failed grades, to family emergencies – I watched them reach toward each other in new ways. I mean this literally, leaning on each other's shoulders, holding hands, rubbing the back of a tearful group member, huddling into an across-the-desk hug. Inevitably, as jokes were made about not expecting to cry in English class, or sad/weird/funny coincidences, the spirit of the room lifted as the collective recognition that we *had each other* made space for joy.

Sample Lesson Plan

- Estimated Time: 45 minutes to 1 hour, depending on class size
- Classroom Orientation: Place classroom seating in a circle if possible. Instructor should join the students in the circle as a participant.
- Activity: (Instructor participates with the students)
  - Invite students to journal about the themes of joy, sorrow, or anger, and how that emotion overlaps with how they feel they are showing up for themselves, the classwork, and the classroom community. This can be a general prompt or inspired by a quote.
  - After writing, ask students to highlight one or two key sentences that represent their strongest or most resonant ideas.
  - Invite students to share one by one, beginning with their highlighted lines and expanding into anything they want to share, particularly as it effects

their presence or engagement with the class community. (Instructor can model this sharing if a student doesn't volunteer to share first, but I've found it to feel more organic if the instructor participates with the students as you move around the circle.)

Building and Defining Joyful Community

Now that we found each other again in community, we had to figure out how to put our community into action. In our classroom, this action meant redefining our agreement of who we were as a cohort community and how this motivated our self-care, goal-setting, and activism. I decided to bring the class back to discussion of excerpts of bell hooks's *Teaching Community* and Gloria Anzaldua's *Light in the Dark/Luz En El Oscuro*, core texts that we read at the start of the semester. In *Teaching Community*, hooks (2003) emphasizes how fear and individualism keeps us from connecting with others and recognizing the harms of dominator culture. Anzaldua's *Light in the Dark* (2015) traces her pathway to healing after experiencing susto/soul loss. To get there, she theorizes different stages of conocimiento/knowing that acknowledge the inevitability of the fragmentation of self under oppressive systems and that outline practices for personal and intellectual freedom. Although the concepts of both books may seem dense, my goal was/is not for students to understand them fully, but rather to decode and apply them to the best of their ability in our classroom context. Assembled in small groups, I gave each group a quote and an open-ended prompt. For example, I asked when bell hooks says:

> When despair prevails we cannot create life-sustaining communities of resistance. Paulo Friere reminds us that "without a vision for tomorrow hope is impossible." Our visions for tomorrow are most vital when they emerge from the concrete circumstances of change we are experiencing right now,
>
> *(p. 12)*

what can our Puente community learn about how to nurture hope? How does this help us define our intellectual vision for ourselves and each other? Or, when Anzaldua says:

> Through knowledge we liberate ourselves… By cultivating awareness we minimize wounding (p.91–92). Releasing traumas of the past frees up energy, allowing you to be receptive to the soul's voice and guidance. Taking a deep breath, you close your eyes and call back tu alma – *f*rom people, ideas, perceptions, and events you've surrendered it to. You sense parts of your soul returned to your body,
>
> *(p. 139)*

I might ask: how is our learning tied to our healing and freedom? How does this relate to our Puente values, especially connected to cultural knowing? Believing these powerful texts held the keys for us, I hoped that after our recentering in vulnerability, they would hit differently and that they would imbue a different sense of power. After writing out/illustrating their interpretation of the quotes and questions, the students were asked to either create a list of classroom community principles or a few sentences that define our community. After sharing out each group response, the class worked together to identify our favorite lines from each response and revised to create one statement that represented the class. This "collaborative ideation... the ideas that will liberate all of us" (brown, 2017) included lines such as "our Puente community trusts each other and the knowledge we bring to the classroom from our communities."

To bring it back to our student circle, self-care, and healing, we then built upon these theories with adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Theory* (2017). A book that guides community practice, reflection, and its connection to patterns of the natural world, brown outlines five principles of emergent theory, and accompanying questions to evaluate self and group commitment to each idea. I invited students to engage with at least two of brown's question in response to our new class community statement. Questions include the following, among others:

> Are you a living realization of your values and beliefs?; Is your group a living realization of your collective values and beliefs?; What are you embodying in your daily life, in your work?; Who do you lean on? Who leans on you? How do you feel and what do you do when you witness anger? Joy? Are you living a life that honors all of your gifts?
>
> *(brown, 2017, pp. 185–190)*

I intended that the return to reflective writing would emphasize that students care of self was just as important as the care for our community. I was also able to experience a joy in the agency my students demonstrated in their responses – feeling confident in their contributions to our cohort definition, in the expression of their beliefs and values (and how they saw them fitting into the classroom space), and in the responsibility they were taking about the effect of their presence/absence from the classroom activities.

Sample Lesson Plan

- Estimated Time: 2 hours
- Classroom Orientation: Students in groups of four to six, desks or tables together leaving space for a gallery walk around the classroom

- Activity:
  - Part 1: Give each student group a poster or large sticky paper with a key quote about community building, healing, or a relevant class theme. Ask student group to use the space on the quote poster to respond in written or visual ways that interpret the quote and relate to the class community. Next, give the students a second poster/paper and ask them to translate their quote response into a classroom community value statement. Ask each group to post these on the wall and do a gallery walk, allowing students to highlight their favorite lines as they move from poster to poster. From the most highlighted lines, create a collective classroom values statement.
  - Part 2: Invite students to reflect on the value statement through brown's emergent theory questions in a journal space. Options: these reflections can be personal, with students sharing out one key takeaway; they can share in groups; or they can submit for instructor feedback.

Co-Creating Joyful Space and Classroom Agency

The last key step of shifting more fully into our joy was being intentional about the physical space of our classroom. Since other classes were also held in the same room we met, anything we brought to the space was temporary, and we had to leave the room with us. However, that didn't mean we could not be intentional about taking a little bit more time to make it ours for the hour and a half we had. In *Ratchetdemic: Reimagining Academic Success*, Christopher Emdin (2021) discusses how important the atmosphere of the classroom is for students' sense of belonging and ability to express anything, let alone joy:

> Too many children are being told that if they act as themselves – if they are talkative, ask questions, laugh or talk too loudly, or express too much joy – they are disruptive to the classroom and unprepared for learning.… When these same children are told that they have to be quiet and obedient to be seen as smart and prepared for learning, they believe that they have to choose between being themselves and being academic. … the issue here is that the same phenomenon exists for teachers who have to choose between bringing life and joy to students and teaching for obedience, silence, and complicity.
>
> *(p. 86)*

I wanted a call and response class. I wanted it to take a minute to get everyone's attention because the group discussions were so engaging. I wanted the class to look, sound, smell, and taste like us. I wanted for our presence and joy and learning to be tangible.

This started by playing music at the start of class – sometimes a song that connected to our themes, sometimes just something that helped me claim the space as my own. As I noticed students responding positively, and making requests, we started a classroom playlist. This playlist shuffled throughout our sessions, pausing for important moments of communication and playing during transition times. I asked students to share how their chosen songs reflected their identity, culture, or core self.

To expand reclamation of the space, we introduced snack sharing days and incorporated visual art/art making as a regular form of discussion/group response. Students expressed joy and validation as their music/art/snacks were celebrated by their peers. As with our student recovery circles, we found joy in a new way of seeing each other.

Sample Lesson Plan

- Estimated time: 30 minutes to 1 hour
- Classroom Orientation: Students in groups of four to eight
- Activity: Invite students to consider how we can co-design our classroom space
  - Assign each student group a sense (of the five senses) to consider in the space. For example: what things do we want to see in our space (like art)? What do we want to hear (such as music or active participation)? What do we want to smell or taste (such as snacks)? Be sure to remind them to consider accessibility and how their choices can be inclusive of the needs of everyone in the classroom.

Conclusion

In my quest to address my own and my students' burnout, I found practices that allowed us to collectively cultivate joyful agency and commit to healing. Even as I cared deeply about my existing curriculum, when I watched myself and my students struggle, I realized I had to take a cue from *Emergent Strategy* and adapt. Following this principle, brown (2017) teaches us that "adaptation reduces exhaustion. No one bears the burden alone of figuring out the next move and muscling towards it. …is something not working? Stop. Change" (p. 71). To stop the plan, to express vulnerability toward our students and admit something is not working takes a level of courage that must be actively cultivated by teachers. It's not the presentation we are encouraged to have. But if we want to get our students to value classroom time, to seek refuge and find joy in learning, we must do something different. We must break down the professional façade and move into becoming facilitators of learning. Particularly in the humanities, we have the ability to lovingly challenge our students to consider the kind of

humans they want to be. This requires feeding imagination and encouraging our students to project themselves into the future. As Ritchie (2023) suggests, we should invite students to collaborate, merging ideas and strategies that:

> point us towards the necessity of creating luscious, generative spaces and practices that make room provisioning the world we want and inviting people into creating it with us, iteration and adaptation to meet the needs of participants and of the moment, opportunities to learn from our mistakes, and for fostering transformation and building resilience.
>
> *(p. 27)*

If we can imagine our classroom as portals (to joy, to agency, to healing), we can "imagine new worlds that transition ideologies and norms" (brown, 2017).

While I wish I could conclude by reporting that all my students stepped fully into their agency and nurtured their resilience, this is the student group that within a few months were separated by COVID lockdowns. The shift to online challenged us all, but in comparison to my other courses, who had not had the time to connect this way, I did observe more bids for connection and efforts of care between this group of students. While many struggled academically in the transition, the ties of their classroom community kept them motivated enough to get through the rest of the semester. I was so grateful that even apart, we still found ways to reach for each other.

Notes

1 The mission of the Puente Project

> is to increase the number of educationally underrepresented students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities, earn college degrees and return to the community as mentors and leaders to future generations. The program is interdisciplinary in approach, with writing, counseling, and mentoring components.
>
> ("About Puente," 2024)

As part of their Puente Project cohort, students take their first and second semester English courses together with the same instructor and a supplementary counseling or career-focused course. Students also participate in a mentorship component, university campus tours, a student conference, and other events specific to each campus program.

2 In this cohort, several undocumented students worried about their safety and ability to stay in the United States as they received mixed messages and watched back and forth legislation under the Trump administration. My LGBTQIA+ students faced increased incidents of discrimination and fearmongering from their peers. Collectively, we all shared experiences of increased racial discrimination, living in an area where white supremacist action was on the rise.

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WE DON'T HAVE TO BE HEROES

The Joys of Pedagogical "Quick Wins" and Community to Disrupt STEM Instructor Burnout

NaTasha Schiller and Kirkwood M. Land

In a research brief, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2020) reported distressingly high levels of faculty burnout in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. They detailed distinctly unjoyful "mental exhaustion" as well as the differential impacts felt by specific elements of campus communities (e.g., women and faculty of color). They also noted that these issues were systemic before the pandemic and merely enhanced by recent events. Far from being a blip on the radar, burnout trends for faculty in higher education continue to rise (Vyletel et al., 2023). For STEM faculty, there are often compounding issues of ever-increasing class sizes and pressures regarding student performance on professional placement exams (e.g., MCAT, DAT, or PCAT). Understanding some psychological roots of this "burnout crisis" and devising strategies for overcoming it is an urgent requirement for retaining those instructors most committed to student success. Therefore, this chapter addresses two things: strategies for optimizing student success and the institutional pressures faculty may be under to *not* utilize those strategies. We contend joy is a mediating factor both in terms of selecting effective strategies for students and of managing institutional pressures. In other words, by using joy as a guide, instructors can optimize student success and monitor their own well-being. We offer a tale of two professors, enduring the best of times and the worst of times ….

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-14

Finding the Joy: Instructor Case Studies

NaTasha Schiller: Starting Out Optimistic, Empowered, and Joyful

In July of 2001, one month after my daughter was born, I made the decision to attempt to go to college in the hopes of providing her with a better, more stable future. Not knowing how to apply to college, I wandered around the closest campus I could find, asking random students and staff how to register. It was a facilities management employee who helped me by walking me to the Financial Planning office to get the process started. Thus, I began my academic career as a non-heteronormative, differently abled, low-income, first-generation student, with a 3-month-old infant, at Grand Valley State University in the fall of 2001. Then, I failed my first chemistry class. I took this as evidence that I did not belong in college or science and started the withdrawal process. A faculty member, who started as my "savior" and later became my mentor, found me in the corridor and asked me why I was crying. When I explained that I was preparing to give up on my dream, they said, "It isn't that you are not intelligent or creative enough to do this; sometimes it is because you don't have the correct tools to get started." They taught me about free resources on campus: counseling and tutoring! They helped me navigate the university so that I could be successful. Because of this, I earned my bachelor's degree in Cellular and Molecular Biology in May of 2008. My child was 7 years old and a celebrity around campus. This success did not come easy; I nearly dropped out of college four different times before obtaining my degree, due to both the emotional difficulties related to imposter syndrome and financial difficulties of paying for college. To this day, my student loans are a constant reminder of this struggle.

My first experience with undergraduate student instruction started with teaching research techniques to students while I was a lab technician at Hope College in Holland, Michigan (2008–2011). From there, I discovered my passion for STEM teaching and began the transition to my doctoral program at Western Michigan University. When I began teaching a course of my own in 2013, a large introductory lecture class for non-biology majors that averaged 250 students per fall semester and 100 students per spring semester, the class had a 10-year historic course failure rate of 31.7%. I was understandably unhappy with that high number and started asking questions of my department chair as well as of Student Success Services. These questions led me to learn that not only was the overall failure rate that high, but that there were large inequities in the failure rate of historically underrepresented groups, with disproportionate failure rate gaps as large as 29% between demographics. This was painful to learn and relive emotionally. I was low-income. I was first generation. Additionally, minority students should not be 29% more likely to fail my course, and I refused to be part of an educational system that would perpetuate such inequities!

I embarked on a three-year journey of self-education. I started investigating, identified, and read hundreds of articles on teaching and learning research. After I learned that there were such things as "High Impact Practices," I absorbed, reflected on, and implemented many. I started seeking out mentors and faculty at Western Michigan University who would be willing to assist in my pedagogical education. I joined a journal club of three people: one Biology faculty member, one staff member, and myself. We found joy together as we discussed and dissected research in pedagogy and active learning. We discussed the logistics of how to implement things like a flipped classroom, teamwork, and more low-stakes assessments in large lecture halls while and mitigating the time commitment, as I was still a parent, and continuing my own education for my Ph.D. in Biology and Molecular Genetics. During my journey, I started to follow the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education and learned about using tools such as backward design and the assessment cycle to improve student success in my course. I partnered with Student Success Services and became deeply involved in the STEM student success steering committee connected to the John N. Gardner Institute Gateways to Completion program. Being involved in this community brought me immense satisfaction and helped validate my excitement about teaching and learning.

These intensive, steep redesign efforts, using a blend of "Quick Wins" and "Major Projects" (see next section), not changing content or rigor, resulted in large gains in student success for my course. I successfully brought the non-completion rate down to just 8%. The disparity between socioeconomic classes also had decreased between the 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 academic years.[1] Further, academic equality gaps between minority and non-minority cultural/ethnic groups had decreased between 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 academic years[2] (Schiller, 2017). The amount of joy this data still brings me today cannot be accurately measured.

Because of my own past, the gains and the effort I paid into these student successes filled me with deep gratification, and I wanted to continue to root out other educational disparities. I became deeply involved in two professional development teaching intensive workshops at my home institution, as well as being invited to join the Teaching and Learning Academy at the John N. Gardner Institute, where I developed a national reputation as an advocate for inclusive and equitable excellence. All this while still a doctoral student. The success of this involvement resulted in me leading inclusivity seminars and taking on an institutional role as an innovative leader. I participated in the American Association of Colleges and Universities' Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) States Initiative Action plan for the State of Michigan in 2017, participating in discussions with members of the Michigan Association of State Universities (MASU). I helped develop statewide Essential Learning Outcomes and a statewide action plan for committing to be a LEAP state,

promoting measurable student achievement. I gave of my time and pioneered additional workshops to help my peers discover new and alternative high-impact teaching methods and pedagogies that they could implement in their courses. I was invited to facilitate work on other campuses (where incidentally I met co-author Land). My passion for educational equity and student success, and my skills in objectively analyzing course design in a committee environment, were evidence of my strong commitment to teaching and learning. The trouble with all this great effort is that I invested three years into learning and designing to implement something for which I would not fully see the benefit (or failure) of for another two full years. Fortunately, the *ad hoc* learning community at Western Michigan University and the community that developed around the Gardner Institute helped keep me engaged, helped me stay resilient, helped me feel like I belonged in a student-centered academic environment, helped me feel complete joy in teaching, and helped me feel motivated in the face of this delayed gratification.

Kirkwood Land: Early Training in the Community College Classroom

As a first-generation student, I was introduced to a college environment when I took community college courses during my senior year of high school. I absolutely loved my professors, who helped me feel valued and empowered, so it didn't take long before I decided I wanted to be just like them. Later, during graduate school at UCLA, I discovered my passion and preference for undergraduate teaching over the intense environment of academic research when I taught a non-majors biology course at Santa Monica Community College. This pedagogical training at the community college in the late 1990s would help to position me to overcome the challenges ahead at my current institution. In the community college setting, the diversity of student learning styles and backgrounds were viewed as assets, and they allowed me to develop a broad repertoire of teaching skills. In turn, helping to accommodate student needs and being flexible with both methods of teaching and expectations were valuable to student success. The lessons I learned from my students also helped me improve my curriculum.

What I learned early on was that changing one's approach to teaching did not diminish rigor or quality. Students still had the same requirements, but I worked with their circumstances to help them succeed. I felt joyfully empowered and believed that my teaching experience at the community college would position me for success in future teaching environments. After graduating with my Ph.D., I started a postdoctoral fellowship at University of California San Francisco, another large research-heavy institution. Again, I sought out teaching opportunities at the local community college in San Francisco. I, again, tested

many of the teaching strategies I used at the community college in Southern California with gratifying success.

Centering Student Success

As evidenced in the previous narratives, both of us developed effective strategies for supporting the students in our classrooms that were also sustainable in terms of our own workloads. We created a joyful win–win for students and for ourselves by figuring out how to "right size" our investment of time and optimize "quick wins" (low effort–high impact pedagogical techniques). In doing so we eschewed "thankless tasks" (high-effort and low-impact), which leave little time for more productive or personal endeavors and leading to burnout. Our reflexive practice and teaching communities also allowed us to resist pedagogical "fill-ins" (low-effort and low-impact), which are generally unsuccessful or with no discernible effect, leaving instructors jaded or frustrated. "Quick wins" also left us energized to try the occasional "major project" (high-effort and high-impact), large-scale course redesign and curricular overhaul that necessitate a great deal of time and energy.

Because readers may be interested in these specific techniques, in our next section we will explore the "quick wins" (low-effort and big-impact, see Clayton et al., 2018) that busy STEM instructors can immediately try in their courses without having to make significant other changes, which will concomitantly increase the instructors' self-efficacy and gratification. We have come to refer to these kinds of joyful " 'small win' " changes as pedagogical "micro-investments."

Pedagogical Micro-Investments: The Best Bang for Your Buck

In 1983, when Muhammad Yunus established the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, little did he know he would win the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for his work eradicating poverty through micro-credit, small loans to the destitute with lessons on a few financial principles. While our intention is not so grandiose as to aspire to the Nobel Prize, we do recognize a kind of poverty in the traditional (joyless) ways STEM courses are often taught, and we also see the time scarcity faced by many instructors. We hope to disrupt that cycle by offering currency to those STEM instructors who are looking for a kind of micro-credit of their own: small investments (pedagogical changes) that can garner big returns (student success and personal joy). We use the term "currency" deliberately and with a double-meaning: the currency of time investment and the currency of immediate needs. We offer ideas for "quick wins" that garner large pedagogical payoff in terms of improving outcomes for students, which can motivate student persistence and concomitantly build instructor self-efficacy (belief in their capabilities as teachers) and joy. The positive emotions engendered by these results might then

subsequently lead instructors to tackle "major projects." Please note that these are approaches that have worked for us, and we invite readers to take these for inspiration to test in their own classrooms, not as narrow prescriptions. Citations provide references for those who might desire more detail on specific techniques.

"Quick Wins:" Low Effort–High Impact Micro-Investments

Quick wins begin with small changes in the way you think about teaching and students:

- Learn a little bit of relevant social science research (e.g., motivation or cognition theories) to help develop a framework for instructional choices.
- Find the evidence to back up choices that seem "right" (e.g., teach like a scientist) to ground confidence.
- Develop as a reflective practitioner; keep notes about what has worked to promote an assessment cycle (see also Shakman, Bailey, & Breslow, 2017) and save time in later iterations of the course.

Quick wins can be achieved through "small teaching" (Lang, 2016) or changes in your pedagogical practices:

- Get to know your students: Have attentiveness/sensitivity to and avoid perpetuating past trauma. Consider the reality of differential impacts and/or advantages experienced by students.
- Build a strong classroom community to develop student sense of belonging and academic identity.
  - Greet your students, by name if possible, as they enter the classroom or if you see them on campus. This personal touch sends the message to your students not only that you remember them, but that you consider them an important part of your day (McGuire, 2015).
  - Rather than forcing your rules/standards on the students by way of syllabus, allow time in the first class for the students to co-construct guidelines that they feel are important for their success (Edwards & Shipp, 2007).
- Look for student assets to build success; think about how you can leverage students' community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) as an academic source of strength.
- Encourage students and yourself to practice self-compassion (self-care). Teach them about this (see Neff, 2023).
- Teach "transparently," explaining the reasons why you are asking students to perform various tasks/assignments, increases student buy-in and engagement (Winklemes, Boye, & Tapp, 2019).

- Be mindful of the terms you use to describe things: Instead of "homework," use "learning assessment;" instead of "group work," use "team learning."
- Remember that "the person who does the work does the learning" (Doyle & Zakrejsek, 2014) and that learning is a social act.
  - Team-based learning can be structured around authentic and engaging problems. Team contracts allow peers to keep peers accountable.
- Create two-staged exams (Michaelson, Davidson, & Major, 2014) that teams might work on.
- Put more of the learning responsibility on students; don't perform *your* learning, have them develop theirs. Note: each of these approaches not only saves instructor time but also cultivates student agency and important cognitive skills.
  - "Crowd source" and co-create materials (concept maps, study guides, etc.).
  - Teach students how to quiz themselves and ask good questions using Bloom's taxonomy. (You might even select some of their questions to use on exams as a way of validating their efforts.)
  - Have students self-assess by reporting their learning using evidence to support their claims.
- Teach students how to learn; include 2–3-minute lessons at the end/start of class (see McGuire, 2015).
- Use writing to activate critical thinking and metacognition, BUT don't read everything students write (Camfield & Land, 2017).
- Leverage the expertise of institutional/external resources (e.g., tutoring center, peer learning assistants, Center for Teaching & Learning, and online communities) to support your facilitation and give feedback on student work. These spaces can help instructors build a community that can reinforce their own resilience, self-efficacy, engagement, and sense of belonging.

"Major Projects:" High Effort–High Impact

Once you have experienced some small wins, you may develop stronger beliefs in your capabilities as a teacher and will feel encouraged by the positive results demonstrated in your students' improved learning. Then, you are ready to tackle bigger challenges that take more time. In our opinion, many of these are internal and have to do with instructor mindsets:

- Accept fallibility (make mistakes, it's okay). Model the kind of comfort with risk-taking you'd like to see from your students.
- Be vulnerable: be open to and seek feedback.
- Develop a fundamental trust of students; assume positive intentions.
- Develop strategies for coping with institutional nay-sayers (don't take it on). Build networks with supportive colleagues.
- Dismantle the mindset that change happens from individual heroic effort.

However, here too, there are specific pedagogical undertakings to consider:

- Re-evaluate your learning outcomes and "backwards design" the curriculum (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).
- Flip/micro-flip your classroom, incrementally; work with colleagues to share recorded materials (Albert & Beatty, 2014; Fidalgo-Blanco et al., 2017).
- Embed undergraduate research in classes (Dolan, 2016).
- Allow yourself time to see changes occur.

Now having categorized those pedagogical strategies that are most sustainable and most/least likely to result in student success, STEM instructors may feel better able to be effective in the classroom. However, that effectiveness may still be influenced by institutional contexts and mindsets that can undermine and/or promote faculty joy. Understanding how those systems operate requires some more storytelling.

Losing (and Recovering) the Joy: Instructor Case Studies (Part 2)

NaTasha Becomes Discouraged and Disempowered: Joy Abates

After graduating with my Ph.D., I excitedly transitioned to a position as Assistant Professor at a smaller independent university in North Carolina. It is particularly notable that my reputation as a student success *wunderkind* was the reason I got this job. A number of key people at my new institution (hiring committee and dean) wanted me to "save" a department that was pedagogically hidebound with an unacceptable student failure rate of 53%. Unfortunately, this meant from the get-go, I was set up to be at odds with my department. Moreover, my designated role as "savior/hero" set me up to take on super-human feats.

Additionally, this transition resulted in a loss of community support from the John N. Gardner Institute, the loss of the support from institutional student success committees, and the loss of collaboration within my former department. Compounding these feelings of loss was the increased responsibility of being a new, junior, tenure-track faculty member at a smaller, less staffed, independent university. In addition to my personal intense teaching assessment and cycle of continuous course redesign, I was running my own research program and expected to publish, with no grant funding due to an institutional restriction, teaching 12 credit hours, advising 100+ students, holding 9 open office hours per week, time-responsive emailing, and participating in service to the university on various activities such as the student life committee and the finance committee, on top of departmental responsibilities of learning outcome assessment and curriculum reform. Further, I was asked to do MORE: go to football games,

basketball games, call students to check in on them, make accommodations for students who wanted to turn in late work, get together with students outside of class, go to department outings, attend co-worker social events in the evenings, etc. The sheer amount of expectations started to impede my capacity to use joy as a metric with which to determine where to invest my time. The icing on the burnout cake was the fact that I was not receiving appropriate accommodations for my disability, which made my work more exhausting. By the end of my first year, I began to ask, "why would I want security/tenure in this system?"

Despite all these demands, my joy in teaching, while tarnished, was somewhat sustained by my personal desire to improve student success and my ability to continue using quick wins. I continued finding joy and experimenting with high-impact practices: teaching my students about Bloom's taxonomy and Maslow's hierarchy of needs; using pre- and post-exam wrappers to support metacognition; asking students to compose self-efficacy narratives; holding one-on-one study strategy meetings; designing team-based learning opportunities; utilizing grading contracts, two-staged exams, and non-multiple choice exams; infusing active learning such as think–pair–share, team pre-content assessments, Jig-Saw journal article reading in every class; structuring a micro-flipped classroom; employing mindful universal design; providing extended homework deadlines with an added metacognitive assessment; increasing the number of low-stakes assessments; and resilience coaching. This was in addition to a "major project" that I created and successfully executed: an authentic Course-based Undergraduate Research Experience (CURE) in an upper-level molecular genetics course, where students designed, implemented, and assessed their own original molecular engineering experiment in mouse muscle cells using state-of-the-art technology of CRISPRi (CRISPR interference) and microscopy. Every day with this CUREs course was joy filled watching the students discover more about biology and themselves.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that I became increasingly more and more exhausted, spending every waking thought on work and someone else's offspring, and I had less time or energy for my own life, my own child (who at this time was a freshman in college). I was emotionally invested in the success of every individual person in my classes and the success of my institution, such that I became wracked with the anxiety to "save" the students, even from themselves. My work at this independent university had similar gains in student success to Western Michigan University, but I felt less joy and more resentment toward the work and what I perceived as "lack of appreciation" from my peers in my university community. I became trapped in the focus on service to the community and the students, at the cost of my time and emotional well-being, such that I lost some of the gains I had made in my own belief in my capabilities as a teacher and started becoming less able to stop the cycle of self-blame when students failed.

Unfortunately, my lost sense of efficacy could not be reinforced or bolstered by my peers in my institution. At this institution, I worked alone and felt shame for any time I spent on students. I was constantly told that I "cared too much" or that "that's not your job." The feelings of isolation and loss of community support made it more and more difficult for me to identify the positive evidence of success. When the faculty evaluated my teaching, I was informed in writing of two things: (1) "I (the evaluator) have no training in which to assess the way Dr. Schiller teaches," and (2) "Students are happier if they can sit back and listen to the lecture, not put work in." For both evaluations I provided lengthy rebuttals with scholarly teaching and learning articles to support the high-impact, evidence-based practices that I was implementing. Unfortunately, it became obvious toward the end of my time at this institution that the previous teaching success, and my personal joy with my teaching, was not just because I was creative and doing social good, but also because I had a community of support surrounding me throughout the process. That former community, which I had lost, had been able to help model and reinforce resilience for me when things were difficult, it provided me with a space to cognitively engage in the ideas I wanted to implement, and it helped provide a place where I felt belonging.

After the difficult 2020 academic year, coupled with the significantly increased demands on faculty for student retention efforts and university service hours, I started to sense myself becoming emotionally "burned out." The demands from the university and the pressures for promotion began to outweigh the joy that I felt in the classroom with students. I could no longer see the purpose of what I was doing or the value of the work. I only felt the intense depression, stress, and sadness of so much time spent on each student. I began to focus solely on those who failed. This is perhaps unsurprising given my own educational journey, where a faculty "hero" had rescued me from dropping out of my undergraduate program. However, reverting to that modeling did not serve me when I myself was in a faculty role. My need to save every student became my enemy. It did not matter to me that the failure rate for my course had dropped drastically below the department's historical average (53%); I only focused on the 8–12% who still failed. Further compounding this emotional turmoil was the knowledge that my scientific career and biological research advancement was being stifled by all the invisible service work, a lack of institutional financial support, a lack of emotional bandwidth, and a lack of temporal resources. Ultimately, I made a choice based on my personal passion for science, my emotional safety, and my need to still have joy in teaching and learning. In 2021, I resigned my faculty position.

At this point, readers may be asking themselves: "What is this story doing in a book about joy?" To that question, let me remind you of our contention in this book that joy is not just "feeling good." Joy can also come from agentic resistance against oppressive systems. In my case, this resistance meant quitting

my faculty position, but that need not be your response. In telling my story, I hope you might be more able to reject self-blame for systemic problems and be quicker than I was to name aspects of institutional culture that are toxic. In the naming can come repair.

Looking back from my current space, removed from the university environment and now working in industry, I realize that I was emotionally fragile: dealing with the grief over the loss of my previous institutional communities and over the loss of the idealized vision that I had of what I thought a professor was. During that time, I never allowed myself the space to grieve these losses and re-invent my ideal, nor was I given any mentorship that could help me reconcile the ideals I had for my teaching with institutional constraints. Additionally, while I did recognize the need for community support, it was not something that was available for me there, and the limited funding I was given precluded the possibility of networking outside of my university. However, the primary reasons why I did not allow myself to grieve, or even seek out counseling for this grief, can be attributed to a deficit in temporal and emotional currency. I did not prioritize my own needs, and I continued to have no emotional bandwidth to think about self-care. Further, while I did make multiple attempts to start learning communities at my institution, they were not sustainable, and often my efforts were mocked by other faculty.

Today, I see value in these experiences. I can now reflect on how powerfully institutional culture can shape our identities and see how vulnerable those of us first-generation academics with various forms of imposter syndrome are. Today, I find joy in my new relationship with scholarly teaching and learning, as an advisor to educators. While something of a cautionary tale, this chapter is a way for me to reach you and help you activate joy in your students while maintaining your own joy in teaching. The best way to accomplish this is by maintaining a robust community with other faculty who share your values and who can help you maintain the centering of joy.

Kirk's Tenure-Track Job: Joy Under-Threat and Rediscovered

After two years of postdoctoral work, I secured a tenure-track position at a comprehensive four-year university in Northern California. I hoped this position would allow me to pursue my passion in teaching and continue my research with a focus on undergraduates. However, when I started at the university, I had assumed faculty everywhere had training like what I had received at the two community colleges: understanding the diversity in student life experiences, learning preferences, and expectations. That proved not to be the case. Moreover, I was surprised to learn that some members of my new university questioned whether I was capable of teaching undergraduates at a doctoral-granting/professional-training institution given that I only had community college teaching experience. Those comments would be a premonition for what lay ahead.

Old-school traditional methods of teaching were expected, and anything that deviated from those methods was considered inferior. In part, this was because the vast majority of students in our biology program aspired to become dentists or pharmacists, so there was tremendous pressure to "teach to the test," to ensure success on the Dental Admissions Test (DAT) or Pharmacy College Admission Test (PCAT). External exams as a metric of teaching success risk creating a false and rigid mindset about what sorts of students are "worthy" and which just "don't have what it takes," feeding into the tendency of entry-level courses that "weed out" students who don't arrive at the university fully prepared. Because our program had high enrollments, there was never a reason to question the "survival of the fittest" mentality that permeated the department, and few instructors questioned the high non-completion rates in our introductory courses. Instead, high failure rates were often seen as badges of honor, of rigor, a sign we were doing our duty as "gatekeepers."

Amid this climate of transactionalism, some of my colleagues became cynical about students. Additional pressures to increase class sizes and "do more with less" created untenable workloads that also led some colleagues to become jaded regarding our university's values. Within this kind of dismal institutional context, it is remarkably difficult to swim against the current. I often found myself capitulating to pressure to curve my course grades downwards or, more subtly, to feel ashamed of the empathy I felt for all students, especially those who were struggling academically. I would not say I was burned out, because I still found myself energized in the classroom, but I did feel drained by the hiding I had to do from some of my colleagues.

All this is to say that joy is very much situationally constructed. Individuals who find themselves in contexts where they are discouraged against finding joy in their teaching often "pay it forward" by making their students miserable. Fortunately, the opposite is also true. For me this started in 2013 when I was invited to join an interdisciplinary Networked Improvement Community for writing in the disciplines. Then-director of the University Writing Program sought to connect faculty who wanted to improve student success, using writing as a thinking and learning tool. She was keenly aware that many faculty were siloed in their home departments and needed to reach outside those walls to connect with others who shared their values. In that space, I found "my people:" colleagues in physics, mathematics, geology, sociology, kinesiology, philosophy, writing, and general education who were committed to teaching and learning. Not only was I able to rediscover the skills I had honed through my community college teaching, I developed a whole new repertoire of techniques, and a beneficent cycle was started. Even more significantly, I had mentoring that allowed me to realize that failures (like adding written essays to exams without providing additional time) were not reasons to abandon having students demonstrate their learning through writing. However, I needed to abandon a "thankless task" (a high-stakes situation for students where time constraints set them up to fail and

an untenable grading load for me) in favor of "quick wins." I had to create the conditions under which students could compose successfully. This started with assigning asynchronous take-home essays, later supported by a daily practice where I asked students to compose a "thesis" for every lecture I delivered. This allowed them to start thinking about oral and written communication as the same thing, with similar cognitive and structural features. Over time, I began asking them to share their theses with classmates and "revise" to best reflect what they collectively thought was the take-away from that day's class. This review technique was a game changer both in terms of the pleasure students felt in working with one another and also in terms of improvements in student success. Moreover, this collaborative work helped blunt the individualistic competitive climate in our gateway courses, embracing a greater range of student knowledge expression.

From this faculty community spawned other connections – with tutors in the writing center, with the academic support hub, and with peer learning assistants. Moreover, it launched a new research area for me (see Camfield & Land, 2017; Camfield et al., 2020). Data derived from these studies slowly have made their way back to my departmental colleagues, and slowly the departmental culture has begun to shift. This is not to claim personal credit for this shift. There have been changes in administrative priorities regarding student success and changes in departmental personnel (e.g., new hires and junior faculty receiving tenure) that mean I no longer feel like the odd man out. The point here is that joy (in the form of student success and teaching gratification) is not sustainable when it is one person's individual heroic responsibility. Joy must be networked in human relationships.

As the first parts of our stories entail a list of pedagogical tactics, this second suggests things instructors might avoid or stop doing, as we have found them to be minimally impactful on student learning and/or conducive to burnout and loss of joy in teaching.

"Fill Ins:" Low Effort–Low impact

- Mindlessly replicating "the way you were taught."
- Lecturing non-stop for 90–120 minutes.
- Holding fixed mindsets about students.
- Ignoring institutional resources.
- Blindly using textbook slide decks, quizzes, and exams.

"Thankless Tasks:" High Effort–Low (or Toxic) Impact

As with small wins and major projects, instructor mindset plays a large role in causing us to undertake thankless tasks. These internalized harmful narratives (listed below) need to be disputed and disrupted. This may well be the hardest

step of this process. After all, neither our doctoral training nor our institutional contexts encourage us to take our own mental health seriously. While not every person will struggle with all of these, take note of which you may fall prey to and develop a practice of "centering joy" to help you resist.

- Savior complex regarding students and/or the institution.
- Assume I must "do it all" and it "has to all be perfect."
- Internalizing messages that rationalize untenable workloads (e.g., braggadocio about "hard work," suffering, and masochism).
- Conflating learning with suffering; fearing that if students enjoy your class, they aren't learning/working.
- Doubling-down on false logic: "if one student can do it, they all can" (or "if I had to endure it, then they should") or myths like "grit is enough."
- Ignoring the importance of mental health and assuming accommodations are "coddling."

Conclusion: Joyful Take-Aways

What these narratives reveal is the necessity to reflect both on one's individual classroom practices and on institutional contexts. Instructors must inquire: "where am I finding joy?" and "what is impeding my joy?" Do you hear others or find yourself resisting pedagogical innovation? From the adjunct: *I am teaching six courses at three different colleges. I don't have time to redesign my courses.* From the assistant professor: *I have to be strategic. Tenure will be based on my research. Teaching has to come second for now*. From the mid-career instructor: *No one else in my department is making significant effort to improve their teaching. Why should I put in extra labor?* From the traditionalist: *I teach the way I was taught. It worked for me; it can work for today's students.* Reasons like these may signal burnout.

In terms of the domain under your personal control, you may want to audit where you invest your pedagogical time and energy to evaluate its effectiveness. Ask yourself: does it spark joy? For example, Schiller spent an inordinate time conducting one-on-one study strategy meetings with every one of their students. They noted that these meetings had a high impact for the very few students who followed the study plans developed there, but they did not impact many students. (While many students came to the meetings, they did nothing to change that semester.) So, Schiller determined the meetings were a "thankless task;" however, they also acknowledge that the practice may have a delayed impact on some students down the road.

As a corollary practice, you may also want to ask questions about your institutional culture: are those academic spaces conducive to joy and gratification? If the answer is no, where might you find a community (within or

outside your discipline) of like-minded colleagues that might help you resist a "savior complex," set boundaries, and develop effective and sustainable teaching strategies.

That said, responsibility for assuaging burnout does not rest solely on individual instructor's shoulders. Institutions should also take heed of not only the differential outcomes experienced by students from historically marginalized backgrounds, but of faculty as well. Our (NaTasha's and Kirk's) institutional isolation and lack of support were particularly problematic given our positionality as a "first-gen academics."

Recent advice for addressing faculty burnout runs the gamut from suggesting instructors distance themselves from work, seeing it as a job not a calling/duty and questioning internalized beliefs about work that lead to burnout (Malesic, 2022), to suggesting instructors seek more meaning in their work (Sims, 2022). Our recommendations align with these by offering a joy-centered framework for how to simultaneously detach (from thankless tasks) and attach (to effective and generative practices). We note that the "bigger lift" happens inside one's head in developing self-awareness and the realization of how one's identity is shaped/pressured institutionally (e.g., to be silent, to work harder and harder). Challenging those internalized messages may not be possible without meaningful connection within a community of like-minded colleagues. However, it also takes small steps to accomplish these kinds of changes. The micro-investment framework helps establish a joyful and beneficent cycle: small changes may deliver the vaccine we need to inoculate ourselves against epidemic burnout.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- Do you feel external measures of success (security/tenure and promotion) are at odds with your internal sense of joy and peace?
- If you are a faculty member, how would you characterize your departmental culture? Is it conducive to joy?
- Are you feeling burnout or grief? (If so, where is that coming from?)
- Do you have a community of joyful support that allows you to both bear witness to problems within your institution and seek solutions?
- What do you need to improve your access to a community of support?

Notes

1 With a change of 6.9% in disparity between Pell eligible and non-Pell eligible students resulting in an equity gap of 5.1% in 2016–2017, compared to the previous equity gap of 12% in 2015–2016. Likewise, a 5.9% change in disparity between first generation and non-first generation occurred between these same academic years resulting in an equity gap of 1.7%, compared to the previous 7.2% gap.

2 With the largest change in disparity of 14.7% between Black/African American students and White students, resulting in an equity gap of 14.3%, compared to the previous 29% gap in 2015–2016. Additionally, a 10.2% drop in disparity between Hispanic/Latino students and White students occurred within these same academic years resulting in an equity gap of 1.5% in 2016–2017, compared to 11.7%.

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15

JOY

A Compass through Failure

Emily Rónay Johnston

Like many educators, I strive to be a better one. I talk to colleagues, attend conferences, read the literature on best practices, and sometimes leap headlong into pedagogical trends in an attempt to improve my craft and better serve students. Yet as we know all too well, intentions and outcomes don't always align. Wires cross. We misinterpret others' needs. The new curriculum flops. In response, we further entrench in an improvement mindset, resolving evermore fervently to try harder and do better. In all this efforting, we can overlook the joy of failure.

To give failure its due, this chapter tells a story about my headlong leap into labor-based contract grading (LBCG) and the floundering that ensued. LBCG has rapidly become a commonplace assessment model in first-year composition since compositionist Asao B. Inoue introduced it to writing studies in 2019 with the publication of *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, now in its second edition (2022). A form of alternative grading in which grades are based on effort rather than quality, LBCG operates on the premise that the only constant in the classroom is labor: "energy used, calories burned" (p. 75). As Inoue explains, labor is not only "the engine that runs all learning" (p. 75), it is revolutionary, "part of how change and flux happen" (p. 110). While traditional grading aims "to control [...] and measure or rank students" (p. 5), LBCG aims to create classrooms "where every student, no matter where they come from or how they speak and write, can have access to the entire range of final course grades possible" (p. 3). LBCG offers a long-overdue corrective to instructor bias, product-over-process orientation, and students' writing anxiety in the classroom. Even though LBCG

DOI: 10.4324/9781003532224-15

is specific to first-year composition, I invite readers to use my story to imagine pedagogical trends designed to correct long-standing issues in their own contexts and to reflect on their failed attempts to implement them.

Fortified by its promises of resisting hierarchy and promoting equity, my colleagues and I launched LBCG in our first-year composition program. Granted, we knew that our context and positionalities differed from Inoue's. An established, tenured, cisgender man, Inoue taught his own small seminar-style writing courses. In contrast, my colleagues and I were a cohort of pre-tenured and non-tenure track cisgender women faculty, housed in a program that structured first-year composition courses as large lectures taught by faculty with small discussion sections facilitated by teaching assistants (TAs) who did all the grading. We taught from a common syllabus. Given our program's position at the institution, as the required first-year sequence for students entering the university's undergraduate college dedicated to social justice, we taught composition through an intensive curriculum on structural inequities and movements for social equality in U.S. history, society, and culture. Despite the structural and positional differences between Inoue's context and our program, ideologically, our curriculum and LBCG seemed made for each other. However, LBCG did not land well. Instead of taking more risks in their writing, many students became hyper-focused on grades. Instead of pedagogical agency, many TAs expressed confusion and resentment.

To be clear, this is not a story about the failure of *LBCG*, but rather the failure of *how we implemented LBCG*: adopting someone else's model while expecting the same results. Moreover, it is a story of how our failed implementation exposed the constant presence of joy, what writer Ross Gay (2022) defines as an intentional practice of connection with the full spectrum of human experience. This is not a story about discovering joy in the aftermath of reflection on lessons learned. Our joy was being reminded, throughout the process of failing, of our commitment to our core values as educators: treating education as a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). In this way, my story highlights how joy can function as a compass for any educator who experiences failure in their attempts to promote self-actualization and critical consciousness in the classroom. While my colleagues and I learned that we ultimately needed to create our own brand of alternative grading to enact our values, our failed implementation of LBCG was liberatory in its own right.

In sharing this experience, I hope to reassure readers that failure is an ever-present feature of engaged teaching, and something to celebrate. Moreover, in telling this story, I align in solidarity with other composition teacher-scholars and administrators who have narrated their own failures. Reflecting on their failures in writing program administration amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Justin H. Cook and Jackie Hoermann-Elliott (2022) normalize failure, reframing

it as "its own distinct experience" (p. 62) from success. Heather Bastian (2019) affirms the need to treat success and failure as "both/and experiences that exist simultaneously and independently" (p. 95), a conclusion she comes to in the wake of her writing program failing to survive massive budget cuts at her institution. She contends that failure "opens up space for reflection and for critique of structures and norms" (p. 102). Describing the debilitating onset of imposter syndrome when she started her PhD program, Allison Carr (2013) imagines "what could happen if we risk dwelling in the shameful muck and mire of our failure" (p. 32) so we might learn not to avoid failure, but how to fail. These stories fortify my conviction that failure deserves to have a joyful presence in our institutions, programs, departments, and classrooms.

Indeed, when we pathologize failure, we make it fearful and inadvertently reinforce for our students that failure is a mere stepping stone along the way to the more important and culturally valued "success." That constant pushing is exhausting. And, in our quest for success, we miss important truths that failure exposes. When we consider failure in its own right, we can connect, intentionally, with that which we might otherwise be prone to rush past. In short, we can exercise joy. What gets in our way of recognizing the joy of failure is attaching to a particular outcome and clinging on for dear life. In fact, when things fall apart, the title of Buddhist writer Pema Chödrön's (2005) classic book on coping with a myriad of failures, it can be "good news" (p. 13). As she explains, it can "teach us to perk up and lean in when we feel we'd rather collapse and back away" (p. 13). Treating failure as "good news" is what this chapter aims to do. The joy of failure is not found in "I'll do better next time," but in the recognition that "next time" is now.

A Story of Joyful Failure

By the spring of 2021, pandemic fatigue was in full swing. I had also just completed a program assessment that exposed a significant contradiction between our program's stated goals, nurturing writerly agency, and the harm our curriculum was causing multilingual students of color by way of disproportionately lower grades. My faculty colleagues and I wanted to create a comprehensive programmatic change that would uplift students and TAs from Zoom drudgery, reinvigorate the writing process as a vehicle for learning, and prioritize mental health. We wanted to unapologetically position ourselves as facilitators, not gatekeepers; create classrooms where everyone could learn and excel, with multilingual students at the center; and implement curriculum and assessment that reflected how writing gets messy when thinking gets complex and therefore celebrate "messy writing." We wanted to practice what we preached.

So, we spent the summer researching alternative grading, and in the fall of 2021, we launched LBCG as our official assessment model. Brimming with idealism, we anticipated that LBCG would empower our 1,000 undergraduates and the 30 TAs responsible for grading student work. We believed wholeheartedly in the healing, emancipatory effects that Inoue (2022) describes—that LBCG could "cultivat[e] enough grace to allow for [students'] seemingly clumsy gestures, their momentary faltering in words, so that their poems, or papers, or new selves, can be born [... to] listen many students into existence" (p. 304). We eagerly anticipated the structural transformation that Inoue (2022) claimes LBCG lays the groundwork for in "offer[ing] students in writing classrooms the chance not just to redirect the way power moves in the classroom, but to critique power" (p. 301). With these prospects guiding us, we imagined that LBCG would free TAs up to focus on rich discussion of the writing process with their students, and that students' teacher-pleasing tendencies and grade anxiety would diminish. Our unencumbered hope indicated one form of joy, the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed kind. We believed that this student-centered grading model would be a welcome antidote to the top-down lecture model of our courses and the institutional mandate that students meet English writing proficiency requirements through them. We had committed ourselves to a model that treated care as a viable learning outcome and that could set revolution in motion. We had strived to do better by our TAs and students, and we had found a tool for doing just that. Or so we thought.

As the quarter unfolded, grades increasingly preoccupied both students and TAs. Treating the labor contract as a checklist for earning an A, students became litigious about points. TAs became disillusioned with enforcing a contract they had no hand in creating, while they simultaneously struggled to redirect students' attention. We had assumed that the open-ended terms of our contract would spark experimentation and growth. Leaving qualitative criteria out, our bottom line was simple: "Respond to the prompt and upload your work to the correct link by the deadline." But with completion as the bar and the structural disconnect between those who had designed the contract (us faculty) and those carrying it out (the TAs), some students openly admitted to phoning it in. This response affirmed the fact that students have become conditioned by a transactional grading system. Even for students who demonstrated authentic engagement, our contract distracted them from learning, as they could be marked down for submitting work to incorrect links or minutes past deadlines, and our contract left no room for trying again. Students either checked out or panicked at their TAs.

TAs struggled to find common ground around what even constituted completion. Some TAs marked assignments with incorrect citations as incomplete. "That's not a good faith attempt," they'd remark. "At least they appear to have made an attempt," other TAs would retort. The inconsistency

in grading exacerbated the brewing mistrust among students. We had created open-ended writing prompts to encourage students to ask hard questions without the fear of judgment or grade consequence, explore connections between course material and their daily lives, and engage authentically. But there was no incentive for students to take such leaps in their work with on-time completion as the bar and revision neither required nor optional. Moreover, our top-down implementation of the contract left no room for student or TA buy-in with these terms. Sure, we had set them in an effort to create clear, consistent expectations across the 60+ sections of our courses and to streamline TA labor, but our mitigation efforts inadvertently kept us too close to instructor-based grading. The message we were sending was contradictory: labor because that's what learning is and what you'll be graded on, but only labor that fits within the arbitrary parameters of Canvas submission requirements. One TA astutely observed the contradictions unfolding in an anonymous mid-quarter survey:

> One of the goals of labor-based grading—as stated both in the Inoue [text] and on our Labor Contract—is to shift students' focus from exclusively on grades and getting an A to learning and improving their writing. However, the Labor Contract includes a long list of specific tasks that lead to getting an A, which has resulted in students worrying a lot about these specific things. More than emphasizing risk-taking, this has seemed to emphasize merely reading the fine-print and following directions.

From this description and the many others like it, my colleagues and I wondered if our grading contract was creating the conditions for playing games and meeting instructor standards, not learning. The "long list of specific tasks" did not include revision, so students could continue to earn full credit for work with the same issues their TAs had flagged in previous assignments so long as students met the labor instructions for the current assignment. While Inoue makes no claim that LBCG circumvents gaming the system, TAs had assumed that students would use their formative feedback to experiment with their writing now that instructor-defined quality was no longer the benchmark. TAs new to teaching felt particularly discouraged. They struggled to implement accountability mechanisms that did not violate the terms of the contract, laboring harder themselves to encourage engagement.

The TAs' observations were borne out at the end of the quarter, when the program received more than double the usual number of grade contestations. By and large, these requests did not come from students disproportionately harmed by instructor bias, the students that our grade review process was designed to protect and that alternative grading models like LBCG aim to advocate for. They came from students used to excelling in school who had wound up with high Bs or low As in our course due to points lost over incorrectly submitted work.

It seemed that our contract was simply activating the perfectionism of high-achieving students and emboldening them.

Joyfully Fixing Failure

My colleagues and I could have responded by doubling-down on enforcing the contract or sulking in defeat, but instead, we chose to lean into the contradictions and get curious. The contradictions indicated what Chödrön (2005) calls impermanence: "a principle of harmony" (p. 60) in which all things exist in balance—success and failure, hope and defeat, intention and consequence. She goes onto explain that when "we can recognize our reaction to impermanence [...] curiosity comes in" (p. 62). For my colleagues and I, treating the contradictions as a sign of impermanence meant that we acknowledged and held compassion for our disappointment rather than resisting it. We wondered what it had to teach us. We considered how our institutional conditions may have contributed to these outcomes, limiting the ways we could implement the student–teacher negotiation process that Inoue and other contract grading scholars intend with their models. We considered how our own positionalities limited our options as well. The leaning-in helped us name a larger failure before us: our expectations. "Cutting our expectations for a cure is a gift" (p. 30), Chödrön (2005) says. We had expected LBCG to "cure" our program. But our program was different from Inoue's writing courses. We were positionally different people than Inoue. In expecting comparable results to Inoue's, we had missed the "gift" of recognizing that there is no magic one-and-done cure for inequities in higher education.

While our contract was backfiring, our values were intact. Just as we had done when program assessment and pandemic fatigue sent us down the LBCG road in the first place, we remained committed to listening to hard feedback. That commitment gave us space to question whether our contract needed overhaul to accomplish what it was intended to accomplish: prioritizing a cohesive, agential learning experience for students within the bounds of university requirements, while protecting TA labor. In this way, the litigiousness and disillusionment were "good news." They prompted us to intentional turn toward failure and avoid spiraling. In other words, in the very act of accepting failure's presence, we kept it from becoming the fearful thing we've been conditioned to treat failure as. We kept it from consuming us.

To be sure, recognizing and acknowledging joy's presence during the tumult did not come easily. In faculty meetings, my colleagues and I spent significant time venting our frustrations with the grade disputes and dampened morale. The volume of emails we received from disgruntled students and TAs became so overwhelming, we considered reverting back to qualitative rubrics. But the care we had taken with choosing LBCG reminded us that launching it was an investment in long-term change to what was possible in first-year composition: fostering

agency and flattening hierarchy amid required courses that relied on exploitative labor conditions. As often as we lamented, we also reminisced about the joyful hours we had spent preparing for the LBCG rollout: our dog-eared copies of Inoue's book; our excited talking over each other while discussing Inoue's ideas as we imagined the transformation LBCG could bring; our heavily commented-on and suggestions-riddled Google Docs as we co-drafted our program's labor contract. As one colleague frequently reminded us, shifting from qualitative to alternative grading was like making pancakes. "The first one never comes out well. The perfect pancake takes time." These moments of commiseration with my colleagues reminded me to pay attention to something other than the reactionary negativity of "we failed, let's throw the whole thing out." The solidarity we had built with each other through the process reminded me that reaction is an ego-driven grasping for control that divides and conquers. Solidarity counteracts ego. It goes beyond "being in it together"; it requires purposeful connection: joy. We had not gotten to this moment based on snap decisions and divisiveness, and we certainly would not resolve anything that way either.

At the end of the rollercoaster first-quarter rollout of LBCG, we gave each other permission to unplug and rest. Just as prioritizing care for students and TAs had led us to LBCG, we needed to prioritize care for ourselves. As Gay (2022) says, joy is "what emerges from how we care for each other *through*" (p. 4) suffering. That rest allowed us to return to the drafting table before the new quarter started with a clearer perspective on how to adjust the grading contract. We agreed that making a major change like throwing out LBCG, mid-year, would not only violate the commitment we had made to a yearlong pilot but would also shortchange students and TAs who were benefiting from the shift away from qualitative grading. Indeed, as Cook and Hoermann-Elliott (2022) advise, even in normalizing failure, writing program administrators "should try to protect our most vulnerable and overworked instructors [TAs...] from failures that were not wholly their fault" (p. 74). So, we created a supplemental contract for TAs to use in their sections in which they could negotiate, with students, the terms of section engagement and assignment revision. We intended for this shift to support autonomy, making space for TAs and students to define the needs and goals of their sections outside the bounds of the top-down contract from us faculty. We began to feel again that excitement from our initial discussions of LBCG, eager to see how this change might offset the powerlessness TAs were feeling and affirm for students that they had a say in their grades.

Joyfully Failing to Fix Failure

Our excitement was quickly dampened again when we introduced the revised contract to TAs on the first day of the new quarter. At the end of that orientation session, some TAs were incensed. They felt blindsided, claiming we had

sabotaged them by changing the terms of LBCG with little time to adjust. As they despaired, they had no experience with contract negotiations. Despite its flaws, the ready-made contract from the previous quarter made expectations clear. The resources I had prepared to guide TAs in facilitating negotiations offered little comfort. Reading about and discussing the topic among their peers was one thing; actually doing it with the very undergraduates who had complained to them about contract unfairness in the previous quarter was another. While we had wanted to introduce the revised contract to TAs sooner, their employment contracts prohibited them from working before the first day of classes. Once again, our intentions had been to protect TA labor, but our plan backfired. Once again, we could have curled up in despair but, instead, chose to lean in.

So, I spent the first two weeks of the quarter treating the TAs' section contracts like drafts of papers from students, offering feedback for revision and tips on how to go back into their classrooms and renegotiate. In the process of reading and conferencing with TAs about their contracts, I noticed glaring differences from section to section. For example, in one contract, students could miss 20% of section meetings with no impact to their grade, while in another, a single absence would bump their grade down. This disparity among section contracts snapped me into a difficult realization: that despite our best intentions to amplify TA autonomy, my colleagues and I had created conditions for even greater inconsistency across sections and potentially greater grading inequity. Moreover, we had made blanket assumptions about TAs' needs. The truth was, not all TAs resented the top-down implementation of LBCG; some preferred the ease of just following the terms the program set. The TAs had vastly different degrees of comfort with being classroom authority figures. Some TAs readily pushed back when students tried to negotiate for more absences, confidently explaining the importance of classroom community and insisting on regular attendance. Other TAs, wary of conflict, passively accepted whatever terms their students requested. Teaching experience had something to do with the disparity, but so did positionality. Among the wary TAs, a high number were women of color.

This pattern was painful to witness. The reason we had chosen LBCG was to create conditions in which every student could earn an A, to challenge the Standard Academic English that has consistently made that possibility more accessible to white, cisgender, neuronormative students (National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), 2021). Leaning into the pain, accepting its presence without trying to shake it off, my colleagues and I remembered that the TAs were students *themselves*, complex individuals deserving of just as much success as the undergraduates they taught. This recognition exposed the double-bind we were in as a first-year composition program at a large university. On the one hand, we were striving to treat the TAs as autonomous agents capable of setting the terms in their classrooms, who could benefit from witnessing themselves taking the lead and leveraging that experience in an increasingly competitive

academic job market. On the other hand, as students, they were balancing teaching alongside their own coursework, limited in their working hours and earning minimal compensation, all while bearing the bulk of the grading labor. At this point, my colleagues and I came to the realization that our implementation of LBCG had not just encouraged litigiousness and disillusionment; it had put the most vulnerable members of our teaching community on the front lines of navigating a grading model that we ourselves were still trying to learn.

Joyfully Co-Creating a Better Fit

Clinging to LBCG as the gold standard of equity-based assessment may have kept us from this realization. Instead, we considered the possibility that LBCG might not be the best fit for our program. In other words, in committing to our pedagogical values of equity rather than attaching to particular means of enacting them helped us reframe our failed implementation of LBCG as an opportunity to clarify and affirm humanization at the center of our work. So, instead of turning back to Inoue's work for guidance, we tuned into the voices of on-the-ground experience in front of us: the TAs and students. We created an anonymous survey for TAs to share uncensored feedback about how LBCG was working in their classrooms. We held a listening session for students about LBCG. Eventually, we even invited Inoue to come and facilitate a workshop with our teaching community, which gave TAs the opportunity to be heard by Inoue himself in their struggle to adapt his model. The results of these interventions confirmed the disparities we were already noticing. Some students and TAs were finding ground with LBCG. However, others vehemently opposed the foregrounding of "labor." For them, basing grades on labor felt deeply hypocritical in a program like ours where the curriculum focused on a critical examination of racist racial projects like chattel slavery and settler colonialism in which labor was a tool for dehumanization and genocide. While Inoue has complicated racialized, capitalist conceptions of labor in his book, this did not erase the visceral unease that some TAs felt with judging their students based on the labor they had expended and that students expressed about trying to prove they had labored "enough." As one TA noted, labor problematically valorized the individual, explaining that "the focus on individual work to achieve an 'A' range grade rather than asking the student to do something that enriches the classroom community" reinforced a capitalist framing of education as a commodity. At the end of the year, several TAs left the program out of deep frustration with LBCG and their loss of trust in us to set them up for success.

Their departure cut me and my colleagues to the core. Resistance to the contract was one thing, losing trust was another. Navigating failure through joy is

impossible to do alone; community is essential. So, processing that loss included multiple after-hours phone calls with each other, on top of our usual faculty meetings. During those calls, we reviewed the many critiques and complaints, but also the affirmations and praise in TAs' and students' feedback. A student had acknowledged in the listening session that they could "focus on learning and growth" since their grades were no longer based on quality. In the survey, a TA echoed this sentiment: LBCG was helping them reward "questioning and openness rather than getting the 'correct' answer." Sometimes, I took walks during our calls. They provided a welcome backdrop for this hard reflection. I surrounded myself with mountains in the distance and the ocean just a few miles away. The struggles of earth and water to survive and transform were far larger and longer than ours. This physiological reclaiming of space reminded me that we'd had the courage to try something new and still had the agency to keep trying. TA and student feedback, put into perspective by the fresh air, provided affirming evidence that we had resisted the rush into fix-it mode when problems arose, that we had paused to listen, and that our values were still intact. We were onto something with alternative grading. We just needed time to create a pancake that suited our needs. Our particular experiment with LBCG had failed, while simultaneously affirming hope.

It would be easy to chalk up our failure to the mounting body of criticism on LBCG. Some have noted the ableism reinforced by a labor-based grading system (Carillo, 2021), while others have critiqued it as a "trap" for Black students (Craig, 2021). But delineating those criticisms is not the purpose of this chapter. Besides, as my colleagues and I had learned, sometimes failure lies within the hardest place to look: ourselves. So, in the spirit of intentionally connecting with painful truths, we decided to embark upon our usual summer curriculum planning with a TA who had been vocal in their critiques of LBCG, but also in their commitment to upending qualitative grading. In the summer of 2022, we collaborate with them in researching a different form of alternative grading. Together, we read Linda Nilson's (2014) *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*, which, ironically, Asao Inoue had referred us to during his workshop with the TAs. Like LBCG, specifications grading is a counterresponse to a "broken" (p. 2) grading system that "prioritizes credentials over learning [and] results over the integrity of the process" (p. 7). Specifications grading aims to empower students to take responsibility for their grades rather than continue to hang that responsibility on their teachers, as they have become conditioned to do. In providing clear, simple expectations for each assignment, specifications grading is designed to help students practice course learning outcomes through a scaffolded process of increasingly complex specifications. Instructors grade assignments on a pass/fail

basis and provide actionable feedback, and students revise any assignment that fails until it passes. Like a labor-based contract, a specifications grading contract aims to make an A attainable for all students.

What most appealed to us with specifications grading was moving away from the fraught concept of labor. Where labor as a metric had proven challenging to track, at best, and inequitable, at worst, specifications gave us a language for articulating specific skills and knowledge that could help students develop as writers, all while removing the expectation that they demonstrate those skills/knowledge according to an individual instructor's biased conception of quality (or "enough" labor). Encouraged, we imagined that specifications could provide a common language for TAs to base their feedback on and to hold students accountable for implementing. Specifications could allow us to emphasize, and students to experience, revision as integral to the writing process in ways that our labor contract had not. We could streamline TA labor while boosting their morale with the renewed focus on feedback and revision. We could ease student confusion about expectations and deepen their engagement by setting "no grade is final" as a foundational term of the contract.

Throughout our conversations about specifications grading, however, we kept coming back to the fact that we missed the emphasis on questioning institutional power and centering linguistic diversity at the core of Inoue's model. Nilson's book did not explicitly address students' intersectional identities and their disparate levels of preparation to meet course learning outcomes. So, we decided that we needed to adapt things from LBCG and specifications grading to invent our own version of contract grading. For example, we integrated metacognitive reflections, drawing on Nilson's "metacognitive wrapper" (p. 70), a self-assessment of learning at the beginning or end of a project, with Inoue's "labor log" (p. 150) and "labor journal" (p. 151) in which students track and reflect on their labor. In these reflections, we would ask students to form arguments about their work for the assignment and identify the significance of that argument to their development as writers. This structure of reflection would allow us to teach components of academic writing, like evidence-driven argumentation, while keeping the focus on learning. Moreover, this structure could lay a foundation for students to regard their own work as just as worthy of close study as the work of professional writers. In creating this hybrid contract, we demonstrated to ourselves and each other that the values that first led us to LBCG were alive and well.

Reporting on the outcome of specifications-based contract grading is beyond the scope of this chapter (and not its point). But suffice it to say, the year we launched it in our program went far smoother than the previous year had, for TAs and students alike. That said, the success of any assessment model—the

alignment of intentions and outcomes—is an ongoing endeavor. We have more experiments to run, more questions to ask, and more skepticism to embrace.

Failing Joyfully Forward[1]

Saying that joy guided our failed implementation of LBCG is in no way intended to minimize the harm that our pilot of LBCG caused. TAs lost trust and left. Students' grades dropped. But because we remained connected to our values and "scooch[ed] closer to hear" (Gay, 2022, p. 5) harm's teachings, we treated failure with integrity. Full stop. No "but what was the final outcome?" is needed to qualify that joy.

Adopting a ready-made model like LBCG and also enforcing it are both tricky. I have learned that, no matter the model, we can't adopt someone else's wholesale and have it come out the same way it did for them. People are too dynamic, our contexts too different. Trying something new always takes time. We can't just bide that time; rather, we can practice mindfulness about how our specific positionalities and contexts necessitate changes and adaptations to the model. Part of this mindfulness includes reflecting on multiple layers that can combine to create failure. For example, my program's implementation of LBCG didn't work because *the program failed*. The large lectures/small discussion sections setup of our courses imposed LBCG onto the TAs, leaving them with the enormous responsibility of being on the front lines with students while having little agency in mitigating challenges when they arose. But our implementation of LBCG also didn't work because *the university failed*. The instructional structure at our university placed TAs, often among the least experienced and lowest-paid instructors on campus, in the high-impact role of teaching first-year students. Their own labor contracts afforded them minimal time for training. What's more, the lack of alternative grading models campus-wide, of system-wide approaches to rebuilding assessment anew, confused students. They'd encounter LBCG in one context (our courses) and curve grading in another, with no resources to help them navigate these different models. And thirdly, our implementation of LBCG also didn't work because *I failed*. While our motivation for piloting LBCG was equity, my idealism about its efficacy generated a trifecta of expectations: TA agency, student engagement, and revolution. When the shit hit the fan, I felt tempted to double-down on those expectations to "make" them manifest. It was only in turning toward others, my colleagues, that I was able to shift toward a larger ideal—community—and stay the course of centering joy.

The labor of teachers, especially teachers in positions of precarity like TAs, needs to be imagined fully at the center of any grading practice. And we cannot ignore the larger contexts in which our students "student." If we don't at least talk to students about the ways in which alternative curriculum or alternative

grading can fail, about the ways conventional curricula/grading function and why they function that way, we may as well be throwing them to the wolves while calling it compassion.

TA labor conditions, the institution's college-based model of first-year writing, the tension between content and composition in our program, and the individual and collective expectations that my colleagues and I brought to the pilot all swirled together to create failure. But I can't just add up these failures and arrive at a definitive answer that explains why LBCG failed. Trying to claim an answer would reinforce the tendencies of ego to attempt to interpret the minds and actions of others. In a joyful realm of learning and accountability, failure takes on a far more nuanced meaning than what the meritocratic culture of academia might have us believe. Failure, like joy, is "a practice of survival" (Gay, 2022, p. 10) that is necessarily elusive. Failure extends beyond any single pedagogical method, individual, or program, and it is greater than a sum of those parts.

I've found freedom in failure. It has given me permission to trust myself more rather than outsource that trust to the trends of my field. My commitment to creating pedagogical spaces where everyone—students and teachers—can learn and excel has deepened through this failure, as have my values of process and revision, self-discovery, and community. How joyful! It has taught me how to better consider context and hierarchy when implementing any pedagogical method—through listening, offering opt-in and opt-out options, running a smaller-scale pilot up front before diving in, collaborating in curriculum development with colleagues *and* students, instituting regular feedback mechanisms, centralizing negotiation, getting outside, and the list goes on. To be sure, I am not naming these mechanisms as a magic formula for future success, but rather to minimize the harm my failures can cause.

After 20 years of teaching, I can *and will* still fail. The lesson plans I design, the assignments I develop, and the ways I assess my students' work—all in the spirit of engagement, learning, and growth—can result in disengagement, stagnation, and bitter resentment. I can fail not only my students, but also my colleagues. No amount of experience has prevented or will prevent that. But this experience with LBCG has made clear to me that failure is joyful when I stay present. I was able to access joy because my colleagues and I remained rooted in our commitment to the larger work of equity, while releasing our attachment to any one way to achieve equity.

When we prioritize joy, we can temper our tendency to throw away pedagogical innovations, like alternative assessment, when we encounter problems. We can hang on a bit longer to see if there are adjustments to make the things we are excited about work. We can avoid blame and animosity. We can affirm our commitment to pedagogical excellence and equitable practices in ways that work not just for students, but also for instructors. We can refuse the narrative that we must suffer to do something good for our students. We

can remember that *our* joy counts. Efforts to eradicate inequity and injustice in higher education will always fail because the systems in which teaching/learning happens are inequitable, but that does not mean we cannot humanize our students and ourselves.

Questions for Reader Reflection

- What have you failed at?
- What were you trying to manifest?
- What "went wrong"? What "went right"?
- How are the answers to those questions within your control? How are they beyond it?
- For what might you feel grateful in this experience of failure?
- How might joy help you maintain focus on core values in the face of operational failures?
- Are you willing to keep failing?

Note

1 A riff on and reframing of the premise of *Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success* by John C. Maxwell (2007).

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APPENDIX

Teaching Tips to Spark Joy in Your Classroom

Joy arises organically and cannot be guaranteed by a one-size-fits-all course design template. However, the following strategies can help you increase the likelihood of joyful teaching and learning.

Our chapters have shown a connection between joy and both student agency and community. Therefore, our overarching suggestion is for instructors to utilize strategies that balance and enhance agency and community. Additionally, being authentic and transparent with students – such as explaining why emotions matter, how community enriches learning, and the purpose behind reflective activities – can boost joyful engagement. There's a two-fold advantage here: When students understand the value of their tasks, they are more likely to be invested and intrinsically motivated. When you communicate your reasoning behind curricular and pedagogical choices, you flatten hierarchy and foster a more egalitarian learning partnership.

While not an exhaustive list, these are some ideas we've raised in our chapters. You will see chapter notations after each entry to signal where you might go for a fuller discussion.

Feelings Come First: Make Space for Identity and Emotions

- Consider the hidden narratives of shame or inadequacy that students may carry, even those who seem confident (see Chapters 7, 10, 11).
- Acknowledge the impact of stereotype threat, imposter syndrome, trauma, anxiety, and marginalization on students, particularly those from underrepresented groups (see Chapters 3, 4, 7, 8, 11).

- Discuss how cultures use fear to coerce people into conforming and explore ways to develop individual and communal courage as a tool for resistance (see Chapters 2 and 4).
- Educate students on the physiology of emotion (e.g., the fight-or-flight response), helping them recognize their emotional cues (see Chapters 2, 8–10).
- Begin classes with a short breathing exercise to aid in emotional regulation and connection (see Chapter 9).
- Create opportunities for students to exercise their own authentic voices (dialectics, slang, informal speech) in response to open-ended assignments where they have the agency to make choices (see Chapters 3 and 11).
- Ground heavy topics in compassion. Ease into practicing compassion for one another in the class, and model it (see Chapters 4 and 5).
- To optimize psychological safety, start a unit or course with less-threatening topics – e.g., examples from ancient times and hypothetical (maybe even silly) scenarios – that activate students' emotional responses without being overwhelming because they are distant or removed from their direct lived experiences. From there, start practicing "agreeable disagreement" and celebrating the pleasure of changing one's mind (see Chapters 3, 5, 6).
- Normalize suffering and the discomfort that results from learning certain indisputable facts (e.g., racism, and sexism); address the impulse to denial head-on (see Chapters 4 and 5).
- Take a chance on students' emotions (as opposed to feeling threatened by students' feelings or imagining that there's no place for feelings in academic spaces). Let them be angry or sad; let them be funny and joyful (see Chapters 3 and 5).
- Help students recognize that emotions may be "real but not true." Emotions give us information about what we value, but they don't substitute for reliable information about reality (see Chapter 5).
- Encourage social and emotional learning alongside content learning. Incorporate skills like self-awareness, self-regulation, and social awareness into your lessons/units. For example, engineering design teams might be more effective if they learn non-violent communication (see Chapter 2, 4).
- Recognize that students have finite emotional and cognitive bandwidths. Every student's bandwidth is different, depending on the day, their past lived experiences, national or world events, and/or employment or family caregiving responsibilities. Check in with your class to see what kind of load they are carrying. A simple prompt asking students to "hold up your hand and show me where your emotional batteries are: 1 finger (totally drained) to 5 fingers (fully charged)" can provide valuable information that can help you be more responsive and plan an effective class session. It also signals that you care about their well-being, an opportunity for joy (see Chapters 9 and 12)!

Engage Cognitive and Imaginative (Re)Framing

- Invite imaginative discussions about what the group would like the classroom to be, from the physical space to its intellectual and liberatory possibilities. What can you dream together (see Chapter 9)?
- Normalize honest ignorance (see Chapter 5).
- Promote a Growth Mindset to remind learners that we all struggle with things before we get good at them (see Chapters 7, 10, 11).
- Talk about resilience: that developing it necessitates an optimal amount of adversity (so don't shy away from a challenge or from discomfort) *and* that there are ways of mitigating the effects of crushing adversity (see Chapters 3, 11, 13).
- Help students set mastery rather than performance goals (see Chapter 10).
- Create celebrations of progress, not perfection (see Chapters 3 and 10).
- Use reflective writing to help students learn from failure and make meaning of their experiences (see Chapters 4, 10, 11).

Communicate Clearly, Creatively, and Often

- Implement frequent opportunities for student feedback to you regarding their learning experiences, not just at the end of the semester (see Chapter 2).
- Represent and present information in multiple ways/modes to optimize learners' active and creative engagement (see Chapter 4).
- Offer students multiple pathways for knowledge expression, such as role-playing, reflective journaling, and artistic projects (see Chapters 3, 4, 11).

Provide Modeling

- Remember that your students will mirror whatever energy you bring to the classroom. Use this power wisely (see Chapter 2).
- Share your vulnerability and recognize it as the source from which meaningful student engagement arises. Encourage them to be vulnerable with each other, but don't force it (see Chapter 5).
- Encourage students to tell their stories and offer your own, modeling authentic vulnerability (see Chapters 3, 5, 13).
- Speak in "your own" voice; discard a formal academic pose in favor of showing you are approachable and human (see Chapter 3).
- Demonstrate compassion for students and speak directly about the value of compassion as an intentional choice (see Chapter 5).
- Share what gives you a sense of awe and wonder in your discipline (see Chapter 11).
- Talk about what you feel curious about and discuss how that guides your research (see Chapter 11).

Make Space for Who Your Students Are

- If you are gregarious, think about making space for quiet (see Chapter 12).
- If you are most comfortable in lecture mode or as discussion leader, think about how you might step back and center student voices (see Chapters 3 and 12).
- If you are introverted and socially anxious, think about the advantages of classroom community and explore ways of leveraging them (see Chapter 6).

Relationships and Community: Foster Joyful Interactions

- Prioritize a classroom environment where students feel safe and/or courageous, so they may become willing to be vulnerable with one another (see Chapters 4–6 and 11).
- Co-define and co-create classroom agreements that include both you and your students as members of the community. Refer back to these regularly (see Chapters 2 and 6).
- Create a culture of accountability by walking students through the consequences of various actions/inactions (e.g., What if no one does the assigned reading? What if everyone turned assignments in late? What if no one comes to class?).
- Get to know your students, by name when possible. Friendly greetings at the door go a long way toward creating a joyful and welcoming climate (see Chapters 6 and 14).
- Encourage student collaboration whenever possible, but with clear guidelines and expectations (the community agreements can be helpful for this) (see Chapters 2 and 6).
- Build authentic trust as the cornerstone of agency and empowerment. If you trust students, they are more likely to trust you. (Note: *Mis*trust can be communicated on day 1 through course policies. Does your academic integrity policy suggest you think all students are likely cheaters? Does your assignment deadline policy signal that lateness is laziness?) (See Chapters 5, 6, 13.)
- Earn students' trust by listening and humbly admitting positionality and fallibility (see Chapters 5, 6, 13).
- Get out of the way; remember the course is for the students, not about you. Look for ways to flatten hierarchy and ranking in your classroom (see Chapter 8).
- Make jokes and encourage play (see Chapters 3, 5, 11).
- Normalize difference and disagreement. Work together to find common ground (see Chapter 5).
- Allow students space and time to craft their own communities organically; however, create conditions where community is desirable (see Chapter 7).

- Remember that virtual environments are not the enemy. When allowed to develop organically, they can be a great way of initiating surface-level forms of joy (see Chapter 7).
- Encourage collaborative problem-solving and "struggling together" to support interpersonal connection as well as continued learning (see Chapters 4, 7, 11).
- Help students build and sustain collective thinking with transparent, structured, and reflective group activities (see Chapter 9).
- Encourage engagement by proactively providing the time and space needed for students to formulate their individual contributions (see Chapter 12).
- Leverage the power of small groups as spaces where many students feel more comfortable interacting – solving problems, discussing case studies, engaging in metacognitive reflection. (This is a great way of making even very large lectures feel intimate.) (See Chapters 3 and 12.)
- Have small groups of students briefly report back on their discussions to the larger class, so that students are able to hear their peers' perspectives. Celebrate moments of discovery, synergy, and divergence as all contributing to knowledge creation (see Chapters 3 and 12).
- Share and celebrate personal goals and academic aspirations together (see Chapters 4 and 10).

Design with the Body in Mind: Physicality and Physical Spaces

- Arrange learning spaces to facilitate unselfconscious embodied learning and consider having class outdoors when feasible (see Chapters 9 and 11).
- Allow time for students to settle in with brief periods of silence at the start of class (see Chapter 12).

Curricular Concerns, Policies, and Pedagogical Practices

- Make interdisciplinary connections whenever possible. Perhaps even co-teach a course or bring in guest lecturers from other fields of study (see Chapter 2).
- Incorporate culturally relevant materials and diverse perspectives that connect with students' backgrounds, interests, and experiences. This can increase motivation and support the cultural capital of diverse learners (see Chapters 7, 8, 11).
- Don't be afraid to slow down curriculum to make space for check-ins and community building. Resist the tyranny of content coverage: do more with less ... and "more" includes meaning-making (see Chapters 6, 12).
- Create regular routines/rituals that students can anticipate. Offer an agenda for each class session (see Chapter 12).
- Develop assignments and a grading system that blunt the negative impact of failure (see Chapters 10 and 15).

- Emphasize assets. Create opportunities for mastery experiences where students experience "getting it right" (as opposed to so much of school culture where they are made over-aware of perceived deficits). Scaffold assignments to build from foundational strengths toward increased challenge and complexity (see Chapters 3, 11, 15).
- Set students up for success: have clear directions posted for students at the start of class and provide a few minutes of quiet preparation time for them to engage the prompt (see Chapter 12).
- Design learning experiences that activate multiple senses and movement, with options to support access needs and variable energy levels (see Chapter 9).
- Develop assignments where students are "having so much fun they don't realize they're learning" (e.g., role plays, mock trials, improv games). But then follow-up by asking them to reflect on what they've learned (see Chapters 3 and 11)!
- Encourage student agency by making spaces that reduce self-consciousness and are just for them (where there are no right or wrong answers): 10 minutes of silent time at the start of class, journals where they can freewrite and explore ideas, art-making, and/or playful games (see Chapters 4 and 9).

Instructors: Practice Self-Care and Well-Being

- Use "low-effort, high-reward" teaching techniques to protect yourself from burnout (see Chapter 14).
- Find a community that can help you differentiate between those things affecting your well-being that are under your control and those that are artifacts of a toxic institutional culture. (Explore the former and resist the latter.) (See Chapter 14.)
- Find colleagues with whom you can talk, constantly, about what together you value as educators. (Remember, these might be folks outside of your department or discipline.) (See Chapter 15.)
- Use this community of people for reality checks so as not to get lost in your own idealism or cynicism (see Chapters 14 and 15).
- Use this community to help you decathect from harmful beliefs (about students, your work, or the institution) and commit to generative ones (see Chapters 14 and 15).
- Collect your own metrics for success so you can dispute the cynics and nay-sayers (see Chapters 14).
- Practice self-compassion and prioritize self-care (see Chapters 13 and 14).
- Seek out mental health resources for yourself. (It's okay to ask for help.) (See Chapter 14.)

- Wrestle with your own discomfort regarding ambiguity and fear of failure; remember that the tendency to take failure personally is about ego (see Chapter 15).
- Failure can be generative, but that requires a willingness to take risks and be vulnerable (see Chapter 15).
- Develop objectivity: attend to what is actually happening with your students and avoid doubling-down on making something work/fit just because (in your head) it was "supposed" to go a certain way (see Chapter 15).
- Be open to surprise and let outcomes emerge (see Chapters 3, 4, 7, 11, 15).

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