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Author

Camfield, Eileen Kogl

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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

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 responsiveness, 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 deatomize 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 responsiveness, 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, 2013) 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, *joy-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 necessitates 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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