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Introducing Joy-Centred Pedagogy: Hope for Hard Times

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My call for submissions for this special issue began with the unjoyful: an acknowledgement of global environmental collapse, political polarization, social breakdown, the threat of artificial intelligence eclipsing human thought...students who seem lonelier, more disengaged, dysregulated, and depressed than ever. I proceeded to pose the question: How can educators respond to this moment? I noted one reaction might be to throw our collective hands up in despair and retreat into cynical silence: “there’s nothing we can do; we tried, and we’re tired.” However, I asserted there is another way: joy-centred pedagogy. In his essay collection *Inciting Joy*, Ross Gay (2022) observed “joy is not separate from pain,” before he queried: “What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us when we help each other carry heartbreak?” Inspired by this wisdom, the concept of joy-centred pedagogy emerged during the development of a book I edited, *Joy-Centered Pedagogy in Higher Education: Uplifting Teaching and Learning for All* (Routledge, 2025). That publication articulated a necessary ‘next step’ beyond culturally-responsive and trauma-informed teaching to show ways learning spaces can allow students (and teachers) to feel seen and valued, as well as process trauma, by leveraging the healing and pro-social effects of joy. Therefore, when I was invited to edit this special issue, I asked educators to share the ways they are activating joy in their classrooms and other sites of learning to help students develop agency and purpose. Thus, this special issue richly continues an ongoing conversation.

All that said, in the 18-months since our book was published, I have repeatedly encountered a range of questions – from the gentle, “How do you define joy? Isn’t it just an ephemeral and subjective state?” to the more skeptical “What about rigour? Does joy-centred pedagogy simply mean we hand out lollipops and give our students easy A’s for effort?” and “Isn’t it unethical to manipulate students’ emotions in the classroom?” The roots of these queries seem to stem from genuine curiosity and also (in some cases) from assumptions that our classrooms are emotionally neutral spaces rather than (often) sites of student stress. So, to answer the first question, joy-centred pedagogical practices are those that allow students to feel a collective sense of uplift, a sense of purpose, a belief that what they have to contribute to the classroom has value. It is an absence of fear and shame. To some extent it is subjective but, far from invisible, it is obvious on students’ faces, in their attendance records, and in the depth of their engagement with their learning. It is more than just contentment – just as the experience of actually visiting the Grand Canyon, Victoria Falls, or the Great Barrier Reef is different from looking at a picture of them. And, like that

experience of visiting a place of great beauty, joy-centred pedagogy is embodied, so it can indeed be challenging to capture in mere words.

In the book's introduction, I describe joy as "the current that runs underneath all effective curriculum" (p. xv); as "a pedagogical 'renewable resource' (one that can regenerate itself as quickly as it is depleted) – an authentic, embodied state of uplift that educators can intentionally cultivate in their classrooms to activate for students a sense of mattering, resilience, and agentic engagement" (p. 9). And, there's hard science to explain how joy

as a dispositional framing activates other pro-social emotions and effects through experience-dependent neuroplasticity and limbic regulation. In other words, when students are encouraged to emotionally synchronize together joyfully, their brains can expand to become more receptive and flexible. Thus, joyful learning experiences are more powerful than pleasure, simple happiness, sense of comfort, or well-being. (p. 9)

In short, it helps us understand why best teaching practices actually work. Far from lacking high academic standards, joy-centred pedagogy demands the best kind of rigour – that which is *vigorous*: promotes growth, creates human connection, and inspires deeply meaningful learning.

However, it cannot be reduced to a mere formula or simple algorithm. There is no one-size-fits-all blueprint for joy because human beings are not all the same. Joy looks different depending on the people in the room, the relationships being built, the course, and even the moment. The best we can do is centre on certain principles: 1.) *First, do no harm*. This is not as easy as it sounds. It requires (self)awareness of systems that coerce dehumanizing professional performances. Joy-centring teachers and administrators must refrain from replicating these. 2.) *Choose "best practices" that are authentic to you*. There is no shortage of scholarship about what teaching techniques result in positive outcomes, but not all of these will align with who you are as a teacher. Try things out to see what feels joyful for you. 3.) *Listen to your students*. Students can sense if you are truly on their side. (I say this as someone who taught 8th grade for six years; trust me, I know.) Joy is a powerful but sensitive bird. It will fly out the window of classrooms that 'fake it.'

At this point, you may be wondering, "If it takes all this effort, why bother with joy-centred pedagogy?" The answer is simple: the present compels it, and the future depends on it. We exist in a moment where A.I. promises effortless 'learning,' but there are two things A.I. cannot provide, for which our students have a crying need: sanctuary and solidarity. Students' lives are incessantly surveilled – from the trackers parents place on their phones to the personas they curate and maintain on social media, today's young people are rarely unplugged. They desperately need a reprieve from the deluge of consumer capitalism, an oasis from social comparisons and judgement—a sanctuary. Here I do not simply mean we create cell-phone free classrooms as sanctuaries (although that's probably a good idea), I mean we help our students get in touch with themselves... to pay attention to how they are feeling, to develop the capacity to say "okay, phone/gaming console/electronic device, I've had enough for today," and to retreat to whatever space they devise that lets them be fully (freakily) themselves. Give us a generation that can joyfully self-regulate like that – can recognize the need for and have the tools to build a sanctuary – and we turn the corner on the mental health crisis we are currently facing. Coupled with that sense of surveillance is the fact that students are ever more isolated and need to develop a sense of solidarity with other humans, especially across differences. A World Health Organization [study](#) (2025) showed globally that loneliness is highest among 13- to 17-year-olds (20.9%), and, notably for our purposes here, teens who reported feeling lonely were 22% more likely to get lower grades in school. The classroom is an excellent incubator for the skills essential for joyful connection: empathy, patience, curiosity, flexibility. In turn, as Ross Gay (2022) observes, "joy is an ember

for or precursor to wild and unpredictable and transgressive and unboundaried solidarity. And that solidarity might incite further joy. Which might incite further solidarity” (p. 9).

All this, then, is the backdrop for the special issue you see before you. I invited contributors to use joy-centred pedagogy as their springboard to share with me their own musings about what joy-centred pedagogy is, about how to cultivate it in classrooms (and other learning spaces), and about how to measure its impact. I was prepared for thought-provoking and rich discussions. What I was unprepared for was sheer volume and outpouring of submissions on this topic, well over 100. (Turns out there’s a lot of interest in joy right now, perhaps because the need has never been greater.) Therefore, what you see before you is not just a double issue; it really is a “triple issue” where I have attempted to organize the 25 articles into three focal areas. That said, there is clear conceptual overlap between the three sections, as well as clear themes that run throughout the entire issue. Here’s the common ground. At its core, joy-centred pedagogy promotes equity. It is not mere ‘gimmicks and games’: it must be authentic to be effective. It requires psychological safety and flourishes within a strong sense of community. That community is built through trust and mutual vulnerability. There are also systemic educational realities that constrain joy, like standardized tests and large classes. Larger political and economic forces play a role in inhibiting joy: the weaponization of notions of care and inclusion, deficit-thinking, religious radicalization, and commodification of degrees – which must be resisted. All are explored in this issue. Additionally, within this issue you will find pieces that explore not just the impact of joy-centred pedagogy on students, but also the potential for joy to sustain teachers and administrators themselves, doing the hard work of showing up every day to maintain an ecosystem of abundance in which joy can flourish. Upon this common ground, there are some divergences of opinion -- as well as differences in the educational levels engaged (articles range from a focus on primary school up through higher education), discipline (subjects span from the social sciences to the arts & humanities to STEM), and geography (authors hail from nine different countries, spanning four continents). Such a wealth of wisdoms!

I. Conceptualizing Joy

The first eleven selections in this issue extend the conversation about ways of defining joy-centred pedagogy. It begins with an unapologetic affirmation of joy as pleasure. **Handalarski, Jiménez, and Young** studied “three spaces within a school of education to connect the sensual and experiential aspects of joy-based learning through attention to pleasure -- sharing that joy is not a destination but emerges in higher education settings when we engage in pleasurable practices that are collective, embodied, and driven by curiosity.” **Forbes** explores the power of play to affect classroom climate and the subsequent joy that arises in classrooms as “a subtle form of resistance within a system that produces stress and burnout, and that tends to prioritize performance over humanity.” **Yeo and Stalheim** explore how “Rosa’s concept of resonance can provide a conceptual architecture for a joy-centred pedagogy,” where “‘logics of delight’ interrupt the logics of capitalism... [and] the concrete particulars of joy become essential for resilience in a cold and alienating age, become a means of resistance.” Then, this section turns to examine the civic impact of such positive feelings, arguing joy-centred pedagogy promotes the kinds of conversations and listening that, on a macro-level, are good for democracy. As explained by **Kogl**, “civic joy emerges

in classrooms in which students practice mutual recognition and collective meaning-making. It offers an alternative to nihilism and apathy, generating not consensus or sameness but a sense of belonging. Making space for civic joy in political and civic education settings does not require professors to be entertaining or fun, but to allow students to discuss topics of real concern to them in ways that allow them to prioritize their membership in a shared world.” **Kirsh** aligns with this perspective and points out that “academic writing instruction often positions argumentation and persuasion as the primary modes of civic discourse, reinforcing adversarial forms of public discourse beyond the classroom.” She argues that “writing pedagogy centred on joy can reimagine civic writing, orienting it toward relational learning, ethical representation, and writing as a way of being rather than writing designed ‘to persuade, to argue, to win’.” This section next explores ways joy can connect faculty colleagues. **Taczak and Sponsler** share their thoughts on “collaborative creativity,” a “relational, reiterative process through which meaning is co-constructed (in this case, co-creating poetry) in response to the shared successes and challenges of faculty life, positioning struggle not as an individual burden but as an occasion for collective invention.” **Lynch** describes a similar creative process involving quilt and patch collage-making to “examine how joy can be intentionally cultivated in teacher education as an embodied resource for agency, justice, and sustainability...to suggest that arts-based inquiry creates a third-space sanctuary where educators can name harm, collectively carry tension, and reimagine rigour as academic vigour.” **Howard** explores how “Black male principals experience extreme challenges due to deficit framing that has informed hiring and retention practices, promotion, job roles and job-related stress... [yet despite this] a ‘possible joy’ approach to leadership [grounded in] resistance, care for students, and leadership rooted in core values and conviction” can help educational leaders keep fighting the good fight, even against the odds. Finally, in this section, readers are invited to think about ways joy-centred pedagogy might be cheapened and co-opted by malign forces and to consider ways to hew to the right path. **Imad, Clark, and Bartholomae** consider “traditions that have long refused to separate [joy] from struggle – Black and abolitionist thought, Chicane and Latine thought, and West and North African Sufi teachings.” **Babich** positions “interdisciplinarity as a foundational condition for cultivating joyful learning communities in hard times...as an alternative to cynicism, disengagement, and burnout.” He cautions against seeing joy as merely “an affective or motivational outcome rather than a condition grounded in epistemology.” **Caola** argues that joy is “best understood not simply as an individual emotional outcome but as an emergent property of learning environments that either support or frustrate the Self-Determination Theory’s core psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.” She observes that “joy arises within inclusive classroom communities shaped by shared learning, mutual care, and collective meaning-making, while its absence may reflect conditions of disconnection, constraint, or diminished competence” ... [and] she further argues that “cultivating joy-centred pedagogy is not only a matter of effective teaching but also an ethical responsibility, particularly in light of inequitable access to need-supportive educational environments.”

II. Cultivating Joy in the Classroom

The next six selections offer inspiration and guidance for how practitioners might use joyful teaching practices to promote deep learning. **Costa and Szpakowska** “examine how involving students as partners in shaping the syllabus, assessments, and participation structures transforms the classroom’s emotional and intellectual climate. Rather than framing joy as entertainment or ease, it is conceptualized as relational and emergent, arising through agency, trust, shared

responsibility, and productive struggle... [Serving as] a renewable resource that signals meaningful engagement and underscores the need to rethink classroom structures in response to student disengagement and faculty burnout.” **Neuhaus** shares ideas about *unessays* to “create opportunities for us to work with students who are creatively and meaningfully engaging in our course content” and to “facilitate unlearning passivity for students and unlearning didactic teaching and the transmission model of education for faculty.” Building on Caola’s ideas about joy and self-determination theory from the previous section, as well as student development theory, **McFerren** also invites us to unlearn and to reconceptualize “classroom management” away from rigid notions of control and authority in favor of “joy-centred facilitation as a pedagogical stance grounded in relational clarity, shared responsibility, reflection, and intellectual risk-taking.” Also linked to models of motivation, **Winek** looks to self-efficacy theory and acknowledges “in the era of AI...it is critical that students understand the importance and value of having their own original thoughts and opinions, and the dangers of outsourcing them to an algorithm. Yet, encouraging students to find and use their own authentic voices through a well-developed curriculum, one that both fosters student self-efficacy and incorporates ethical use of AI, can be a joyful endeavour.” **El Khoury** and **Ma** echo Winek’s sentiments to argue that “assessment reform in the generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) era should move beyond defensive approaches focused primarily on preventing misconduct or detecting AI use.” They describe joyful assessment as “safe, emotionally responsive, empowering, and supportive of student agency,” providing a practical example of how “AI agents designed for specific educational purposes can support joyful assessment by creating low-stakes opportunities for practice, feedback, reflection, personalization, and multimodal demonstration of learning.” Finally, **Mello** offers an innovative strategy for building community in large classes through a joyful “cozy pedagogy” to “infuse much-needed warmth and well-being into our classroom dynamics, building new and lasting relationships for collective resilience.”

III. Calculating the Impact of Joy

This final section showcases eight articles that draw on the ideas and strategies for joy-centred pedagogy to attempt empirical studies intended to measure its impact. There is an impressive range of topics addressed. **Arifin and Syakur** note that “while joy is increasingly valorized as a pedagogical instrument for identity formation, its collective manifestation as a bulwark against ideological fragility remains undertheorized.” Moving away from Western notions of joy, as often associated with positive psychology, they consider how “collective joy” can blunt the threat of religious extremism in Indonesian boarding schools. **Chavez** illustrates how joy-centred pedagogy can help learners in disaster-prone regions “recover academic motivation and resiliency.” He observes “while educational disaster response typically prioritizes infrastructure restoration, there remains a critical deficit in psychosocial interventions that cultivate joy to address recurrent climate trauma.” He investigates the ways “culturally mediated pedagogical resources” rooted in authentic relationships allowed participants to “temporarily suspend their survivor narratives and reclaim their student identities.” The section also includes studies of how joyful classrooms can blunt the stigmas often experienced by students with behavioural difficulties, language barriers, and learning differences. **Guennoun and Akrafi** demonstrate the ways ‘sparking joy’ proves a better disciplinary strategy than more traditional and punitive methods. **Khan and Liu** studied ways “translanguaging pedagogy promoted inclusion and justice in multilingual ESL classrooms in Pakistan... concluding that [these] emerge through the intersection of translanguaging practices and positive classroom relationships, positioning joy as central to equitable multilingual pedagogy.” **Makaya, Mauree-Narrainen, and Nirmala** disrupt the “deficit-focused narratives”

through which learners with dyslexia in mainstream classrooms are often portrayed and instead emphasize “how joy functions as a pedagogical tool within inclusive teaching strategies in Zimbabwean primary schools.” **Mansor and Ming** detail how “structured learning experiences can support the emergence of joy during hands-on learning activities” in a primary school Makerspace. They reveal that joy “was cultivated through four interrelated pedagogical conditions: meaningful challenge, collaborative interaction, learner autonomy, and opportunities for creative expression... enabling students to experience curiosity, confidence, and a sense of accomplishment while persisting in complex learning tasks.... and demonstrating that joy is not merely an emotional outcome of engaging activities but a pedagogically designable mechanism that supports meaningful participation and sustained engagement in learning environments.” **Purigay and Lopez** explore the ways joyful learning affects students’ scientific sense-making and agency in secondary science classrooms. They note these experiences are “activated by collaborative inquiry, productive struggle, and engagement with uncertainty” where “joy functioned as a form of collective care, enabling students to take intellectual risks, persist through difficulty, and experience science as meaningful rather than merely performative.” **Teane** highlights ways “traditional approaches to teaching genetics in Life Sciences have often failed to equip teachers with effective strategies for engaging learners with complex and abstract concepts.” She shows how “place-based education emerges as a culturally responsive and transformative strategy for teaching challenging life sciences topics and that joy-centred approaches can support science teaching in under-resourced contexts.”

Let me now close with gratitude to these many contributors who deepened my thinking about joy-centred pedagogy by shining lights on myriad contexts where the principles hold true. My appreciation extends to the many other teacher-scholars whose work does not appear in this issue, but whose work nevertheless furthers the cause. I am thankful to the many reviewers whose insights strengthened the pieces you see here as well as to my in-house consultant, Gregg, who listened patiently as I thought-talked through the focus and structure of this issue. Finally, thank you to the *Journal of Teaching and Learning* for the opportunity to serve as guest editor. It’s been an honour and a privilege to work with you all.

Author Bio

For 35 years, Eileen has worked in education as a classroom instructor, curriculum designer, and faculty pedagogy coordinator. She spent five years as director of a university writing program before becoming the Executive Director of Student Academic Success Services. Currently based at the University of California at Merced, Eileen serves as senior faculty associate in the Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning and as a teaching professor in the Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Group and The Global Arts, Media, and Writing Studies Department. Her work focuses on student and faculty agency and self-efficacy development as well as burnout resistance. She also leads a research group dedicated to exploring strategies for developing student resilience in the face of compounding adversities. Her recent book *Joy-Centered Pedagogy in Higher Education: Uplifting Teaching & Learning for All* (Routledge Press, 2025) argues that joy—rooted in curiosity, connection, and creativity—provides a powerful framework for both explaining the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies and for guiding educators through academic obstacles.

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