



Rekindling the joy of learning

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We explored modern myths in higher education in the first section and here we challenge one that is increasingly familiar: that joy and productive learning are incompatible. We saw in section two, *Caring and compassionate pedagogies*, ways in which we can move beyond mere inclusive policy to embedded caring in practice. In this final section, we follow long-standing calls from those who have challenged myths and centred compassion to assert that joy is entirely compatible with, indeed a fundamental tenet of, effective education. In 2022, Lauricella and Edmunds proposed a framework for 'Ludic Pedagogy', challenging our conceptualisations of the academy and asserting that education can and should be a space for excitement, positivity, and joy. Drawing on bell hooks' observations that many working in higher education balk at the idea of having fun in class, seeing it as 'disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process' (hooks, 1994, p.7), their framework contends that including laughter, playful experiments, and shared experiences in the learning environment reduces stress, underpins community building, and increases motivation to learn.

At a time when many across our sector are expressing growing concerns about student disengagement; mental health of students and staff; the impact of financial constraints; and the broader purpose, value, and indeed, future of higher education, this section of the special issue invites us to reflect on how our teaching practices, institutional cultures, and

educational policies can make a positive difference in intrinsic motivation, intellectual curiosity, satisfaction, and success for learners and educators alike. In short, what it looks like to thrive, not just survive, in the 21st-century university. We frequently assert that 'if you enjoy your work, you'll never work another day in your life'. Why not apply the same principle to education? Here we have collected papers that explore both barriers to and enablers for creating more joyful learning.

Trust as the foundation of joy

We begin our exploration of *Rekindling the joy of learning* by highlighting the importance of trust. Neuroscientists have long recognised the links between trust and both productivity and joy (Zak, 2017), while playful educators like Whitton (2018) use trust to create the magic circle, a space of safety in which adults can engage in playful behaviour. Trust, we - and our authors - argue, is a foundation of joy in learning. In their thoughtful opinion piece, Joanna Wilson-Scott, Joy Perkins, Mary Pryor, Mailie Besson and Samu Turi start us off from the position that the current higher education assessment landscape – characterised by over-assessment, heavy assignment weightings, a focus on summative over formative assessment, and clustered deadlines – is conducive to neither joyful learning nor student wellbeing. The authors, a team of students and staff, provide a bridge between our joyful and compassionate learning themes, advocating for compassionate assessment practices that place student wellbeing at their core. They also emphasise the importance of involving students as active collaborators in (re)designing assessment, rather than treating them as data sources or passive recipients of change. Centring student wellbeing and the student voice in this way is essential, they argue, to making assessment practices more compassionate and learning more joyful.

Connie Gillies, Monica deQuinto Schneider and Gabrielle Nieuwoudt's passionate account of a persistent crisis of trust in higher education offers trust as a foundation stone for changing this. They share their graduate student perspective: that 'for the joy of learning to be realised, it is crucial that students [...] can trust themselves, one another, and their educators' (p.3). Their opinion piece argues that this trust is based on the shared values, relational histories, loyalties, and identities that bind communities, yet it is often compromised, leading to a lack of confidence in the teaching and learning environment for

both students and educators. Their paper serves as a reminder and a provocation about the vital importance of trust in building a joyful learning environment.

Echoing this call to challenge practices that can damage trust, Marianne Greated and Magnus Quaife's case study presents an experiment in collaborative pedagogical design at two Art Schools in Scotland and Finland, where students and staff co-created new approaches to group critiques (crits) to enhance feedback understanding and effectiveness. The study found that co-creation workshops deepened students' engagement and feedback literacy, making crits more meaningful, enjoyable, and inclusive.

This call to educators to focus on building trust and intrinsic motivation is echoed throughout our *Rekindling the joy of learning* theme. Building trust and partnership is explored in depth in a research paper co-written by Karen Stepanyan and two student authors, Hoi Fung Poon and Kaede Hasegawa. They share the design, implementation, and evaluation of a self-assessment task that replaced traditional assessment in a large undergraduate technical module in the hopes of increasing intrinsic motivation. As a result, they found reduced stress levels for students and deeper self-assessment of their work.

Lisa Clughen takes a more detailed look at the mechanisms of intrinsic motivation and its impact on well-being in the learning environment. Drawing on the science of learning and bell hooks' (1994) concept of eros in the classroom, she contends that positive emotions are foundational to effective learning and should be deliberately cultivated by educators in their pedagogical approach.

Designing joyful learning experiences

While the first collection of papers in our *Rekindling the joy of learning* theme maps where we are in higher education and entreats us to change our own and our institutions' practices, our second collection of papers provides inspiring and insightful suggestions for how we might get there. Catherine Mansfield's empirical study of the perspectives of staff and students on positive emotion in a STEM-context at a research-intensive university offers a complementary case study reflecting many of Clughen's themes. Highlighting that enjoyment is often prioritised in mandatory education yet overlooked in the higher

education context, Mansfield's account illustrates the importance of relational pedagogy and of creating space for exploration and creativity to rekindle students' joy of learning.

Continuing our exploration of joy in the learning environment, Estrella Sendra's research draws on the theories of bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Lynne Segal to propose that this environment need not be confined to the traditional classroom. She examines the role of guided study field trips in creating dynamic and engaging experiential learning in Arts and Humanities education. She also reflects on her own range of experiences with 'curated' trips to festivals and events and proposes that combining these with opportunities for classroom reflection can enhance academic and social skills through a collaborative and less hierarchical setting. The examples Estrella describes, from four different institutions, present a model 'beyond the classroom' that can promote connection and critical engagement for students, as well as enhancing their well-being and confidence.

Similarly, Laura Milne, Katharine Welsh and Richard Hind explore approaches that invite experimentation and innovation. Their case study offers an example of game-based learning through a collaborative design between learning technologists and academic staff. What emerges is a compelling example of learning games and the provision of formative feedback in a fun, playful context as an effective way to enhance accessibility and build learners' confidence.

This is not the only paper in this section to look at game-based or playful learning – nor is it the only paper whose authors include a learning technologist as a practitioner in this area of educational innovation. Maria O'Hara and Cecilia Lo propose in their case study that the emergence of new technologies creates opportunities for creative experimentation and joyful learning for both students and educators. In the context of generative AI, in particular, games and play can also support them in adapting to the shifting expectations and regulations of a dynamic learning environment. Maria and Cecilia draw on their own experience of enhancing generative AI literacy for staff and students through playful learning and gamification, sharing practical examples of activities they have designed and implemented and that have served to challenge some of the current anxieties and concerns about the role of artificial intelligence in higher education.

In another case study about meeting challenging topics with playful interventions, Camille Huser, Waqar Ahmed, Noy Basu, Graeme K. Donald and Malcolm Shepherd describe how

they have applied Lauricella and Edmunds' framework of Ludic Pedagogy – deliberate playfulness - to the potentially fraught topics of global climate change and sustainable healthcare. Their study describes how a range of techniques for teaching, formative development, and summative activities offered evidence of the potential for the wider application of a ludic approach, to counter the current 'hypervigilant, restrictive and punitive culture of higher education' (Edmunds and Lauricella, 2021). Importantly, alongside their call for more research into this approach, the authors also contribute suggestions for further pedagogical developments as well as a valuable and practical series of tips for educators to inspire experimentation.

Moving from global issues to individual characteristics, Helen Briscoe's case study focuses on the increasing number of mature and non-traditional learners in UK higher education institutions and, in particular, describes initiatives that improve the learning experiences of students re-entering education by creating a 'community of positive support' (p.1). Informed by her own experience as a mature student and as an Academic Skills Advisor with extensive experience of working with mature students, Helen describes her university's effective Returning to Learning initiative (R2L). Drawing on student feedback about R2L, she emphasises the importance of creating supportive, accessible, and friendly spaces for students re-entering education, which, she argues, have helped rekindle a joy of learning.

If we want to rekindle joy, we need to resist the impulses that drive us to conceptualise education as a transactional exchange for quantifiable outputs and economic worth. These papers show that a re-evaluation of trust is essential for effective and sustained learning and for the wellbeing of both students and educators. Our authors in this section of the journal also remind us of the many ways we can foster curiosity and playful experimentation in the learning environment. Through relational pedagogies, gamification, co-creation, and playfulness, we can make learning more meaningful, engaging, and rewarding for all parties and still produce competent, well-rounded (and perhaps happier) graduates.

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Martin Compton has over 30 years of experience as an educator, teaching across secondary, further, and higher education sectors in the UK and abroad. Following roles at the University of Greenwich and University College London (UCL), he joined King's College London in 2023. Martin focuses primarily on exploring the educational implications of artificial intelligence. As the University Lead for AI in Education, he supports colleagues and students in critically reviewing and innovating teaching, assessment, and feedback, whilst championing a 'freedom to learn' philosophy.

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