



## Liberating learning in the empathetic university

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For joy to be promoted in learning and teaching, it is necessary for the education system to align itself to the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and, in addition, ensure that the curricula are redesigned at various levels for more relevance and inclusion.... [T]eachers that promote joy in learning will invariably experience the joy of teaching (Omidere et al., 2021, pp.230-231).

Liberating Learning is both an aspiration and a practice. It is a response to current challenges, a vision for the future, and an acknowledgement that shaping the educational environment is a constant project. There is a rich history of reimagining the university as a space of possibility rather than constraint. As our higher education systems and their communities are under increasing strain (Kapur, 2023) and universities navigate ongoing uncertainties, now is a good time to revisit and reinvigorate these conversations; adapt them to new contexts; and shape academic environments that are more inclusive, rewarding, and sustainable for the people who experience them.

Through this special issue, the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* has created an opportunity to bring together many different voices: from undergraduate students to senior leaders; early career educators to emeritus professors; and colleagues in professional services, academic, and third-space roles in the United Kingdom and beyond. The research papers, case studies, opinion pieces, and brief communications you will read in this volume explore Liberating Learning from multiple vantage points, revealing both the systemic challenges and the possibilities for transformation.

Our authors' contributions to the issue reveal a balance between theoretical reflection, experiential insight, and practical guidance. Some of the papers challenge long-held assumptions and practices that shape expectations of teaching and learning, while others offer examples of alternative approaches: pedagogical innovations, shifts in institutional

culture, and many stories of learning environments that prioritise care, joy, agency, experimentation, and divergent thinking.

It is entirely in keeping with the values and mission of the journal, as well as the ethos of Liberating Learning, that the editorial board has guided this project and the work of the guest editorial group with care, compassion, and joyful encouragement. In their editorial roles and as colleagues, Lee Fallin and Alicja Syska have been our cheerleaders and our mentors, supporting us to think beyond the conventional design of a journal issue so that we contribute to ‘democratising publishing, diversifying writing, and cultivating the scholarship of Learning Development’ (Syska and McDonald, 2025, p.2). The guest editorial group for this issue comprises colleagues from two institutions – King’s College London and UCL – many of whom are engaging in editorial work for the first time.

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They have supported us and one another across the many tasks and responsibilities required to get a collection such as this to publication. Against the backdrop of busy teaching and meeting schedules, this group of like-minded colleagues has been generous with their time - in particular, for reflection and discussion about Liberating Learning, and for practical and conceptual support for our authors. It reminds us that while much of what you will read in this issue is about teaching and assessment practices, and about bringing joy and compassion (back) to education, there is so much to be gained from finding ways to connect meaningfully with colleagues and students around shared interests and concerns. It was important to all of us that our ways of working to create this special issue would reflect the values explicit in our authors’ contributions. To that end, we aimed to model the practices we are advocating for, including compassionate and developmental peer review processes and empathetic communication.

Together, we have also endeavoured to meet JLDHE’s ambition to foster ‘courageous conversations’ in the field of learning development (Syska and McDonald, 2025, p.2). We



believe our authors' contributions to the special issue open up such conversations, inviting readers to consider and talk about new ways of teaching, learning, and belonging in the university.

This collection has been just over a year in the making. That time has provided space for ideas to evolve, for our key themes to come into focus, and for many of our authors to engage in shared inquiry and build on each other's insights. However, for the guest editors, the origins of Liberating Learning go back a little further, when, in the wake of the pandemic and while adjusting to ways of working in what some called 'the new normal', we first drew up a pedagogy of care '(hu)manifesto' (Compton and Lindner, 2022). Inspired by the foundational works of hooks (2003) and Noddings (2005), we were looking to prompt reflective discussions with colleagues about supportive and practical ways to prioritise compassion and kindness for the student community and for themselves as educators. We also drew extensively on the work of Cate Denial (2019), considering the impact of trust, empathy and confidence between students and staff for enhanced communication, engagement, motivation, and learning.

Through these discussions, we came into contact with a growing network of colleagues committed to reimagining the status quo, which in turn led to a 'Freedom to Learn' conference in 2023, hosted by King's College London and including the work of several of the authors who generously wrote for this special issue. The event itself challenged some of the conventions of academic conferences, including inviting students to deliver the keynotes that started and concluded the day. We are delighted, therefore, to note that several of the submissions in this issue are authored and co-authored by students and recent graduates, some of whom spoke at the conference. At the end of the event, one of the attendees remarked 'I have found my people'. This was a wonderful indicator of the connections and collaborations that were formed on the day, but, beyond the positive energy and productive exchange of ideas in the moment, it also led us to ask: how do you sustain and grow these connections within and across institutions? How, together, might we help shape the institutional cultures in which we operate?

Liberating Learning is part of this endeavour, to build on the momentum of the conference and extend the conversations and examples of effective practice to a wider audience. Our hope is that the journal issue serves as a collective resource that others can cite, revisit, and use as a foundation for future inquiry and collaboration, and that it contributes to an

evolving discourse about what it means to create meaningful, transformative learning experiences in higher education.

We are delighted to present here 39 papers contributed by 99 different authors. A key feature of this issue is the diversity among contributors and the institutions they represent. We are proud to have a strong student and recent graduate presence, highlighting both independent student voices and staff-student collaborations. For some of our authors, this represents their first academic publication, whereas others are adding to a significant and well-respected corpus of work in learning development. There are papers from 40 higher education institutions in the UK and around the world. Many of the authors have co-authored cross-institutionally and sometimes across national borders. Indeed diversity and collaboration are at the heart of this special issue as a critical manifestation of Liberating Learning.

It may seem obvious, but we assert that time is needed to reflect on fundamental questions: why does learning need liberating? What is higher education for? Why do we do things the way we do them in our universities?

The contributions in this issue engage directly with these questions, offering fresh perspectives and practical approaches. Some introduce new ways of thinking but all build on foundational work emblematic of the ongoing dialogue and tensions between convention and culture change. It has been more than 50 years since Freire (1970) challenged the 'banking' model of education, advocating instead for dialogue and problem-driven education that fosters critical consciousness and active participation. hooks's (1994) view of education as a transformative act necessitated acknowledging mutual vulnerability and the active pursuit of social justice. Similarly, Brookfield (1995), whose work on 'critical lenses' has informed so much of the work we in learning development have drawn on, stresses the importance of critical reflection, advocating for pedagogical practices that empower learners and teachers to question assumptions and reshape educational environments. Justice and injustice, critical and trauma-informed pedagogies, equity and reflexivity: all feature in this special issue.

Another thread connecting the diverse contributions in this volume is a structural critique of higher education systems. Too often our systems fail to reflect equity-centred practices. Throughout this special issue, you will hear from those, like us, whose professional

identities and practices are nourished and revitalised by joyful moments and opportunities to connect with others in meaningful, human ways. Several of the papers remind us of those who occupy roles that are subject to intense pressure and sometimes precarity; those for whom care, compassion, and joy may feel like a luxury. Barnett (2013) called for universities to reject narrow instrumentalism and embrace imagination, uncertainty, and intellectual openness. And yet, perspectives on the purpose of higher education have in many cases become more constrained rather than more expansive. Sperlinger et al. (2018) asked ‘Who are universities for?’ and articulated a need ‘to remake higher education as more responsive to the shape of a wider range of people’s lives’ (p.17). Their voices, among many, argue for changing “‘how things are” rather than looking back nostalgically to an earlier era’ (Sperlinger et al., 2018, p.11). Berg and Seeber (2016) highlighted the urgent need to resist the neoliberal pressures of relentless productivity, speed, and competition. And yet, we may find ourselves experiencing guilt when we take the time to read an article. Reading these words should not be a luxury; having time to critically examine current practices and processes and to consider alternative and improved ways of doing and being is an essential element of reflective and thoughtful educational practice.

The work in this special issue builds directly on these foundational critiques, proposing practical and reimagined ways forward that embody alternative visions for pedagogical and institutional practices. To that end, *Liberating Learning* is structured around three broad themes: mythbusting the modern academy, caring and compassionate pedagogies, and rekindling the joy of learning.

### ***Mythbusting the modern academy***

In the first themed section of this special issue, colleagues challenge some of the dominant narratives in higher education that shape academic structures, assessment practices, and student and staff expectations. The big question we asked in establishing this theme was ‘What amongst our accepted conventions, regulations and practices might we reconsider to create a better experience for all stakeholders?’

From questioning conventional practices in academic writing and assessment to reimagining institutional policies and processes, from rethinking anonymised marking and

grading structures to exploring playful and care-focused pedagogies; these studies offer critical perspectives on how universities function and how they might evolve. Some advocate for relational marking and the decentring of grades, shifting the emphasis from rigid structures to reflective, student-centred approaches. Stommel (2017) and Blum (2020) among others have argued persuasively that grading can undermine intrinsic motivation, that it can work against effective learning and learning for its own sake, and that it lacks statistical validity and has negative impacts for community building and the establishment of trust. You will read in this section explorations of work in this domain. Other authors highlight alternative forms of knowledge creation, such as collaborative and speculative storytelling, while critiques of neoliberal academia expose the impact of 'carelessness' in institutional practices. Collectively, these works reveal the potential for transformative change in higher education by interrogating long-standing assumptions and offering creative, evidence-based alternatives.

### ***Caring and compassionate pedagogies***

The papers in this theme include a range of approaches aimed at fostering inclusive and supportive educational environments. Key topics include trauma-informed assessment design and feedback mechanisms that consider the emotional wellbeing of both educators and students; the integration of compassionate practices within academic integrity processes to address epistemic injustice; and collaborative pedagogical designs where students and staff co-create feedback methods to enhance engagement and inclusivity. Papers include research and reflections on empathising with and understanding students better, and working collaboratively with students in the classroom in addition to working with them as research partners.

Our colleagues also examine the role of vulnerability in teaching as a means to resist market-driven educational models; the application of compassionate learning design intersecting participation, justice and care; and initiatives that monitor and improve the learning cultures for students. The concept of 'reparative pedagogies' is examined in the context of addressing historical injustices within curricula. Each contribution in this section reveals the power of compassion to transform thinking and behaviours, with many calls providing evidence of achievability.

## ***Rekindling the joy of learning***

This theme explores the historical and potential value of promoting enjoyable learning for its own sake, highlighting the role of joy in higher education in relation to positive student (and staff) mental health and wellbeing. Universities, whose curricula include consideration of global crises, are often immersed in crises themselves. Their academic staff and students in many parts of the world are experiencing efforts to silence dissent and to diminish or remove diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. It may seem counterintuitive to promote joy in this context but we assert, following Hall and Steele (2024), that promoting joy is itself a radical means of defiance that offers a source of strength and inspiration for teachers and students.

Joy in learning manifests when students discover and apply new knowledge, where their teachers scaffold a balance between struggle and achievement, where the students exercise autonomy through choice, and where the environment fosters belonging and acknowledges the impact of wellbeing on students' ability to engage and experience joy (Cronqvist, 2024). In this section, you will see exploration of the role of trust, of intrinsic motivation, and of positive emotions in enhancing the educational experience.

This final theme concludes with optimism and hope. It examines pedagogical practices that foster curiosity, creativity, and innovation, where the goal is engaging and fulfilling learning experiences. While it highlights the persistent crisis of trust in higher education, this theme emphasises the need for shared values and relationship-building to grow confidence among students, educators, and institutions. Collaborative pedagogical designs and co-creation workshops are presented as effective methods to deepen student engagement and feedback literacy. Innovative assessment practices aimed at reducing stress and fostering self-assessment also feature, alongside the importance of cultivating positive emotions in the learning environment. The roles of relational pedagogy, experiential learning, and game-based learning in creating a more joyful and inclusive educational experience suggest multiple mechanisms for finding a path to enjoyment in learning. The role of new technologies and playful interventions in addressing challenging topics is also examined, with a focus on enhancing generative AI literacy and sustainable healthcare education. Rekindled joy is both possible and desirable when interactive, student-centred approaches, incorporating playful activities are enacted.

## ***Conclusion***

To champion liberation in learning is to commit to fostering a more authentic, joyful, and humane education system: one that treasures the pursuit of knowledge, the exploration of the unknown, and the growth of both individuals and their communities. At its core, it recognises that learning is a practice of freedom, capable of transcending boundaries and transforming lives. This collection is a culmination but not an endpoint. It is a significant milestone in a journey that, for us, is rooted somewhere in our own experiences as students and then as teachers.

Our experience of collaboratively guest editing this special issue has been transformative, both in terms of professional growth and joyful learning. The authors whose work you will read here offer remarkable possibilities and opportunities to reimagine our practices and they exemplify that joy.

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