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Towards a pedagogy of joy

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an original empirical case for taking joy seriously to create a more inclusive and connected education. Drawing on a co-produced research project with students ($n=21$) at a UK Russell Group university, we share reflections on students' experiences of joy in higher education. Our students co-constructed meanings of joy and its relationship to their educational journeys. They revealed the conditions necessary for a joyful pedagogy and its importance within education. We recognise joy as simultaneously personal and political, drawing upon literature across sociology, psychology, philosophy and education. Recognising the structural features that impede or undermine joy in higher education, we advocate for moving *towards* a pedagogy of joy to realise inclusive and generative learning environments. This paper offers a contribution to the interdisciplinary but burgeoning literature on joy including Black, Crip, Queer and Feminist work. It also adds empirical and methodological insights to understanding joy in education.

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Joy; joyfulness; enjoyment; creativity; creative methods; participatory methods; critical pedagogy; affirmative ethics

Introduction

This paper makes an empirical case for taking joy seriously to create more inclusive, meaningful and connected educational environments. Our work takes an intentionally affirmative stance, developing a body of work which critically accounts for current conditions, whilst seeking to resist them and imagine more inclusive futures (Braidotti 2018; Shuster and Westbrook 2024). Joy, we argue, is widely compromised by the conditions of UK Higher Education (HE). We do not believe that moving ourselves towards a pedagogy of joy is radical but is rather *necessary* for better educational experiences and outcomes. Drawing on co-produced research with 21 students, at a UK Russell Group university, we share insights on experiences of, and barriers to, joy in HE. We frame our affirmative ambition as something possible and within reach, even if at times this feels quite the opposite. In

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doing so, we make three original contributions to the existing scholarship. First, this article offers a contribution to the limited *empirical* scholarship work that explores joy in HE. Second, we present HE students' conceptions of joy alongside their interpretations of how and where this manifests within their learning experiences. Third and finally, we create a space for scholars and practitioners to consider pedagogies of joy for their own educational practice.

The structure of our paper is as follows. First, we review contributions to the theorisation of joy, drawing in particular from sociology and philosophy. We then shift focus to think about and review literature that explores joy in education. Following this, we introduce our 'Joyful Learning' project, providing context to the research design and collaborative process with students as co-producers of knowledge, theory and understanding. Our findings document student contributions that centre on co-defining joy, what 'charges' or 'squashes' it in higher education and co-creating joyful artefacts that represent educational experiences. Through these creative and collaborative endeavours, we develop understandings of joy within higher education as personal, political and in fact, socially necessary.

We are acutely aware of tensions that arise when advocating for joy in higher education where resources are limited. We are also mindful of the co-option of joy in education and ensuring that we are not instilling a 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) where we push for joy without a critical acknowledgement of the social, cultural, economic and political conditions in which we are operating. We also acknowledge the intersectional and theoretical contributions into understanding joy that come before us, including the assertion that joy is not antithetical to struggle (Mwale 2023). However, our students' contributions make clear that more simply needs to be done, despite the manifold challenges, to improve student experiences in higher education. Our conclusions seek to reflect this and, despite the struggles that we are presented with, we *choose* joy as a response with takeaway tangible actions for the future.

What is joy?

Joy is widely thought to be a 'fundamental aspect of social life' (Shuster and Westbrook 2024). Despite this, *joy* and the experience of *enjoyment* have received surprisingly little attention within the social sciences. Shuster and Westbrook (2024) have reflected on an absence of joy as the object of sociological study; a 'joy deficit'. Similarly, Griffiths (2012) has noted a distinct lack of empirical interest in joy. This has been understood, in part, as a consequence of disciplinary preoccupations with social problems. Sociology, for instance, has tended to pay more attention to the negative consequences of social problems than it has to the more positive aspects of social experience (Shuster and Westbrook 2024). Joy is also hard to pin down because it crosses emotional, physical, cognitive and communal domains of human experience (Arnett 2023). It is difficult, for example, to definitively conceptualise exactly where joy begins and ends and its entanglement with associated positive emotions. It is not our intention, however, to offer a definitive conceptualisation of joy within this article. Instead, we utilise joy as a sensitising force and concept to drive our collaborative work with students with, by and for, them.

The *social* dimensions of joy have been examined within some of the sociological literature. Much of this work has focused on interpretations of joy in terms of *struggle* or *resistance*. Shuster and Westbrook (2024), for example, have studied trans joy. Their work showed that trans people emphasised joy in the affiliations that their marginalised status afforded.

Joy, as such, can arise *because of* and *in response* to difficult circumstances. Studies of Black joy have also theorised joy as a racialised expression of ‘autonomy, community building, creative agency [and] resistance’ (Tichavakunda 2022: 424). As Mwale (2023: 382) put it, with reference to her anti-racist community work in London:

Joy is not in spite of our suffering. It is precisely because our community experiences such trauma, harm and pain that we can’t wait for joy... We must practise the kind of care, love and joy that we want to see in our daily lives in the future, today.

Joy, as such, is an experience that can be simultaneously personal and political. It is experienced *in relation* and *in response* to.

Philosophically, Spinoza’s *Ethics* (2001[1677]) has inspired some of the most useful work in this space. For Spinoza (2001[1677]), joy connotes the experience of enhancement that occurs when bodies are brought closer to their capacities, through positive relations with others. Relations can be ‘good’ when they compound bodies, and enhance their capacity. Conversely, relations can be ‘bad’ when they disempower bodies, resulting in their diminishment. If we read these bodies as human, we might imagine the experience of empowerment or clarity that can be derived from a generative encounter of any sort, like education. Indeed, it is our capacity to *intelligibly* navigate the manifold challenges life throws at us that sits at the heart of Spinoza’s ethics. Education and learning are *central* to this aim. As Youpa (2020) recently put it “the best way of life in Spinoza’s view, is a life of learning”. In this article, we do not claim to arrive at an encompassing definition of joy, but rather position joy as a ‘sensitising’ concept. We draw upon the works of Spinoza (2001[1677]) in particular, because we feel it offers an intuitive and foundational conception of joy, that runs through much of the subsequent literature (see Deleuze (1988), Braidotti (2018) and Arnett (2023), for example). However, we are equally interested here in HE students’ *own* conceptions of joy, defined on their terms, and their interpretations of experience in Higher Education. The use of concepts in this paper, as such, entails the application of Spinoza and others’ work, to suggest directions along which to analyse and understand HE students’ own conceptions and experiences (Blumer 1986). We now turn to understandings of joy and enjoyment within the educational field.

Joy in education

In this paper, we want to make a case for teaching and learning encounters that *create the conditions for joy* and invite students to lean ‘in’ rather than ‘away’ from the possibility to connect and become. This builds upon the work of Berg and Seiger (2017), bell hooks (2003) and Paulo Freire (2002; 1992), all of whom have created space for slower, more critical and emancipatory discussions of educational praxis. We agree with Dhungana’s assertion that ‘joyful teaching and learning in the university setting is both possible and necessary’ and to do this, we must facilitate and respect our interdependence, celebrate wonderment and cultures of inquiry (Dhungana 2023: 30). Scipio et al. (2026) also develop a pedagogy of joy from transformative learning spaces including: attending to affective entanglements; switching roles; cultivating third space and; co-dreaming to enact. However, we wish to note that affirmative orientations need careful acknowledgements of context. Without a critical sociological foundation, appeals to joy can easily slip into a kind of naïve idealism that obscures current material conditions. References to enjoyment in UK educational policies have been critiqued

by HE scholars as political attempts to legitimate policies that are pedagogically limiting and driven by target cultures (Hartley 2006). Pleasure, as Berg and Seiger (2017) put it, can feel inimical to the hurried and highly rational cultures of the corporate world. Yet, trends towards the corporatisation of HE continue to shift the sector towards a consumer oriented ethos that impacts the expectations (and experiences) of students, whilst presenting wider challenges to academic freedom (Alibašić, L. Atkinson, and Pelcher 2024). Some critical reflection on current labour conditions and wider trends towards the corporatisation of HE, as such, is important, because these are ultimately the conditions that engender our affirmative view *towards* more joyful pedagogies (Braidotti 2018).

Western educational policies are increasingly geared towards the value of education in terms of graduate outcomes (and future economic returns), rather than educational *experience*, or education as an end in itself (Griffiths 2012). To some extent, this is understandable. Money matters, and jobs are important; we think it would be naïve to suggest otherwise. However, an established body of work has now critiqued the amplification of neo-liberal marketization in HE (Tomlinson, Enders, and Naidoo 2020: 627) for students, staff and professional services alike (Berg and Seiger 2017; Brewster et al. 2022). Such experiences disproportionately impact minoritized or otherwise under-represented groups (Addison, Breeze, and Taylor 2022). Educators in universities tend to find joy in their work *despite* (not thanks to) the conditions of their employment (Whitsed et al. 2024; Kern et al. 2014). HE, as such, is widely experienced as a strained environment in which the pressure to achieve models of excellence, can compromise educational experiences for everyone. It has also been observed in our previous work with students; a key motivation for the present study (Mason and Warmington 2024).

Beyond this, evidence for the social importance of *enjoyment* in education is compelling. This is also nothing new. Aristotle (*circa* 340 BCE: 599-601) noticed that ‘those who work with pleasure always work with more discernment and accuracy’. Enjoyment, then, is an important ideal in education, not just because it is likely to be reflective (and possibly constitutive of) emotional wellbeing, but because emotional wellbeing is also conducive of successful learning.

Before proceeding, however, it is important to be clear that we do not suggest all educational experiences can or should be joyous. This is an unrealistic (and probably undesirable) goal. We are more comfortable, here, with the idea that joy in education is most likely to happen within supportive, engaged and relationally driven educational contexts. These are some of the conditions that appear conducive to joy, and, in our opinion, they are conditions that could be prioritised more than they seem to be at present. Griffiths (2012) has also pointed out that joy might occur in unexpected places, like the pursuit of something difficult, a pedagogical relationship, or the experience of personal transformation, not all of which are necessarily fun. The present reality though, is that we still know very little about joy in HE, because the *empirical* studies with a sociological lens remain limited. This is why we have framed our article as a step *towards* pedagogies of joy: not as the panacea or state of permanence, but as an affirmative orientation that guides us.

About the project

This project came about in response to an institutional call for education projects within the Faculty of Social Sciences with a commitment to themes relating to (but not limited to)

student voice and building engaged, inclusive and joyful learning communities *with* students. This follows a broader trend in both research and pedagogical practice that positions ‘students as partners’ in co-creating learning and teaching (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014) through research-led education (Neary 2013) and shared decision making (Bovill 2020). We assembled a team of student leaders (3 student lead researchers who previously held student union leadership roles), academics and professional librarians at a UK Russell Group Higher Education (HE) Institution. Working with librarians from the University enhanced the participatory focus, as strong collaborative relationships were already established between the University Library and the Students’ Union Officers as the lead researchers. The librarians also brought their experience of community building across the disciplines, along with expertise in creative literacies which complemented the academic leads roles in the focus of participatory, creative and pedagogical research. Together, we considered how we might think about learning not as a ‘sense of duty, but out of a sense of joy’ (Foreman: 10). This affirmative orientation is also entangled with our methodological commitments to inclusive, participatory methods and disrupting normative knowledge hierarchies (Heron and Reason 2008). To do this, we co-hosted two creative workshops during the summer of 2023 (Ethical approval no: 052793). Arts based methods were an integral part of this project as we saw creative, collaborative inquiry as one route to joy that allows for a dialogical pedagogy where you can ‘wonder together’ (Montuori 2008: 17). We note that creative or arts-based processes were not expected of everyone and autonomy was offered as to whatever medium and form of expression worked for diverse bodies and minds. We also do not wish to assert that creative methods are the only way for joyful ways of working either.

Our student leads advertised the project workshops to undergraduate and postgraduate taught students *via* student union networks, university emails, posters and digital displays across campus. Tea, cakes and craft materials were provided. 21 students participated, including our three lead student co-researchers who also contributed to workshop creations. Students came from a diversity of disciplines: data science, psychology, education, arts and humanities. Students self-described themselves, with 6 self-identifying as having a physical impairment, mental health condition or as being neurodivergent. Several students shared within the session coming to university later in life or barriers to accessing university. The students were predominantly women. Approximately four students were international students. Some students’ self-described their social identities, but many students did not share demographic information beyond their roles at university. We see students choosing to reveal and/or disclose their social identities as optional and part of the collaborative process. We do not seek to make claims about generalisability or social groups within this paper. We also recognise the potential ‘limitations’ of a small, self-selecting group and encourage further research with larger student populations to capture a more diverse student voice to critically engage with joyful learning which includes thinking through a host of research methods. Bovill (2020) notes that staff-student partnership projects often have small groups that are often already engaged or advantaged in some way: our project reflects this given that our student co-leads were student union officers and thus represented particularly engaged student cohorts. We recognise the limitations of this and advocate for further research that captures a diversity of student engagement and contributions. Student workshop contributions included a diversity of creative and art-based formats which acted as prompts for our analysis and visual dissemination discussed below.

At the start of the workshops, the project was introduced by the academic and librarian leads who provided background and justification to the project from a pedagogical perspective who then, upon instruction from our student lead researchers, left the sessions. In co-constructing the research process, it was important to challenge power and imbalances and to enhance student voice. As part of this, as a team we also took time to think through creativity and joy together, often leaving space for discomfort in the absence of structure, telling of the academic and hierarchical structures we were seeking to disentangle ourselves from. Our lead student researchers, upon brief guidance into creative methods from our academic leads, carefully designed a creative, participatory and inclusive workshop schedule lasting two hours. Emphasis was given throughout the session for students to participate in any way that felt accessible and meaningful to them. For example, student participants were encouraged to join group discussion, but options were made available to work independently including using an iPad to submit individual audio recordings.

There were four key activities within the workshops and all the creative activities were designed with, and for, students. First, was photo elicitation (Harper 2002) - a technique where a collection of stock images from a preassembled pack are presented to harness deeper insights and provoke further conversation. In our case, student participants were invited to select an image that represented joy and another image that represented their educational experience. Second, our student co-researchers led an activity termed 'the battery of joy' where student participants were asked to consider what charged or squashed their joy in education. Third, the session allowed for open creativity where student participants could choose any medium to create and represent joy in education. Student contributions were collected and recorded in a diversity of formats - from visual and audio material to the physical creation of material artefacts. Fourth and finally, we had our 'jar of joy': a closing activity where students were asked to think of a word or statement to reflect their feelings at the end of the workshops. Example statements included: 'aglow', 'expression', 'inspired', 'refreshed', 'I don't feel alone', 'I feel valued', 'relaxed', 'I feel encouraged', 'I feel heard' and simply, 'I feel better'.

When reflecting upon the participatory and creative nature of the workshops, one student stated that they enjoyed the playful concept and how, 'it just goes to show, when it is not power from the top down... it's an open collaborative experience... everyone here... has had an open, fun, nice time.' The students' account of open and playful conditions with redistributed power speaks to the very notion of joy: the elation of the right relation (Arnett 2023). Collaboration with, for and by, students so that they can develop understandings *together*.

Following this, we had a collaborative analysis session where student leads encouraged academics and professional librarians to also participate in the activities and share understandings and educational experiences. Our student leads facilitated thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022), highlighting themes and data codes from creative workshop data, audio transcriptions and personal fieldnote reflections. These themes included notions of interdependence, feeling competent and connected to something bigger than ourselves. As a team of academics, librarians and student lead researchers, we built these thematic areas together by being data-driven (inductive): centering the methodological process of the workshops as collaborative analysis and which informs the structure of this paper. However, we also wish to recognise that the academic leads have steered much of the conceptual and theoretical (deductive) analysis of this paper, recognising the limitations and practicalities of participatory research especially for small scale projects. Our analysis thus starts with

the definition of joy through to the creative expressions of this within higher education. In our attempt to retain the spirit of students' intellectual journeys and curation of themes and agendas, we present findings structured as creative activities that reveal substantive themes around joy and not vice versa. Our findings focus on collectively defining joy, the relationship of these definitions to education and crucially, the conditions that move us towards joyfulness in higher education. We now detail our findings on how we might theorise a pedagogy of joy and enact a move towards it.

Co-defining joy

Given our work with students as *co-researchers*, co-defining joy was integral to our participatory processes. It thus formed the initial work of our creative and collaborative inquiry using photo elicitation whereby students selected imagery that aligned most closely with their understanding of, or affiliation to, joy. There was a curiosity in the everyday and the mundane through to the extraordinary scale of the world, aligned with Spinoza's (2001[1677]) notion of joy which illuminates an expansiveness. One student described the humbling nature of the world and its connection to joy by selecting an image of the sky, explaining 'looking at infinity. The stars, the moon, the sun – it gives me hope'. The very use of the word 'hope' aligns with Friere's work where there is an 'ontological need' in tackling oppression and pursuing a path to liberation and social justice (Freire, 1992; 2000). For students, joy was also about establishing a sense of safety – a safe, calm, gentle environment and 'calming the noise' with an absence of shame. Similarly, one student selected a woodland scenery, explaining:

Nature is my happy place, anything in a woodland feels safe. I like the steps going up – I don't know what is at the top...it's a sense of adventure – to get lost in the woods and to see where it takes me.

Like the woodland and the sky, students selected animals, community and connection. These echo ideas of the posthuman which sees the human condition as not solely reduced to traditional conceptualisations of what it means to be human, but rather a 'complex assemblage of human and non-human, planetary and cosmic, given and manufactured, which requires major re-adjustments to our way of thinking' (Braidotti 2013: 159). Essentially, the articulations of the meanings of joy all emphasised the role of *interdependencies* and *relation* both with and beyond the human. To echo Arnett (2023), these understandings of joy were too 'elation[s] of the right relation[s]'; whether that relation be to another person or to the natural environment. Joy was found *beyond* the self, by working together and feeling part of something bigger. The 'sense of adventure' also aligns with Spinoza's (2001[1677]) notion that routes to joy mean there is a 'capacity to act' and to 'strive' or 'persist in being'. One student selected an image of two people working together explaining, 'My joyful experience comes from working together with others such as my dissertation supervisor.' For us, scaffolding collaborative ways of inquiry and exploration enables us to achieve this.

Following our work to co-define joy, we then sought to find an image that represented educational experience. When asked about higher education experiences and the joy it might bring, little joy was found. Students pushed back against the association of education as always being joyful, describing higher education as an often arduous and turbulent journey, citing overbearing content with courses often designed in ways that were detrimental to well-being. Educational expectations were also mapped against the uneven

terrains of students' personal lives and circumstances, and the diversity of these against when considering matters of disability and impairment or attending university later in life, for example. Individualised, goal and achievement driven targets of grades, assessment and 'what's next' stifled and squashed joy, with the exception of students describing accounts of committed teachers, pockets of community and friendships that eased the load. To demonstrate this, one student selected an image of a bustling crowd in public life explaining:

Everyday I am just so busy. Sometimes I think I am lost because in work we are comparative. We just have to pass exams to get a high score, but how I connect joy in learning is not this. I guess the reality is if we keep pushing this goal, we lose the joy. I feel lonely. I want to scream. I just want something different. I just want joy.

This student participants' account illuminates the metric and achievement driven focus of HE, echoing previous research that note western educational contexts focus on marketised, neoliberal ideals of education (Griffiths 2012: 667). Neoliberal ideals set individuals in isolation (or as the student said, 'lonely') and in competition to one another, and not, in connection and collaboration. Students utilised metaphors of survival, thinking about the sea, journeys, cliffs, pressure and fire and associated feelings of intensity, stress and pain with content in education as 'simply too much to grasp.' This hinders our striving for enhancement. Whilst joy is theorised as bound up with the experience of persistence and struggle, it is important to note that we found parallels of this co-existence when exploring the question of joy in education. Many students said there were 'elements' of joy in their education, but stressed how this often arrived from a backdrop of compromising joy, difficulty and struggle:

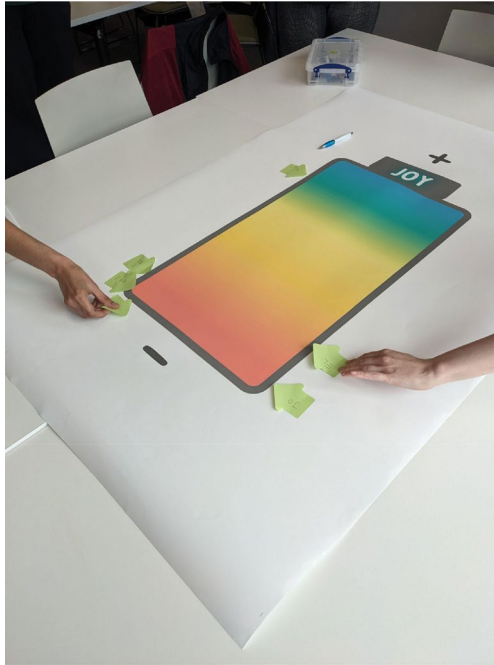
A lot of things are good; like the search for knowledge, the expansiveness. You're on a journey, but this can lead to murky situations where you're not sure where you're going. It can feel futile as you're grappling with concepts. Expansiveness is a form of joy; you're learning, growing and becoming bigger than you were before...At the same time, it has the tendency to cast you adrift and make you feel separate; untethered.

Here, students themselves describe 'expansiveness' and a growth beyond the self (2001[1677]). The feeling of 'separation' or being 'untethered' is important, not only in the move towards joy and connection but also through the lens of belonging within higher education, which can be felt unequally across social identities and familial or educational backgrounds (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Murray et al. 2022). Similar to the description above that articulates the co-existence of joy with uncertainty and ambiguity, another student selected an image of clouds with a rainbow appearing just behind:

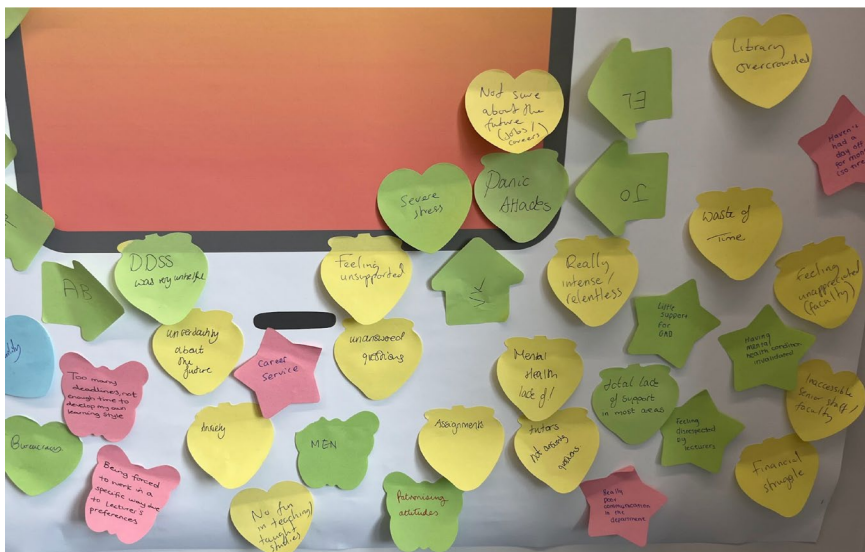
There are definitely elements of joy in education, like the rainbow in the distance with the huge, heavy cloud looming towards you. A lot of the time in education there is this tremendous pressure overhanging [you] - this burden...will it ever be fulfilled? You get the rainbows from the storms, from the mix of sunlight and rain. Maybe I'm telling myself that there is some joy in suffering. You get glimpses of joy but you have to look for the breakthrough in the clouds.

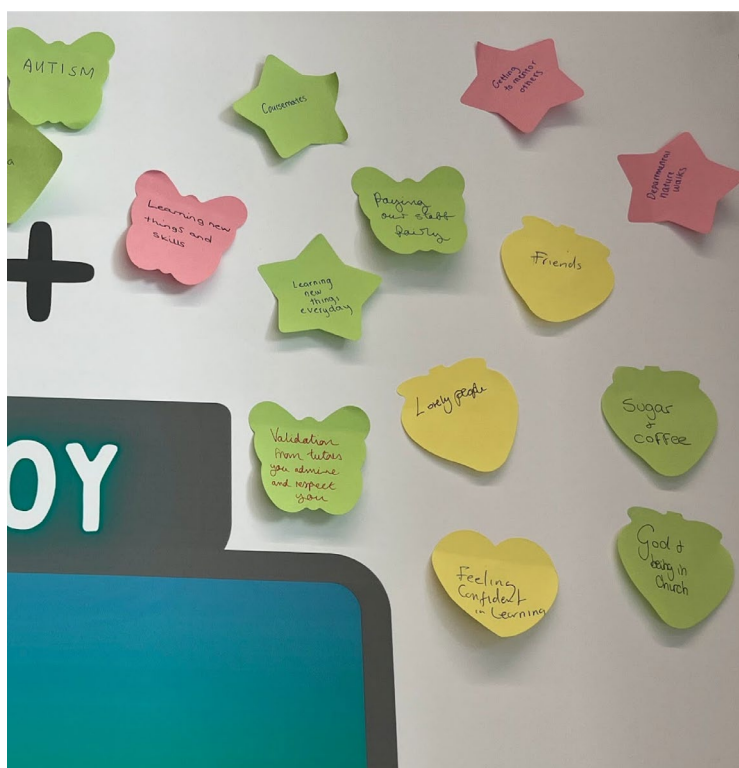
Students' acknowledgement of the entanglement of joy and struggle has clear alignment in sociological understandings of joy and persisting *because of* and *in response* to difficult circumstances (Mwale 2023; Tichavakunda 2022). We now move to the applications and examples of such cited by students in their higher educational experiences *via* our creative method, the 'battery of joy'.

The battery of joy: charging and squashing



The second activity, 'the battery of joy' was created by the student co-researchers as a way of documenting how practices, relations, environments and things were conducive or hindering a joyful education. This method involved a large printed multi-coloured battery image as a prompt: students could place their positive or negative experiences onto the '+' (what charged up) or '-' (what drained or 'squashed' joy) of the battery, following conversations about educational experiences. This methodology is entangled with conceptualisations of joy whereby 'striving' is essentially about thinking about what charges, opens us up or attracts us to others and connects with the broader world. What 'squashes' or drains us, is essentially what reduces this capacity to act and affords us agency and connectedness.





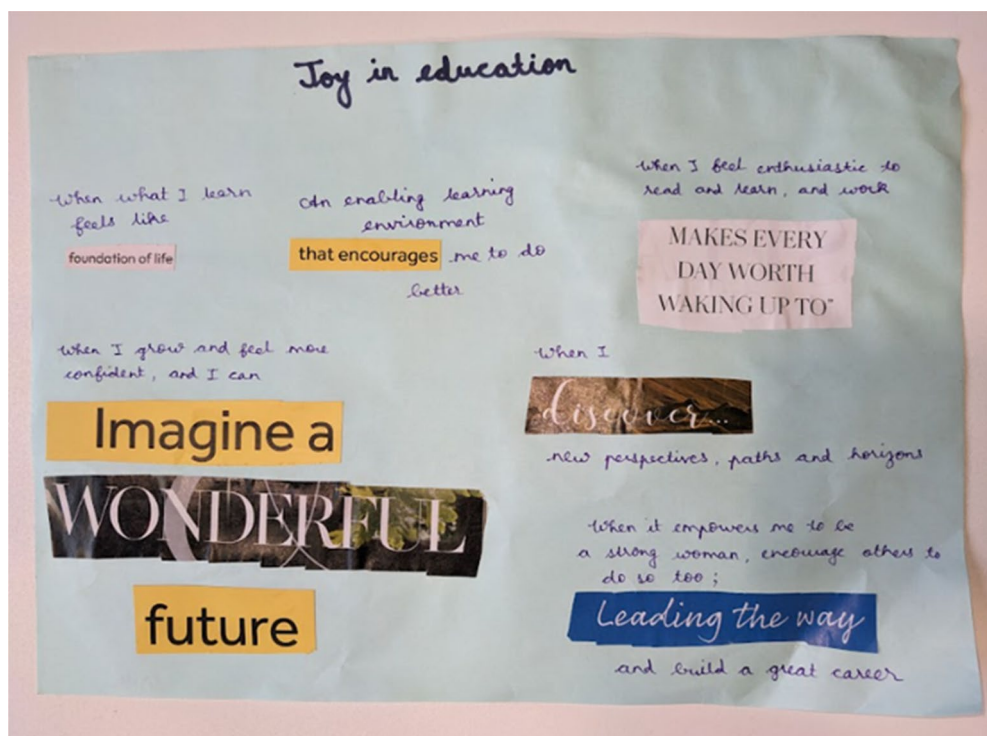
this may be somewhat self-selecting. Creativity does not necessarily mean novelty or innovation, but rather celebrating the foundations of what is already there and incorporating alternative takes and expanding, should the processes embrace this. Students cited how joy can be reached by the process of ‘learning something new’: *expanding* knowledge. Students described the ability to connect with new cultures, religions and sharing food together: learning programmes where students could *move beyond* the university, connecting with societal issues that matter to them or have a broader social, political, economic, environmental and ecological significance. This matters when we think about the very definition of joy that is not only about relation, but about broader social, built and natural environments that connect us (Braidotti 2013).

What really ‘charged’ up students and made them feel joy in their learning journey was *discovery or rediscovery of themselves* as an autonomous learner with confidence in their ability (Arnett 2023; Spinoza 2001[1677]), supported by validation by those who teach and support their learning experience. This matters for students who have had an educational journey which has not followed a ‘straightforward’ path, and the students in our workshops overwhelmingly represented backgrounds in which there were barriers in their educational journeys including being first generation, a mature student, having physical impairments, mental health conditions and disability. We do not wish to make generalisations or arguments as to why such students attended the workshops despite this observation. However, there is a broader case to be made for creating educational conditions that support the enhancement, confidence, autonomy and connectedness *for everyone*.

To summarise, the battery of joy was a creative and *methodological* process which gathered examples and applications of conditions that squash and charge up joy within higher education. We will shift our attention to the specific creative expressions brought into being by individual students. We assert that these offer further empirical evidence moving towards a pedagogy of joy and what we need to *do* as educators to enable this to happen.

Joyful artefacts: bringing joy into being through creativity, connection and hope

Our open and collaborative workshop space created by our lead student researchers meant that conditions were created so that student participants could take the time to sit, chat, create and crucially, *connect*. Here, we had a series of tables with art-based, creative and digital resources available and student participants were given the option to respond with contributions related to joy (alignments and rejections), or simply follow the feeling in that moment. Students shared accounts of their journeys into education, declared political intentions and came together in solidarity to share the weight of inaccessible and hierarchical systems in higher education that inevitably fails us all (Goodley 2025). Arts based methods can generate contributions that are ‘emotionally and politically evocative, captivating and aesthetically powerful’ and there is no question that the students’ contributions do this. The artefacts we now present detail the complex and multifaceted accounts of struggle, isolation and barriers, but also of creativity, connection and hope.



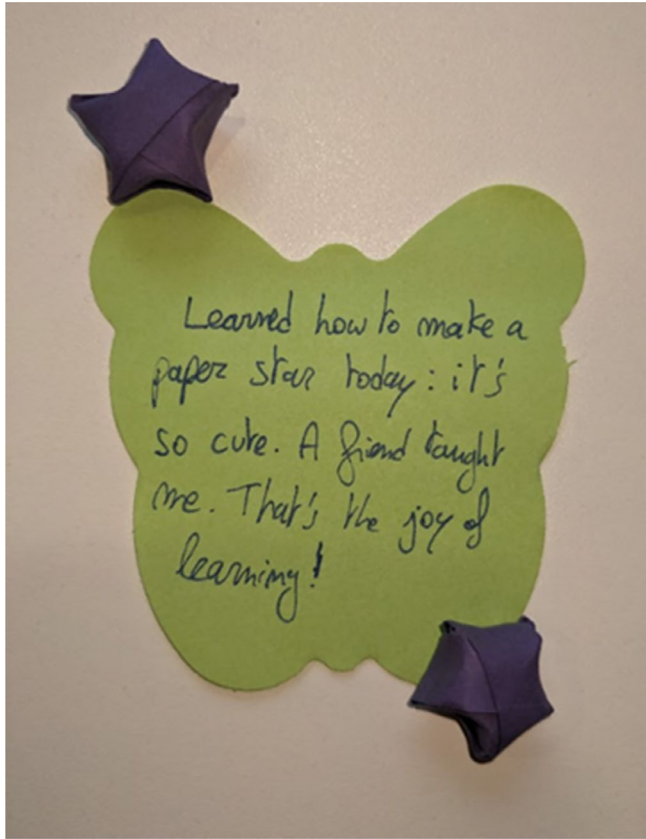
The artistic contribution above, capturing handwriting and collaged words, offers a clear focus on an affirmative future with joy in education in mind. The student highlighted that, to date, their university experience had *not* been joyful, experiencing disappointment in its failure to meet expectations. They explained further:

I would have liked more encouragement...to feel that it is meaningful...I want to wake up and be joyful, enthusiastic to do what I'm doing...I want to feel hopeful about the future...Joy in education for me is when I can grow, when I feel more confident, where I can imagine a wonderful future for myself in the world, where I discover new perspectives and horizons. Joy in education [would]... empower me to be a strong woman, to make others feel that way, and to lead and build the career of my dreams...in the end, hope is all we have.

Key to this account is not only the affirmative orientation of joy (Braidotti 2018) and the conditions required that provide a capacity to act and feel meaningful (Spinoza (2001[1677])), but also of hope. As Back (2021: 3) notes, 'It is perhaps easier to offer a list of worldly troubles than it is to speak of hope in our times.' To similarly speak of joy and in conjunction with hope draws similar parallels. bell hooks (2003) writes about joy and hope, noticing how these guide us towards social justice, and how students are pushing for a justice-based future from their contributions. We can see this in a methodological sense *via* the participatory work of arts-based methods as demonstrated here, but we can also argue for this in our pedagogical theory and practice in moving ourselves towards a pedagogy of joy.

Community, connection and friendship were ever present throughout the creative artefacts. One example was how two students came together in the creative workshops to learn how to teach each other through creation, to learn from each other; and, from this

interdependency, they argued arrives joy. Below is a picture of a green post-it note where a student documents how they learned how to make a paper star in the workshop, supported by a friend and 'that's the joy of learning!'.

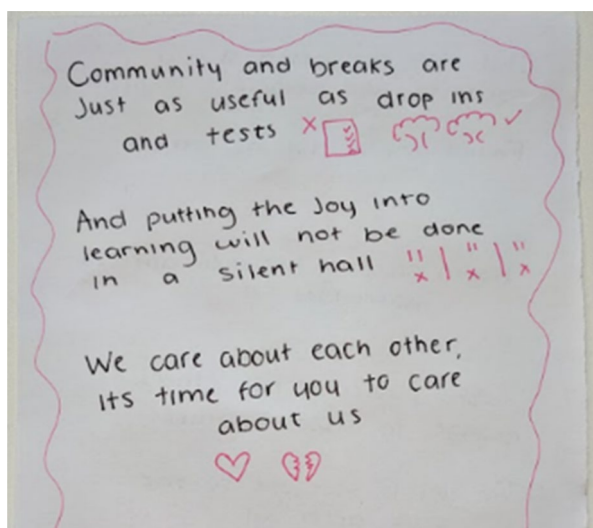


They explained:

Joyful learning is thinking, 'Oh, I would love to learn this!' and then someone else says, 'I know how!' and then they show you. It's about sharing knowledge.

This highlights the productive force of learning *together* and resisting traditional hierarchies. For Montouri (2008: 17), joyful learning captures the 'magic' and 'wonder' of creating an environment where we learn together. Joy in education is not solely about an individual journey, but creativity and connectedness within and beyond the classroom.

Similarly, a student wrote a story about her educational journey. She described herself as a student who 'loved books, documentaries and learning' but experienced panic attacks at school which 'disrupted the class' and led to being taken away from the shared learning environment. She documented talking openly with others about struggles with anxiety, but the barriers faced in higher education with prescribed activities that did not align with growth, expansiveness, connection and healing. What transformed this was community: participating in societies and supporting others, and significantly, finding joy in doing so. She found joy in helping others as explained below:



This takes us again to the necessity of community, of slower and more careful pedagogies (Berg and Seiger 2017) and a de-pathologised university (Goodley 2025). This is of course in tension within a marketised higher education of set amounts of contact, care and numerical outcomes, as opposed to care and relationality being embedded and centred with, and for, students with social lives. As a final and connected creative response that concludes this section and perhaps offers one of the most radical and dissenting voices is where a student stated, 'Exceptionalism will not cure us...All of us, together, are creating something joyful and beautiful when here together and not competing. It's radical and it's brilliant to resist that'.

We now conclude with our contributions on what we do as not only scholars, but as educators, to respond to this call for resistance (Mwale 2023; Shuster and Westbrook 2024; Tichavakunda 2022) and to find *practical*, *possible* and *achievable* ways to build community, support one another, and to move us towards a pedagogy of joy.

Conclusion: our 'takeaway tangibles' for joyful learning

Joy can't be constant. But, to support a sustainable, diverse and dynamic learning environment, just like in a healthy ecosystem, we require a meaningful, deep and interconnected investment in its foundations to enable moments of joy to flourish (Student Co-Researcher)

As our lead student co-researcher and co-author Alison articulated, we cannot advocate nor expect to feel joy all the time. It is also important to remain cautious about a romanticised or idealised push for joy as resolving all facets of the social experience of education. But what we can do is work together to create environments of interconnection and offer the necessary foundations for joyfully co-existing in higher education together. Our priority first and foremost was to advocate for moving us *towards* a pedagogy of joy, recognising and building upon the significant interdisciplinary contributions of joy and their commitments to social justice (Mwale 2023; Shuster and Westbrook 2024; Tichavakunda 2022). As Braidotti (2020) notes, 'We are in the world together but we are not one and the same'.

We must acknowledge our collective endeavour whilst recognising that social inequities: we require different resources, learn in different ways and, express ourselves and communicate in a diversity of ways too. We must also remain attentive to a critical joyful pedagogy, one that recognises the societal conditions and contexts of labour precarity, marketisation, funding cuts and systemic inequities that exist within education and beyond. With this in mind, we want to document what we believe to be ‘takeaway tangibles’ for moving us towards a joyful education. We believe these suggestions can be practically implemented, whilst remaining attentive to the educational institutions we operate (and are indeed constrained) within:

- **Facilitate opportunities for engaged learning**, where students have the opportunity to decide what they are studying and make connections with what motivates and matters to them within and beyond the university. This might include focusing on a societal topic or challenge, for example. Education is relational and bigger than an institution. Relational pedagogy puts connection at the heart of education (Bovill 2020), ensuring that students feel belonging within higher education (Gilani and Connor 2024) and that educators can and should facilitate this for the common good (Dhungana 2023).
- **Create opportunities to connect and create communities of learning** such as communal learning at the start of teaching. This might include going for a walk together, learning outside, sharing food or immersing the group in a playful or creative task. Returning to Hooks (2003) we need to create spaces for joyful connections, within and beyond disciplines to enable learning and taking a collaborative approach is one way to do this.
- **Recognise students as experts with their own knowledge and experience** and prioritise learning about this from the start and shaping teaching from that and with them.
- **Acknowledge that none of us know everything and we all need support with something.** This requires us as educators sharing our own vulnerabilities or uncertainties within our learning journeys and encouraging students to share what they find difficult or need help with.
- **Build care into programme design** by actively listening and responding in ways that are productive and supportive. This can be achieved through simple check-ins and tailoring individual and group tuition as learning progresses. There needs to be care in the learner, care in learning, recognising the diverse networks of care and community that feature as part of this.
- **Let learners co-create and value each other’s contributions**, giving time to share interests, motivations and set learning and teaching activities that celebrate and document achievements.
- **Support learners in developing collaborative skills**, with group problem solving and an appreciation of team work contributions.
- **Make it safe to ‘fail’ and not know.** Educators must remind students that it is ok to share scribbles, ideas and current thinking. It is important we remind ourselves and others that mistakes, gaps and ‘failures’ are productive, and reflective work enables us to embrace this. Students desire conditions to not always be assessed, measured, pressured to ‘get things right’ or ‘achieve’. We do not wish to say that a pedagogy of joy is without struggle, but rather presents an opportunity to be part of the intellectual

puzzle that educators and learners know and love. This requires us focusing our attention on process and not outcome where our conditions allow for safe failure as fundamental to growth (Noddings 1992), learning and inevitably, joy in the process. Now, it is of course not our intention here to de-centre material realities of university or academic life, its costs and students' futures. Indeed, bringing attention to a pedagogy of joy may *enhance* student achievement - joy, learning and *self-discovery* as successes within themselves.

- **Embed rest and slowness.** Remind ourselves and each other that in order to enjoy learning, we need to have time to rest, reflect and recuperate. Pacing learning and embedding breaks during learning and teaching is essential, as is seeing education as simply one part of our social lives. We must push for a slow and careful pedagogy and not a system that simply reacts to crises (Berg and Seiger 2017). Students and educators alike learn and work in a diversity of ways and at different times and paces, but our structures do not reflect this. We must embed flexibility, slowness and rest to challenge fast paced and pressured educational environments: allowing for learning to develop in our own time, at our own pace and on our own terms. And through a collective commitment to do less and to slow down, we create space for us all.

In a time of metrics, teaching frameworks, league tables and rapid technological change with the influx of artificial intelligence (AI) shaping education, we often forget to pause and think about joy. Enjoyment in education is not neatly captured in metrics, nor must we accept cyclical educational outcomes that do not ask the question. So to move us towards joy, we must note the fleeting glimmers of discovery, expansion and connection: inevitably, we all need this.

To conclude, this paper has presented students' empirical accounts of what joy means to them in their educational journeys. We have sought to pay serious attention to joy and enjoyment, drawing upon theories such as Spinoza's *Ethics* (2001[1677]) which captures joy as the experience of enhancement when brought closer to our capacities, through positive relations with others. We argue that such theorisations are helpful when engaging with conversations and contributions into the enjoyment of education and indeed our own students' contributions as to their understandings of what joy is and how this may or may not manifest in their own educational encounters. Drawing on co-produced research with 21 students, at a UK Russell Group university, we have shared insights on experiences of, and barriers to, joy in HE. Whilst we recognise this is a small scale study in a UK context with one university, we hope that students' contributions and conceptualisations on the existential meanings of joy in education very much span beyond this. For us, such accounts are matters of what it means to learn, teach, share and simply, be human and connect with the world around us. Our hope from this paper is that educators, learners and scholars alike embrace and further this work in moving us towards a pedagogy of joy.

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