

Book Review

Joy-Centered Pedagogy in Higher Education: Uplifting Teaching and Learning for All

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Eileen Kogl Camfield's *Joy-Centered Pedagogy in Higher Education: Uplifting Teaching and Learning for All* (2025) offers a transformative and humanistic approach to higher education, shifting pedagogical priorities to center joy as both an emotional and structural facet of learning. This review synthesizes the book's thematic structure, which spans creative expression, inclusivity, and quiet reflection, while evaluating its theoretical implications and practical strategies. Each chapter, written by a diverse group of educators, presents a compelling narrative that highlights the significance of emotional engagement, resilience, and inclusivity in the learning process. By methodically examining key chapters, this review assesses the strength of the book's arguments and its relevance in an academic landscape characterized by widespread student disengagement and institutional rigidity.

In an era marked by academic burnout, declining student engagement, and a growing mental health crisis (Suárez-Colorado et al., 2019; Chong et al., 2025), this book offers a counter-narrative focused on emotional well-being and transformative pedagogy. It addresses systemic issues that afflict modern academic environments, particularly the depersonalization of learning and the reduction of education to mere credentialism. Through a collection of essays by educators from various disciplines, Camfield reimagines the classroom as a space of abundance, vitality, and joy. The introduction establishes that joy is not a trivial addition but rather “an essential source of abundance and vitality.” By nurturing joy, educators can help

students develop a sense of *matter*ing, which in turn fosters greater academic resilience and personal growth. Camfield challenges the conventional divide between rigor and joy, urging readers to recognize that joy and academic excellence are not only compatible but also mutually reinforcing.

One of the most innovative and emotionally impactful chapters, “Transforming Trauma: The Joy of Student-Written Stand-Up Comedy” by Eileen Kogl Camfield and Josiah Beharry, highlights creative expression as a powerful tool for healing and deep learning (Camfield, 2025). The authors share their experiences guiding students in writing and performing stand-up routines based on their personal struggles and resilience. In this context, humor transcends mere coping; it becomes a pedagogical strategy that empowers students to reclaim their narratives. This chapter illustrates how vulnerability in learning environments, when approached with care, can provide therapeutic benefits while also enhancing critical thinking and narrative skills. By navigating trauma through laughter, students become co-creators of meaning rather than passive recipients of knowledge. This integration of cognitive and emotional engagement reinforces the volume’s central thesis: learning is most transformative when it engages the whole person.

In “Choosing Joy Over Dread: Bringing Art, Playfulness, and Agency to Learning,” Tara Mason and Marisella Rodriguez engage in a meaningful discussion about how incorporating artistic and playful approaches transforms the student-teacher relationship (Camfield, 2025). The authors critique the rigid structure of modern classrooms and advocate for more fluid, participatory forms of engagement. Their pedagogical experiments, which include creative art projects and classroom games, foster a learning environment that is both vibrant and democratic. By providing students with various avenues for expression, they honor diverse intelligences and learning styles. The incorporation of joy is not merely decorative; it fundamentally reshapes the learning experience by creating space for risk-taking, redefining failure, and promoting a culture of exploration. This focus on student agency reinforces the book’s message that educators should share power and collaborate with learners in the co-creation of knowledge.

Lott Hill’s essay, “The Joy is in the Inclusive (Teaching) Journey,” explores how inclusive pedagogical practices enhance joy in the classroom (Camfield, 2025). Hill contends that when students feel genuinely seen, heard, and valued, their ability to experience joy—and thus to learn—grows. In this context, inclusivity is framed not just as representation or access but as a matter of relational ethics. The chapter offers practical strategies such as modifying language in syllabi, diversifying course content, and actively seeking feedback from marginalized student populations. These techniques serve not only as tools for improved classroom management but also as instruments for justice and connection. Hill highlights that joy is not evenly distributed in academia and must be intentionally cultivated for students historically excluded from centers of power. This perspective aligns with Camfield’s broader argument that joy should be both individual and collective, spontaneous and intentional.

In Jackie Shay’s “Overcoming STEM Imposter Syndrome through Joyful Curiosity” (Camfield, 2025), the challenges of STEM education are examined. Shay highlights how high-stakes testing, competitive environments, and monocultural teaching practices contribute to feelings of inadequacy among STEM students. She advocates for a shift in the learning experience to emphasize curiosity and wonder, demonstrating how even the most rigid disciplines can be revitalized. The chapter shares classroom experiments that encourage students to pose big, open-ended questions without the fear of being wrong—this pedagogical approach disrupts the performance-driven nature of STEM and transforms students into explorers. The sense of wonder fostered in such environments serves as a remedy for imposter syndrome, replacing fear with a genuine desire to learn. This essay powerfully reminds us that the joy of learning knows no disciplinary boundaries and that curiosity can serve as a form of resistance.

In a reflective and unconventional chapter, Angela Winek’s “Celebrating Silence: Making Space for Quiet Joy in the Classroom” critiques the emphasis on constant activity in educational environments (Camfield, 2025). Winek argues that intentional silence can function as both a cognitive and spiritual practice, enabling students to process information more profoundly. By incorporating meditative practices, silent reading, and moments of stillness, she reintroduces contemplation as a vital pedagogical tool. Her argument challenges the hyper-productivity culture prevalent in higher education, proposing that embracing a slower pace can be transformative. This chapter provides a necessary counterbalance to the more expressive strategies presented elsewhere in the volume, emphasizing that joy is multifaceted—it can be loud and playful, as well as quiet and introspective. This diversity in tone and approach enriches the overall thesis, ensuring the book is more than a simple celebration of happiness.

The book concludes with an appendix that serves as a practical guide for educators looking to implement joy-centered techniques in their classrooms (Camfield, 2025). This resource synthesizes the core pedagogical strategies discussed throughout the volume and connects them to specific chapters, providing a clear roadmap for application. For example, educators receive guidance on designing inclusive syllabi, incorporating artistic expression, and creating reflective spaces. The appendix reinforces the book’s dual commitment to theory and practice, transforming it from a philosophical treatise into a practical manual for

change. This focus on usability enhances the book's appeal and ensures its insights can be effectively translated into action across various institutional contexts. It bridges the often-cited gap between pedagogical theory and classroom reality, demonstrating that joy-centered pedagogy is not just an ideal but a viable approach to teaching.

The reviewed book offers a profound reimagining of teaching and learning in the 21st century (Camfield, 2025). As higher education institutions face pressures to reform, Camfield and her collaborators advocate for an educational vision rooted in empathy, agency, and collective flourishing—reclaiming the classroom as a space of joy, healing, and transformation. This vision aligns with a growing scholarly movement that champions joy-centered and humanizing pedagogies as antidotes to bureaucratic academia. Traditional higher education models have prioritized productivity, standardization, and performance metrics, but a shift toward affective, relational, and student-centered practices is increasingly documented in empirical research (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Seminal works like bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* laid the groundwork for these changes, and recent studies support her claims (Hooks, 2014). Seminal works like bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) laid the groundwork for these changes, and recent studies support her claims (Hooks, 2014). However, implementation remains uneven, constrained by institutional structures—rigid assessments, publication demands, and bureaucratic oversight—that stifle innovation and joy in teaching (Mountz et al., 2015). Educators are calling for structural change to enable more holistic and liberatory learning approaches. In this context, the book serves as a timely call to action and a practical guide, underpinned by research and praxis, to reimagine higher education in more humane and emotionally resonant ways. Its interdisciplinary reach and emotional depth make it especially valuable for policymakers, instructional designers, and faculty developers committed to sustainable educational reform.

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of joy-centered pedagogy on student outcomes, including well-being, engagement, and academic performance. While studies show that emotionally resonant teaching fosters deeper learning and retention (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Zembylas, 2014), more longitudinal and cross-institutional analyses are needed to validate these findings across diverse educational contexts. Research could explore how systemic barriers—such as accreditation standards, funding models, and faculty evaluation systems—can be restructured to support affective and relational pedagogies (Walker & Ngara Manyamba, 2020; Nair et al., 2024). Additionally, there is a need to investigate how digital and hybrid learning environments can sustain emotional connections and communal learning, a concern amplified in the post-pandemic era (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Bond et al., 2021). These inquiries would extend Camfield's work and offer pathways for institutions seeking to implement emotionally sustainable education at scale.

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