About Chapter 5

For **Kristin Land,** the pandemic brings with it the urgent need to make learning more joyful for her community college students, especially when contact is limited to Zoom. "I set out to center joy because I couldn't imagine how else I would entice my students—let alone myself—to show up each week if I didn't."

Land's breakthrough—reimagining her class in order to make a consistent space for joy and play—brings with it inevitable doubts. Is she doing justice to institutional expectations? A 2021 study about play in higher education provides one answer. While "playful pedagogy remains an uncommon approach" (Forbes, 2021, p. 57), one that is devalued and underused, when college students have the opportunity to experience play in the learning process, they are highly motivated and engaged, with no sacrifice of rigor. Land makes her own compelling case, with multiple classroom examples, for a practice she rightly calls "radical" and "transformative."

Teach What You Love

How Carving Out Space for Joy Transforms a Composition Class

Kristin Land

During the early months of the pandemic, I made a vow to teach what I love and to have fun on Zoom.

I vowed to center fun—joy, really—in my Critical Thinking Through Literature community college course because I had been moved by Alice Walker's advice. "Hard times require furious dancing," she explains in the preface to her poetry collection with the same title. "Though we have all encountered our share of grief and troubles, we can still hold the line of beauty, form and beat—no small accomplishment in a world as challenging as this one" (2010, p. xv). Walker calls out a survival strategy used by marginalized communities for centuries: uplifting beauty and humanity ignites joy.

It is worth noting that joy is not synonymous with happiness. Psychologists describe joy as a deep state of well-being that arises from a clarity of purpose, from a sense of being in tune with something larger than ourselves. In *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, Emily and Amelia Nagoski take that definition one step further, arguing that the very act of reminding others and ourselves that we are enough, just as we are, is the "springboard from which we launch into a joyful life" (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020, p. 214). They insist, "Your joy matters. Please tell everyone you know" (p. 214).

That is what I set out to do: to greet my students, just as they are. I set out to show my mostly first-generation college students that there is joy in discovering our own interpretations of literature, that these discoveries have potential to connect us to our "something larger." I hoped to emphasize the beauty in discovering a new perspective, in conquering a challenge, in fine-tuning a skill, in seeing our family assets and ancestral wisdom elevated. But mostly, if I am honest, I set out to center joy because I couldn't imagine how else I would entice my students—let alone myself—to show up each week if I didn't.

I also wanted to entice students to stick out what would doubtless feel like a slog of a semester. Even in the best of times, there is no guarantee that my community college students will return to the next class. Students disappear midsemester. They are pulled away for a variety of reasons: a health

challenge, a promotion at work, a new child, a desire to work in a more hands-on field, a responsibility to earn money for their household. I start every 18-week semester thinking of ways to dissuade students from dropping out, even when I am not teaching via a virtual platform. But, during the pandemic, the urgency to build a class full of sticky experiences, meaning activities that glue students to one another and to meaningful ideas, rose to a new height as community losses drove home for me what so many survivors of oppression understand intuitively: Joy is a resilience strategy.

CARVING SPACE FOR JOY

On a literal level, my vow to teach what I love and uplift joy meant I had to change aspects of my curriculum. I swapped out a play about Haitian children and replaced it with Luis Valdez's satirical, one-act plays: *Los Vendidos* and *The Militants* (1990). I replaced Jesmyn Ward's masterful but intense novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2018), with Weike Wang's cheeky novel, *Chemistry* (2017), a coming-of-age-story that opens with a rebuffed marriage proposal. I paired *Chemistry* with several short stories about relationships, including "Never Marry a Mexican" by Sandra Cisneros, "How to Date a Brown Girl" by Junot Diaz, and "Birthday" by David Wong Louie.

To deepen our analytical conversations about the literature, I integrated several chapters from bell hooks's essay collection *All about Love*. I was eager to hear how students felt about hooks's bold argument: "To truly love, we must learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (hooks, 2001, pp. 5–6). My hope was that students would wrestle with and construct precise notions of what loving relationships might truly look like, a concept I believe is deeply useful for all adults, especially as we seek to confirm that our joy matters.

By setting out to teach both *what* I love and *about* love, I aimed to recreate a virtual environment with echoes of what I had experienced with my elementary school teacher, "Ms. Jarvis," back in 1985.

Schooling took a joyful turn for me when I entered Ms. Jarvis's 4th-grade classroom. Ms. Jarvis—whose guitar greeted us in the morning, whose walls lulled us with Dali's watches, whose lessons invited us to invent stories based on the witch my classmate drew—knew how to inspire. She gave us time to put our heads down on our desks and daydream until our pencils flurried across the page, depositing little haikus or illustrated comic strips. In her class, learning was a joyful process, a powerful blend of inquiry, creativity, and challenge individualized for each young mind's development. We took home jars of caterpillars that would become monarch butterflies, we bound books of our own words and drawings, we allowed art to spark our imaginations about life during the bubonic plague of the early Renaissance. Along with serious subjects, she melded joy.

Even though culturally her class was rooted in Eurocentric traditions, she seemed to hold onto the ancient beliefs that every individual's story matters, that every student's creative impulse deserves watering.

As 4th graders, we didn't produce Shakespeare-worthy sonnets, but we did create our own songs, poems, lab reports, and choreography to express the knowledge base we inherited, acquired, and constructed. I wanted to learn in her class. To this day, I remain warmed by her gentle yet insistent invitation to identify as a creator.

I wanted my students to experience something like what I had experienced with Ms. Jarvis because cultivating our creative muscle may be one of the most profound gifts we can give ourselves and others and one of the most ready sources of joy we can tap.

MY QUEST TO CREATE A JOYFUL CLASS

I have been on a quest to infuse joy into my teaching for a while now. My first conscious spark came when Carmen Johnston, a mentor on my tenure committee, said that teaching English should be fun for me (personal communication, September 13, 2012). She was not just attempting to alleviate my nerves as a newly hired, full-time faculty member. She was also previewing a foundational concept of transformational equity work: Perfectionism and the belief that success comes with excessive hours of work are tools of oppression, tools of manufacturing a hierarchy that disconnects the vast majority of humans from their personal empowerment, from their source of joy.

A few weeks after Carmen offered her advice, Dr. Cesar Cruz, a community educator, visited our campus to talk about how traditional schooling must be upended if we are going to draw out the strengths of Black and Brown men, a group historically underserved by our community college English courses. I felt particularly committed to adjusting my curriculum to better meet the needs of men of color because my course completion rates, like that of so many of my Language Arts colleagues, demonstrated that I had significant learning to do in this area.

In his talk, Dr. Cruz insisted that he'd never met anybody who liked being *schooled*. "But I've also never met anybody that doesn't like learning." He paused, letting that sink in (Cruz, 2012).

Schooling and learning are not the synonyms they seem. Schooling is about conformity and obedience, while learning ignites creativity and curiosity. Learning is what I had loved about Ms. Jarvis' class.

With this advice, I pieced together a theory about my teaching, a theory to counter the vast majority of my educational experiences. In short, humans are creators, and they derive joy and purpose through creation.

I have no problem advancing this theory when I teach creative writing. But for some reason, in composition courses, I am often sucked toward

conformity, toward a type of schooling that wrings life out of my teaching and, worse, out of too many of my students' learning experiences. I attribute part of this challenge to the skills I feel obligated to teach as a composition instructor—students *have* to know what a thesis is—and part of this challenge to the fact that it can be difficult to tackle weighty social justice concepts, like the erasure of indigenous identity or environmental racism, with a light, playful touch.

Recently, it became clear that my struggle actually emanates from a pervasive deficit mindset: a mindset I must consistently watch for and resist because it reinforces conformity, not curiosity. It interferes with my ability to see that having fun can coexist alongside rigorous work.

When I shared my vow to center joy with colleagues, I often felt them bristle, even across a phone line. As the fall semester of 2021 kicked off, one of my composition colleagues doubted that fun could include challenge, doubted that this attitude could also cover course outline objectives.

I understood those doubts. I remember bristling in years past when the seemingly fluffy statement rolled off another instructor's tongue. I was skeptical of their intentions. Do they just want to be popular? Are they shying away from the hard content, leaving me to clean up what hasn't been taught? Didn't they risk insulting students by offering work that didn't respect the students' intellectual capacities?

Back then I was less clear that challenge can coexist with, even be the foundation of, joyful learning. Back then I hadn't realized that when I infuse fun into my curriculum, I also infuse flexibility—a key quality that allows instructors to meet students where they are and seek strategies to grow our minds together.

THE EVOLUTION OF JOY AND PLAY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

In 2012, with Carmen and Dr. Cruz's advice at the forefront of my attention, my curriculum and pedagogy slowly morphed. My course materials and routines became more grounded in material I loved; my teaching practice slowly became more flexible. For example, I made time to play silly games at the start of class. I would try simple things like playing "Would you rather. . . ." Or I might ask students to post a pun, "You know, a dad joke," on the board. Both community builders translated well to the chat feature on Zoom.

Surprisingly, the more flexible I became, the more ideas I had about including play in the class. In fact, in March of 2020, just a week before rumblings of California's shelter-in-place orders, my students had been playing games that their classmates had invented as part of a research project.

We started the semester preparing to compose an essay about Andrea Smith's first three chapters of *Conquest: Sexual Violence and the American*

Indian Genocide (2015). To bring the urgency of her ideas to life and to add an element of synthesis into the paper, I crafted a project which asked students to team up and conduct independent research on a particular indigenous group's modern-day struggles. Each student team located research about their chosen indigenous community's cultural assets and current sociopolitical struggles. Then the teams designed a game to teach their classmates about their findings.

Our classroom took on the feel of a game night once the games were ready. We set up stations for student groups to rotate through. We had snacks for participants to munch on. In one corner, Jesus's team presented a 3-D puppet show about the Kiribati's struggles with plastic pollution and rising sea levels. Bridget's team designed a Jenga game with color-coded tiles representing different categories of facts about the Zapatistas. The biggest hit, designed by a team of female students, looked like a version of Chutes and Ladders. Players attempted to make their way home from a *maquiladora* (manufacturing plant) just outside of Juarez, Mexico. The game emphasized the struggles related to the ongoing femicide targeting the poorest women just across the U.S. border. Most of the maquiladora workers had migrated away from indigenous communities located in rural areas in the Mexican states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero.

Within this assignment, and particularly on this day, I had certainly managed to meld the ingredients of joy—creativity and a commitment to something larger—with meaty, social-justice related content. And, while the day was a success on the whole, as were the later research papers, I still recall walking away noticing the gaps, the deficits, the skills not yet mastered. Hadn't one group forgotten to cite their material in MLA 8 style sufficiently? Hadn't another group set up the game in a way that required far too much prior knowledge for players to make any meaningful guesses? How could I be sure that Oscar actually knew how to find information in our library databases? He'd been absent so often.

I even recall being upset with Oscar during the game session. His group was stationed at the whiteboard, hosting a version of Spin the Bottle. Oscar stepped into a leadership role, inventing adaptations to the rules when he noticed the game wasn't working. But all I could focus on that day was that Oscar had barely shown up to plan for his group's presentation.

In other words, on this day of purposeful play, I looked for what went wrong, for the deficiencies in the students' performances and in my own setup. In looking for what didn't work, I missed what mattered: Oscar had shown up to learn and to support his group. Oscar had cared enough to show off his leadership skills. I was the one who wasn't prepared to greet the talents, the assets he was choosing to show.

As I prepared future courses during the pandemic, I vowed to stop that joy-killing habit of focusing on what needs to be better. I vowed to center on what's good. I vowed to remember that amplifying joy is a path that leads to a love of learning.

SUBTLE SHIFTS PAY OFF

While I did make major shifts to the curriculum, it was the more subtle shifts that truly paid off. Indeed, I would argue that what had been missing pre-pandemic in my composition courses was the subtle shift to focus on students' assets, to remain flexible and responsive as individual students found their way through new content.

During the pandemic, in my composition courses, I made small shifts to my daily in-class rhythm, staking out more space for students to read, write, and share. I paused more to validate individual students' interpretations. Obviously, this wasn't so simple. Zoom discussions, even when they are about the topic of love, often feel slow and choppy. Still, I stuck with my intention and by the time we started our short story unit, most students eagerly volunteered responses.

One discussion was particularly lively. After we had reviewed a passage from our assigned story, I posed the question: "Does Junot Diaz's short story, "How to Date a Brown Girl," flip traditional expectations of any male archetypes? Consider details from the story as well as definitions of love offered by bell hooks."

Roxana responded first with an emphatic, "No." She pointed to a line where she claimed the narrator sounded "cocky and overly confident, just like a traditional *machista*."

"Interesting. Where does that cockiness come from?" I asked the class.

"He's not cocky. He's more insecure," Jesus volunteered. "It's like he takes an identity depending on the type of girl he meets. On page 149, he says, 'You'll wonder how she feels about Dominicans. Don't ask.' He tries to make himself the person he's not because he feels his race and background are not good enough. Not cool enough. Embarrassing."

"Jesus, you are making me think about how racism can affect our sense of self, can encourage us to hide parts of ourselves," I said.

The more I validated responses, the more students contributed.

Jesus added, "Most men would rather hold on to their ego than show a type of affection. Pride and ego matter to them more than anything. It's what they believe is being a man."

A few students added onto Jesus's comments, mostly agreeing with him, before I nudged the class to make connections to our earlier readings: "Do you all see any links between the narrator's desire to protect his ego and some of the definitions of love that bell hooks offered us?"

Isiah raised his virtual hand. "There's that quote on page 42 of *Honesty: Be True to Love* where bell hooks said, 'loving justice between a man and a woman does not stand a chance when other men's manhood matters more.' I think that fits."

As I offered an affirming finger snap to Isiah, Brenda's virtual hand popped up, signaling she was ready to break her silence. "I agree with Isiah.

It does seem like he cares more about other men and what they think," she said. "Notice that most of the instructions start with what the man should not do, opposed to what he should. It's almost like the narrator thinks there's masculinity in acting aloof."

A few more students commented, but I had an eye on the clock and needed to wrap the discussion. "I love how you are all building off of each other," I said. "These are interesting observations. Write them down. Capture the bling. Remember, you can use these ideas in your critical thinking posts, which are due tomorrow night." I switched my slides, projecting the work I wanted them to do before the next class, then continued, "It seems like many of you see Yunior's character as sort of reinforcing archetypal ideals of masculinity. But I wonder, do you think the story *as a whole* is also doing that? Do we, as readers, feel differently? Do we have any epiphanies or ah-ha moments? That's something to consider as you write."

By offering a more literary line of questioning, I hoped students would take a fresh look at the story when they wrote. Of course, I was also certain that many literary concepts were new for several students. Few had considered that a reader—not a character—might have an epiphany. I figured that I could continue to introduce this concept as I responded to their low-stakes critical thinking posts, short writing assignments that served as a stepping-stone or early draft for an upcoming essay.

I have used low-stakes writing prompts to replace traditional plot-driven quizzes for years, but the way I responded to writing shifted during the pandemic. With a focus on joy, I decided that my comments should mirror the type of response I gave to my creative writing students.

In creative writing classes, we follow a simple writing group ritual of Bless (name something strong, something that works in your peer's writing) and Press (ask questions to clarify or elaborate). Students Bless and Press both with in-class quick writes and with more polished pieces written by their peers. I always pause, right after students experience the ritual for the first time, to ask how it feels to have their work blessed and pressed in this way. Students consistently echo Elizabeth's comment: "We don't usually talk about what works in other writing classes. This is so nice. I like getting that kind of feedback."

When I integrated the Bless and Press ritual into my composition course, I noticed how it positioned me as one reader, not the ultimate authority. Students could decide whether to answer the questions I posed when they developed the draft into a longer piece. The ritual fit smoothly into all stages of the writing process from peer review to teacher comments on major essays. Students even blessed and pressed their final drafts, as a sort of author's note for me to reply to.

To illustrate, after the class discussion about "How to Date a Brown Girl," students continued to wrestle with notions of love and masculinity in their Critical Thinking Posts. Roxana doubled down on her belief that Yunior was

not flipping any archetypal scripts, even if he wanted to on some level. I blessed her ideas, with the following comment:

> Roxana, I appreciate the way you notice the tone shifts in the story. In your passage below, you make a strong point that Yunior's insight only lasts briefly before his insecurity actually pushes him toward male dominance. You wrote: "Yunior mentions to 'tell her that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own' (Diaz, 147). Something about the tone he says it in feels as if Yunior let his guard down for a quick second before switching the topic back to seem macho once again. It feels as if for a split second, Yunior wanted to slip in how he feels insecure about his own personality or features, and that's why he wants to be more manly; he believes that dominance can make up for the things he's insecure about."

Earlier in her post, Roxana exposed how Yunior's character was bound to traditional macho roles. She wrote:

> Yunior also mentions that you should '. . . never lose a fight on a first date or that will be the end of it' (Diaz, 146). He's trying to show his dominance and fight for his side, rather than to talk things out with his partner. He'd rather argue for his side, rather than talking things out and figuring out a better way to settle the problem. This reminds me of a quote in *All About Love* that states 'loving justice between a man and a woman does not stand a chance when other men's manhood matters more' (hooks, 42). Both quotes connect because it defines how you can't have a relationship, if the only thing that matters is the guy winning, or the guy trying to show off that he can fight back, or just show his dominance in general. There also can't be a relationship if there's no communication, no respect, and no trust. In a way, some people want to have a relationship but not put in the effort; it's mostly just because they want to be seen in one, or to just have someone there, but the love isn't actually real.

To press Roxana's thinking in terms of literary analysis, I typed the following series of questions:

> Clearly you see the main character as stuck in traditional roles of masculinity. So, do you think the *author* is telling this story to expose men like Yunior and their struggles? Like is the reader supposed to feel sorry for Yunior? Or feel like Yunior is a jerk and he needs to be shamed? I ask because I wonder if you think readers, like you and your classmates, have any ah-ha's about the way gender stereotypes get reinforced, even though Yunior does not.

A week or so later, as Roxana wrote her literary analysis essay for our short story unit, she had the opportunity to address those questions or to explore a new line of thinking. For the most part, she chose to ignore my

question about the reader's epiphany. Instead, she built up an argument about the symbolism in the two stories she analyzed. I was pleased to see that shift, given we had also spent several classes digging into symbolism and the way it connected to Chicana female archetypes like *La Llorona* and *La Malinche*. Her overall analysis of the two stories was outstanding, but what I found most affirming was a comment from her self-reflection. She wrote:

> In all honesty, I felt like it was easy for me to write this essay because I had talked about the writings in class and in breakout rooms so it was easier for me to jot my ideas down since I already had a few in mind. Also, I feel more proud of this essay more than my last one because I feel like there's no forced writing in this one, it was all smooth and thought out and it was actually pretty fun to write. Usually, I would get stuck on how to bring in a quote or how to blend it in and then talk about it, but for this essay it was mostly like once I started writing, I couldn't stop.

My effort to validate students' assets enlivened the learning environment for Roxana. It also made my time spent reading student writing more joyful. Figuring out how to celebrate what was good motivated me to read students' weekly posts. Figuring out how to ask an authentic question that might stoke a student's natural instinct to investigate the world was actually fun. Students and I felt as though we were in a conversation as respectful intellectuals.

Pre-pandemic, I rarely approached a class with such a steady goal of naming and amplifying what is good. In the past, I would sabotage the joy by anxiously trying to fill up any perceived gaps in required skills, as if students should have already mastered them.

The pandemic sparked a much-needed breakthrough: I finally internalized how centering joy within learning spaces is a radical act. It is a counterweight to the way higher education is steeped in deficit perspectives about students' capabilities—and by extension, about a teacher's ability to be both rigorous and joyful, a warm demander, as Zaretta Hammond (2015) might say, an alliance builder who partners with learners to support their natural talents and cultivate their life's purpose.

My breakthrough revealed to me how centering joy is an asset-based approach to classroom instruction, a way to celebrate and amplify the linguistic, navigational, familial, and aspirational wealth that students from historically marginalized groups possess (Yosso, 2005).

When I sustain a focus on centering joy, I am also implementing a trauma-informed approach to instructional design (Baez et al., 2020; Davidson, 2017), allowing laughter and natural curiosity to heal the wounds of traditional academia's overly assimilative process, a process that favors objectivity and competition, a process that cultivates fear. In *Teaching Community*, bell hooks notes that "the culture of fear that is rampant on most college campuses . . .

undermines the capacity of students to learn. Fear-based students doubt that they can accomplish what they need to accomplish" (2003, p. 132). I must add that as teachers, when we are driven by fear, we doubt our capacity to engage all students. We shut down our ability to uplift the unique assets of individual students whose creative ideas may break new ground in our fields.

As my breakthrough took hold, I vowed to work harder to notice what was good in students' work. I committed to validating students' written responses, and in doing so, I saw that students began to trust that my actions matched my stated values; they began to shed their fear of saying the wrong thing, and they began to take on creator identities, much like I took on a creator identity in Ms. Jarvis's class.

MORE TALENT ON DISPLAY

When students are invited to express creativity, they are free to show us even more of their talents, amplifying joy all around.

For the final unit in our composition course, we focused on Luis Valdez's satirical one-acts from *Teatro Campesino*, a theater company launched during the Chicano Movement. In addition to writing a literary analysis paper about Valdez's plays, I asked students to work in pairs to design an original satire.

I gave students choice in terms of the genre of the satire: They could present a video modeled after the *Key & Peele* sketch "TeachingCenter" (2015), draw a poster/cartoon strip similar to artist Esther Hernandez's *Sun Mad Raisins* (1982), or a write a piece like a play or an article typically found in *McSweeney's*.

Two of the steadiest participants in the class created a biting satirical video parodying a pharmaceutical advertisement. They advertised *Gay Away*, a pill to "cure" homosexuality, and highlighted the side effects such as "increased suicidal ideation" and "loss of fashion sense."

Andrew, a young man who barely participated in my Zoom sessions but who did his best to submit all writing assignments despite working long hours to contribute to his household, shined in this project. He submitted a satirical video using stop-motion animation. It featured his siblings, their rubber duckies and frogs, and an elaborate stage that spanned the dining table. Along the edge of the stage, Andrew simulated a sidewalk with cardboard strips and placed two toy soldiers, the kind whose rifles are ready to shoot, on patrol along the sidewalk, as if they were overseeing the ocean front.

Just off the sidewalk, a whale can be seen floating among plastic wrap as the soldiers, narrated by Andrew and his brother, talk about how helpful their inventions have been for the world and how profitable they've been for their families. Moments later, we hear his sister, playing an ocean animal, say, deadpan, "Yes, all the animals are so excited about the new play structure you have built for them!" The camera returns to the whale who is now

entangled among a series of pink and green plastic straws. The image highlights the incongruity in the statement. As the piece carries on, the animals express appreciation, in unison, as if children saluting the flag, for "all the wonderful inventions the soldiers have brought to the world." The absurdity grows as the piece force us to think about the ethics behind our inventions.

Within this final project, Andrew demonstrated his depth of understanding of satirical devices while also showing off his talent with script writing and stop-motion animation, all assets I had little idea he possessed. What's more, his love of learning spread beyond my classroom to engage his siblings in the joy of thinking and creating together. It felt like a Ms. Jarvis moment.

He reminded me that a vow to center joy and teach what I love is important because it undoes the destructive nature of schooling that tends to exclude so many first-generation students on my campus. Rather than insist on conformity and obedience, I centered learning and play. Rather than assuming I have gaps in skills to fill, I pushed myself to validate the multiple ways of knowing and communicating that students already possess. Those changes in my practice made all the difference.

My vow, one I hope to recommit to each semester, pushes me to look for what's good, to amplify that, and to invite students to expand on what matters to them, to grow their own curiosity, to grow their creativity, to remember that teaching and learning should be fun.

CONCLUSION

My breakthrough emerged after serious reflection on Ms. Jarvis's 4th-grade classroom, which remains, unequivocally, the most joyful and transformative learning experience I have had. In her classroom, Ms. Jarvis fostered a desire to learn and take risks. She nurtured a community of students who celebrated one another's curiosity and creativity. The more consistently I emulate her approach, the more I notice my community college students not just persist in my composition courses but flourish. They bond with one another more readily, they take risks with written and oral interpretations, they demonstrate more curiosity, creativity, and vulnerability. They are engaged in learning right through the end of the 18-week course because they feel more relaxed as learners.

Elementary school educators like Ms. Jarvis understand, perhaps intuitively, the benefits of play and joy. Why, then, was it so difficult for me, as an instructor in higher education, to fully embrace this approach? Why did it take the pandemic's collective trauma to unleash my commitment to joy?

In writing this piece, I had to grapple with my resistance to centering joy. Institutional and peer expectations about "standards" and rigor certainly played a significant role. Another factor was the sheer time needed to reimagine my social justice content while making room for play. But my

primary block turned out to be the nagging fear that I might not be adding value to my students' skill sets.

Ironically, educational research (Forbes, 2021) and my own observations demonstrate that student engagement and learning are amplified when instructors center joy. Being aware of my subtle forms of resistance has made it far easier to sustain my commitment. Each semester, as I plan a new class, I ask myself a few key questions: What happens when I use joy as a grounding mechanism from which to plan curriculum, to adjust assessment, and to modify day-to-day lessons? How do students like Andrew, Roxana, and Isiah respond to assignments that invite play? What strengths and talents are my students showing me they possess?

I invite other community college composition colleagues to join me in this radical practice of centering joy. May we shed our own fears and notice how doing so amplifies our students' assets and fosters an environment where all of us, teachers and students, move toward our unique purpose on this Earth.

RECOMMENDED READING

Forbes, L. (2021). The process of play in learning in higher education: A phenomenological study. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, *15*(1), 57–73. https://.doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v15i1.6515

A comprehensive study that exposes why play (and joy) are so rare in higher education and demonstrates the myriad benefits of student learning when instructors do commit to a playful curriculum.

Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.

An in-depth book that explains the neuroscience of asset-based instructional practices and provides tangible ideas for joyful instructional design.

hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. (pp. 127–137). Routledge.

A brief article that emphasizes the transformative learning that is possible when we teach with love and joy in higher education.

Muhammad, G. (2023). *Unearthing joy: A guide to culturally and historically responsive curriculum and instruction*. Scholastic.

A framework and practical guide demonstrating how joy is rooted in the cultural and historical realities of Black students. Lesson plans explain how to cultivate joy and enhance students' criticality.