Exploring and Progressing the Concept of Joyful Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of joyful teaching in higher education and discusses common themes associated with it, as well as presents challenges. It is this concept of joyful teaching that we believe should be discussed and explored in greater detail, especially as it is an emerging concept with decolonizing pedagogies. This study uses 29 qualitative interviews with university faculty to examine the following question: How do university faculty define and practice joyful teaching in higher education? Our paper arises from a study focusing on decolonizing teaching praxis at a Canadian, prairie university, in which the focus of 'joyful teaching' arose as a major point of discussion. Our study suggests that restructuring teaching practices around joy can lead to more supportive, creative, and human-centred classrooms. We believe it is critical for higher education to place an emphasis on joyful teaching to promote not only joy but also self-growth for university teachers and students in post-secondary educational institutions.

Keywords: teaching, joy, playful, belonging, decolonization

Exploring and Progressing the Concept of Joyful Teaching in Higher Education

We are in a significant era of higher education; never have we seen so many different ways of teaching and learning within and beyond the classroom. One area of pedagogical inquiry that has risen in recent years is the discussion of *joyful teaching*. What do we mean by this? To begin, joyful teaching has numerous definitions, as it is not the same for every person and subject; it will not always look the same, considering instructors' unique teaching styles. Notwithstanding, joyful teaching is critical in higher education, as it promotes transformational learning among students (see also Miller & Seller, 1990) by infusing (or embodying – see below) the 'joy' of learning (of change, of shifting worldviews) and its transformational qualities, broadly conceived, into the teaching environment. But what does this look like practically? Typically, higher education promotes standardized teaching, which, in certain circumstances, includes curricula put forth by the university administration (Orelus, 2013). Yet, at the same time, our discussion recognizes the ongoing challenges of standardized teaching, including, in part, that it remains deeply rooted in colonialism (Orelus, 2013). While efforts to meaningfully decolonize higher education are important (Henry et al., 2017; Patel, 2016; Patel & Nath, 2022), we supplement this clarion call by focusing here on how university instructors move away from standardized teaching while promoting joyful teaching in their strategic attempts to decolonize their teaching praxis in the process. We contend that the practice of joyful teaching has the potential to foster transformational learning, which gives students a newfound appreciation of the joy of learning while also giving them a new perspective by pushing them to challenge the strongly held assumptions they have about the world and how it works.

Our paper arises from a study focusing on decolonizing teaching praxis at a Canadian, prairie university; the focus of 'joyful teaching' arose as a major point of discussion. It is this concept we believe should be discussed and explored in greater detail. Equally concerning, we contend, is the lack of consideration joyful teaching has received in discussions of higher education decolonization efforts. To our knowledge, no scholarly attempts have been made to specifically examine joyful teaching as it relates to decolonizing efforts in Canadian higher education. We believe further attention to this under-researched area is both timely and warranted. To address this, we explore the concept of joyful teaching at our Canadian, prairie university. To further examine joyful teaching, we outline the following sections in our paper: a literature review, including the definition of joyful teaching and examples; methods used in our current study; findings, including several themes that emerged from the said study; and a discussion and analysis on joyful teaching as it relates to decolonized teaching and standardized teaching. We conclude with a discussion of limitations and areas for future research.

What is Joy?

While we alluded to the joy of learning above, the term 'joy' itself must be understood to better understand joyful teaching. Mag and colleagues (2021) define the concept of joy as "being with others, sharing (experiences, laughter, tears, and food)—a generally vibrant feeling of happiness" (p. 2). This feeling of joy can present itself in schools through the process of joyful teaching. Poetter (2006) discusses the joy in teaching:

> Joy resides in us and comes out as a result of our interactions with others. It would be inaccurate to say that teaching merely makes us and/or others joyful. It would be more accurate to say that teaching is joy, that our predispositions to engage in it are themselves manifestations of the joy of teaching. (p. 276)

As Poetter (2006) argues, joyful teaching is inherently within us and emerges through our connections with others. Yet, it is not entirely correct to say that teaching simply brings joy to us or those we teach. A more fitting perspective is that teaching itself embodies joy, and our natural inclination toward it reflects the inherent joy found in the act of teaching.

Joyful teaching can be linked to the process of transformational learning. Fetherston and Kelly (2007) consider transformative learning to include changes where we view and comprehend the world, knowledge, and ourselves intra- and inter-reflexively over the course of the learning process. These changes occur through joyful teaching, where, for example, educators can be viewed as learning companions with the opportunity to create joyful learning for their students (Cranton & Wright, 2008, p. 46). Both the educator and the learner then enrich the experiences of the other, and they quickly become important to one another.[1]

In our effort to create a closer connection between joyful teaching and decolonizing practices, we acknowledge Indigenous authors who might not use the word joyful, but argue along similar lines of thought. For example, Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2025) thoughts on 'gratitude' can relate to our discussion of joy. To begin, Wall Kimmerer (2025) contends that gratitude is more than thanking someone or being personally thankful:

> It is the thread that connects us in a deep relationship, simultaneously physical and spiritual, as our bodies are fed and spirits nourished by the sense of belonging, which is the most vital of foods. Gratitude creates a sense of abundance, the knowing that you have what you need. In that climate of sufficiency, our hunger for more abates and we take only what we need, *in respect for the generosity of the giver*. (n.p., emphasis in original)

Here, we see the creation of vitality for oneself, but also mutual respect for those who nourish us. The connection between us and our relations creates a co-situated sense of belonging between the parties, which establishes the basis of relationships. It is in this connection that we create not only gratitude, but the response of reciprocity; in other words, "to give a gift in return" (Wall Kimmerer, 2025, n.p.). Rather than relying upon colonial relations of ownership and value of property, we contend the gratitude-reciprocity nexus suggests an alternative form of joy, where a 'gift economy' is formed, understanding wealth not in terms of capital and colonization but in terms of nourished relations (Wall Kimmerer, 2025). Wall Kimmerer (2025) goes on to state the following:

> To name the world as gift is to feel one's membership in the web of reciprocity. *It makes you happy—and it makes you accountable.* Conceiving of something as a gift changes your relationship to it in a profound way, even though the physical makeup of the "thing" has not changed. A woolly knit hat that you purchase at the store will keep you warm regardless of its origin, but if it was hand knit by your favorite auntie, then you are in relationship to that "thing" in a very different way: you are responsible for it, and your gratitude has motive force in the world. You're likely to take much better care of the gift hat than the commodity hat, because it is knit of relationships. This is the power of gift thinking. (n.p., our emphasis)

[1] We recognize that joyful teaching can occur and lead to transformational learning, the latter of which is a topic that has been discussed at length by a range of scholars (Abramsom, 2016; Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021; Gilly, 2004; Merzirow, 1997; Nohl, 2015, among others). Due to page space and brevity, we limit our conversation to the former; while remaining mindful of the impact the latter can have upon instructors and students in higher education.

This power of 'gift thinking' connects well to our pertinent discussion of joy. To frame the joy of teaching and learning is to remind ourselves of the gifts that are teaching and learning. To move beyond colonial methods of teaching and learning, perhaps we need to take cues from Wall Kimmerer (2025) and reshape the joys of teaching and learning through 'knits of relationships,' where what makes you joyful makes you accountable to spread that joy (material, social, political, etc.) to others so that they may *feel and become nourished* through the gift of joy one gives. We will connect this understanding to our discussion in later sections, but for now, let us turn to examples of joyful teaching.

Examples of Joyful Teaching

Acker (2003) identifies the following attributes of teachers who facilitate joyful teaching: emphasizing both active and participatory learning, displaying enthusiasm for both the course material and teaching said materials, holding students accountable while enforcing high academic values, sincerely caring for students and their learning, and having strong organizational and communication skills when working with students. In our view, these are important for understanding how joyful teaching operates. If an educator holds these attributes, they can better facilitate students' learning in a safe and open environment that both values and nourishes critical dialogue. Adamson and Bailie (2012) note that learning involves emotion as much as cognition (p. 146). Learning is no longer solely focused on the acquisition and retention of knowledge; rather, it is also about how knowledge is experienced and remembered. For learning to invoke emotion, it must occur in a safe, honest, and supportive environment, where the educator is seen as not the possessor of knowledge, but the *facilitator* of knowledge. In this situation, everyone is treated as an equal, and needs are thus effectively balanced.

Both experiential learning and critical pedagogy promote joyful teaching, having the ability to transform institutions and relationships (Breunig, 2005). When listening to instructors discuss how they created safe and dynamic teaching spaces, researchers identified five dimensions of instructor authenticity (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2010, pp. 231-239):

1. Self-engagement as a call
2. Valuing the other – interdependence and seeing student potential
3. Relationship – creating and sustaining a safe space
4. Context – opening new vistas for marginalized non-traditional adult learners
5. Critical reflection

Groen and Hyland-Russell (2010) also focus on the importance of nurturing relationships between students and instructors to facilitate joyful teaching. We believe relationships in higher education should be nurtured, especially as we aim to decolonize the learning experience for students.

Joyful Teaching and Decolonization

Joyful teaching aligns deeply with the principles of decolonization, as it challenges hierarchical and oppressive models of education. By fostering reciprocal relationships and valuing diverse ways of knowing, joyful teaching creates spaces for mutual respect and shared learning. It invites educators to honour the lived experiences and cultural wisdom of students, disrupting Eurocentric frameworks that often dominate educational systems. In this way, and as briefly mentioned above, the joy of teaching becomes not only a personal fulfillment but also a transformative act that seeks to liberate and humanize both educators and learners (Asadullah, 2021; Smith, 1999).

Importantly, joyful teaching can also resonate profoundly with Indigenous ways of knowing; there are parallels between the two, including a greater emphasis on relationality, interconnectedness, and the holistic nature of learning. Indigenous pedagogies often centre on storytelling, community engagement, and experiential learning, fostering an environment where joy arises naturally through shared experiences and collective growth (Cajete, 1994). One can also link joyful teaching to the challenges of colonial, hierarchical education systems insofar as joyful teaching attempts to subvert standardized, top-down models of learning and teaching and, instead, embrace equality, agency, and student empowerment (see, for example, Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001; Giroux, 2011; Roofe, 2024), which are key to decolonization efforts. Moreover, we recognize the extent to which joy can exist as a form of liberation since acknowledging it is not just an emotionally fulfilling experience, but an act of liberation and resistance (Roofe, 2024). Following on, and taking into consideration Wall Kimmerer (2025), we contend joyful teaching can help 'liberate' both students and educators themselves from oppressive colonial structures, making education an act of mutual, liberatory, and *nourished relations* of and for growth to take place. In sum, and by embracing these approaches, educators can create learning spaces that celebrate the richness of Indigenous knowledge systems, affirm cultural identities, and nurture a sense of belonging. In doing so, joyful teaching becomes a bridge that connects diverse perspectives, fostering harmony and respect in educational practices (Michie et al., 2023).

Current Study

This paper stems from a larger study focusing on decolonizing teaching praxis at University of Regina, Canada.[2] The concept of decolonization has been used in numerous disciplines and settings such as in psychology (McNamara & Naepi, 2018), governance and public policy (Monchalin, 2016; Stewart, 2018), restorative justice (Asadullah, 2021, 2022, 2024) and education (Grafton & Melançon, 2020; Paris & Winn, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The concept has generated a plethora of definitions. For example, per Monchalin (2016), decolonization is a goal and process to bring about a fundamental shift away from colonial structures, ideologies, and discourses. Both Indigenization and decolonization remain an overarching priority of the University of Regina. The University's policy states that "working with Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers […] is essential to the preservation, restoration and revitalization of Indigenous traditional ways of knowing; staff, faculty and others are encouraged to invite, engage with and work alongside Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers, and/or Old Ones" (GOV-040-025).

Joyful teaching is one of the major themes that emerged from our study on decolonizing teaching praxis. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 29 faculty members, our research project explores teaching praxis in relation to decolonization from the perspectives of university faculty members themselves.[3] The larger study explored the concept of decolonized

[2] We respectfully acknowledge that we work and live on traditional territories of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. It is a place where the spirit of treaties signed between Indigenous peoples and settler colonial governments is not honoured; thus, we are committed to conversations and relationships in solidarity with Indigenous peoples for change, justice, and reconciliation. We offer our gratitude to Indigenous peoples for their care for, and teachings about, our earth and our relations. May we honour those teachings.

[3] The ability to explore and digest decolonization efforts in higher education is but one aspect of many similar discussions, all of which merits further study. Our ongoing work endeavours to explore how current decolonizing teaching praxis is implemented at and across Canadian university settings; this includes the benefits, challenges, and improvements for implementing decolonizing teaching praxis. Our research continues to supplement clarion calls by those who question whether decolonization will ever be attainable in academia (Battiste et al., 2002; Mbembe, 2016).

teaching in post-secondary education. Prior work suggests the role of Elders, ceremonies and circles are important elements in helping instructors decolonize their teaching (Gacek & Asadullah, 2024). The following section discusses the methods in detail.

Methods

The authors employed qualitative research methods in this study. Qualitative research, put simply, has no standard definition; it can be defined in various ways by different persons or institutions. Yet, we believe Aspers and Corte's (2019) statement closely aligns with our views. Per Aspers and Corte (2019), qualitative research is:

> An iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied. Qualitative research, as defined here, is consequently a combination of two criteria: (i) how to do things – namely, generating and analyzing empirical material, in an iterative process in which one gets closer by making distinctions, and (ii) the outcome –improved understanding novel to the scholarly community. (p. 155)

The key instrument used for this study was in-depth qualitative interviews. We conducted 29 interviews, and each interview lasted an average of 90 minutes. The full research project has been conducted under the guidance and approval of University of Regina's Research Ethics Board.

Research Participants

A total of 29 participants from across different disciplines and demographics participated in this study. At University of Regina, faculty members comprise tenured and tenure-track, lecturers, and sessional instructors. This study included research participants from various disciplines, including social work, engineering, education, mathematics, justice studies, psychology, and kinesiology. We also made sure to have representation from all affiliated colleges at University of Regina. Interviews were structured as face-to-face via Zoom due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant provided their own response to what makes teaching joyful based on their own individual experiences and perspectives.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded based on several themes that emerged from the study. All participant information was anonymized and identified by a random number (e.g., Participant #1 is identified as P1, Participant #10 is P10, etc.). We had more than 20 themes in the initial stages of coding, which were then sorted into groupings depending on similarities and distinctions of participants' experiences. Finally, ten key themes emerged as the main findings of this study, all of which are discussed below.

Sampling

Both snowball and purposive sampling methods were used to recruit research participants (see Noy, 2008; Yin, 2011; for limitations, see also Geddes et al., 2018). Our sampling method allowed us to have diverse participants from different backgrounds and disciplines.

While this question is beyond the scope of our paper, we continue to pose this question in our research, to ourselves, and our overlapping academic, and community circles. We encourage others to do the same.

Findings and Discussion

This study uncovers several major themes in the concept of joyful teaching. When asked *'what makes teaching joyful,*' research participants shared several salient qualities of joyful teaching. Our 10 key themes and findings are discussed below.

A Supportive Classroom Environment

A number of participants discussed the importance of a supportive classroom environment for joyful teaching. P22 elaborated that a "sense of belonging in the classroom" is instrumental for a supportive classroom environment, which can make teaching joyful. P22 added *that "…among the students, that they can see that I am I belong, I know what I can contribute, and I am here and that's as a teacher, you should be able to, I try my best to be let my students know that I'm there for them. They are capable of what their strengths are, can for both perspectives, that's my, best effort that I tried to put forth*".

It was made apparent that there must be a sense of belonging fostered in the classroom; P6 noted that *"knowledge and subjects become meaningless if students do not feel that they belong."* Furthermore, P22 suggested that teachers should create a safe and welcoming space for students to come together and discuss ideas. Additionally, participants such as P3, P4, P5, and P9 reflected on the need for 'flexibility' in a supportive classroom environment. The need for spaciousness and flexibility became more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic as students battled illness, technical difficulties, and loneliness (P9). The need for a motivational and supportive environment goes back to the wise qualities of teachers. Within this environment, particular attributes such as empathy (P8), and respect (P24) should be exhibited. In summary, a sense of belonging, flexibility, empathy, and respect contribute to both joyful teaching and learning environments.

Creativity in the Classroom

There is a demonstrated need for creativity in the classroom. Often, classrooms are seen as joyless and boring environments that are plagued by routinized learning. The curriculum and teaching style may appear as a *"one-size-fits-all"* approach (P4). This has proven to be inefficient when it comes to joyful teaching, since every student learns differently, and every subject cannot be taught in the same format (P11). Participants explained the need for teaching that includes having fun with the content and bringing enjoyment to the classroom. One participant explained, "[*if] you're enjoying the day and enjoy the students and tell the students 'I'm so happy to be spending some time with you today' [then] they will be happier*" (P24). With this mindset, it becomes more comfortable to push students from their "*zone of proximal comfort to their zone of proximal development*" (P26). This theme of teaching creatively and paying attention to students' needs is also shared by other researchers. For example, Newman (1991) argues learning does not have to be a dreadful experience. Although teachers do not always have control over the curriculum, they can change their lesson planning and teaching style. For instance, small group discussions can make the course content more interesting and relevant (Newman, 1991, p. 49); however, these discussions can be difficult to pursue in classrooms with heavy enrollment. Newman (1991) also suggests that teachers approach examinations differently and create study guides that increase cognitive work among students. Often, students place more extrinsic value on their learning rather than intrinsic value.

Playfulness in the Classroom

In our study, several participants explained how their students focus on what they can do as well as what they feel. For instance, P22 shared how students in a genetics class had to show homologous recombination, which is hard to learn in a textbook and even on YouTube. To facilitate learning, this teacher had students create homologous recombination using Play-Doh, which took the students beyond the course content. Although most students would enjoy using Play-Doh in a university classroom, one student argued that they were not being taught appropriately since the teacher was not using lectures, textbooks, and PowerPoints; however, after getting a nearly-perfect score on the homologous recombination using Play-Doh, the student recognized that they were, in fact, being taught—they were just not being taught in a traditional and routinized manner (P22). This respondent explained how teaching students in this way makes learning fun and feels like kindergarten again (P22). P26 also shared the concept of playfulness in their math course. They allowed students to share food and board games to make their classroom joyful and fun. This theme is also shared by researchers. For example, Koeners and Francis (2020) argue that playful learning certainly has its place in higher education:

> Playful learning, therefore, challenges the continued relevance of focusing on a dehumanising and oppressive neoliberal model of performativity-based learning and sheds light on the potential of a joyous, authentic transition to the co-creation of knowledge within higher education. (p. 143)

In order to create a playful, creative environment that caters to students' needs, there must be space for open-minded discussions that have the potential to cause a cognitive shift in worldviews. P22 explained that there needs to be more deliberate inquiries about how playful activities can be culturally responsive education. Morris (2019) argues that faculty should be leaders in the evaluation of their own course effectiveness, and this should not be up to the administration to determine. In sum, teachers at the university level can create joyful classrooms that include fun activities. Joyful teaching can exist and flourish by teaching creatively and paying attention to students' needs.

Relationship Building

Building empathetic, nurturing relationships with students is one of the hallmarks of joyful teaching. Most of the research participants mentioned the importance of building relationships with their students. It is evident from this study that joyful teaching includes collegial exchanges and mutual respect. According to P24, *"developing relationships with students is [the] key"* to joyful teaching. Another participant in this study stated that "*you can have as much knowledge as you want, but if you don't take care of people, it's all and build empathetic relationships*" (P27). This refers to the idea that teachers and students should converse with each other. Perhaps, it is small talk before class begins or a simple question a student asks the professor at the end of class. By engaging in friendly conversation, a "buzz" is created. This buzz is described by a participant to be "*free engagement*" (P27), meaning the student and teacher may discuss topics not directly related to the course content, or even school. Bridging the gap between teachers and students can increase student resilience and build rapport. Additionally, P16 suggested, *"…it's important to develop a rapport with them [students] where they feel respected as adults, rather than, as you know, like minors or younger students."*

According to Newman (1991), teachers and students should be learning from each other. In higher education, it is typical that there is a gap existing between teachers and students. It is

important that both teachers and students view each other as real people; although they are situated in the same course, they have lives extending far beyond the physical walls of the classroom. Each person has a personal life outside of school that involves nurtured hobbies, work, family, and friendships; often included in this are life challenges (Newman, 1991).

Being Available

Several participants suggest being available and present for students is critical to a joyful learning environment. Students want to feel they can reach out to their teacher. If students feel that they cannot contact their teacher, they may feel distanced from the class; this could make learning unenjoyable and dull. Some participants referred to the importance of students being given the opportunity to think critically and question their assumptions about how the world works. During these times, students should be able to contact their teacher to discuss this and promote personal growth (P13, P14, P29). Additionally, P14 suggested to be *"extra available"* for students. P14 explains in detail that "*I feel like the extra availability, if you really want to be an amazing teacher, is helpful to students, I've never had anybody complain that I'm too available to talk.*" In sum, students experience a joyful learning environment if they have access to their teachers. Students feel at ease when they see that their teachers are available to answer their questions on a regular basis.

Practice Self-Care

Being a teacher or a student in higher education can feel, at times, stressful and difficult. It is critical that teachers practice self-care and manage their needs in an effort to teach joyfully. Participants pointed to the importance of knowing their own emotions and attitudes and balancing them suitably. It was recognized that if a teacher is having a bad day and arrives to class in bad spirits, this can negatively impact students' ability to learn; the environment will feel tense and far from joyful. To avoid this, teachers must take care of themselves. A participant explained the practice of mindfulness, which allows them to breathe. This is a method that teachers could also pass on to their students in an effort to help them manage stress (P3). P20 suggested that recognizing, monitoring, and maintaining their own needs allows them to be creative (P20). Accordingly, if teachers do not practice self-care or manage their needs, their ability to teach creatively can be hindered. P24 explicitly describes the importance of self-care in joyful teaching: *"So important for teaching practice as well, you know, in us is to practice a lot of self-care… In order to truly be joyful ourselves or to be as balanced as we can. So, to be happy in our lives as teachers, we need to practice self-care…it feeds into the classroom practice in a balanced way."* Therefore, teachers who are grounded in self-care can positively contribute to a joyful classroom environment.

Qualities of Wise Teachers

Along with 'what makes teaching joyful,' the authors also asked about the wise and harmful qualities of teachers. As we discuss below, wise qualities promote joyful teaching, whereas harmful qualities are detrimental to a joyful classroom environment.

To begin, participants in this study identified numerous qualities that wise teachers embody. One participant discussed, in great detail, the idea that teachers should "*curate knowledge, create knowledge, and disseminate knowledge*" (p. 20). According to this participant, teachers should: (i) curate knowledge by storing knowledge in such a way that it can be sorted and

accessed; (ii) create knowledge by researching in order to derive new understandings and new ways of knowing; and (iii) disseminate knowledge by applying it to people who want to learn.

Participants often remarked that teachers should be patient, understanding, and respectful. For example, participant P19 stated that teachers must not forget that they were once students themselves, so it is important to be empathetic and identify with students. To add to these wise qualities, P18 noted that teachers should be forgiving; in their view, teachers should try to relate to students and understand where they are coming from in terms of their knowledge, beliefs, and opinions. Participants also stated teachers should be receptive and good listeners. For example, P20 noted the importance of two-way communication and stated that teachers "*have two ears and one mouth, so they should be listening at least twice as much as they are speaking*." Another participant discussed being readily available and communicative with students by providing their phone numbers and allowing students to contact them (regarding course content) during evenings and weekends (P14). Several participants explained that teachers should be facilitators of knowledge and learning (P4, P14, P11, P16, P24). In other words, teachers should focus on being a guide *"to take students on a journey of development"* (P17). Furthermore, P24 remarked that teachers "*cannot always make students learn, but they can give students tools to enable their skills to develop*." Additionally, it was stated by other participants that teachers should be open-minded (P4, P11, P12, P18, P27). Open-mindedness refers to a teacher's ability to be willing to consider new ideas without any individual biases or prejudice. P25 indicated that every teacher is a human who has their own biases; therefore, the types of information they choose to teach or emphasize will vary. There was a significant number of participants mentioning the need for teachers to embody compassion, empathy, and, overall, a desire to teach. One participant identified the importance of having fun with the course content, and that teachers should tell students how happy they are to be in the classroom with them (P24).

Although university instructors are often regarded as respective field experts, there is a good opportunity presented here to not only teach students, but also to *learn from them* (Newman, 1991, p. 51). Recall Acker's (2003) list of attributes mentioned above; the qualities that the participants listed are parallel to the attributes Acker (2003) puts forth. According to Sherman (2021), teachers "aim to be the kind of teacher they wish they had when they were in school" (p. 29). We contend if teachers foster the qualities of wise teachers, this can create a more joyful teaching and learning environment.

Harmful Qualities of Teachers

Participants identified several harmful qualities that are detrimental to a joyful teaching environment. Four participants acknowledged the reality that sometimes teachers have not received enough training in pedagogy or classroom management (P5, P6, P13, P27). One participant explained that the university can have well-educated teachers who do not know how to teach concepts at a basic level (P13). This is a harmful quality that negatively impacts student learning in the classroom. To echo this remark, P5 believes teachers are not always taught how to manage a classroom or create a safe space for students. Another participant alluded to large classroom sizes negatively impacting students since teachers cannot maintain the capacity to assess students well (P14).

There was a significant number of participants who described rigidity as a harmful quality for teaching and learning. For example, participant P20 explained that some teachers can have a fixed mindset rather than a growth mindset. Participants also noted closed-mindedness and an

unwillingness to learn as harmful qualities. Specifically, P7, P10, P12, P15, and P20 identified an unwillingness to learn as a harmful quality. This refers to teachers who are not willing to adapt to new conditions, to move forward together, to learn new skills, or to reflect on teaching practices. Participants also regarded the lack of course knowledge as a harmful quality. P24 described teachers not wanting to teach or be in the classroom as a harmful quality. There are numerous reasons why a teacher may not want to teach or be in the classroom; however, P24 believes teachers may be driven by external factors, such as money.

It is evident from the interviews how harmful qualities of teachers include an unwillingness to learn and adapt. Newman (1991) underscores how "successful teachers are those who probe into the untested and unknown by challenging not only the students but themselves" (p. 51). This is especially true when considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers. In a study by Mag et al. (2021), a teacher from Romania discusses the impact of the pandemic with regard to their teaching:

> As for me, the pandemic did not affect my teaching behaviour. I continued to teach with enthusiasm and the same empathetic attitude towards students. I kept the joy of reunions, even though we had to teach online. Teaching involves continuous learning. As compensation, during this period, we had almost constant access to the specialized literature because our university facilitated our access to international databases. Those who have the joy of teaching and the constant enthusiasm for learning are never overwhelmed by temporary crises. (p. 5)

Therefore, the inability of a teacher to be flexible and adaptable is harmful since it has the potential to negatively impact students' learning.

Joyful Teaching is Decolonizing

In this study, most participants stated that honest, upfront conversations about decolonization must occur in order to create decolonized teaching. One participant stated the institution needs to support teachers in "*developing a kind of decolonization approach to their pedagogy*" (P9); another participant argued that teachers should take the time to learn more about the relationship with Indigenous "*culture locally, issues, ways of being, colonization, effects of colonization, the systems and impacts of colonization within their individual field*" (P11). The consensus was to encourage all faculty members to take an active role in decolonizing course material and to make decolonization part of the strategic plan. Furthermore, it was stated that it must start with recognition and acknowledgement, followed by collaborating with Indigenous Elders and/or knowledge-keepers to discuss teaching methods and objectives.

Participants raised a multitude of concerns and challenges with the notion of decolonizing teaching in higher education. Some participants noted that the university may not be able to restructure its deeply rooted colonial mindset. Furthermore, to authentically implement decolonized teaching, the university must go beyond tokenism. Cooper et al. (2021) define tokenism as symbolic gestures which "might give the appearance of reconciliation in the classroom, but they are inauthentic and do little to create transformative change. Instead, they reinforce or maintain the status quo" (p. 55). Several participants suggested to us that gestures such as land acknowledgements feel more procedural than genuinely meaningful (or rather, more symbolic than substantive). For instance, one participant candidly explained that the Faculty of Arts and Campion College ask for reports on what is being done for decolonization so that they can turn it into the government, expressing that this is uncomfortable as it feels like a "box-ticking

exercise" (P1). Moreover, several participants stated that, even when they did try to decolonize their teaching through the use of Elder inclusion, they found the payment process to be difficult and funding from the university to be very minimal. Some instructors at the university feel as though there are not enough Indigenous Elders available and feel unsure of how to build relationships with Elders who are around. One participant stated:

> *I've noticed that there are faculty members across the university and all different disciplines, who are not Indigenous themselves but, by nature of the research that they do, are very, very connected to Indigenous communities and Elders and Indigenous, sort of the support structure that exists on campus. And I suspect that there are a lot of other people who don't know how to take a step into that, who might be uncertain or hesitant about the right cultural practices, or who to approach or how to approach* (P15).

According to some participants, certain departments in the university do not include any Indigenous faculty members and have not even started thinking about decolonization (P2, P3, P5, P6, P11). Furthermore, two participants explicitly raised the belief that Saskatchewan is a particularly racist province that is not progressing like other provinces and territories in Canada (P2, P6).

We believe joyful teaching can help avoid tokenism through efforts to emphasize authenticity in teaching and learning experiences. Especially when one considers the deeper, ongoing engagement necessary for true decolonization, nourishing relationships for students and educators alike also means nourishing those invited to the classroom setting as well. If we align ourselves with the gratitude-reciprocity nexus as suggested by Wall Kimmerer (2025), then authenticity (in teaching and learning, but also decolonization efforts) becomes the action needed from the joy created and expressed in the classroom itself. Such action builds momentum to not only discard and outright avoid tokenism in the classroom but also sets us up for much-needed systemic and broader institutional change, which we believe is essential to consider. Indeed, the joy in teaching and learning can drive structural changes, motivating us to do more with the gratitude we have received (Wall Kimmerer, 2025) and to create more inclusive and decolonized academic environments in the process.

In summary, our research participants expressed that University of Regina has the potential to learn from other institutions around Canada with regard to decolonizing teaching. If teaching is not decolonized, then joyful teaching cannot occur. It is clear from participant responses that there is a feeling of defeat since the university is a powerful institution that is rooted in colonialism. Rather than being a council of despair, however, we believe joyful teaching helps us to begin to tackle decolonization challenges. By actively confronting and reshaping colonial structures in the classroom, and with gratitude and reciprocity in mind (Wall Kimmerer, 2025), we can begin the liberating process of relinquishing teaching and learning rooted in colonialism; it can help educators derive joy through such liberatory (if not resistant) acts. To create decolonized teaching, the institution itself must be decolonized. Within this debate, it is critical to recognize that decolonized teaching typically starts with the impact of colonization, but joyful teaching does not often start with the impact of colonization.

Standardization is Harmful to Joyful Teaching

Standardized teaching may contribute to both joyless classrooms and learning, and standardized teaching can be a barrier to joyful teaching. As stated by three participants (P22, P23, P27), in different ways, joyful teaching promotes both transformation and critical thinking among students.

Therefore, it is imperative for the university administration to explore ways to introduce joyful teaching. According to Sherman (2021):

> The demands of standardization and accountability potentially distract teachers from cultivating a culture of joy… Perennial expected instructional patterns can inhibit creativity and diminish inspiration, qualities that potentially generate joy in teaching and learning. What's more, strict accountability measures make it even more difficult to disrupt these patterns because anxious teachers may be less willing to take instructional risks. In addition, maintaining routines and ensuring predictability provide a security blanket for teachers who may not have skills to manage the complexity of teaching or lack the capacity to make spontaneous decisions that are responsive in particular contexts to particular students. Put differently, although less confident teacher candidates may feel joyful because they have control over the events in their classrooms, the formulaic practices they use are unlikely to inspire students or generate a joyful learning environment for their students or, in the long term, for themselves. (p. 23)

Similarly, Noddings (2014) argues that routinized patterns in standardized teaching do not create joyful teaching. Some participants felt the university focuses heavily on how to assess students using standardized assignments and exams to yield conclusive grades and class averages. An alternative to this could be to assess students differently. For instance, participants felt students are overly preoccupied with their marks and not so much with their learning; they measure their success and worth solely on their grades, which do not always reflect what they know. Moreover, what students learn may seem irrelevant to them, so even if they receive a high grade in a particular course, they will often forget the content as soon as they are removed from the classroom setting. Newman (1991) makes four suggestions to overcome academic cynicism; one of these suggestions is to make learning relevant. Teachers, per Newman (1991), should "provide students with the tools to analyze their lives and the social world they inhabit" (p. 52).

The other three suggestions Newman (1991) proposes include changing faculty attitudes towards students, making learning fun, and removing the competition in learning. To move from standardized teaching to joyful teaching, the notion of learning needs to be revisited and re-evaluated. Participants regarded joyful teaching as giving students the chance to define their own learning. This can be encouraged by the implementation of smaller class sizes and having students sit in chairs in a semi-circle. Koeners and Francis (2020) argue that by "[d]eveloping a 'Playful University,' a place of learning that embraces some form of play, [it] will allow us to promote progressive failing, building resilience and developing individual and collective creativity" (p. 154). This suggestion stems from the recognition that play is a successful teaching practice that is typically only applied in childhood education, but is still highly relevant for higher education (Koeners & Francis, 2020). As the pair go on to state:

> The physiology of play delivers evidence that play can promote intellectual dexterity, individual resilience and adaptability. These important attributes, amongst many others, could help us to adapt in a challenging world and curb the apparent epidemic of stress, anxiety and related mood disorders. (Koeners & Francis, 2020, p. 149)

Implications for Teaching Practices

This study presents several implications for teaching practices. First, this study finds that most participants are willing to take steps to create joyful classroom environments. However, participants experience a lack of training in teaching and other pedagogy skills and resources.

Indeed, in our study, participants shared that there are limited resources and training for them. We suggest that universities need to offer regularized workshops and training on teaching pedagogies. Second, we believe the concept of *decolonized teaching* can complement the process of joyful teaching. Elsewhere, the authors found that decolonized teaching can facilitate the idea of joy alongside other feelings, emotions, mindsets and worldviews in the classroom (Gacek & Asadullah, 2024). Third, participants have numerous opinions on joyful teaching. It is clear there is no one-size-fits-all technique for joyful teaching in practice – and perhaps that is precisely the point.

How instructors choose to implement joyful teaching is entirely up to them, but there are some thought-provoking examples of joyful teaching in higher education which can influence the direction they decide to take. Doing so carves open potential opportunities for instructors to learn and grow as they facilitate student learning and growth. Additionally, participants have varying explanations of what joyful teaching is. Some may choose to focus on the wise qualities of university teachers, while others seem to emphasize avoiding the harmful qualities of professors. They may discuss what the overall classroom environment looks and feels like in terms of creativity, motivation, and support. Many participants suggest joyful teaching, as beneficial as it can be, is not always nurtured and supported due to the current standardization of education. Joy remains an important component in teaching and learning, and therefore must be cultivated and nurtured more so than standardized methods of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Times are changing in higher educational teaching and learning; there is no doubt about it. As Gacek and McClanahan (2021, p. 510) contend, "Socratic teaching styles and the traditional lecture have been the subject of growing critique" (see also Jochelson & Ireland, 2019). Teaching and learning practices are constantly shifting as new generations of students enter higher education; however, unless students are in the presence of an extremely charismatic lecturer who can persuasively and poignantly perform, "students would rather not sit for hours facing forward while the professor waxes lyrical" (Gacek & McClanahan, 2021, p. 510). Equally important to this change in pedagogy and student composition is recognizing and engaging in decolonization efforts within higher education. We believe joyful teaching can work to progress teaching, learning, and meaningful decolonization on these fronts.

Our paper presents an opportunity for instructors and university administration alike to consider joyful teaching in their respective decolonization efforts. Joyful teaching is about creating a learning space embodying joy, which consistently consists of happiness, laughter, and support. At the same time, joyful teaching is not just an outcome of decolonization; it is an active practice that decolonizes pedagogy itself. By situating joyful teaching as an act of liberation and resistance to colonial structures, it carves open necessary space for diverse voices and knowledge systems to flourish in the classroom. Moreover, joyful teaching becomes a means of reclaiming educational spaces from dominating, historical, and colonial ideologies.

To foster this type of learning environment, higher education should consider transitioning from standardized teaching to joyful teaching. This transition rightly involves the decolonization of teaching; while efforts can be made to begin the decolonization process at an individual level, the change needs to be established by the institution itself. Some institutions in the higher educational landscape may believe that standardized teaching is sufficient; we would encourage those institutions—and the administrators and policymakers therein—to reconsider. Certainly, a

transition towards joyful learning requires time, money, resources, and the will to do so, but our findings suggest it is necessary to better equip students with the tools and skills necessary to meaningfully receive strong and comprehensive learning experiences. Several themes of joyful teaching emerged from our study.

We contend these themes have relevance to joyful teaching and should be considered and expanded upon in further research. Of course, a limitation of this study is the small group of participants chosen to discuss joyful teaching; this concept is arguably abstract in some components and is neither easily quantifiable nor generalizable to the larger Canadian population. Moreover, while this study yielded ten themes, it is possible that another group of participants would not have the same or similar thoughts. Nevertheless, future studies that take into consideration these themes in relation to the experiences of students, faculty, and administrators are beneficial, and we encourage greater scholarly efforts in this area of inquiry. This includes explorations of joyful teaching across diverse contexts, such as different disciplines, institutions, or cultural settings.

Higher education can make a difference in students' learning experiences. Our work suggests the joy of learning can be embodied and nurtured in higher educational learning environments. Joy helps bridge connections between instructors and students and can benefit both as each grows in teaching and learning from one another. Now is the time to reimagine what embodying and nurturing joy can look like in higher education.

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