

**Reconceptualizing doctoral students' journeyings:  
Possibilities for profound happiness?**

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# **Reconceptualizing doctoral students' journeyings: Possibilities for profound happiness?**

Carol A. Taylor, Gill Adams

## **Abstract**

This article argues the need for a shift away from the measurement and metrics discourse of 'satisfaction' and towards more nuanced understandings of 'happiness' in relation to part-time doctoral students' educational flourishing. Grounded in empirical data and using the concept of 'material moments', the article brings to the fore the complex, textured nature of students' experiences of profound happiness in relation to three themes: time for me, spatial imaginaries, and the challenge of community. The article's theoretical contribution lies in its deployment of happiness as an analytical lens which provides more nuanced understandings of doctoral students' experiences and learning journeyings. Its methodological contribution lies in its use of creative approaches to generate close-up insights into students' experiences.

## **Keywords**

Happiness, doctoral education, creative methods, student experience, material moments

## **1. Introduction**

Globally, the marketisation of higher education is shifting both the position and perception of universities. According to Elwick and Cannizzaro (2017: 205), such shifts are changing the way that universities are viewed, 'from places where primarily happiness and contentment could be pursued, to places where instead satisfaction and economic reward are sought'. In this new context, where economic arguments override educational justifications and students are positioned as consumers whose demands must be satisfied (Gibbs, 2015), what matters most are metrics of satisfaction, participation and performance, while the challenge and

rewards of learning are sidelined. This article contests the discourse around the metrics of satisfaction through a consideration of part-time doctoral students' engagement with their studies in relation to their experiences and understandings of happiness. The focus on part-time, professional doctorate students is deliberate; although an increasingly popular doctoral route, the professional doctorate student experience is under-explored (Adams, 2018).

The article critically engages with the concept and practice of 'happiness' as a means to ground both empirical findings from a research project with doctoral students and the theoretical insights the data provoked. The central argument is that a focus on happiness helps generate new insights into intensely felt, experienced, and embodied moments of flourishing which often pass under the radar during students' doctoral journeys. It thereby provides a means to contest dominant, singularized and often linear notions of 'the' doctoral student *journey* and opens a way toward more nuanced understandings of doctoral *journeyings*. The consequent reconceptualisation of doctoral students' *journeyings* as plural, heterogeneous and entangled is, we argue, facilitated methodologically and empirically by a closer, in-depth attunement to embodied, affective and material moments in which happiness, joy, and flourishing have an important but often unrecognized place. The focus on 'material moments' builds on Author 1's work (2013; 2018) which attends to those moments which might seem mundane, everyday, fleeting and in all respects quite 'ordinary' but whose force is realised bodily, materially and/or affectively, and which produce some profound moments of engagement. In our empirical data, doctoral students' material moments of happiness come to the fore in relation to three themes – time for me, spatial imaginaries, and the challenge of community. These three themes suggest a need for a more flexible, nuanced account of 'student engagement' which eschews that which is countable in favour of that which is realized and felt materially as a happiness or contentment which pervades one's being

(Gibbs, 2015). In what follows, we interrogate the discourse of ‘student satisfaction’ and propose the necessity of rethinking ‘student satisfaction’ via the alternative discourse of happiness. We then outline the project design, its methodological framing, and the creative methodologies used to gather data. After that, we analyse the findings in relation to the three themes.

## **2. Taking the discourse of ‘student satisfaction’ in for questioning**

Our aims in this section are twofold. First, we take ‘student satisfaction’ in for questioning as a basis for a rigorous analysis of the discourse’s discursive life and the prevailing and dominant doctoral education practices it has given rise to. Second, we propose an alternative conceptualization - that of happiness - as a means to productively ‘reconfigure the event, the problem, and the concept [of student satisfaction] itself’ (Lenz Taguchi, 2016: 214).

### *2.1 Doctoral education in context: marketization, metrics and measurement*

The UK higher education system is characterised by significant competition for students, in which choice is guided by information on quality in the form of institutional ranking and league tables. Brown (2011), however, argues that such information has limitations and misrepresents the work of universities while Nixon, Scullion & Hearn (2016: 2) contend that marketized constructions of the student as ‘sovereign consumer’ threaten the quality of learning amongst undergraduate students and increase the likelihood of dissatisfaction. Furedi (2011), in taking these critiques further, argues that ‘the current worship of student satisfaction’ (2011: 4) poses a threat to the broader intellectual work of the university as well as compromising the intellectual development of students, and contends that students’

intellectual development necessitates challenge and, an unsettling, perhaps at times uncomfortable, struggle. Satisfaction, in contrast, is typically predicated on the fulfilment of expectations, a ‘short-term attitude that results from evaluation of student experience of educational service’ (Schlesinger, Cervera & Pérez-Cabañero 2017: 2180). Such considerations indicate how inadequate the discourse of ‘student satisfaction’ is for exploring the long-term, immersive and complex learning experiences of professional doctoral journeyings.

A reliance on metrics has also become a central feature of doctoral education. In particular, employability agendas have gathered momentum following a review of postgraduate education which included recommendations regarding the preparation of doctoral researchers for future employment (ESRC, 2015) and have led to the prescription of research skills training for doctoral researchers as specified in the Vitae Researcher Development Code of Practice governing research degrees in the UK (QAA, 2012). A discourse around an apparent ‘need’ to improve standards and quality of skills training has led to the production of instruments to measure any consequent ‘improvements.’ In addition, large-scale surveys of postgraduate research student experience have recently been developed, initially in Australia and then in the UK (Zeng, Webster & Ginns, 2013). Currently, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) (HEA, 2015), an annual online survey, collects and reports data on research students’ experiences in the UK. The survey targets students from a wide range of postgraduate research programmes, including those on part-time professional doctorates (HEA, 2017). PRES focuses on headline satisfaction scores (Turner, 2015: 8) and is promoted as a tool to support institutions to benchmark their provision in relation to others (HEA, 2018). PRES, thus, rewrites the doctoral student experience in terms of skills, resources and supervision. Any discussion of learning or of contribution to knowledge – a defining feature

of doctoral research – are absent and motivators for beginning a doctoral research degree are primarily framed in terms of career prospects. What place a love of learning and the pursuit of knowledge?

The key point for us is that such surveys construct and promote a homogeneous view of ‘the’ doctoral student experience. However, doctoral journeys are diverse, heterogeneous and multiple. A growing number of doctoral students in the UK choose a professional doctorate, and the Doctorate in Education (EdD) is one of the largest such programmes both in terms of numbers of students and university providers. This doctorate is an equivalent qualification to a PhD but is different in structure and is designed for education professionals, being structured into an initial two year ‘taught’ phase followed by a two year ‘thesis’ phase, during which students complete their doctoral thesis. In this article we focus on one such EdD, an established programme at a post-1992 UK university and use happiness as a lens to interrogate whether marketization and metrics do constitute doctoral education as ‘no longer regarded as ... curiosity driven and as the disinterested pursuit of knowledge’ (Kehm, 2007: 314). In Ireland, for example, doctoral research students are positioned as ‘knowledge entrepreneurs’ (Loxley & Seery, 2012) but our experience as doctoral educators - and the research we report on here - indicates that those undertaking professional doctorates are unlikely to find such positionings congenial and are far more likely to envisage themselves as ‘researching professionals’ rather than ‘professional researchers’ (Bourner, Bowden & Laing, 2001: 71). Wellington & Sikes (2007: 727), likewise, indicate that many of those undertaking a professional doctorate do so as a means of ‘professional renewal’.

Such concerns contest the assumptions of 'satisfaction' discourses and make what doctoral education might mean and become for part-time EdD students in an era of intensifying performativity more complicated.

## *2.2 Interrupting the discourse of 'satisfaction': Creating a space for happiness*

Gibbs' (2015; 2017) recent work on happiness provides a springboard for our exploration of part-time EdD students' experiences. Gibbs asserts that profound happiness, or contentment, is the 'freedom of self-determination within the context of a chosen world view', a flourishing 'in the world of, but not resolved by, others' (Gibbs, 2015: 63) and we adopt this definition in this paper. We were interested in how this view of profound happiness might articulate with the lived experiences of the students we taught on the EdD and how it might pose a challenge to prevailing discourses on individualized notions of self-care. A focus on happiness, we contend, rather than satisfaction, brings a more nuanced and flexible understanding to doctoral students' experiences and promises to illuminate complexities that 'satisfaction' measurements might miss (Dean and Gibbs, 2015). As indicated, current measures of satisfaction position doctoral researchers (like undergraduates) as consumers, determining their satisfaction on measures of supervision, resources, research skills and research culture. For Gibbs (2015: 59), these surveys 'at best measure what is pleasing and pleasurable about the context of education and not the searching for contentment that pervades one's willed being.' But, as Elwick & Cannizzaro (2017: 206) suggest, the focus on satisfaction in student experience surveys comes 'at the expense of [students'] happiness' where happiness is often an educative process of 'stepping into the unknown', which can (rightly) be 'an unsettling, uncomfortable process' (Roberts, 2013: 472). Yet, the unsettling nature of such a process could be seen as the very way in which universities are able to

‘provide a space in which students might flourish’ (Elwick & Cannizzaro, 2017: 215). Being educated, we content, requires actively embracing uncertainty, engaging with that which unsettles, of living with tensions which is why Roberts (2013: 472) states that ‘to commit to education takes great courage [because] teaching and learning, where they are connected with the development of a critical consciousness, are inherently risky activities’ (Roberts, 2013: 472). Our study, then, was oriented to considering the question of profound happiness in learning, and how such happiness articulates to risk, uncertainty and unsettlement. Where, we wondered, are the spaces in the EdD for such activities?

### **3. Project design, methodological framing and methods**

The project evolved from our respective research interests in theories and practices of student engagement (Taylor, 2012) and doctoral education (Adams, 2018), interests which we combined in the project ‘Happiness and the part-time professional doctoral student experience.’ This project was jointly developed to explore the relations between engagement and happiness in doctoral students' experiences through creative methodologies, a choice which we considered would give us flexible, open-ended tools, rather than 'off the peg' methods, to investigate the affective, embodied and mercurial quality of happiness in doctoral education. Our two guiding research questions were, therefore, deliberately open and exploratory to allow participants scope to respond as they wished and in detail:

1. What makes you happy about your experience at [university]?
2. What does happiness mean to you in your life as a [university] student?

The participants were students doing a professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme at a post-1992 university in the UK.



The methods used were:

- Stage 1: Lego-making with students beginning their EdD studies;
- Stage 2: Journey visualisation with students in the middle of their EdD studies; and
- Stage 3: Photo-elicitation with students towards the end of their ‘taught’ phase.

Creative visual methods have the following strengths: they generate different insights, prompting participants to explore issues that may not have occurred to researchers; they may prompt more intense, emotional and affective talk; they provide opportunities to explore everyday, taken-for-granted and therefore often hidden experiences; and they may shift the power dynamic between researchers, participants and the research context (Pauwels 2010, Rose 2016). Vacchelli (2018) suggests that creative/visual methods offer a higher degree of participation than purely verbal methods such as interviewing; while Mannay (2010) notes that creative/visual methods may help counter the dangers of assumed familiarity in insider research, limiting intrusions by the researcher and providing participants with greater autonomy - this was a consideration for us as tutors on the EdD course.

The Stage 1 Lego making activity involved students using Lego to make something (anything!) in response to the two research questions. Permission was obtained to make digital recordings of table talk during the making activity. Students were invited to photograph their object/ artefact and email the photo to us. The activity was scheduled as part of an EdD teaching session but students had the opportunity to opt out of the research and protocols regarding withdrawal of data were explained. Twenty students participated in this activity. Ethically, we acknowledge that collecting data at this very early stage was somewhat risky, given concerns that students might have felt compelled to participate given our dual roles as both researchers and tutors on the programme. In Stage 2 of the research – a journey

visualisation activity – participants were invited to produce a visual map or collage of an aspect of their doctoral journey, followed by a group feedback session in which each individual talked through the production of their map and what the map represented for them. The group feedback session was digitally recorded, and we (the students and us) took photos of the mapping activity and the maps made. Two students participated in this activity. The third stage involved photo-elicitation in which students took photos which represented what made them happy about their experiences, life and sense of belonging (or not) at University. The photos, taken on mobile phone, Ipad, or camera, were then used as reflexive prompts in an informal meeting/interview, which was audio-recorded. Four students participated in the third phase. At each stage audio recordings were transcribed.

Taken together, these three methods offered methodological possibilities to explore the elusive, difficult to put into words, and hard to pin down and yet profound ways in which happiness is experienced. Such experiences, while tangibly felt, are often part of the mundane stuff of daily life and so our methodological choices aimed deliberately to move away from ‘talk and text’ approaches as a means to assist us in tuning into these ‘felt’ experiences in a non-threatening way. The more general methodological point is that creative and visual approaches aim to reach beyond statements and statistics resulting from large-scale surveys and, instead, generated close-up insight. Institutional ethical approval was obtained for each stage. Participants' names have been changed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.

The data generated (photos, models, maps and transcripts) were analysed using an approach inspired by new materialist frameworks which seek to foreground the material nature of our engagement with the world. Childers (2013: 599) notes that the material and the physical are as important as the discursive and ought to be ‘viewed as equally constitutive forces that

shape our ontological and ... methodological engagements'. Material methodologies acknowledge the situated and contextual dimensions of experience and, in considering knowledge and experience as always specific and partial views from somewhere, they do not seek or desire generalisation. It is for this reason that our analysis worked with 'material moments' as a means to pay close attention to the way that material things act on and with us in educational events and practices (Taylor, 2013). Material moments are not to be conceptualised as 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991), that is, those points at which individuals stand at a crossroads and consciously weigh up actions and risks in a reflexive self-making project of choices, consequences and chances. Material moments are, rather, often evanescent events which take place within the usual humdrum routines of study and amongst the busynesses of daily life but in which, nevertheless, something momentarily of note or significance is felt and experienced, some insight is formed about the worth of what we're doing, something inconsequential happens which makes us 'feel good' about what who we are and the choices we have perhaps not realised we have already made. Material moments are not 'transcendent' moments out of time; they are 'instances, occurrences and interactions which inhere in, and are enacted through, the materiality of bodily relations; they are moments which are materially dense and specific; and they are time-bound and spatially-located (Taylor, 2018) - they are felt experiences of 'things coming together' within the everyday ongoingness of daily life.

The next three sections analyse some of the material moments that emerged in the research and which coalesced into three themes: time for me, spatial imaginaries, and the challenge of community.

## 4. Time for me

Bullough (2014: 29) argues that in the ‘frenzy of fast time’ which characterizes contemporary higher education moments for reflection are endangered and pushed out by performative demands. The questions and methods we used in this research aimed to contest the non-stop, pressured environment of the neoliberal university by facilitating ‘a gathering into a while of time’ (Jardine, 2013: 20). This approach draws on what Ulmer (2017) calls a ‘slow ontology’, where slow is not the opposite of speed but a mode designating the quality of care-full attention which draws into its orbit education, work and life. Our data disclosed many material moments of slow time in which students told us about how their happiness in their doctoral journeyings was related to a different sensing of time.

### 4.1 *Loving learning*

The sense of making time for oneself, set in the context of the busy lives of professional doctorate students who typically work full-time in demanding roles, was appreciated both by those on their first day as they re-engaged with the university environment and by those further on in their doctoral journey (Fig. 1). One who had just started spoke of:

Loving [...] learning more and changing your mind ... doing something outside of my normal run of the mill things and having time for yourself makes me happy.

One of those further on in her doctoral journey also highlights the importance of finding time for herself, for learning, and spoke of how the difficulties in doing so seem to make the achievement greater:

I love learning, so that's why I think I've got this photo, it's my time, I'm doing something I want to do and something that I enjoy, so that makes me happy and I think it's sometimes hard to find time or to give yourself time when obviously you've got all of the commitments.



Fig. 1. The library

She felt that creating time for herself and using that time to work/learn in the space of the university library changed her identity. Away from the demands of work and home she became a student:

I just like coming there [...], I'm removed from home and I'm removed from work and I can just get on with the hard thinking really.

The particular participant's expression of something akin to contentment seemed, to us, to be consonant with a sense of happiness as 'a moving and ceaseless state of learning, ready to face the unanticipated future resolutely as oneself' (Gibbs, 2015: 66), a sense all the more precious perhaps because it is transitory, wedged in between home life and work.

#### 4.2 *A seesaw: trying to balance work and life*

Several doctoral researchers expressed similar difficulties, seeing the maintenance of study/work/life as a delicate balance. For example, one participant created a model of a seesaw, placing a figure representing themselves at the fulcrum, alert to any change in balance, keenly articulating concerns about the sacrifice doing a doctorate entails:

This is the first session for me, but even though I've been thinking about it since the summer I've been a bit up and down thinking whether I should give the time up that I normally spend with my children [...]. So it's balancing the work/life balance really I suppose. So we're currently alright, we're well balanced, I'm alright, feeling quite positive about it.

The doctorate appears as work, taking time away from playing with children and happiness comes through managing that precarious balance.

Another participant told of beginning the doctorate against all odds, having wanted to do so for years, prevented by the weight of multiple caring responsibilities. Her story is full of other people, clamouring for her time: parents, sibling, sibling's children and her own child. She said:

So there's been lots of, lots of 'no time for me' [...] and I feel really guilty because I feel what I'm doing is claiming time for me, but I'm not used to doing that and I'm still not sure I'm going to be able to do it, you know there's lots of demands.

and her lego model (Fig. 2) is, quite touchingly, of a vehicle whose passage is blocked, the doctorate apparently impeded by the other's demands.

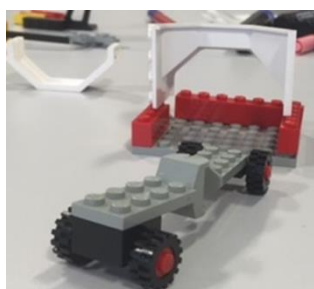


Fig. 2

Students' articulations of 'time for me' illuminates that embarking on a doctorate may be one way to claim time for research, but the happiness engendered by 'time for me' creates ongoing tensions between doctoral students' multiple identities as emerging researchers, as working professionals, as family members. Nevertheless, participants were clear that being a different person – one who does research – made them happy. This was particularly notable for women who, in teaching intensive universities (a large proportion of our participants) are often the ones facing teaching and administrative workload intensification (Angervall & Beach, 2018).

#### 4.3 *Regulated time*

Time for doing the doctorate is severely constrained, not only by external demands on one's time from work and life, but also by the time limits imposed by the course. This regulation of time organises and structures learning, focusing on tasks, progress and outcomes (Povey, Adams & Boylan, 2016). This was brought to the fore by one participant's model that had a bow and arrow pointing at them, materializing the challenges they felt they faced. Their statement, 'If I'm not careful I'm going to get into trouble because I won't meet deadlines' speaks into how deadlines regulate initial modular phases of professional doctorates and

monitoring timescales for completion is one of the metrics used to judge universities. Our data therefore, leads us, like Gibbs, to ask where then is the space for students (and tutors) to potter about, to not ‘worry about learning outcomes or assessment criteria’ (Gibbs, 2015: 65)? Nevertheless, the sense we got from participants was the importance of the struggle, the role played by ‘hard thinking’ as part of the excitement of learning coupled with a worry about not being able to meet demands, all of which aligns with Gibbs’ (2015: 61) notion of all-embracing happiness as ‘the fundamental happiness of willing and then enacting one’s being.’

## **5. Spatial imaginaries and doctoral study**

The data generated insights into the spatial imaginaries which shaped students’ accounts of their experience of happiness in their doctoral studies. To analyse this aspect of students’ experiences we draw on studies from human geography which emphasize the social dimension of space and which consider spatial practices as ‘embodied performances by people in the material world [which] transcend language’ (Watkins, 2015: 509).

### *5.1 Labyrinths, roundabouts, ladders and learning*

Spatial imaginaries are often bound up with shared anxieties and fears about the future (Gregory, 1995). One student made the following model (Fig. 3):



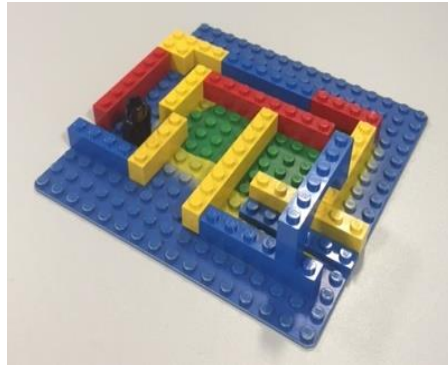


Fig. 3. Labyrinth.

And wrote:

Mine, well I thought it was just a journey ... kind of a labyrinth, so and right now I'm here ... I mean the first stage, which is just beginning, but it's really fun ... instead of dealing with papers, etc. it's right getting hands-on stuff and doing research ... sometimes when you see or hear the corridors are blocked that you would keep on going and then in the end there's an exit to the left or to right, etc. etc. so far, but I am happy because I am about, I mean actually I'm seeing the exit.

An even more maze-like and yet tenuous model materialised another student's somewhat similar anxieties (Fig. 4):



Fig. 4. A roundabout route.

Hang on where does it start? Oh yeah. This is actually before I started thinking about the doctorate and then I was doing quite well with everything and then I was told I didn't have a job for this academic year, which ... okay, and then I applied, oh during all this process I was applying for jobs and at some point along the way I started thinking maybe now is a good time to do a doctorate because the jobs I was going for, people with doctorates were getting them. So ...they did renew my contract ...So then I got happy again and that's kind of actually where I am now... so it's going to be lots of ups and downs and blind alleys and back again. And then I'm going to go round in circles and come back to where I started and then if I was going to carry it on I'd, you know it would just be all over the place basically, but hopefully eventually getting somewhere, even if it's very roundabout route.

In contrast, a third student produced what might be seen as an ostensibly more conventional ladder structure (Fig. 5)

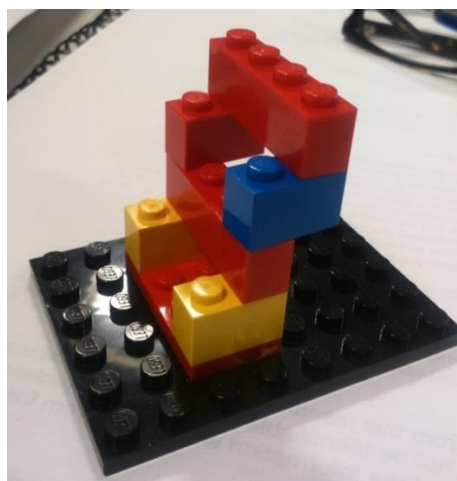


Fig. 5. Ladder.

which engendered this dialogue in the table discussion:

If this is happiness, I would say that I'm on the first rung, I never thought I'd actually get this far. I never in my wildest dreams would have thought that I'd be doing a doctorate...And just to even get this far has been a positive experience to be accepted on it. So literally first rung of the ladder...

These models materialise the diverse and heterogeneous nature of students' experiences of happiness, telling of how happiness is experienced and achieved as a spatial imaginary in the midst of, alongside and with a multiplicity of educational practices, including: induction into becoming a doctoral student: learning how to be a doctoral student; and the conditions of employment precarity that increasingly attend being a part-time doctoral student.

Students' anxieties, and the admixture of happiness with other affects, were not limited to beginning doctoral researchers but mutated subtly as students' journeyings continued. For example, in the visualisation activity (Stage 2) one student generated an artefact which explicitly articulated doctoral journeying as an embrace of getting lost and unpredictability. She said that in the beginning her journey:

Felt very cold ... I felt completely lost, and it was a totally unknown entity, and it was a very scary place to be, and this pot was upright and full of all these things, but it was closed and the point that I'm at now, I feel like I've opened the lid and spilled out all these things that are possible. I've chosen the colours deliberately – pinks because in colour therapy pink is a colour that gives you confidence, and purple is a colour for

healing. So it represents how my confidence has grown and it ebbs and flows and ebbs and flows ... at various stages

Her visualisation was a material overspill – an overflow of signs, textures, colours, objects – amongst which she placed herself as someone who’s ‘a bit like a mermaid, because there is all this treasure at the bottom of the sea.’ She reflected:

What has made me most happy? Learning, just the possibilities, the things that just how much there is that you can learn and it never comes to an end. ...[that's] taken the pressure off too. It doesn't matter if I don't have this mind-blowing discovery at the end. It's not about the end, actually, it's about the progress I make, the things that happen, the transformations that take place as I go along.

This realisation of doctoral learning as an active process, as a propulsive and open-ended possibility, as an ontological space for new learning imaginaries to unfold, suggests a need to re-work the rather limited notion of ‘student engagement’ that underpins the metrics of the PRES and to find more meaningful ways to tune into the ‘many quiet moments of incredible shifts in thought and action’ which bell hooks (2003: xiii) sees as the hallmark of hopeful pedagogy.

## *5.2 Drivers, wheels and waves*

Various studies underscore how doctoral students’ identities are dynamic and emergent, and that any doctoral journey is an identity project in which students endeavor to develop the autonomous identity of scholar (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009; McAlpine & Turner, 2012;

McAlpine, Amundsen, & Jazvac\_Martek, 2010). Autonomy, as Henkel (2005: 172) notes, ‘is integrally related to academic identity.’ For the beginning doctoral students in our study, autonomy featured as being in control, the ability to self-manage, and confidence in one’s capabilities. Their Lego models materialized autonomy as an unsettled state of happiness in relation to moving forward into their desired doctoral identity of scholar as more confident knower, as the following data excerpts from phase one of the project indicate. For example (Fig. 6):

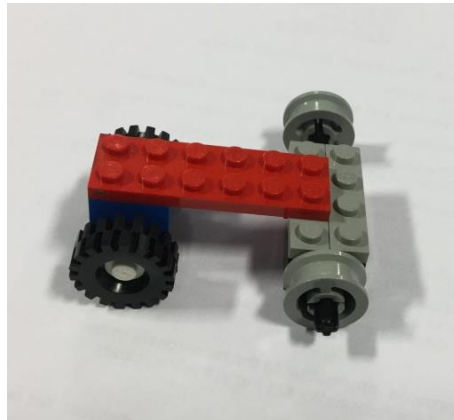


Fig. 6. The doctorate as vehicle.

This is my vehicle, because my doctorate is a vehicle for me career wise. I need one if I’m going to progress in my career, but it also represents moving forward for me in terms of knowledge and experience and challenges, but it’s on wheels so it feels a little bit out of control at the moment, there’s no controls and it’s speeding down the road at the moment a little bit unsure which direction, how I’m going to control it. [That’s] as much as I’d want to say.

Another student's Lego model figured a steep column with an extended walkway off it into space, and she commented how the course made her 'feel like I’m out on a bit of a limb because I’m not really sure what’s coming and I’m a bit scared and a bit confused.'

In such spatial imaginaries, the identity of the autonomous doctoral learner is both something to yearn for and an occasion for visceral bodily affects including fear, confusion and loss of control. These affective states were also visualized in models of a megaphone (which materialized fears of being shouted at from a distance), and of a camera (fear of being an object of surveillance), as students' desires to move forward so that one may begin to inhabit a scholarly identity – that prized individual attribute - are juxtaposed with struggle, risk and discomfort. Happiness, then, emerges as a state of complex crafting in which scholarly endeavor which requires a 'few tools and ... a bit of help' in order that a successful identity as doctoral student may be pursued. Likewise, doors occurred frequently in students' spatial imaginaries, materializing an opening into liminal spaces, those zones of transition in which identities shift between who we currently are and who we desire and imagine ourselves becoming.

The journey visualisation stage of the project enabled one student to see her journeying as a 'wave' and she spoke of being 'completely swamped, and, ermm, there are moments when I feel utterly alone with it all and nobody can see me' (Fig. 7). She continued:

It's a big wave... which was to do with leaving the department at work with no notice, and then I thought I was okay and then it all got too much and I went off with stress, and that is the next bit. So then I was in here for a bit, and then it is all really kind of choppy and I was wallowing around here and wondering what to do and then little by little I started to find a way through and now I'm kind of moving forwards again, and ahead of me is shallower waters and I am not entirely quite sure where I'm going to end up, but it might be here.



Fig. 7. Completely swamped.

Many participants' spatial imaginaries centred around this loss of control – of working out how to embody and balance the 'not being sure' with coming to be (just) sure enough to be able to take the next step. Such self-disclosures of uncertainty, unsettlement, fear, shame and failure keenly acknowledge the ontological difficulty and doubt that doctoral education casts the learner into. To see such ontological doubt as a form of happiness is an important insight made possible by the methods used in the project and poses a very real disruption to the grand narrative which positions doctoral autonomy as an achieved state of the secure and sovereign self. Happiness can, we contend on the basis of this evidence, be experienced as an achieved state of dis-comfort, as is indicated by this comment from a participant in phase three of the project, who commented that, for her, happiness [is] not 'a positive thing at all times... happiness can be a sense of relief as well and also a sense of kind of escapism', that happiness was about quiet satisfaction rather than jumping up and down'.

### *5.3 Protecting space for study*

Data generated in Stage three of the project indicated that some students had by the end of the taught phase developed effective strategies to negotiate the multiple work and life demands and the ontological fears arising from their immersion in doctoral study and, consequently,

the spatial imaginary which predominated was oriented to the notion of ‘protecting space’. This was evident when one participant referred to a photograph of a University Library sign for quiet study as previously discussed (Fig. 1). The same student took a photo of her desk space at home (Fig. 8) and talked about creating separate spaces at home for doctoral study:



Fig. 8. Home workspace.

This ... is a photo of my workspace at home and I have a big computer and a big screen, that makes me very happy, I feel that puts me in a good mood when I sit down. Yeah. I do like technology and that does make me very happy and I've got my RefWorks on there and I've got everything, I feel as though, it's like a control station. It's all there and then obviously texts as I've been purchasing them and all my articles ... So this is a ground floor room in the house and it's at the front of the house, so it is a, well we use it as an office, so there's my desk, my husband's desk, my teenage son's desk and even the little one's desk is this little thing here, so you can just see the corner of it. That's been quite good actually because everybody's doing work, but we're still together.

For a number of students, the act of carving out study space in and amongst the busyness of life in home spaces so that studying can be done in peace and quiet was a relational accomplishment, that is, it is done in relation to other people's activities and doings, and it is



always a continuing activity, not on that is finally achieved. The spatial practices of this student, for example, are enacted in family space so that study space becomes enmeshed within family practices and, importantly, becomes an intimate part of the norms and values of 'doing family together' in ways which work for them in the space and time they have together. Such spatial study-family doings provide a practical illumination of Massey's (2005) contention that space is always under construction as well as being a heterogeneous multiplicity and of Rose's (1993: 37) point that 'everyday space is ... also bound into various and diverse social and psychic dynamics of subjectivity and power.

This latter point is important because the spatial imaginary posited here of protecting space nuances Quinn's (2003: 450) arguments about 'protected space [as] a refuge from various forms of threat.' Protected space, in Quinn's account, is about constructing spaces which have 'material limits' because they are 'always under threat from the encroachments of others.' In our analysis, students' happiness is, rather, entangled with the crafting of study spaces which materially incorporate those 'others' whose encroachment might otherwise be disturbing to doctoral study. Space for study is, then, always a precarious and tenuous achievement within the dynamics of home and family life, and the gendered dimension of protecting space is here brought to the fore in that it is usually women who find their time and space most difficult to 'protect', situated as they are at the intersection between 'private' home, duty and maternal nurturing identities and the educational and 'public' identities of student, learner and scholar.

## **6. The challenge of community**

The influence of others emerged as an important factor in students' doctoral journeyings and happiness. Relationships deemed to be 'significant' were not restricted to supervisors, peers and the wider academic community, but also included family and friends. Interestingly, the role of personal networks has largely been ignored in the literature, an exception being McAlpine, Paulson, Gonsalves & Jazvac-Martek's (2012) study of social science doctoral student experiences of the interweaving of the personal and academic as students respond to challenges during their doctorates. This focus on the importance of networks of relationships challenges dominant policies and practices which emphasize the individualizing nature of research students' experiences. Our study is therefore useful in extending conceptualisations of doctoral research as an entry into communities of research practice (Boud & Lee, 2005).

### *6.1 Becoming and belonging*

Entry into a research community may be experienced as particularly unsettling for part-time professional doctorate candidates and, for one student, the early stages of the EdD brought some issues into particularly sharp focus (Fig. 9):

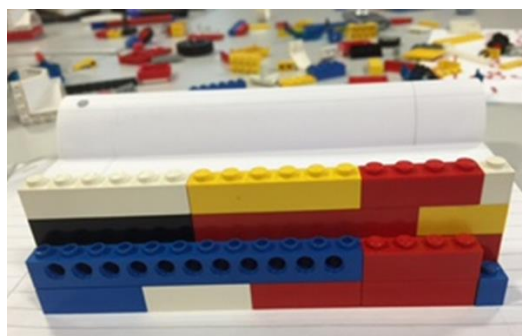


Fig. 9. Building knowledge.

So I feel as though we sort of had this layer of information here, then I met with the supervisor and like you say she said, 'Why don't you go that way?' So then put

another layer on and then suddenly it's gone like this and like this and like this and just from sort of having two years [in practice] where I felt as though I knew a lot, I feel like in so many weeks I feel like I don't know very much at all, but in a good way, because it's made me question a lot. And I feel as though now it's like sort of setting on a journey where I'm going to question lots of things until then I maybe settle down again into a particular route that might lead me through the EdD to the final point. So it's sort of building of knowledge I think that's made me happy.

The supervisor's facilitation of connections between doctoral students as a communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), as indicated in this extract, plays a valuable role in supporting new researchers to begin to develop a sense of belonging. Likewise for another student from Stage one of our study, brokering by a research leader sparked genuine excitement, opening up multiple possibilities, promising transformation that transcended the bounds of the doctorate, with potential for 'the rest of your life'.

The thing that I've enjoyed most so far is the excitement of your thinking changing really rapidly about things. So just from like the initial stages of meeting with one of the research group leads and talking about my ideas, I had kind of two or three experiences of speaking with that person and in the space of literally 20 minutes, radically transforming my thinking about things, or taking me down a different avenue and being genuinely excited about that and kind of the impact that has on the rest of your life or your work. It kind of invigorates your thinking and you think, actually I don't have to settle for how things are, this is going to be far more exciting or interesting and I can have ownership over it as well. So I think that's what makes me happy, so that's kind of the different directions, but not very well demonstrated.

## 6.2 Building relationships, becoming peer

Interestingly, the Lego model-making activity and the small group discussions they provoked provided participants with valuable insights into each other's hopes, fears and vulnerabilities (Figs. 10 & 11):

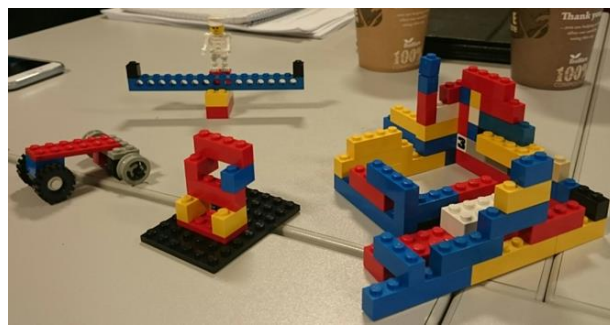


Fig. 10. Group photo.

I think we should take a group photo of them, I mean not us, of them. All our models, put them all together. Is that alright?

I've put all our models together to make a supermodel of our collective journey. It actually looks incredibly precarious doesn't it?

Fraught with danger.



Fig. 11. Supermodel.

The supportive role played by the cohort and the importance of an extended peer group on the EdD is acknowledged by Mellors-Bourne, Robinson & Metcalfe (2016), yet there are times when this supportive network is fractured. Earlier we discussed how one student created a seascape, recounting a feeling of being swamped by waves. She went on to describe a rescue in the warm embrace of the cohort as she re-engaged with her studies:

Coming back on to the doctoral course after stepping off for about five months, the welcome, and actually it wasn't like a 'Weyheyyyy, it's [student name]!', it was just 'Hey, [name]'s back' but it was just lovely, and it felt like I hadn't been away. I just slotted right back in and it's just been really nice ... Because I said I had struggled with the proposal and people coming up to me saying 'Have a look at mine, have a look at mine' and just being there and [another student] said last night on the WhatsApp 'I'm glad you're back' and a couple of people have said I'm glad you're back, and that has just been absolutely lovely. And other things – so I think the thing that has made me most happy is people.

The supervisory relationship, perhaps unsurprisingly, also emerged as key to gaining an understanding of learning on the doctorate. These reflections, prompted by the Stage Two journey visualization activity, evidence a shift in both participation and identity.

And I finally realized that I don't go along to supervisory meetings with questions that my supervisors answer, I go along with queries for discussion. And it's really nice – it used to frustrate me when they didn't give me the answers, because I thought

I am sure that they know, but the point is not to tell me. And now they genuinely don't know sometimes and sometimes I do know, and sometimes when we talk about it we work it out together and that is really exciting.

Here, the shift here from a passive 'they didn't give me the answers' to a more agentic 'we work it out together' points to the happiness of 'becoming peer' (Boud & Lee, 2005: 514) with those who had formerly been positioned as experts.

In the PRES, doctoral researchers are asked to make judgements about their department or faculty research culture, including opportunities provided for discussing their research with peers and becoming involved in the 'wider research community' (Turner 2015). However, 'research culture' is a particularly under-theorized concept (Oliver, Azzi & Spire, 2017) and the PRES conceptualizes research environment in countable terms such as resources and support. The findings from our study – small as it is – indicate that such measures miss so much of what is valuable in students' experiences of peer learning communities. In particular, the experience of professional doctorate students is likely to differ from those on PhD programmes in the main because of the cohort-based nature of professional doctorates but also because participants become adept at navigating the blurred lines between the formal and informal, the social and personal spaces that Mantai (2017) highlighted. The process of becoming, and the feeling of being, a legitimate, knowledgeable and accepted member of a community of doctoral peers was, in our study, evidenced via many material moments of profound happiness which mean much more than what can be provided as department or counted as university resources or in measureable skills-based researcher development support.

## **7. Conclusion: ‘If this is happiness’**

This article has explored part-time students’ experiences of happiness on a professional doctorate. It makes two original contributions. First, it offers a theoretically-informed account of happiness which suggests productive ways to shift the discourse away from the ‘student satisfaction’ measurement and metrics discourse of doctoral students’ experiences and towards more nuanced understandings which activate happiness as a key analytical concept. The empirical data has foregrounded the complex and textured nature of part-time EdD students’ experiences as evidenced through a number of material moments which present the everyday – yet often evanescent – experience of profound happiness in learning and study. The three themes which emerged from the data – time for me; spatial imaginaries; the struggle for community – illuminate doctoral students’ fleeting but profound experiences of happiness and prompt more nuanced understandings of the multiple and heterogeneous nature of doctoral students’ journeyings. In taking the concept of satisfaction in for questioning, the article has generated some key insights which complexify the notion of ‘happiness’ in learning, knowing and studying and encourage understanding of ‘the despair of failure, struggle and elation of achievement’ (Gibbs, 2017: 250). The reconceptualisation of part-time doctoral students’ experiences as a mode of ‘the fundamental happiness of willing and then enacting one’s being’ (Gibbs 2015, 61) gives rise to two considerations One, that happiness is a most baggy label, definitely not one thing, and not necessarily an individual emotion either but, rather, an;

Amorphous, ambiguous, transitory state of being [...] socioculturally situated,  
shifting through time and space, and embedded in normative social and moral codes

regulating appropriate meanings of who should be happy, when and how that happiness should be performed within particular gender regimes (Clisby, 2017: 2).

Two, that a focus on happiness can open ways to reappraising how risk and challenge are intimately entangled within notions of flourishing. Gibbs says:

A university should challenge students to develop the capabilities to optimise their potential to make responsible choices. This may often be achieved through more space in the curriculum to “potter about”, to follow the byways of their curiosity and not to worry about learning outcomes or assessment criteria—all the things that are designed to fill up time, to create the urgency of immediate demand and to induce a fear of forgetting who you are. Such adventures may often be painfully uncomfortable but, in and of itself, this does not diminish the mood of contentment but strengthens students’ resolve to create personal identity within the context of being a member of society (Gibbs, 2015: 65).

Building on Gibbs, evidence from our study suggests that part-time doctoral education should embrace opportunities to unsettle students – or, perhaps even more radically, should to provide the means for them to be productively unhappy in order to facilitate their journeying towards more profound possibilities for happiness – for flourishing – in their learning. Taking such risks are not easy, either for students or for us as pedagogues but, we think, they are necessary.

This brings us to our second original contribution. In our view, the creative methods we employed assisted us in obtaining these insights in ways which more traditional research



methods would not have done. Making and producing Lego models, mapping and collage-making,, and photo elicitation enabled students to materialize their doctoral experiences of happiness in varied, nuanced and detailed ways. The frank discussions which these creative, visual methods gave rise to helped illuminate in some visceral ways the mixture of fear, ambition, optimism, belonging, excitement, risk and fun that attends doing a professional doctorate, or indeed any doctorate. The ups, downs, blind alleys, going round in circles and falling off the edge not only undercut the idea of *a* or *the* doctoral journey and attest, instead, to the multiplicity of doctoral journeyings, they also indicate the fleeting, ephemeral and embodied sense of happiness as an entangled state of materially-located and spatially-specific being and becoming. Using creative, visual methods, then, to attend to material moments of significance, value and consequence for students provides new grounds, on the one hand, for contesting dominant notions of the doctoral journey as a linear, uni-directional cognitive pathway towards pre-determined intellectual goals and, on the other hand, urges a shift away from prevailing discourses which privilege the measurement of satisfaction and the metrics of participation and performance, and towards the risks that attend the profound ontological and epistemological engagements that characterise happiness and which are such a core part of our embodied and material lifeworld.

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