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# Doctoral journeyings: Pedagogic possibilities for profound happiness [abstract only]

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**Doctoral journeyings: Pedagogic possibilities for profound happiness?**

The paper presents findings from a collaborative project 'Happiness and the student experience'. The project began life as a methodological skill-sharing project which used the concept of happiness as a heuristic to consider the non-traditional student experience. It evolved into a more focused, multi-phased project which explored happiness and the part-time doctoral student experience using an innovative range of visual, digital and material methods. Throughout, the project has been motivated by the following three exploratory research questions:

- What makes you happy about your experience at [university]?
- What does happiness mean to you in your life as a [university] student?
- Do you feel you fully belong here at [university]?

In this paper, we draw on data from two phases of the project to consider the complexity of part-time doctoral students' experiences and understandings of happiness. Focussing in particular on how happiness is felt, experienced, and embodied enables us to contest dominant notions of 'the' doctoral student experience and to redirect attention to more nuanced and flexible understandings which privilege the plural nature of doctoral journey*ings*. We argue that reconceptualising doctoral student journeyings as entangled affective and material enactments helps us re-think some of our ideas about doctoral students' flourishing during their studies.

Globally, the marketisation of higher education is shifting both the position and perception of universities. An increasing reliance on metrics of student satisfaction to enhance institutional reputations and increase market share contributes to a change in 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' (Elwick and Cannizzaro 2017, 205). Economic arguments now override educational justifications; what matters in this new era are metrics of satisfaction, participation and performance. The challenge and rewards of learning are side-lined, as students are positioned as consumers. This reliance on metrics is also a central feature of doctoral education, where the skills and employability agendas have led to the prescription of research skills training for doctoral researchers. In the UK, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (HEA 2015), a biennial online survey conducted for the Higher Education Authority, collects and reports data on the student research journey. The survey targets students from a wide range of postgraduate research programmes, including those on part-time professional doctorates. Focussing on research skills, in alignment with the Researcher Development Framework (Vitae 2017), it reports headline satisfaction scores:

> The vast majority of research students (82%) agreed with the statement that they are satisfied with their experience of their research degree. (Turner 2015, p.8)

PRES rewrites the doctoral student experience in terms of skills and resources, any discussion of learning or of contribution to knowledge, a defining feature of doctoral research, are absent. Motivators for beginning a doctoral research degree are framed in terms of career prospects, funding and interest in the subject. What place a love of learning

and the pursuit of knowledge? Such surveys promote a view of 'the' doctoral student experience, an homogenisation of an incredible diversity of experiences.

Gibbs' assertion 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) provides a springboard to explore student experiences. Contentment, thus defined, demands an understanding of 'the despair of failure, struggle and elation of achievement' (Gibbs 2017, 250). A focus on happiness, rather than satisfaction, brings a more nuanced and flexible understanding to doctoral students' experiences, illuminating complexities and emotional depth.

This paper draws on data from students engaged in a professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme at a post-1992 university in the UK. As indicated earlier, the project utilised visual, digital and material methods to explore the research questions, and here we focus on two of these methods: participant-generated photography and making and modelling. The data were collected at two key points in the doctorial journey: at the beginning and in the midst of the initial two-year structured part of the programme.

The first phase involved data collection from a group of students on their first day of the EdD. Ethically, collecting data at this early stage was somewhat risky, given concerns that students may feel compelled to participate given our dual roles as both researchers and tutors on the programme. However, our misgivings were allayed by a belief in the benefits to students in participating in research and in seeing us as tutors 'doing' research and what the process entailed. Although the activity that this group participated in formed part of the EdD session, engagement in the research project did not and students had the opportunity to opt out or to withdraw their data. The research activity itself involved students using lego to make something (anything!) that represented what makes them happy about their doctoral journey so far. During the making and modelling activity, recordings of table talk were made. Recordings were also made during the feedback session, and students were invited to photograph their object/ artefact and email the photo to us.

The second phase involved a participant generated photography practice in which students took photos which captured or 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.

Data were analysed in relation to visual analysis frameworks (Pauwels 2010; Rose 2016). We work with 'material moments', attending to the way that 'material things act on and with us reveals educational practices to be a constellation of human–nonhuman agencies, forces and events' (Taylor 2013, 689).

The focus on happiness is a response to the challenge of problematising what doctoral education might mean and become (Lee, Brennan and Green 2009). We focus on three themes: time for me, protected space, and the challenge of community. Reconceptualising doctoral journeyings as entangled affective and material enactments contributes to a messier, 'lived' understanding of doctoral students' flourishing.

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