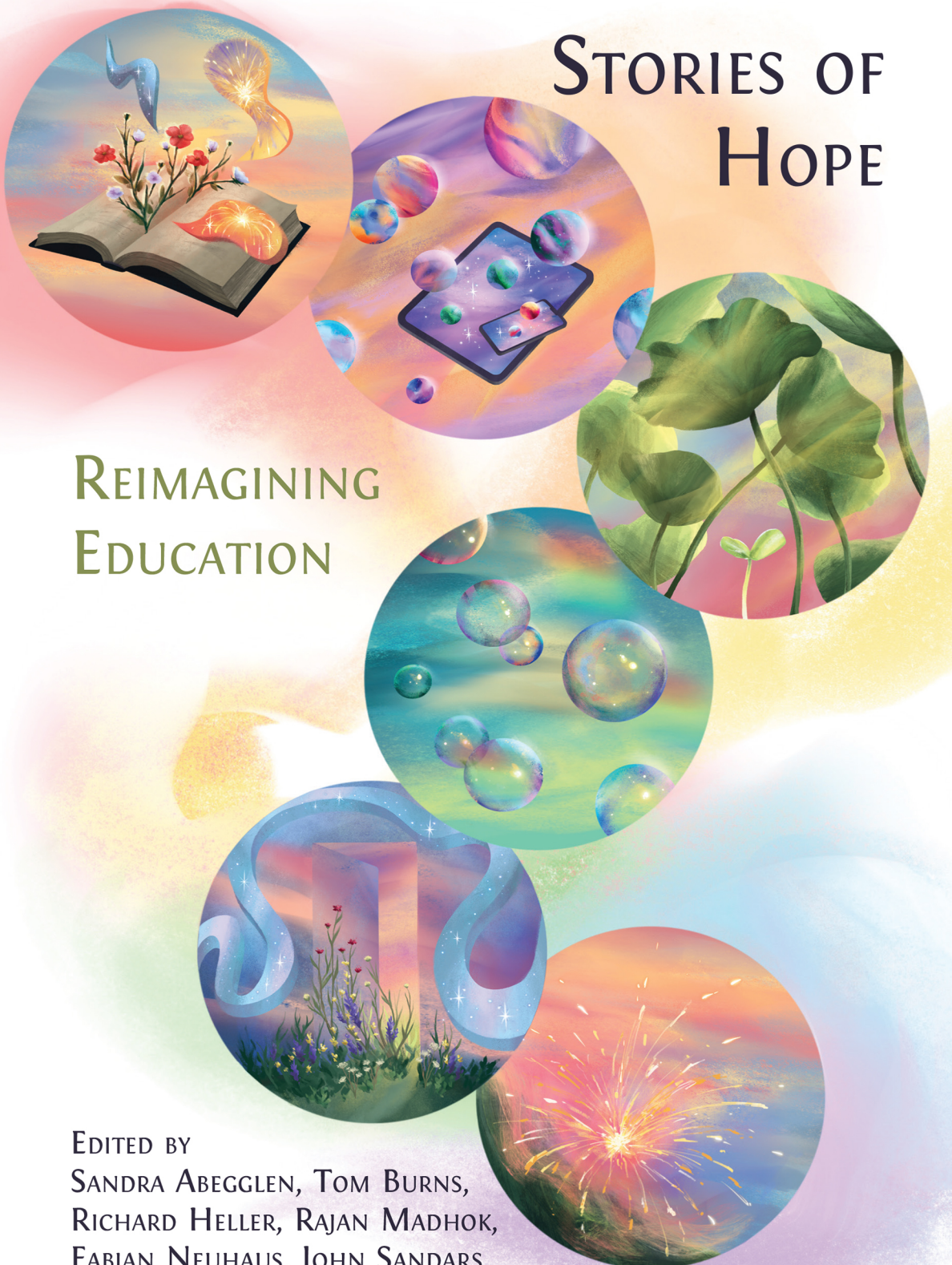
# Stories of Hope

## Reimagining Education



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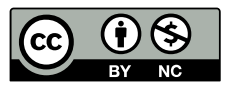





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# 3. Serious fun: Reimagining Higher Education from a humane perspective

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## Abstract

This chapter explores the idea that resilience in education is distinct from grit, emphasising that learning and teaching in Higher Education should be an enjoyable and engaging adventure. It advocates for the concept of "serious fun" in teaching and learning, where assessment serves as a tool for growth rather than a barrier. The Patchwork Text model is highlighted as an effective and supportive approach to assessment, fostering deeper student engagement. Ultimately, the chapter argues that even small changes in learning and teaching practices can significantly enhance experiences for both educators and learners—and create hope.

**Keywords**: resilience; serious fun; authentic assessment; authentic learning; intrinsic learning

## Introducing serious fun

From the military school of life.—What does not kill me makes me stronger (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 33.).

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How can we prepare our learners to cope with the trials and tribulations of modern life? And how do we ensure that we, and our colleagues, are in a fit state to support our learners? There is a school of thought that suggests that success in academia is a matter of the survival of the fittest. But does it need to be like that? Can we instead imagine a model of learning and teaching that allows learners and educators to thrive in academia, rather than merely to survive? Is teaching ourselves and our learners how to be resilient the answer? Well, maybe—but it will depend on what we mean by resilience.

Sometimes resilience is characterised as grit, which we might understand as the ability to grin and bear it despite all the pain and torment. When I think of this type of resilience, I am reminded of the Black Knight in the Monty Python film *The Holy Grail*, who refuses to accept that he has lost the fight despite having lost all of his limbs and his body (Gilliam & Jones, 1975). This is an extreme example of resilience—and I think that there is a type of educator who believes that because they went through such experiences, so must the modern generation of students. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger", people often say, missing out the beginning of Nietzsche's aphorism. However, context matters. If we want to train soldiers, we might want to toughen them up, and we might see them as expendable cannon fodder. But what about in Higher Education (HE)? Is a military school of life a reality that we want for ourselves and for our learners? Do we want to burden students with learning experiences that leave them traumatised? Do we need to over-assess them so that they have no time to breathe and notice what they are learning? Must we overload our staff so that they feel burned out? This is not why we decided to be educators—it is not how we envisaged teaching and learning.

So how do we bring the passion, joy, and excitement of teaching and learning back into HE? We might not be able to sweep away all the atrocities that neo-liberalism has inflicted on academia, but we can introduce some moments of joy to nourish staff and students and to help them find resilience (not grit) to navigate HE. And, furthermore, we can make these interventions meaningful, authentic, and useful to those who participate.

A comment that gave me pause a long time ago, and that still comes to mind now, was that if universities were going to have a sink or swim

attitude to student success, then the least they could do was to ensure that there were life belts available. But how much better would it be if we didn't wait until our learners were in danger of sinking before we provided them with a lifeline?

Luckily, we can do this while holding onto the concept of resilience because there's another, more positive, meaning of the term. *The Chambers Dictionary* (n.d.) gives the following meaning of resilience: an object being "able to return quickly to its original shape or position after being bent, twisted, stretched, etc." and to be "elastic". And it is this ability to bounce back that I would like to explore. I am going to suggest that resilience is best characterised as an attitude to be developed rather than a character trait that some have, and others don't. And I'm further going to suggest that it's one that is better to develop in the company of others, because nothing happens in a vacuum.

So how do we help leaners to develop a resilient attitude which will help them not merely to survive HE, but to thrive? Well, in an ideal world we'd have plenty of time to spend nurturing our students and cheerleading them through to a successful graduation. But in the current reality of our overworked lives, what can we do to help? I think that doing a few small things can make a big difference—to us and to our learners, and can help us to develop a positive, resilient, attitude to life in academia. What I am going to suggest is not radical, and it doesn't require a huge amount of work to set up or support.

The first thing I want to suggest is that language matters. If we talk about students needing lifelines, we make it sound as if it is a matter of life or death—of a struggle with uncontrollable elements. And then that's how students will view it, and how we'll come to view it. But what about if we change the language to talk about learning as a series of interesting and exciting challenges/games/adventures that students can complete with support from us? This is a small change—a mere change in words—but I think that can help to make a big difference to all of us. It's much easier to believe that you can bounce back from an adventure than it is to think that you need to recover from a struggle.

However, I also think that it is important not to seem to trivialise the academic experiences of learners and educators in HE—especially when neo-liberal politicians already talk about some degrees as being "Mickey Mouse" subjects (Morrison, 2023). We need to ensure that

the importance of all academic learning is recognised. A phrase that I coined during my PhD thesis (Honeychurch, 2021) to describe how a group of connected learners learn with and from each other as they play with digital media was *serious fun*.

So, what do I mean by serious fun? Well, fairly obviously, I mean something that is serious—in the sense that learners and educators would recognise it as something that is meaningful and will contribute to learning—and something that is also enjoyable to participate in for both learners and educators. We need to distinguish between something that is merely enjoyable, and something that also has the potential to contribute to deep learning. John Stuart Mill (1991) talks about the difference between higher and lower pleasures, and this distinction is useful here. While playing pushpin (his example of a lower pleasure) might give pleasure at the time, this pleasure is transitory, and it will not lead to deep learning. Reading poetry (his example of a higher pleasure), or indeed reading Mill himself, can lead to deep learning, but it might not always be enjoyable. Reading Mill in the right setting, though, can be both serious and fun, and the trick is to create spaces and opportunities where that might happen. This all makes it sound very instrumental—but it need not be. The idea is for learners to want to engage in learning for its own sake because it is enjoyable. And one thing, in particular, is a huge barrier to learners enjoying their learning—and that's the stress caused by high-stakes, summative assessments when they lack proper support. It's hard for learners to relax enough to enjoy themselves when the threat of an unknown, possibly bad, grade hangs over their heads. And it is also hard for students to see the point of spending time on assignments that are not assessed when they are worried about those that are assessed.

In order to create a space for serious fun, then, another thing I think we need to do is to stop talking about summative versus formative assessment, because this way of talking often leads learners to assume that the former is important, and even necessary, while the latter is trivial and optional—whereas, as we know, this is just not true. Maybe there is a place for assessment that is merely summative (for example, quizzes to check that that students know necessary facts and how to do certain things), but apart from that surely all assessment should be formative in that it helps learners to learn? The next thing to do is to separate

the "summative" aspect needed for accreditation from the process of creating and submitting meaningful work and getting and giving feedback on it. A model that we might use here, though not the only one, is Patchwork Text (Akister et al., 2003). Here we can ask learners to submit pieces of work which can be graded, but it will only be later on that learners will need to submit them formally for adjudication and entry into official paperwork.

One example that I often mention when talking about this, because it us one of the best I have ever encountered, is DS106 (n.d.). One component of this is an assignment bank of activities categorised by varying levels of difficulty (from 1 star for easy to 5 for complicated), and into different types of activity (for example, audio or visual). The way this course works will vary depending on who is running it, so here I share my vision for how it could be used.

Learners are directed to the assignment bank and given a number of stars for their submission to add up to. They then complete the activities they choose (receiving assistance to learn any necessary digital skills) and submit them along with a reflective blog post. Their classmates (and even their tutor) will then comment to give feedback on each activity, and there is then time and space for revisions to be made. Getting things "wrong" in this scenario is not viewed as failure, and learners can afford to experiment and take risks because there is time and space to make revisions in light of feedback. Later in the course they will choose a selection of their creations that they are happy with (again to a specified number of stars) and resubmit these for formal grading. We can also think of ways of further destressing this process by making the grading even more transparent (for another version of this, see Honeychurch, 2023).

I think that the model of learning and assessment that I have outlined above is much more authentic, in a rich meaning of that term, than a model where learners submit their assignments for "anonymous" grading at the end of a course and receive feedback on that assignment; such feedback is also usually worthless at this stage as learners have already moved on to the next set of modules. Learners will be less likely to be stressed, as the grading is more transparent. Educators will not be hit with huge piles of assessments to make in short periods of time so they will find the process of grading assessments to be less stressful—

and even enjoyable. In addition, both learners and educators can enjoy the process of teaching and learning—they can teach and learn despite the necessary evils of summative assessment.

In this chapter so far, I have not suggested huge changes, but focused on proposing minor adjustments that individual educators can make. As Kant teaches us, ought implies can (Duignan, n.d.)—and so it is essential that any changes I recommend are within the capacity of those to whom I am making the suggestions. However, I am going to end with a more utopian checklist for HE. If I could wave a magic wand, then I would ensure that:

- Education is free (properly funded with non-repayable student grants).
- Teaching is highly regarded (on a par with research, or even more important).
- Education is an end in itself, not training for a neo-liberal state.
- Learning is authentic (in all senses of the term).
- Where classes are large, so are teaching teams.
- Assessment is transparent, and "similarity software" is never needed.

As individuals, we might not know how to change our educational institutions, or we might think that we don't have the power to effect meaningful change, but if we all work together, then maybe we can start to push back against the devastation that neo-liberalism is inflicting on academics and academia. Injecting moments of serious fun might not be a panacea, but it should help us and our learners to develop an attitude of resilience.

## Steps towards hope

- Learning and teaching in Higher Education should be an enjoyable adventure.
- Teaching and learning can be serious fun—and our hopeful task.
- Assessment should help students to learn.

- Patchwork Text is a good model for supportive assessment—DS106 is offered as a model and a resource: https:// ds106.us/.
- Small changes to learning and teaching can make a big difference to learners—and educators.

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