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Why universities should seek happiness and contentment

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Hammond, CA (2018) Why universities should seek happiness and contentment. *British Journal of Educational Studies* , 66 (3). pp. 406-408. ISSN 0007-1005

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British Journal of Educational Studies, Vol. 66 (2018)

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2018.1443718>

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Why Universities Should Seek Happiness and Contentment. By Paul Gibbs. Pp 248. London: Bloomsbury. 2017. £90.00 (hbk). ISBN: 9781474252058

In his recent book *Why Universities Should Seek Happiness and Contentment* (2017), Paul Gibbs offers an intriguing trove of conceptual adaptations, incisive observations and accessible critiques, which cumulatively target the standardising bureaucracies infecting educational practices, brought about by the increasing marketisation of Higher Education. The exposition is framed and supported by a matrical web of philosophical insights, recent legislative developments and impacts, and is flourished with a smattering of embryonic pedagogical techniques, aimed at encouraging practitioners to engage in critical reflection and the development of new and innovative practice. Gibbs refreshingly avoids producing a predictable trawl of increasingly popularised and sanitised notions of happiness and contentment. His in-depth and critical analysis of these terms, along with his philosophical notion of *potentiality* has more of an affinity with the technique of *détournement*: Through a Heideggerian affirmation, the otherwise neoliberalised and tamed terms are afforded a radical and liberatory dynamism.

The diversity of Gibbs extensive and yet remarkably accessible philosophical repertoire, spans Boethius and Aquinas; Lock, Hobbes and Hume; Rousseau, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche; however, it is Heidegger that he utilises and returns to as the cornerstone and main philosophical reference point for the work. Gibbs associated treatment of the Heideggerian concepts of mood, authenticity and despair are not subject to an extensive nor purely technical exposition. This is not a criticism of (or indeed lapse within) Gibbs writing, but more of a recognition and celebration of his playful, creative and ironic Heideggerian refractions, and how they serve to reframe the notions and potential potency of happiness and contentment.

The structure of the book is usefully set out, and constructs a coherent meta-logic of definition (of key terms and ambitions), followed by thematic expositions, and an array of proposals for pedagogical techniques ripe for experimentation. The brief Preface proves to be an essential precursor to the eclectic themes and ideas covered by Gibbs; this consists of strategic and aphoristic paragraphs, which serve to contextualise the myriad philosophical reference points that either smatter or anchor the work. The subsequent and main content of the book is divided into three organising parts, Part 1: *What Are We Talking About*, consists of 5 chapters which cumulatively explore the contemporary state of higher education. This is followed by Part 2: *Voices of Happiness, Satisfaction and Contentment*, a section that consists of only 2 quite short chapters, which operate as apt and appropriate summaries of some recent publications and studies in the areas of student voice, happiness and contentment. Finally, Part 3: *Happiness and the Disposition of Contentment*, also a 5 chapter section poses a number of pedagogical possibilities, not as dry, prepopulated and step-by-step practices, but as embryonic proto-opportunities, for practitioners to creatively adapt as models for alternative practice.

For my own reading, I found chapter 1 *Happiness and Education: Recognizing Their Importance* a particularly striking chapter, its strident and meticulous dissection of the invasive consumerisation of higher education, and its pernicious ramifications, is timely and astute. The issues flagged by Gibbs in this chapter – and indeed, in refracted ways throughout the book – state and frame problems that ought to be confronted and mulled by all higher education practitioners, to consider ways in which the waning vestiges of academic autonomy and freedom can be wrested and reinhabited. One critical reflection is that whilst the book contains many innovative aspects and fresh insights, the brief penultimate chapter: *Grounding: A Pedagogy of Contentment for Higher Education* could have been a little longer, so as to develop more practical detail. For me, this was a much anticipated section; having been persuaded by Gibbs erudite passion and appetite for change, I was rooting for more ‘logistical’ detail. The vibrant smorgasbord of pedagogical ideas could have been afforded one or two examples of practice, to meaningfully frame their potential implementation within often rigid and preformed curricular structures.

Notwithstanding this, Gibbs timely book deserves wide and careful reading; it responds to the dearth of skilful, provocative and hopeful texts, and sets out to offer alternative possibilities and practices for practitioners within contemporary higher education. Beyond the abstraction of philosophical context, Gibbs brings to the debate of happiness and contentment an eloquent and dynamic energy, and through this, flags the pressing need for anti-conformist and transformatory pedagogical practice. This needs to be considered alongside the following important rider: this is a challenging book; not in the sense of being littered with obtuse language or ideas – as noted, these are clear, intact and accessible – but more so with regard to the responses and actions necessitated from readers. The detrimental developments taking place within and across higher education, so robustly outlined by Gibbs, require radical, creative and unorthodox responses. As such, the tactical nuggets contained in Gibbs book should not be simply and passively read; if any constructive and positive higher education future is to be salvaged, *ontological* pedagogical developments – as everyday practices – must emerge as part of a collective swell of conscious and resistant activity.

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