THEME 1: FOUNDATIONS OF HAPPINESS

Beyond the Classroom

Nick Gellatly · BA (Hons) Digital Media Production · Ruskin Module, October 2026

The task asked for two conversations about what we have been learning, one with a fellow module student from a different discipline and one with someone outside the university. I had a reason for choosing as I did. My artefact for this module is a pop-up café on 2 December, where I will be asking people what happiness and queer joy mean to them, so for the second conversation I went to a group already doing that work in my own town. The St Neots Initiative is a volunteer-led community interest company which has spent this year asking residents three questions: what do you love about St Neots, what could be better, and what would make it a great place to live. I have been involved since June, interviewing speakers at the Big Listen, then at Tables Across Town in September, and on 28 October at the Listen Back event at the Citizen Hub, which is where this conversation took place.

The first conversation was with two second-year psychology students from this module. We began by comparing notes on weeks one to five, partly because between the three of us we could not reliably remember all of them, and then spent most of the time on whether education should be aiming at happiness at all. Both of them arrived at a position close to Aristotle's without either naming him: you should not be slavish about it, because a little discomfort is what gets you into the material, and you need the lows

to know what the highs are. The sharpest thing either of them said was about therapy, that the goal should not be to make someone happy but to help them deal with their problems, even if that makes them unhappier along the way. We did not agree about everything. I suggested an AI tool for assembling some footage and one of them declined, twice and politely, on the grounds of not being comfortable with it doing their work for them. What surprised me most was that all three of us admitted we had quietly switched off during the economics week, which is precisely the problem a cross-disciplinary module exists to solve, happening in the room.

The second conversation was at a table of six: a business owner in his fifties, a retired prison officer in his seventies, a commuter in his thirties, a new resident in his forties, a community campaigner in her twenties, and me, sixty next year. Five things came out as mattering most for a contented life. Place, meaning the physical environment, affordable housing and access to green space. Wellbeing, meaning health, safety and somewhere to exercise. People, meaning finding your tribe. Future, meaning a reasonable hope that things will get better. And purpose, which was the one everybody agreed on, and which came out as “it’s great to feel useful” and “something to get up for”. The barriers they named were structural rather than personal: a high street losing its shops, and jobs that exist but cannot be reached, because buses do not run outside the towns and driving lessons now cost more than most young people can find. Two things troubled me. Of only 250 formal responses, the under-thirties and those in tougher financial circumstances were badly under-represented, so the exercise risks measuring the contentment of people already engaged enough to answer. And when the table reached finding your tribe, someone observed that a centre for young people is in progress but that there is nothing at all here for queer people, and that it needs work.

What struck me afterwards was that the same answer arrived from both conversations, from people with no particular interest in philosophy. A psychology student said the point is not to make someone happy but to help them deal with things. A retired prison officer said happiness is having something to get up for. Neither mentioned Aristotle and both described eudaimonia, a whole life going well rather than a mood maintained. I have been arguing on this module that Aristotle gives the better account of what happiness is while Epicurus gives the better advice on how to get it, and I am now less sure of the second half than I was. More personally, I spent the evening recognising hopes I share, alongside a regret I had not expected to put into words, which is that I spent a very long time not being myself. I have often felt like the other person in the room, and I came out, haltingly, in my late fifties. Coming to ARU has given me a sense of purpose and a good deal of joy I did not have three years ago, which is precisely what that table said mattered most. The next step is obvious enough. On 2 December I open the café in Rus 137 and put the same questions to a different room, including the one nobody in St Neots has a place for yet.

Illustrations

All four illustrations were generated to a single house formula, so that the piece shares an identity with the Queerly Beloved Café materials: a loose hand-drawn illustration, drawn in a slightly wobbly dip-pen ink line with soft watercolour washes, visible brush edges, paper bleed and imperfect uneven linework, sketchbook feel, nothing geometric or vector, the object centred with generous empty white space either side, plain flat white background, no border, no frame, no text and no lettering.

1. The task
An open notebook lying flat with a pencil resting across the page and a pair of round reading glasses beside it. Washes in warm amber, cream and muted teal.

2. Two students
Two simple empty wooden chairs turned slightly towards each other as if in conversation. Washes in muted brick red, mustard and cream. No people.

3. The table of six
A small round café table seen from slightly above, with six mismatched cups and saucers arranged around its edge and a teapot in the middle. Washes in sage green, dusty blue, warm amber and cream. No people.

4. What comes next
A simple panelled door standing slightly ajar, with warm light spilling out through the gap onto the floor. Washes in warm amber, golden yellow, dusty blue and cream. No people.

References

Aristotle (2009) The Nicomachean Ethics. Translated by D. Ross. Revised by L. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Citizen Hub (no date) St Neots. Available at: https://www.citizenhub.co.uk/st-neots/home (Accessed: 29 October 2026).

Epicurus (1994) The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia. Translated by B. Inwood and L.P. Gerson. Indianapolis: Hackett.

St Neots Initiative (no date) About us. Available at: https://www.stneotsinitiative.org.uk/about-us-st-neots-initiative/ (Accessed: 29 October 2026).

COMING SOON

The Queerly Beloved Café

Wednesday 2 December 2026 · 12 noon until 3.30
Room Rus 137, Ruskin Building, ARU Cambridge

An afternoon pop-up café built around queer joy. Tea, coffee, cake, books to take away, a noticeboard you are invited to add to, and a table with room at it. Drop in for twenty minutes between classes or stay until the lamps go on. Nothing is for sale, nothing is asked of you, and there is no obligation whatsoever to be cheerful.

Everyone is welcome.

QUEER JOY · SACRED BELONGING · A TABLE FOR EVERYONE