

The role of gratitude in higher education

Kerry Howells

University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
k.howells@unsw.edu.au

Abstract: *“Once I had an innermost attitude of gratefulness I found the world to be a different place. The class was not as long and I seemed to be more attentive because I was trying to use my time there wisely.” Margaret is one of hundreds of students who have found that the practice of gratitude while partaking in academic study not only leads to greater engagement and motivation but also a deeper understanding of concepts and academic texts. However, the importance of this profound practice is overlooked in most teaching and learning pedagogy, with due consequence not only for the increased impetus that gratitude could bring to the university community, but also the added dimension it could give to the academic learning process itself. This paper will outline the finer distinctions that are needed to discern the meaning of the term “gratitude” in an academic context and offer suggestions as to its relevance as a way of thinking in higher education. Rather than seeing gratitude as something one might practise separately from one’s academic life, the paper argues for the place of both students’ and teachers’ gratitude in the enhancement of academic learning. This will be illustrated with an example of how gratitude was introduced as a practice in two academic contexts, with positive outcomes reported by students when they applied this to their study of mainstream subjects.*

Keywords: *Gratitude; student engagement; learning strategies.*

Introduction

The ethics of gratitude and whether or not it is a virtue that should be cultivated as part of our moral life have been taken up in many debates (Berger, 1975; Camenisch, 1981; Lyons, 1969; McConnell, 1993; Walker, 1980; Simmel, 1996). White (1999) carries the argument as far as recommending that gratitude is a disposition that democratic citizens should cultivate. It is held to be one of the key pinnacles of many religious paths (Camenisch, 1981; Szilagyi, 1992; Steindl-Rast, 1984) and that which adds cohesion to human relationships and society (Simmel, 1996). Recent research by leading psychologists has shown that gratitude enhances well-being and motivation (Lampman, 2003; Easterbrook, 2003). However, the investigation of the relationship between gratitude and the academic learning process is unexplored territory upon which the discussions in these fields have barely made a mark.

This paper draws some of the necessary distinctions needed to clarify how the meaning of the term “gratitude” is to be understood in a traditional academic context. Examples are taken from two contexts to show that university students see the relevance of gratitude to their academic learning. In drawing this to light the paper pre-empts some obvious objections to the proposition that gratitude has a place in a traditional university setting. The position taken in this paper is

that the predominant attitude held by many students - and indeed that which tends to pervade the whole university community - is that of complaint and dissatisfaction, the opposite of gratitude. Although there may be many good reasons why this may be so – in particular rising fees and reduction in resources - it may have a corrosive effect on students' ability to engage in their studies.

The nature of “gratitude”

The definition of “gratitude” in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* is: “Being thankful. Appreciation of and inclination to return kindness”. If we equate it with the “giving of thanks”, the notion of gratitude has universal application and can be understood by all. Its meaning goes beyond a passing thought or feeling, to that which is expressed in some way. Such expression usually refers to either “gratitude *to* someone” or “gratitude *for* someone or something”. Gratitude pervades the “being” of a person in the sense that in order for it to be true “thanksgiving”, the intellect, will and emotions need to be involved (Steindl-Rast, 1984).

Simmel (1996) argues that gratitude is the most important cohesive element for society. It is the “moral memory of mankind”, in that when we are grateful to somebody or for something, we tend to hold this in our being as a memory that needs to be acted upon whenever the opportunity arises. Gratitude is the bridge connecting one human being with another:

“If every grateful action, which lingers on from good turns received in the past, were suddenly eliminated, society (at least as we know it) would break apart” (1996, p. 45).

This notion has important implications if members of the teaching and learning community are constantly looking to receive without any motivation to “give back” out of a sense of gratitude. If the reaction to current events is characterised by that of complaint and dissatisfaction, the cohesive elements that are crucial to a functioning relationship and community may be undermined.

Although the benefits to learning of optimism and positive thinking have been widely documented (Rose & Nichol, 1995; Seligman, 1992; McGregor et al., 2001), it does not necessarily involve a relationship with “the other” that is inherent in gratitude. One can think positively and it can be an entirely individualistic event. There may be a reciprocal effect on others around, but that is not necessarily the aim in thinking positively. On the other hand, gratitude, by its nature, involves an interaction with the other because it implies a sense of giving, of returning thanks. As such it has a necessary connecting force with something or someone beyond the self.

Practices of gratitude may enhance the academic thinking process itself. Heidegger hints at this by drawing a fascinating philological link between the Old English “thencan”, to think, and “thancan”, to thank: “...the old English noun for thought is thanc or thonc - a thought, a grateful thought” (1968, p.139). That is, the origin of the term “thinking” is the “thanks owed for being” (1968, p.141). He expands on this notion when he says:

How can we give thanks for this endowment, the gift of being able to think what is most thought-provoking, more fittingly than by giving thought to the most

thought-provoking? The supreme thanks, then, would be thinking? And the profoundest thanklessness, thoughtlessness? (1968, p.145).

In his question “Is thinking a giving of thanks?” Heidegger is pointing to a circular relationship between thinking and gratitude. The more one thinks with gratitude, the more one is truly thinking. Similarly, the more one is able to bring one’s whole self to the thinking process, the more one is expressing gratitude for the ability to think. Thus, becoming capable of thinking does not mean merely performing well in some mental activities, or increasing our ability to represent thoughts or ideas. It is rather what Mugerauer describes as “a grateful and responsive relationship to what calls for thinking (the gift we incline toward), it is nothing willful at all, but a learning to dispose ourselves to what is addressed to us” (1988, p.149).

Gratitude as a practice in an academic context

To capture this sense of gratitude that goes beyond thought or feeling to be a part of the “being” of a person, it is necessary to name a dimension of self that relates to being, where it can be recommended that students and teachers practise gratitude. I call this dimension “innermost attitude”, which is synonymous with the notion of “thinking from the depths of one’s being” or the “spirit in which one does a certain action”. Innermost attitude affects all dimensions of self on a deep level – subconscious, thoughts, words, emotions and physical states. Conversely, these dimensions also affect innermost attitude.

Here an approach for encouraging gratitude in the academic context is proposed. The approach, called “A State of Preparedness”, describes the process where students are invited to take greater responsibility for preparing their “being” before and during academic learning by becoming aware of the kind of innermost attitude that they hold and the effect this is having on their learning. In a similar way, teachers examine their innermost attitude and the effect this has on both their teaching practice and on their students’ ability to learn.

Students can be introduced to the concept of “innermost attitude” by using the following model.

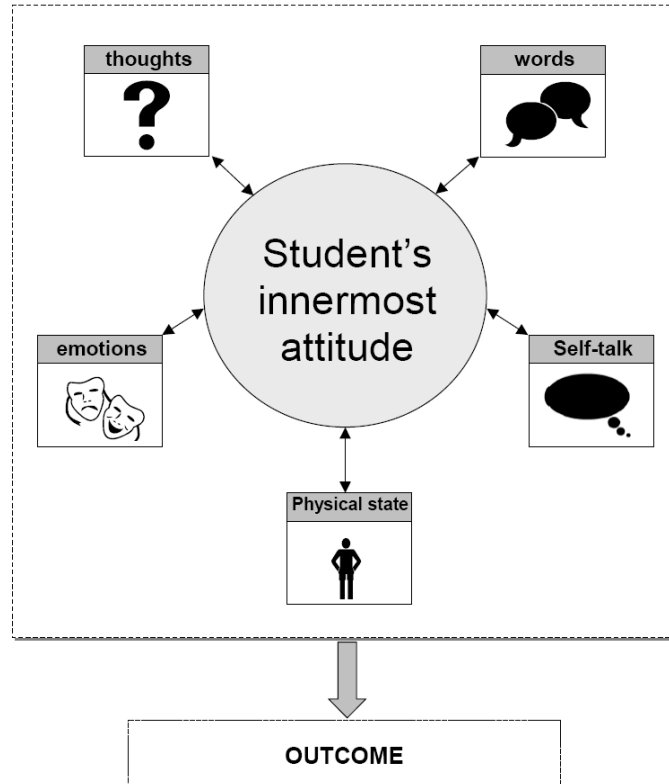


Figure 1: Model of “A State of Preparedness”

This model can be used to ask students to nominate the various consequences of complaint and dissatisfaction and then to contrast this by replacing this innermost attitude with that of gratitude. The answers often given are outlined in Figure 2, where students are asked to consider the consequences of innermost attitude, using the scenario of a boring lecture.

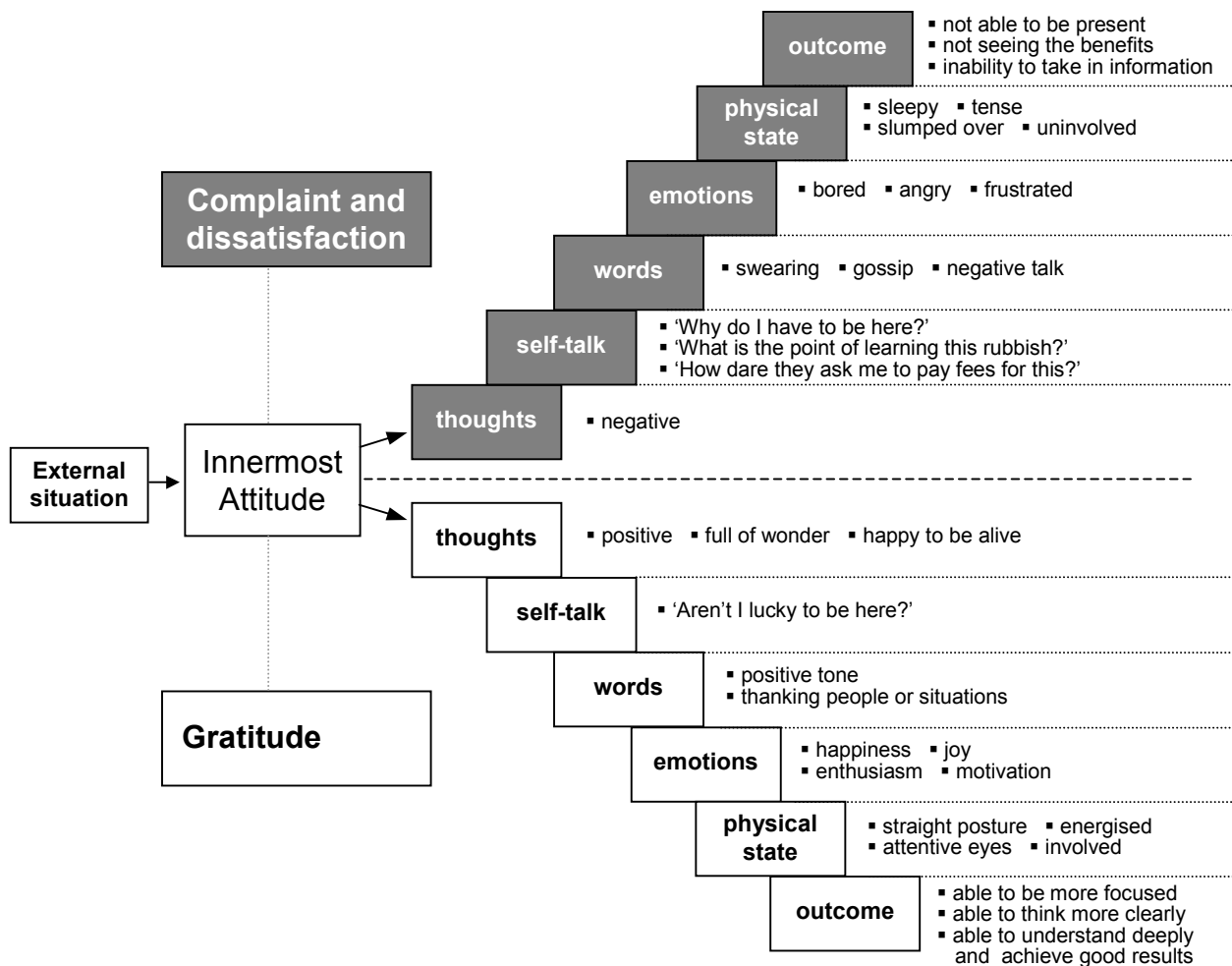


Figure 2: Model comparing outcomes of complaint with those of gratitude

Students can be asked to explore their own definition of gratitude and the distinctions outlined in the beginning of this paper. Emphasis is given to the concept that gratitude is not a “way of being” unless it is expressed in some form of action. This would include an exploration of how to express gratitude for all that is responsible for bringing the learning situation to be. Perhaps, in ideal circumstances, it would include expressing gratitude to parents, teachers, administrators, governments, deans, vice-chancellors, and other students. It is important that students also be invited to challenge the concept from the point of view of its application in their own lives. In both class discussions and written assignments, students are asked to objectively evaluate the effects of applying gratitude to their academic studies and suggest aspects of their learning situation that they can be grateful for.

Case study 1

The approach of “A State of Preparedness” was applied in the Education 101 Integrated Learning subject that was offered as an elective at an Australian University. The focus of the twelve-week course was the application of A State of Preparedness and learning strategies that

generate a deep approach to learning (Marton et al., 1993) and enhance the core skills of reading, memory, writing and oral presentations. The context was the academic tasks and content from mainstream subjects. Students from the faculties of law, business, information technology and humanities took the course along with three or four other academic subjects.

Data was collected from courses taught in 1999, 2000 and 2001, with a total cohort of 41 students. The sources of data collected were an “individual project” and a learning journal. The individual project encouraged continual reflection on the application of the principles of the Integrated Learning course to the most challenging subject that the student was studying concurrently. Data was also taken from a learning journal entry that was to be submitted at the end of the semester on the topic: *"How have I changed this semester?"*.

A content analysis was applied to both of these data with the question of *"What effects do students report from their application of gratitude to their academic studies?"* If more than eight students mentioned this as an outcome either in their individual project or journal, then it was counted as a theme. If the same student mentioned the particular outcome in both their journal and their individual project, then the instance of the outcome was only recorded once.

Although they were free to choose from a range of different learning strategies and each of these was given equal importance and emphasis within the context of the course aims and curricula, most students chose to apply the practice of gratitude. This was the aspect of the course that was consistently reported by the majority students to have had the most dramatic effects, not only on their ability to study but also on their relationships and general well being. From the total of 41 Individual Projects, 3 students reported that gratitude did not work for them, five students did not mention gratitude as a strategy that they applied to their other subjects, and four students wrote about how they applied gratitude but did not mention any specific outcomes.

The following themes on the effects of practising gratitude arose from the remaining individual projects and student journals:

- Enhancement of the academic thinking process and deeper understanding of concepts;
- Able to be more engaged, less distracted;
- Greater motivation;
- Improved learning strategies;
- Increased confidence and improved quality of life;
- Increased sense of interconnectedness.

Examples that illustrate some of these themes:

Enhancement of the academic thinking process and deeper understanding of concepts

I tried to apply it (gratitude) to Cost Management when I went to lectures and in tutorials and the teacher was able to teach well and we learnt more and I found it easier to understand things compared to last time probably because I felt involved in the learning process unlike in the past (Andy, 2001, Individual Project).

Increased sense of interconnectedness

One main focus of attention was ‘giving’ to my learning situations. Rather than talking in class for reasons such as pursuing a higher grade for participation, I gave to the teacher and the class more thought out responses and questions with the anticipation that the answers would inform other members of the class as well as myself. In doing so I found that the questions I was asking were actually more beneficial to my own understanding than before. I found that the more I gave to my classes, the more I received. The teacher was appreciative of my participation therefore creating a better relationship between us. Building such relationships with teachers is of high importance to me and is conducive to a more insightful and reciprocal angle of learning (Shelley, 2001, Individual Project).

Case study 2

The Integrated Learning course was condensed and adapted when applied in a different Australian university in 2003, where one-day “learning principles” workshops were offered to students who were about to embark on studies in the Division of Economics and Financial Studies. Students were introduced to different learning strategies ranging from the more conventional “study skills” and “time-management” orientation to those more related to A State of Preparedness. Again it should be noted that equal importance was given to each “learning principle”.

A total of 220 students enrolled for the workshops and 188 attended. Most of these students had gained entry to the university on the basis of high TER scores (90 or above) and had been educated under the Australian high school system. Students came from a variety of different cultural backgrounds and high schools and were entering a range of different majors including Actuarial Studies, Economics, Business Law, Business Administration, Business Studies and Accounting.

In the light of the position outlined in this paper, my aim was to investigate the following questions:

Which dimensions of learning do students see as relevant to their future studies in the Division of Economics and Financial Studies?

Table 1 tabulates the results of one of the questions which students were asked to respond to in the course evaluation

What changes do you intend to make as a result of attending this workshop?

Table 1

Attend to my innermost attitude and practise gratitude	50
Improve my approach to learning/ apply my preferred learning style	45
Stop procrastinating	35
Be more awake/present	28
Be more organised with my time	21
Look for the big picture/ details/ interconnectedness	20
Communicate more with others about what I am learning	17
Find a deeper intention for why I am studying	12
Look for data that says that "I am off course"	9
Choose a deep approach	5
Read more before the lecture	2
Improve my long-term memory	1
Have regular study breaks	1

Addressing the challenges

Although equal importance was placed on various learning strategies and the approach of A State of Preparedness, it can be noted from these case studies that a large percentage of students selected gratitude as relevant to their academic learning. However, any notion that gratitude be on the pedagogical agenda in higher education would suggest that universities attend to the question of "how to be?" in a more expansive way than the traditional focus on the "higher order intellectual skills" that characterise "higher" education (Barnett, 1990).

One could ask the question: "Is the appropriate place of university education to prescribe "ways of being" such as gratitude and giving?" Are we not enforcing a sense of mass culture here, creating an "ideal person", without taking into account expressions of individuality? In answer to this question, when we prescribe ways of thinking we are already automatically prescribing ways of being. By asking students to think rationally, logically, critically and analytically, we are asking them to take this also as a way of being. This is evidenced by the fact that the higher order intellectual skills are included in the list of "desired attributes" for graduates. By recommending other ways of being, a wider range of aspects from which the self draws identity is being suggested. Moreover, the process of *inviting* students to practise gratitude is couched in terms of a *change* in innermost attitude rather than a new innermost attitude. As such, it implies that there is already a certain kind of innermost attitude present.

Importantly, students themselves are asking that this relationship between "being" and academic thinking be forged more strongly. Some sociological perspectives point to the fact that today's students are continually confronted with the questions that are focal for everyone living in western society: "What to do? How to act? Who to be?" (Giddens, 1991, p.70). Greater impact is also brought to this factor by the "radical reflexivity", characteristic of "high modernity", which "extends to the core of the self", where we not only reflect on our actions, but on our own subjective and internal experiences (Giddens, 1991). Accompanying the radical reflexivity is a greater intensity in the search for meaning (Tacey, 2003; Taylor, 1989) and a "deepening of the self" (Lash & Urry, 1994). Today's students come to the learning situation with a greater need for their inner experiences to be validated, because it is from these experiences that they

are continually being called upon to answer existential dilemmas and to make choices that were traditionally made by institutions.

Another fundamental shift in perspective that would need to occur would be that in understanding that an important characteristic of gratitude is that of giving, we need to examine the kind of give and take mechanisms that are currently in place in higher education. In the very way in which many learning situations are structured, the teacher's role is usually constructed as "the giver of knowledge" to the student and the learner's is that of "receiver". This is becoming more firmly entrenched as student fees are rising and students are now being seen, and seeing themselves as, "clients" who need to be satisfied. In order for more of the giving aspect that is crucial to gratitude to be brought to the learning situation, it is recommended that the student is invited to develop an innermost attitude of wanting to give and not just take, and that the academic looks for ways in which they can receive from their students.

However, does the recommendation for the practice of gratitude lead to passivity on behalf of the student, where they just accept any situation as it is and feel grateful for it? If they have been deeply affected by discrimination, for example, should they just be grateful and move on? The approach argued for here is one of pro-activity and awareness, where the student does indeed act, but does so from both a position of change of self and also action to effect change in the external situation. Moreover, the practice of gratitude is more likely to lead to greater action than non-action, and what's more, greater clarity and agency in the process.

In the face of immediate or imminent hardship or difficulty it may not be possible or indeed appropriate to practise gratitude. If it is a long time after the event, however, we might turn to the wisdom of great sages and statements such as "no pain, no gain" or "in the seed of discomfort there is comfort". Although being positive about an unfortunate event may be totally inappropriate, being grateful for the lessons or for the chance for self-transformation might be considered as a sign of wisdom and emotional maturity. If students are taught to look at events in this way, they may do less complaining or avoiding of unfortunate situations and have greater ability to come face to face with difficulties so that they can develop and strengthen their character.

Conclusion

The overriding premise of this paper is that attention to certain ways of being can enhance the academic thinking process. The fact that the hundreds of students who have taken the approach of A State of Preparedness over the past nine years have reported positive outcomes from the application of gratitude to their mainstream academic subjects, bears witness to the fact that students of today are indeed searching for answers about "how to be". They feel comfortable in looking to their inner dimension to find answers to this question while they are carving out their identity in their university life. These outcomes also demonstrate the relevance of the practice of gratitude to the study of subjects that are traditionally steeped in logo-centricity.

Under the present circumstances where the malaise of complaint and dissatisfaction seems to prevail, the lack of gratitude practised in the university context - be it on the part of teacher, student, dean, vice-chancellor, administrator - has the potential to undermine the cohesion that is so essential to the enrichment of a true community. Although it may appear to be somewhat

simplistic, the practice of gratitude by teachers and students is actually very profound. It can be applied to any academic subject and can be practised by all teachers and students. In doing so they would bear witness to Socrates' statement: "Who has most deeply thought loves what is most alive" (cited in Heidegger 1968, p. 20).

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