Gratitude in Education: A Radical View

Gratitude in Education

A Radical View

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FOR MY STUDENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> *Where there is no gratitude, there is no meaningful movement; human affairs become rocky, painful, coldly indifferent, unpleasant, and finally break off altogether. The social 'machinery' grinds along and soon seizes up.*[1]
> – Margaret Visser

Why gratitude in education?

Many frown upon the use of the words gratitude and education together. It seems like a strange combination. We might perhaps be able to contemplate the place of gratitude in aspirations for wisdom or transformation, but to picture how it relates to learning for information or understanding content may require a greater leap than many are willing to make. Gratitude could be seen to be more relevant to lists of values or mission statements rather than as a thread that can run through our curricula. Schools such as those based on the Montessori and Steiner traditions or those of a religious denomination often proudly advocate gratitude as one of their core values. Initiatives such as service learning[2] and 'Tribes'[3] capture the spirit of giving that is also embraced by gratitude. Recent studies in the field of positive psychology herald the potential of gratitude for enhancing the wellbeing of students.[4] However, it is still difficult and extremely rare for much of mainstream education to make links between gratitude and teaching and learning pedagogy.

I first stumbled upon gratitude as a powerful learning strategy for students nearly two decades ago. I was teaching a philosophy unit called 'Cultural and Ethical Values' at a university which had the reputation of being the domain of the 'privileged' few. Students from all faculties were obliged to take the unit, alongside three other core units. I was filled with appreciation that so early in their university studies they had the opportunity to gain a foundation in ethics and be in touch with the greats of ethical philosophy – Plato, Augustine, Kant, Mill, Nietzsche, Sartre, Confucius, and Buddha. A large number of students, however, wandered into my tutorials full of complaint about being required to study something they did not choose, and which they believed had no links to their other studies or vocation. Other tutors in the same course were reporting similar resistance and low levels of student engagement. After the first two semesters of teaching the course and unsuccessfully trying to whip up enthusiasm, exuding my passion for the subject, using all the best teaching techniques I knew, but receiving

the same negative and unmotivated reaction from a large number of my students week after week, I decided that something had to shift. We were at a stalemate.

I took a different approach in the following semester. I facetiously informed my students, to their surprise, that I refused to teach them unless they chose to be 'present' enough to learn. I spent the first half of the tutorial in the first three weeks trying to understand what it was that was underneath the students' refusal to learn and be engaged in the unit. I asked them to write non-stop for twenty minutes on topics such as their obstacles to learning and their perceptions of why they found it difficult to engage; and followed this with group discussion. I came to discover a number of incongruences that I believe are as prevalent in today's university and school students as they were then. Although we may think that our students might be making conscious choices not to pay attention, to drift off, to be disengaged, in actual fact they want to be present, but do not know how to be. Most seem thirsty for answers about how to be more engaged, and look to us as educators to provide these for them.

I also discovered that the majority of students, no matter how privileged, were full of complaint about what they did not have, or about how their expectations were not being met, or that they wanted things to be different and were resentful that someone else was not initiating that change. They wanted to be engaged, and yet did not feel they were actively choosing not to be engaged. They were firmly entrenched as receivers, complaining about not receiving enough and feeling they deserved more. They were not seeing that their complaint and resentment could be undermining their ability to be engaged.

Without much preconceived intention at the time, I suggested that perhaps gratitude could be a valuable alternative paradigm to the one of resentment that predominated. Interestingly, many students started to approach their studies with more gratitude. They reported that as they practised more gratitude when they studied, they experienced increased engagement, greater connection to the subject and teacher, a deeper understanding of content, and increased motivation.

From that point onwards, the *educational* value of practising gratitude became my imperative. I started to embed gratitude as a learning strategy in each of my units, no matter what the subject. I have since taught the relationship between gratitude and student engagement in a number of different contexts and institutions – first-year orientation and transition programs, pre-service teacher education, Years 10, 11 and 12 high school studies, and other learning strategy courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Many of these students went on to apply an increased consciousness of gratitude to their learning of subjects traditionally immersed in the objectivist framework. They reported the benefits of applying gratitude even when they were studying information-dense subjects such as tax law, economics, psychology, and business administration. The contexts and age groups may be different but the outcomes were consistent: attention to gratitude serves a very important need for students to attend to their being at the same time as their thinking. If they think about what they have been given rather than looking

only for what they can receive, their learning transforms and they are able to be more present in their learning.

While teaching these students, I came to see that the number one condition or teaching strategy for discussing gratitude as a learning strategy is my own practice of gratitude. As I reflected why some groups of students were able to embrace the place of gratitude more than others, or even why some seemed to express more gratitude than others, I discovered that there was an uncanny relationship between my own level of gratitude and that of my students. Before we can expect students to practise gratitude, teachers need to be practising. This is the rationale for my approach to this book, and why I have written it about teachers' gratitude before addressing students' gratitude.

From this realisation I developed a pedagogy for teaching gratitude to teachers and school leaders, and started to offer this in the form of professional development and action research projects at several schools and universities. Most seemed to embrace gratitude as a powerful way of combating the resentment they themselves were carrying into their classrooms and staffrooms. Instead of blaming the system, they felt empowered to investigate the part they could play and respond proactively. Most were motivated by the inherent wisdom that their students' sense of entitlement and ensuing complaint affected their learning, and that gratitude presented a positive way forward.

Yet for some the concept of gratitude, especially the radical one I was proposing, was difficult. They were uncomfortable with connotations of indebtedness, reciprocity and obligation. I learned that unless this proposal is explored within a critical framework and in a way that empowers teachers, it could be seen to be adding to the heavy load of civic debt teachers already feel they carry. Indeed, they might ask, at a time when we have codes of ethics in education telling us that we are to act with 'dignity', 'integrity', 'respect', 'empathy', and 'justice', was I adding yet another weighty word, another loaded concept, to this ever-growing list? Am I also suggesting "another new technique" to teachers who complain already of an overcrowded and demanding curriculum and the most difficult generation of students they have ever had to teach? Some warned of the inherent dangers of suppressing negative emotions; of the possibilities of abuse of power where teachers expect their students to express gratitude to them; of the irrelevance of gratitude to the main game of teaching content; and of accepting the status quo in situations of inequity where much change is needed.

These teachers' responses helped me realise that I needed to listen more closely to the underlying difficulties that students may have with the notion that they should be more grateful. If we agree that gratitude has a place in our students' learning, and if gratitude is something that needs to be directly and consciously nurtured, where and when in the education system does this occur? Is it the place of education to nurture gratitude, or is this stepping over the traditional divide between the objective and subjective domain of the student? Can gratitude be 'taught' to another, in the traditional sense of imparting content, or is it so

complex, so subjective, and so far away from 'the main game of teaching and learning' that all we can hope for is to pass it on through our own example?

Over time, I came to discover it was the dual challenge of the mismatch of the concept of gratitude, and how it plays out when teachers consciously practised it in the classroom or staffroom, which they struggled with. Yet it is this complexity that gives real meaning to the term, and where its potential for enriching our lives is found. When educators practise gratitude in the midst of time-poor and stressful conditions – where their self-efficacy, collegiality and resilience are most under threat – gratitude takes on dimensions that are far deeper than those that come out of most other academic discussions and clinical research.

When I first started to discuss the role of gratitude in education, I received all manner of looks and recriminations – especially in the world of mainstream academia. Now I am invited into faculties such as accounting, optometry, and law – faculties that in the past were dominated by the positivist framework, considering the subjective domain of the student to be irrelevant to higher order thinking. Their interest in the role of gratitude is indicative of a wider phenomenon, a change in consciousness that reflects what thinkers such as Charles Taylor[5], Anthony Giddens[6], and Richard Tarnas[7] discuss as a "radical reflexivity", or Ronald Barnett[8] calls an "ontological turn", where we not only reflect on our thinking, but on the interrelationship between our thinking and our being.

My aim is to make the principles underlying this book appealing and accessible to those teachers who may see gratitude as part of their professional identity, but whose feelings of disempowerment and disillusionment often work against this. *Gratitude in Education: A Radical View* thus directly addresses factors that, I argue, strongly impact on student engagement and teacher presence, efficacy and resilience.

Why gratitude?

We live in a time when we are constantly exposed to the suffering of those less fortunate than ourselves, or those who have had the world at their feet snapped away by an earthquake, a wave, a bomb, a fire, or a rampant storm. As they plummet into chaos or flee for refuge, we are summoned to answer just how to respond to the millions reaching out for our regard. If we have our own fortunes intact (for the moment) just one glimpse of others' suffering, can, if we allow it, generate a deep moral questioning of how we should react. A common refrain is that we should be grateful for what we have. But for gratitude to be an effective and moral response, we would need to embrace it as more than something that makes us feel good or reminds us of how good we have it. For if we were to meet gratitude face to face she would say 'take action that serves others', 'give back', 'give up', 'say sorry', 'let go', 'clear the air', and 'connect'. We are in danger of staying with an impoverished sense of gratitude if we only entertain it at the level

of our intellect, or indeed if we consider it in isolation from its meaning in our interactions with others. To reach into the true nature of gratitude, we need to engage with it through action, and discover an embodied understanding through our lived experience, our connectedness to the other.

There is much in today's world that can numb our gratitude. Our excuses lead us to indifference when wholly reasonable indebtedness to each other and the environment knocks at our door. We have found numerous places to hide from gratitude. Some hide behind their concern about simplistic Victorian notions of gratitude where they may have felt they were required, ordered in fact, to put themselves in the shoes of others and never complain about their own pain. Some believe gratitude should remain in its cathedrals and religious inscriptions, neither to come out into contemporary discourse nor guide our secular life. Others are encased by a resentment that they have made their mission in life to protect. They take umbrage at any whiff of the word 'gratitude' as they think it suggests we ignore their pain.

In many circles, the greatest hiding place is in watered down versions of the word gratitude itself, so its role is as something that can make us feel good. It seems that the more we reach into the power of gratitude to answer some of our current psychological and social ills, the more the word is used to serve the very self-interests it wishes to destroy.

To hear the power of gratitude we need to listen with our heart. If we listen to one beat of nature, we would hear her crying out for us to give back for what we have received. Governments around the world are hearing that cry, but most do not hear it in their hearts. To take the kind of brave and urgent action our earth and humanity require, we need to be deeply moved by a force that connects us with each other, our environment, and perhaps to something greater than ourselves. If we allow gratitude to come out of hiding, and live in our hearts in an authentic and contemporary way, it can offer that bridge to community connection and action.

Many great thinkers of the past[9] including Seneca, Aquinas, Hobbes, Einstein, Chesterton, Shakespeare and Kant have spoken about the place of gratitude in enriching our lives. For hundreds of years, gratitude has been discussed in many diverse fields. When we read or hear the word 'gratitude' it can often be enough to remind us of a missing piece, an incomplete part played in our giving back, a strength we gained from expressing gratitude in times past. For some it can be a source of pain. The word gratitude reminds them of how deep is the wound when they give and give to others and nothing is returned, or where all they seem to receive is ingratitude.

In the past decade we have witnessed an exponential growth in explorations of gratitude in both academic journals and general texts. Perhaps this signals a rising interest in sources from where we can enhance our wellbeing or reach a higher consciousness? Yet if our discourse wholeheartedly embraces gratitude without an awareness and respect for those who do not warm to its powers or value its intent, we can alienate them unintentionally.

We do not need another book that simply adores and adorns gratitude. Nor do we need one that prescribes how to be or how to feel good, or which assumes a neutral starting point that discounts the culturally rich and deep understanding of gratitude that many readers already bring to the text. We need a book that can explore the dilemmas raised when we place this giant of a term amidst a complex, pluralistic, secular context, so that we can better understand its contemporary meaning and potential. We do not need a book that patronises or offers a panacea for all of the world's problems, but we do need one that mirrors the kind of dialogue we need if we are to bring gratitude to the table as we consider it as a meaningful way to respond and to be.

Why gratitude in education now?

Students orientate themselves to where they can feel valued and where there is trust. It is not until they find this safe haven that they can settle and be present enough to learn. Many of our educational environments – be they schools or universities or colleges of advanced education – are breeding grounds for conditions which make it difficult for gratitude and trust to take hold. Conditions that are the antithesis to gratitude – resentment, victim mentality, envy, or a sense of entitlement[10] – are toxins that kill off goodwill. A toxic environment of ensuing complaint culminates in good teachers and leaders walking out wounded by ingratitude, extremely unlikely to return. It is our lack of consciousness of the impact of this malaise that keeps us in the dark, and stops many wonderful education initiatives from taking hold. At a time where measurement and economy are our guiding lights, we are neglecting to attend to our ontological domain, our way of being in the world, and the impact this has in our education communities.

We often condemn students for their disengagement and for their blatant displays of negative complaint and blame. Some say these are characteristics of a typical generation Y student, who is totally absorbed in his or her own needs and interests. Yet it is also the environment we provide that allows such attitudes to prevail. Although Charles Dickens' satire of where gratitude has no place in Gradgrind school (described in his book *Hard Times)*, was published as long ago as 1854, it bears a scary resemblance to the ethos that predominates today.

> It was a fundamental principle of the Gradgrind philosophy that everything was to be paid for. Nobody was ever on any account to give anybody anything, or render anybody help without purchase. Gratitude was to be abolished, and virtues springing from it were not to be. Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across the counter. And if we didn't get to heaven that way, it was not a politico-economical place, and we had no business there.[11]

As the philosopher Michael Dale[12] notes in his exposition of how the characteristics of Gradgrind philosophy play themselves out in our times, much of our current educational discourse is dominated by language that reflects a bargain across the counter, or by what some call an 'exchange paradigm'. Genevieve Vaughan and Eila Estola describe the underlying logic and values of this paradigm as being ego-oriented, and something that "requires equal payment for each need-satisfying good".[13] In education this paradigm is characterised by individualism, instrumentalism and consumerism. For the philosopher Charles Taylor[14], the result is fragmentation and disenchantment, which has dissolved community and "split reason from self."[15]

As Dale notes, our present educational discourse is dominated by words that reflect this 'bargain across the counter' mentality – words like 'client', 'service', 'stakeholders', 'consumers', and hyphenated words such as 'performance-referenced', 'outcome-oriented', 'competency-centred', as well as unhyphenated ones like 'cohort groups', 'market demand' and 'standard variations'. He then goes on to ask what is it that we teachers do at university? "We 'deliver instruction'. Teaching in a classroom is an 'instructional delivery system', and the latest technology simply an 'alternative delivery system'."[16] Instead of reflecting on the Socratic question of "How should one live?" Dale says, we are instead focused on "How to make a living?"

In his address to the House of Lords in August 2011, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, spoke of his views on the riots of the youth – as young as seven years old – across Britain. In his impassioned plea, he said:

> *...I believe one of the most significant questions that we ought to be addressing in the wake of these deplorable events, is what kind of education we are interested in, for what kind of a society? Are we prepared to think not only about discipline in classrooms, but also about the content and ethos of our educational institutions – asking can we once again build a society which takes seriously the task of educating citizens, not consumers, not cogs in an economic system, but citizens…*[17]

The archbishop issues a challenge for Britain to reconstruct its education not by using an instrumentalist model but one that builds "virtue, character and citizenship". This echoes a cry from many quarters around the globe, for some time now, for character education to be at the heart of our curricula. Indeed through the ages, it has been at the forefront of debates about the purpose of education.

I propose a way forward is to embrace a paradigm that stands at the opposite end of the exchange paradigm alluded to in this speech. If the exchange paradigm is self-orientated, then a radical counterpoint would be a 'gift paradigm', which is other-oriented. Vaughan and Estola describe the gift paradigm[18] as one where "a giver unilaterally satisfies the need of a receiver and thereby establishes bonds of mutuality and trust."[19] Gratitude embodies a dynamic interrelation between giver,

receiver and gift, and as such can provide a powerful dimension to the gift paradigm. Philosopher Robert Roberts describes gratitude as comprising of

> …givers, gifts, recipients, and the attitudes of giver and recipient toward one another. It is a deeply social emotion, relating persons to persons in quite particular ways…[20]

By encapsulating the relationship between giver, receiver and gift, gratitude is highly relevant to the educational context. The receiver of education recognises that what they receive is a gift, and this prompts them to give back. When the giver of the gift of education sees that what they give is perceived as a gift, they are motivated to give and give, without necessarily wanting anything in return. A true dynamic is restored where education encompasses a healthy flow of giving and receiving amongst all parties. In most contexts, education is currently constructed as the teacher who is giving the gift of education to the recipients, the students, and there is an absence of students being educated to give back for the gifts of education. Too often education is not seen by its receivers as a gift or privilege, but only as a right or expectation.

This book neither presents gratitude as *the* answer to how we might educate better citizens, nor as a panacea to cure all of the ills of society. However, it does present a strong case for why we may consider gratitude as an important missing piece of current educational practices and why it may play a part in being a powerful antidote to the exchange paradigm.

Archbishop Williams goes on in his speech to draw our attention to a need for greater awareness of a deepened sense of "empathy with others", and "our involvement together in a social project in which we all have to participate". Yet to rally us *all* to participate in a social project – particularly one that aims to consider the kinds of virtues, character and citizenship we wish to promote in education – we need to consider, intelligently and wisely, the global, pluralistic and post-structuralist society we cohabit.

Just around the corner, or at least somewhere in the vicinity of the parliament where the archbishop was speaking, there are a growing number of philosophers and educators who take issue with educational policy that advocates what they call the "happiness agenda". In their recent work, educational philosophers Kathryn Eccleston and Dennis Hayes[21] present an important and convincing warning against the rise of "therapeutic education", which they define as "…any activity that focuses on perceived emotional problems and which aims to make educational content and learning processes more 'emotionally engaging'…"[22] They object to the large amount of funding being poured into education programs that focus on emotional wellbeing, and the picture of the "diminished self" as being vulnerable and fragile, that lies behind these initiatives. They regard such therapeutic education as "profoundly anti-educational", as it attempts to "coach appropriate emotions as part of developing emotional wellbeing and happiness."[23] Moreover,

they cite many poignant examples where education in these emotions is common across all levels of education, and is socially engineered by the state.

When Adam Smith, in his 1759 work *The theory of moral sentiments*, recommended gratitude as a crucial antidote to self-interest if we were to have a healthy political economy, and when G.K. Chesterton wrote of gratitude as the source of human happiness in the early 1900s, they were doing so at a time when society was much more malleable to embracing a common identity that was prescribed by the church or the state. The most we should aim for today is an invitation to engage in healthy and open dialogue. If a commitment to a particular aspect of character education should arise from this dialogue, it needs to be chosen consciously and critically, and be informed by a plurality of views and concerns.

This book is not aimed at prescribing a certain way of being, nor is it offered as something that can be considered in isolation from other dimensions that contribute to effective education. Rather, I am inviting my readers to engage with the hypothesis that gratitude may be one important aspect that, for reasons I explore in the following chapters, has been overlooked.

Lived experience as my field of inquiry

As a custodian of gratitude I would not consider letting it loose in education without a critical framework that honours its strong historical and cultural roots. If we introduce gratitude poorly, it could be swept up as part of the 'happiness agenda' (which is currently its place) and miss its educational purpose and potential. In order to examine the role of gratitude critically, we need to listen to the difficulties the term raises; we need to awaken to what these difficulties can teach us about ourselves and about the term gratitude; and we need to make time for our understanding of gratitude to evolve. To this end, this book engages with hermeneutic inquiry to invite the reader to explore both dilemmas and possibilities. By taking this approach, I consciously rebel against the simplistic ways in which the concept of gratitude is used in some of the contemporary discourse that dominates the so-called 'positivity industry'.

Gratitude in Education: A Radical View uses impressionist ethnography[24] to explore the potential of gratitude, and to bring to life the dilemmas which educators grapple with when practising gratitude. My approach is narrative and interpretive as I recount stories of academics, school leaders, teachers, students, pre-service teachers, and parents, and interweave them into an account of my own discovery of the significance and challenge of practising gratitude in my life as an academic, teacher educator and parent, and about gratitude as a radical act of agency in education. It is impressionistic because, using strategies of remembering, recalling, and imagining, I deliberately attribute certain characters, parts of conversations, circumstances and events to players in my narratives in order to bring to life the

dilemmas and give fullness to each story. In doing so I am able to bring the lived experience of gratitude to life in all its complexities and subtleties.

My ethnographic impressions draw together interpreted threads of teachers' and students' reflections, personal interactions, transcripts from interviews and focus groups, class discussions, and extracts from emails and student journals.[25] The characters portrayed are real people, though some are composites. Sometimes I have embellished responses and dilemmas by incorporating those experienced by others in different contexts. The institutions where they are positioned are real places. All identities are masked. I do not wish any character or place to be associated with a particular portrait. My purpose is not to tell the story of a particular character or a particular institution, but to draw out general points that may be relevant to many.

I have extended some questions and answers or reinterpreted them to tease out the dilemmas more fully for the reader. Large bodies of texts such as email correspondence and transcripts remain mainly true to their original form.

Through my years of study as a practising educator, many thinkers in the fields of philosophy, education, sociology, positive psychology, spirituality and anthropology have caused me to reflect deeply about the place of gratitude. Rather than looking to these texts to provide a unifying theory underlying my approach to gratitude, I propose that they each offer lenses of wisdom through which those who work in the field of education may view their experiences of gratitude. To this end, I interweave theoretical insights with the exploration of the complexities and potential of gratitude.

Each chapter starts with a scenario in a school or university setting and uses dialogue to tease out the possibilities and dilemmas regarding the chapter's topic. After introducing the reader to various dimensions of gratitude practice for teachers, the book turns its focus on teaching gratitude to students, and invites the reader to further consider its pedagogical significance.

Although the effects of gratitude have been explored in other fields, this is the first full text to explore gratitude in the context of education, and the first to present gratitude as a pedagogy that underlies effective teaching. It acknowledges that gratitude is only one aspect of a teacher's pedagogy, but argues that it is so important that it is worthy of this work in its own right.

I invite you to join me in an exploration of the worthiness of a greater consciousness of gratitude in your vocation and life.

NOTES

Chapter 1

[1] Visser (2009, p. 327).
[2] See Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty, & Nielson (2009).
[3] See Gibbs (2006).
[4] For examples of applications of positive psychology to education, see: Chan (2010); Froh, Miller, & Snyder (2007); Froh,, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, K., & Miller, N. (2009); Froh, J., Yurkewicz, C., & Kashdan, T. (2009); Froh, Bono, & Emmons (2010); McCraty & Childre (2004); Seligman (2009); Seligman 2011; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins (2009); Unsworth, Turner, Williams, & Houle (2010).
[5] Taylor (1989).
[6] Giddens (1990, 1991).
[7] Tarnas (1991).
[8] Barnett (2004).
[9] For good overview of the influences of some of these thinkers see Harpham (2004, p. 19-36).
[10] Bono, Emmons, & McCullough (2004, p. 473) discuss these states at greater length.
[11] This was cited in Dale, M. (2004, p.66).
[12] Dale (2004, p. 67).
[13] Vaughan & Estola (2008, p.24).
[14] Taylor (1989).
[15] As the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) remarks, we live in a time where many are left with "a feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer".
[16] Dale (2004, p. 67).
[17] Williams (2011).
[18] Anne Game and Andrew Metcalfe also discuss the notion of the gift as it relates to education. For example see Game & Metcalfe (2010).
[19] Vaughan & Estola (2008, p. 24).
[20] Roberts (2004, p. 65).
[21] Ecclestone & Hayes (2009a, 2009b).
[22] Ecclestone & Hayes (2009b, p. x).
[23] Ecclestone & Hayes (2009b, p. xii).
[24] John Van Maanen (1988) describes this as 'impressionist tales', where "…Reflective, meditative themes may develop from the story and spin off in a number of fieldworker-determined directions. The story itself, the impressionist tale, is a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker's way of knowing so that both can be jointly examined…The epistemological aim is then to braid the knower with the known…" p. 102.
[25] Where appropriate and necessary, I have always sought permission and ethics approval for these to be recorded.

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