

Taking Teaching as a Calling: The Significance and Practice of Gratitude in a Teacher's Career

Zeng Na

School of Foreign Languages
China West Normal University
Nanchong, Sichuan Province, China.
nanazeng2000@163.com

Abstract

Successful teaching experience and outcome is often dependent upon the teacher's personal charisma which includes the qualities of a sense of humor, friendliness, forgiving, understanding, caring, patience, and so on. A critical link to all these positive characteristics is that the teacher feels a deep sense of gratitude on a daily basis. This article reports on studies from the field of positive psychology that focus on grateful affect and grateful expression. As far as teaching is concerned, it reveals that gratitude is one of the most obvious positive emotions to flourish a teacher's life and career. In practice, some tools of cultivating gratitude for a teacher are introduced such as staying away from mass media, keeping a gratitude journal and keeping a gratitude reminder. It is hoped that through practice, teachers in their daily teaching experience can tune their feelings to the grateful channel and arrive at the level where teaching becomes a calling in their life.

Key Words: teaching, gratitude, significance, practice, calling.

1. Introduction

Teachers today, regardless of race, religion, or sex, are facing multiple challenges. The expectations of modern society regarding what teachers of the 21st century should be like and be able to do are many and diverse. However, a good teacher has been somebody to be desired to educate any new generation in all times. As a teacher in the 21st century, one must understand their changing roles and increasing responsibilities. Different educational cultures give priority to teachers' skills and knowledge differently. If one wants to be acceptable as a person and recognized as a good professional, they have to live up to the expectation of some highlighted roles, such as teacher as a person, teacher as a skilled professional, and teacher as an ethical person and professional.

However, considering teaching as a lifelong career and even a calling, teachers' own feelings and emotions as to be a teacher is of pivotal importance. Before being a teacher, the teacher must first be a person. All students highly valued teachers' positive personalities such as sense of humor, friendliness, forgiving, understanding, caring, and patience. After all, it is these personal characteristics that form a kind of charisma in a teacher that makes students sit still and listen, feeling secure, interested, joyful, and hopeful. What can a teacher do to cultivate these beautiful personal characteristics in themselves? A critical link to all the positive emotions is a teacher's feeling grateful to his career and students. Gratitude is a strong predictor of subjective happiness or a sense of wellbeing (Nelson, 2009; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). So cultivating a sense of gratitude in a teacher's soul not only helps the teacher's career thrive but also extend the tunnel vision of being a mere teacher to another level of being a mission and calling on this planet. Rediscovered by the field of positive psychology, the potential benefits of gratitude have been brought into the focus of the public. A lot of research has been done to discover the happiness-driving and life-fulfilling qualities within the sense of gratitude. In this paper,

we will explore the sense of gratitude, which a teacher feels every teaching day, to demonstrate its magical power in enhancing the positive feelings and empowering the teaching career as a calling.

2. Significance of a sense of gratitude

2.1 Conceptualizing gratitude

The word "grateful" is derived from the Latin word "gratus", meaning a deep appreciation of people, nature, God, or the cosmos, which evokes a subjective experience that includes a sense of thankfulness, wonder, and appreciation (Emmons, McCullough, & Tsang, 2003). Within the psychological literature, gratitude has been conceptualized in two ways: dispositional gratitude and state gratitude (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Dispositional gratitude is a personality trait, which demonstrates itself in the tendency or proneness to experience gratitude (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). When one realizes that something good has happened because of some other person or force, he or she would experience the momentary emotions of gratitude, which is called state gratitude (McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004).

While when examining the significance of gratitude in a teacher's career, we believe it is important to understand both of these forms. In our research, we therefore distinguish between two gratitude traits: dispositional gratitude (feeling grateful) and state gratitude (enacting gratitude). Feeling grateful is an affective or emotional response to the receipt of another's benevolence, whether that is a person or supernatural force (Watkins et al., 2009). In the case of teachers, feeling grateful is the key issue to start his or her day of teaching, because this feeling sets foundation for the feeling tone of the teacher's whole day, which makes a difference to students' performance in class and the teacher's daily life as well. It is safe to say that good teachers make the day for themselves and also for students. Conversely, enacting gratitude is an expressive response, such as saying "thank you". If a teacher learns to say "thank you" to his or her students many times a day, students will feel empowered and full of hope and respect. Therefore, gratitude may be seen as an emotion or affective state created by recognizing that a positive outcome has been obtained, and recognizing the source for the outcome (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). From this perspective we are convinced that the sense of gratitude can be cultivated in a person's life even if they are not born with the grateful traits or tendency.

2.2 Powerful effects of gratitude

The focus on gratitude and other positive traits has received support from some psychology-based researchers who have found that gratitude increases positive emotions, enhances optimism, defends against stress and depression, and assists individuals in both negative events and positive circumstances (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009).

McCullough et al. (2002) found that dispositional gratitude or the grateful disposition makes people have a tendency to focus on the sunny side of their life. People with grateful traits in them are not merely ignoring or denying the negative aspects of life (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008) but may embrace a worldview where every trouble is considered as a challenge and everything is viewed as a gift and blessing. Thus they are more likely to feel empathetic, sensitive, and have the natural ability to take the perspective of others and less inclined to experience interpersonal emotions, such as envy, and may be more willing to forgive (McCullough et al., 2002).

Emmons and McCullough (2003) also showed that state gratitude is strongly associated with positive affect, suggesting that individuals who are able to attain a state of gratitude will experience more positive emotions. They studied 201 undergraduate participants in three groups who were randomly divided. They assigned the first group to write about five things they were thankful for each day for 10 weeks. The second group was assigned to write about the daily trouble with the focus on what was going wrong in a day. And the third group

wrote about neutral events. All participants were asked to report how they felt about life, their expectations for the following week, and how connected they felt to others on a weekly basis. The study concluded that gratitude participants reported feeling more optimistic about the following week, felt better about their lives in general, and felt more connected to others compared with the control participants.

Based on these studies, it is evident that the sense of gratitude is not only a way to communicate positive outcomes, but that it also acts as a powerful cue to enhance the quality of one's life. The expression of gratitude causes teachers not only to feel recognized and accomplished for their acts, but also to engage in improved working relationships with their students and colleagues.

3. Practice of a sense of gratitude

Not only are the findings in positive psychology relevant, but they are natural extensions of our practice. Some tools for cultivating gratitude would be introduced in this part to make the practice go smoothly.

3.1 Staying away from mass media

One of the major problems for those who seldom feel grateful is that their view is blocked or distorted by the mass media. What you see on the news is only one tiny piece of the puzzle for what becomes news in our lives is based on the narrow definitions that we see presented in programs. One of the issues is that the quality of information we take in about what is going on in the world is low and the way we process it is suspect. It is easy to go about your day thinking you have caught up on the news. However, in a 60-minute broadcast, or in the morning paper, not all the news is covered. You think that you are informed with everything, but you are not really learning anything. On the other hand, TV news programs are designed to keep you watching closely, in a state of fear and denial, desperately hoping for some relief. In between the fear-generating vignettes, the program will supply you with a way to overcome your fears and rising panic ---- many carefully placed opportunities to buy things. The commercial spots they design are often longer than the news stories themselves. The commercials are fast-paced and exciting and as a result, influence the way the news stories around them are produced.

Television (and print media) news gives us other burdens as well. It teaches us to not be concerned with depth and precision. It teaches us to overlook the details and make global, far-reaching conclusions after hearing only a few seconds about a situation. In other words, television deprives us of the precious tool of thinking, not to mention the feeling of gratitude which can only emerge with clarity of mind. How many of us can really say that these habits have not infiltrated into the way we learn and communicate in our personal lives? So in order to cultivate the sense of gratitude, staying away from the mass media is necessary. If you cannot do it in the beginning because you are in a habit of turning on TV once you come home, you can reduce the time of watching television and read the so-called importance news.

3.2 Keeping a gratitude journal

The journal is one of the most widely used tools for practicing gratitude (Emmons, 2004). As a teacher, to build a sense of gratefulness into your daily teaching life, consider a teaching gratitude journal. You can write five things down for which you are grateful for in the very beginning, such as "I'm grateful to be with those nice students today; I'm grateful to the girl named Catherine who greeted me with an angel-like smile on my way to classroom; I'm grateful to the shy boy in my class to answer a question voluntarily; I'm very grateful that all my students have done the homework I assigned last week; I'm enormously grateful that I'm learning something from my students today." You can even decorate your journal with photos of your students and keep it with you whenever you have classes. A few times a week, encourage your students to jot down things they are grateful

for. Spelling does not matter, and you don't need to write in complete sentences. Items can be very small, because if you can be thankful for small things, you are able to find more things to be grateful for and one day you would realize that you are blessed and embraced with these beautiful things every day. Every so often, before the class, the teacher can read some of the past entries out loud in front of the whole class. If a teacher can keep doing this, his or her class would be full of joy and gratitude where students are willing to learn more, because teaching is not just about knowledge and facts. Teaching is a feeling of love which connects the teacher and the students and inspires the students to think on their own and appreciate everything around them. In so doing, the teacher can create an aura of happiness and fulfillment inside and outside the classroom.

3.3 Keeping a gratitude reminder

Gratitude can also be practiced without journaling. If you are forgetful and have tight schedules in your career, try something else. Another useful tool recommended by Emmons (2007) is visual reminders which have the function of reminding a person to feel or express gratitude when they have the chance to see or touch the reminders. A teacher can choose something you have to use every day as a prompt. For example, you can choose your USB flash drive to practice gratitude if you bring your flash drive with you whenever you have classes. Every time you see or touch this flash drive, you say "thank you" to yourself, your students, or the government who offer you the job. If you have time, calm down to feel the feeling of gratefulness when you have it in your hand. The key to it is sticking to practicing it until it has formed a habit in your life like washing your face and brushing your teeth. By doing so, the teacher can shift attention from the "automatic pilot" to what is good in life. And it is easy for the teacher to feel grateful on a daily basis, even in a circumstance where hardships, difficulties and hassles are emerging. Because positive emotions can build psychological resiliency, the person who is grateful has the tendency to look at the positive side of these things and is able to see them as blessing in disguise under such situation. And the grateful person has the ability to bounce back more quickly from negative emotional states. In addition, positive emotions have the potential to weaken persistent negative emotions (Frederickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000). For example, the practice of gratitude inhibits a person in trouble or disaster from feeling anger, bitterness, envy, greed, and inadequacy (McCullough et al., 2002).

4. Conclusion

Although the recent literature in this arena has largely come from the field of positive psychology, the practice of it can be used in many fields. And the practice of gratitude cannot be confined to religion and philosophy. As a matter of fact, it is beyond religion. When it comes to the educational field, gratitude is a way of thinking that alters a teacher's perceptions of life and the causes of events. Our research has demonstrated the importance of gratitude and provides some useful tools to practice it. If a teacher is willing to take one of these tools, it will have both momentary and long-term effects on individual functioning that can potentially enhance interpersonal functioning in teacher-student relationship. Gratitude appears to work because it increases positive emotions, which can undo negative ones and builds resiliency. We believe that this approach is valuable in furthering our understanding of the factors underlying successful teaching career.

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