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Creating a Caring Culture: Exploring the Implications of Gratitude in Adult Education

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Abstract: Viewing classrooms as a culture, we sought to determine if gratitude could be a meaningful resource for creating a “caring” culture within the classroom setting. Findings suggest that gratitude promotes prosocial behaviors, builds stronger relationships, and helps to develop a greater sense of well-being (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Emmons, 2008).

Pulling from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (i.e. positive psychology and adult education) we sought to determine if gratitude could be a potentially meaningful resource for creating a more “caring” culture within the classroom setting. Gratitude as an affective trait promotes prosocial behaviors, builds stronger relationships, and helps to develop a greater sense of well-being (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Emmons, 2008). By prosocial behavior, we are referring to empathy, civility, mutual respect, and trust that results in admiration for one another (Buck, 2004). Gratitude is also supported by Wood, Joseph, and Maltby (2008) who states that “gratitude represents the quintessential positive personality trait, being an indicator of a worldview oriented towards noticing and appreciating the positive in life” (p. 443). Based on these preliminary findings, our theorizing from the literature seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What influence can gratitude have on the classroom environment? and (2) If gratitude is important for human flourishing and well-being, what strategies can be implemented to promote gratitude within the classroom? The significance of this exploration is to provide an alternative lens for viewing the cultural dynamics in the classroom setting. Finally, due to the limited amount of research on gratitude and adult learning this exploration offers an exciting new line of inquiry for adult and higher education focused on a more holistic perspective.

We have selected the Broaden-and-Build Theory by Fredrickson (2001; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005) as a theoretical framework for answering our research questions. Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions build social and personal resources by broadening cognition, attention, flexibility, and coping mechanisms (Fredrickson, 2001). Therefore, building positive emotions (i.e. gratitude) broadens one’s appraisal by increasing “momentary thought-action repertoires and builds enduring personal resources” (Fredrickson, 2004). For example, people with a positive outlook are more apt to deal with setbacks (i.e. resilience), find more creative ways of dealing with setbacks (i.e. coping), and have a more global appreciation for change (i.e. flexibility) (Fredrickson, 2001). Furthermore, as a positive emotion, gratitude is thought to undo negative emotions. According to the broaden-and-build theory the development of positive emotions are cumulative and this creates an upward spiral towards positivity (Fredrickson, 2001). Finally, this adaptability creates “enduring personal resources, like social connections, coping strategies, and environmental knowledge” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p. 679).

This accumulation of positive emotions (i.e. gratitude) can also have lasting effects because overtime “positivity can transform individuals for the better, making them healthier, more socially integrated, knowledgeable, effective, and resilient” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p. 679). This implies that gratitude can not only have immediate effects on the learning environment, but as a whole, educators and students alike can develop important relational skills beyond the classroom setting. Within this nonlinear and dynamic theory, the broaden-and-build theory is a systems approach to integrate the “multicomponent systems that simultaneously alter patterns of thinking, behavior, subjective experience, verbal and nonverbal communication, and psychological activity” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p. 680).

Benefits of Gratitude

Gratitude creates an outward focus or a growing desire to build stronger relationships with others (Howells, 2012). In building stronger relationships, “gratitude might be thought of as a social resource that is well worth understanding for the development of societies based on goodwill” (McCullough & Tsang, 2004, p.136). The building of social resources speaks to the underlying moral or ethical virtues of gratitude. According to Emmons (2004), “gratitude is a purely person-to-person phenomenon” (p.7). This implies that the greater the exchange of gratefulness between self and others, the more positive the environment becomes. This is therefore a reciprocal relationship between self and others that leads to openness and engagement. Furthermore, as a prosocial behavior, gratitude can build stronger relationships with others through motivation and reinforcement of positive emotions. For example, as a motivator, gratitude “urges the grateful person to respond in gracious and prosocial ways” (McAdams & Bauer, 2004, p. 87). In terms of gratitude as a reinforcer of prosocial behaviors, gratitude encourages moral actions that promotes and supports the well-being of the community [society] (McAdams & Bauer, 2004).

In viewing the classrooms as a culture, we are defining culture as “the shared beliefs, values, behaviors, language, and ways of communicating and making meaning among a particular social group” (Tisdell, 2003, p. 37). Following these ideas, we question what influence gratitude may have on the social context of adult learning. According to Merriam and Bierema (2014), “context refers to the social system that shapes the thoughts and actions of people within a particular setting...In adult education, context has been equated with the history and culture of the learner, the setting, and the learning environment” (p. 241). Secondly, due to the complexities of today’s learning environments: Is gratitude a culturally relevant concept? Tisdell (2003) builds on Guy’s (1999) notion that creating educational experiences that are culturally relevant is the “reconstruction of learners’ group identity from one that is negative to one that is positive” (p. 40). Because our endeavor is a focus on the positive, our findings suggest that “gratitude works together with a complex array of evolving human adaptations to broaden and build pleasing and mutually beneficial exchanges among individuals in ongoing social communities (McAdams & Bauer, 2004, p. 87). Therefore, by taking on this cultural perspective, we propose that the classroom can be positively altered by gratitude practices. These practices include creating experiences that enhance one’s perceived level of gratitude (e.g. gratitude journaling, acknowledging others kindness, and appreciating the simple things). Gratitude practices are more than simply saying “thank you,” but they are a deep recognition of the roles others play in one’s success. This relational idea or this idea of connecting to

something/someone other than oneself creates new social norms directed towards developing stronger relationships, hence, creating a caring culture.

Because it is the interpretation of experiences that expands relational perceptions, the social-cognitive model adds the notion of benefit appraisal. Through the appraisal of value, cost, and genuine helpfulness of an experience (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Linley, 2008), these components can help to explain further the benefits of gratitude for creating a caring culture. There are four basic assumptions of this model, which include: (1) people perceive aid/help from others differently, (2) recognizing aid/help as a benefit produces state gratitude, (3) those with higher trait levels of gratitude will have a stronger benefit appraisal, and (4) this higher benefit appraisal explains the association between state and trait levels of gratitude (Wood, et al., 2008). The value of using this model for explaining how a person can broaden his/her level of knowing (i.e. gratitude) is that through benefit appraisal, one can develop an outward appreciation for others. In fact, the very social-cognitive nature of this model “integrates social situations, individual difference, and the mediating cognitive mechanisms of meaning-making” (Wood et al., 2008, p. 282), which are needed for interpreting experiences. Finally, this appraisal can strengthen one’s moral barometer (McCullough & Tsang, 2004), which has been described as “a response to other people’s generosity” (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Larson, 2001, p. 252).

Barriers to a Culture of Gratitude

As with any scientific endeavor, it is prudent to explore alternative views or issues related to the topic of interest. First, the only alternative to gratitude is ingratitude, “the failure to acknowledge the beneficence of others, which can lead to resentment, hostility, or indifferences” (Emmons & Shelton, 2002, p. 463). As ingratitude increases, the interconnectedness formed through gratitude diminishes leading to a “confining, restricting, and shrinking sense of self [identity]” (Emmons & Shelton, 2002, p. 463). Also, “research has shown that people who are ungrateful tend to have a sense of excessive self-importance, arrogance, vanity, and a high need for admiration and approval” (Emmons, 2013, p. 105). This relates to culture is that ingratitude creates a sense of entitlement. When a group member develops an attitude that “something is owed to me,” this diminishes one’s relational perceptions. By elevating one’s positionality, this alters the balance of power within the group. Furthermore, the attenuation of an attitude of entitlement only cultivates resentment, which is counter to the goals of gratitude. The value of gratitude in social situations is that gratitude “can be understood as an emotion that serves the social function of promoting relationships” (Algoe, Haidt & Gable, 2008, p. 429).

Besides ingratitude, another issue with gratitude is indebtedness. In regard to indebtedness, the receipt of a gift may be demeaning or strike a sense of obligation in others. Shelton (2004) explores this notion by stating, “feeling grateful, however, does not require the perception of indebtedness as much as it requires the awareness of the beneficence of others. As mentioned, the defining feature of gratitude is giving and receiving a gift. This is fraught with an assortment of perceptions, psychological states, and conflicting emotions” (p. 272), and it is these assortments of perceptions that causes pause when examining the meaning behind the gift. Scheible (2000) suggests that gifts can have a negative connotation, because “gifts bring pride, envy, hatred, greed, and jealousy. An example of this would be giving a gift for the wrong reasons, as in flaunting one’s wealth” (as cited in Shelton, 2004, p. 272). Shelton (2004)

describes this as fabricated gratitude because this form of gratitude masks the negative feelings associated with the gift. Therefore, indebtedness should not be used synonymously with gratitude.

Furthermore, Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, & Knolts (2006) builds on Greenburg's (1980) work, which defines indebtedness as "a state of obligation to repay another and an emotional state of arousal [or] discomfort, which alerts the person to opportunities to reduce discomfort" (p. 218). These thoughts were tested using three different vignettes. Within each vignette, the expectations for return favors were increased. Findings from the first study showed that as expectations increased, gratitude decreases and indebtedness increases (Watkins, et al., 2006). The takeaway is that "when a favor is given with increasing expectations of return from the benefactor the beneficiary feels less gratitude but more indebtedness" (Watkins, et al., 2006, p. 226). This suggests that gratitude and indebtedness should be seen as distinctively different emotional states (Watkins, et al., 2006). Also, Mathews and Green (2010) presented two studies that test how self-focus is linked to gratitude and indebtedness. Their findings build on the notion of indebtedness by stating that "indebtedness is more likely when one's attention is turned inward, as opposed to outward toward the benefit or external factors" (Mathews & Green, 2010, p. 711). Moreover, "individuals prone to greater public self-consciousness and social anxiety reported more indebtedness" (Mathews & Green, 2010, p. 716). The talking points from these studies suggest that (1) The higher expectations are for a return result in lower levels of gratitude, and that (2) The terms "gratitude" and "indebtedness" should not be used synonymously because they represent distinct emotional states (Watkins, et al., 2006).

A final barrier to overcome is considering the intentionality of others prosocial behaviors. More specifically, "when gratitude expressions are interpreted as disingenuous, they are not effective as moral reinforcers" (Watkins, 2014, p. 154). This implies that the reciprocal, prosocial outcomes of grateful expressions are diminished if the recipient interprets the benefactor's intentions as negative. The notion of intent can have major ramifications on creating a caring learning environment. For example, if gratitude is used for the intent of gaining favors from others, there is a significant chance for this expression to have a negative impact on the relationship because ill-intentions alters trust (Watkins, 2014). In fact, according to McCullough & Tsang (2004), "the perceived intentionality of the benefit is the most important factor in determining whether someone felt grateful after receiving a benefit" (p. 124). Therefore, if intentionality is key to promoting gratitude, and gratitude promotes prosocial behaviors, then a caring environment must be built on good intentions and trust. Finally, it is these good intentions that amplify the positive we see in others and it promotes a "pay-it-forward" attitude.

Implications for Practice

Overall, our findings from the literature demonstrate that gratitude may be a potential source for creating a caring culture within the learning environment. This caring culture creates an environment which promotes adaptive skills for both students and educators. The value of this understanding in Adult and Higher Education is that gratitude alters one's appraisal of the learning environment through the building of enduring resources which can have a positive impact on future learning endeavors. Also, by understanding the positive influences of gratitude, we are approaching adult learning from a more holistic perspective. From this holistic perspective, gratitude may aid in developing the whole learner by promoting subjective well-

being. Finally, by drawing on these different areas of research, Adult Educators can expand their own ideas about how to influence the learning environment more positively through creating a caring culture.

As a final thought, the implementation of gratitude in the classroom is now challenged with the notion that as educators we cannot require students to be grateful, and if this is the case, what is gratitude's value in the classroom? The value is found in providing students with opportunities to cultivate their own gratitude by "seeing the benefits that accrue" (Jonas, 2012, P. 44), and by seeing these benefits, educators are able to provide them with an alternative lens for interpreting their learning experiences. This implies that by cultivating opportunities for benefit-finding we are providing students with the power to positively influence the classroom culture. By acknowledging these acts, educators have an opportunity to cultivate gratitude. Furthermore, Algoe (2012) speculates that the "expressions of gratitude inspires incidental witnesses to be prosocial, due to the fact that attention has been drawn to appropriate group behavior and because such behavior appears to be socially rewarding" (p. 21). Therefore, setting the stage for gratitude within the classroom may function to build and sustain prosocial norms and to create a stronger social network through reciprocity.

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