Gratitude: Humanising pedagogy in higher education

Cheryl Chan Xuan Tong[A]

A   *Project Coordinator, Family Service Centre*

Fadhil Ismail[B]

B   *Senior Lecturer, Academic Support & Curriculum Planning, Kaplan Higher Education Academy*

Keywords

Correspondence

fadhil.ismail@kaplan.com [B]

Article Info

Abstract

Psychology has largely viewed human functioning from a deficit model in the past but has since turned to a more optimistic, positive psychological lens. Gratitude is a well-researched concept associated with a broad range of psychology theories, such as Fredrickson's broaden and build theory and Algoe's find, remind, and bind theory. Research studies revealed that gratitude is one of the strongest predictors of wellbeing and is strongly linked with better psychological and subjective wellbeing. However, gratitude is rarely studied in higher education contexts, making it critical to understand if and how gratitude can impact learners' wellbeing positively, which, in turn, may lead to better performance in their studies and improvements in their overall wellbeing. This research study employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to capture the experiences and perspectives of students and lecturers in higher education in relation to gratitude. Findings revealed that gratitude leads to positive emotions, better relationships, and prosocial behaviours. Additionally, gratitude was found to improve students' wellbeing and increase their engagement and motivation levels towards learning. To integrate gratitude into the academic curriculum, discourses surrounding gratitude must be reconsidered, and intentional learning spaces for gratitude should also be developed.

Introduction

> A happy soul is the best shield for a cruel world. (Atticus, 2016, n. p.).

In the past, psychology has focused exclusively on weaknesses and deficits. Individuals' functioning was scrutinised from a diagnostical lens which requires healing and repairing (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000). A bulk of psychology deals with psychological disorders and negative aspects of life, while little is known about how normal people flourish under conditions that are less hostile in some societies today (Fredrickson, 2001). According to Hale et al. (2019), it is likely that many societies around the globe are generally affluent, whose members live in relative comfort and have had their physiological and safety needs met. As such, it is expected that people today might be more interested in exploring ways to lead more fulfilling lives. Hence, psychology has shifted its focus to more positive aspects, focusing on strengths and flourishing (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000). The notion of positive psychology is to re-examine an average individual to find out what enables them to thrive, what is going in the right direction and what improves their wellbeing (Sheldon & King, 2001). With the evolution of positive psychology into its third wave, the direction of inquiry is now heading towards navigating various groups and systems and becoming increasingly more multidisciplinary and multicultural to consider a broader range of methods (Lomas et al., 2021).

Singapore is renowned for its world-class education system (Lee & Gopinathan, 2020), although this comes at a price. Students are challenged by intense competition and the pressure to perform. A recent survey conducted in Singapore revealed that undergraduates cited work and educational commitments as causing them the most stress (Lim, 2022). This finding was supported by the alarming spike in the proportion of youths aged 18-29 with poor mental health to over 25% (Goh, 2023). Across the globe, youth suicide remains a major concern (Allen et al., 2024), being the leading cause of death amongst Singaporean youths amongst youths aged 10-29 in the years 2019 to 2021 (Samaritans of Singapore, 2022) and Australians aged 15-24 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023).

One central assertion in Brookfield et al.'s (2024) book on teaching well is that 'teaching well' is a concept that is dynamic and always relevant. However, this concept will evolve with what practitioners find out about how students learn in changing contexts and different learning environments. Efforts to establish approaches to 'teaching well' are critical, and it is also equally vital to understand that 'teaching well' is not just about pedagogical approaches but also includes ensuring students' wellbeing. In attempts to alleviate the impact of the highly competitive education system, Singapore's Ministry of Education introduced mental health literacy and support in higher education institutions, including various mental health programmes and resources, focusing on increasing awareness, self-care, as well as early help-seeking behaviours (Rizal, 2023). Moreover, Singapore's educational policy direction is also heading towards holistic development, such as leveraging students' strengths and abilities, recognising the need for developing positive and conducive learning climates for students and having competent, caring teachers (Lee & Gopinathan, 2020). A possible entry point to facilitate positive learning climates in higher education could be to humanise pedagogy using gratitude.

Gratitude

Academic literature discussing the concept of gratitude has repeatedly documented positive results (Lomas et al., 2021; Watkins & Bell, 2017). Emmons and McCullough (2003) posited that gratitude requires one to acknowledge the accomplishment of a desirable outcome, and this desirable outcome originates from an external source. Gratitude can be understood as an affective trait, a mood, or an emotional state (Locklear et al., 2023). It can also be defined as an emotion experienced when an individual affirms a benefit that happened to them and recognises that another individual is largely responsible for this benefit (Watkins, 2014; Watkins & McCurrach, 2017). McCullough et al. (2002) proposed the moral affect theory towards understanding gratitude as a moral emotion, where gratitude serves the functions of a moral barometer, moral reinforcer, and moral motivator. Those high in affective trait gratitude typically experience gratitude more frequently since they have a low threshold for gratitude (Watkins & Bell, 2017).

Furthermore, Emmons et al. (2003) explained that people with high gratitude dispositions should possess four facets: intensity, frequency, span, and density. Similarly, individuals with a high gratitude disposition also possess three lower-order traits. They should be high in abundance, appreciation of simple pleasures and an appreciation for others. It is also interesting to note that appreciation, a cognitive component of dispositional gratitude, permeates the three lower-order traits. According to Watkins (2014), one must first recognise the gift to experience gratitude. Subsequently, recognising the goodness of the gift, the goodness of the giver, and the gratuitousness of the gift increases the likelihood of one experiencing gratitude (Watkins, 2014). This is consistent with Emmons and Mirshra's (2011) perspective that gratitude involves people's endorsement that their desirable outcome or gift is attributed to the giver, and gratitude is typically directed towards another person or entity (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Positive emotions and education

Fredrickson's broaden and build theory of positive emotions (2004) suggests that positive emotions seemingly expand individuals' transient thought-action repertoires and form their long-lasting personal resources, which she applied to the understanding of gratitude. Gratitude, like other positive emotions, produces flourishing in addition to signalling flourishing. Fredrickson (2004) argued that negative emotions in traditional theories often boil down to a specific set of urges or behavioural options, which apply to life-threatening situations when swift decisions are required, whereas positive emotions broaden individuals' mindsets and build enduring personal resources (Fredrickson, 1988). In particular, gratitude propels people to engage in a wide

range of prosocial behaviours creatively (McCullough et al., 2002) instead of merely repaying the deed tit-for-tat (Fredrickson, 2004).

Algoe's (2012) find, remind, and bind theory is an extension of Fredrickson's broaden and build theory, which looks at the social functions of gratitude. Algoe (2012) suggests that gratitude aids in the maintenance of the most important relationships people have in their lives, with those they care about and rely on. According to the find, remind and bind theory, gratitude enables one to identify new aspects of their partner that they are grateful for or remind them of their partner's existing characteristics that they are grateful for, which eventually binds the two in the dyad more closely together. She mentioned that grateful people are more likely to have higher intrinsic motivation towards taking actions that would result in the enhancement of the relationship (Algoe & Haidt, 2009).

One study that explored the integration of gratitude in the class was Noland et al.'s (2017) study. However, their study focused exclusively on the effect of gratitude on happiness and not other aspects of students' wellbeing. Other researchers have explored the role of gratitude in education (Howells, 2004) and gratitude in educational philosophy (Bostad, 2021), but none has drawn direct links to examine how gratitude can be incorporated into pedagogy, with considerations of students' well-being and specifically in the higher education context. Hence, this gap lends itself to the objective of this study, which is to investigate the effect of gratitude on students' performance in higher education and explore ways in which gratitude can be used to humanise pedagogy in higher education. With this objective being the cornerstone of this study, this research study investigates the effect of gratitude on students' performance and wellbeing and explores ways for gratitude to be integrated into pedagogical approaches in higher education classrooms.

Literature review

Several studies indicate that gratitude has strong relations to all aspects of wellbeing (Bono et al., 2022; Cregg & Cheavens, 2021; Wood et al., 2010). In their meta-analysis, Wood et al. (2010) revealed that gratitude was correlated with traits associated with positive emotional functioning, lower dysfunction, and positive social relationships. Similarly, Mӑirean et al. (2019) found that all dimensions of trait gratitude had positive relations to the dimensions of psychological wellbeing. Gratitude has been demonstrated to enhance subjective wellbeing through grateful processing (Watkins et al., 2015). An intervention study on the effects of a positive psychology course on student wellbeing found meaningful improvements (Maybury, 2013), such as improvements in students' happiness, mindfulness, hope and positive orientations for the future. Similarly, Kardas et al. (2019) found gratitude to be the strongest predictor of wellbeing. While gratitude has been extensively researched in areas like anthropology and social psychology, the application of gratitude in education is still in its infancy stage (Howells, 2014). Nonetheless, gratitude contributes to high levels of student satisfaction amongst undergraduates and feelings of gratitude are driven by helping behaviours,

care, perceived effort and environment (Cownie, 2017). Specifically, reciprocal engagement was perceived by one student to be helpful for more engagement in the course unit since there is more feedback and help provided (Cownie, 2017). Moreover, Cownie's study (2017) also revealed that the reciprocal student-academic relationship presents an explicit and intentional attempt to avoid disappointing the helpful lecturer.

While gratitude is a natural occurrence for some teachers, others find the need to cultivate gratitude intentionally (Wilson & Foster, 2018). Wilson and Foster (2018) detailed a form of gratitude language that fits into the teaching context, inviting teachers to incorporate this language into discourses and classroom discussions such as through gratitude circles or simply by greeting each student, ideally by name and expressing gratitude for their presence. This seems analogous to the recent discourse on humanising academia through the recalibration of kindness in higher education pedagogy (Tan, 2022).

Howells (2004) brought attention to understanding gratitude in education contexts and how the practice of gratitude by both students and teachers can improve academic learning. Additionally, a randomised controlled trial found that gratitude journals resulted in higher levels of gratefulness in participants (Lai & O'Carroll, 2017). Among high school students, a new approach to gratitude intervention included a combination of psycho-education top-down technique and a bottom-up social media app that supported students' personal and social well-being, with improvements in outcomes in trait gratitude (Bono et al., 2020). Though not specifically designed for implementation in schools, school-based positive psychology interventions (PPI) have produced promising outcomes in terms of student wellbeing, academic outcome, school climate and even teacher wellbeing (Shankland & Rosset, 2017). Furthermore, gratitude interventions are most effective when both meaning and positivity are prioritised, as those who only focus on either positivity or meaning enjoy fleeting benefits (Atad & Russo-Netzer, 2022).

Generally, there are two common gratitude interventions to cultivate gratitude (Dickens, 2017), and they are having a gratitude journal and a behavioural expression of gratitude. Gratitude journals require individuals to list things for which they are grateful regularly (Wood et al., 2010), while the behavioural expression of gratitude encourages the expression of grateful feelings to others (Wood et al., 2010). The gratitude letter is the most cited behavioural expression, in which one writes gratitude letters to the person to whom they are grateful and then reads the letters to their benefactors (Seligman et al., 2005). The advantages of such interventions include low cost, time effectiveness, ease of understanding, and implementation (Dickens, 2017).

However, Wood et al. (2010) cautioned against understanding gratitude simply as being grateful to others. Instead, it should also be conceptualised as a life orientation that involves one's deliberate efforts to focus on and appreciate positive aspects of life. Otherwise, a person with high gratitude may tend to attribute their independent success to the efforts of others, as pointed out by McCullough et al. (2002). Gratitude

was least experienced in young and middle-aged adults and the most in older adults (Chopik, 2019), as gratitude may be an adaptive evolutionary mechanism that brings people together in groups (Algoe, 2012). With increased concerns about mental health issues amongst young people (Goh, 2023), it is crucial that research investigates improving the wellbeing of youths in the classroom. Since gratitude has such robust connections to wellbeing, it might be able to affect students' wellbeing positively, in turn leading to better academic performance in higher education institutions. Therefore, the current study aims to gain insight into the effects of gratitude on students' performance in higher education institutions in Singapore and how gratitude interventions can be integrated into lessons as a pedagogical approach.

Methodology

Qualitative research uses a holistic approach to understand the human experience under specific circumstances (Rahman, 2016). Since this study is interested in subjective experiences of gratitude that may influence students' wellbeing, a qualitative research method has been adopted. The advantages of qualitative data collection methods include revealing diversified truths (Fraser, 2004) and allowing theories to surface (Eyisi, 2016). This research study used purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling where the researcher chooses participants based on specific criteria, encompassing those knowledgeable about the research topic (Rai & Thapa, 2015).

For this study, five student participants were chosen based on the criteria that they are currently enrolled in a higher education institution and taking an undergraduate course within the institution. Five lecturer participants, on the other hand, were recruited from various disciplines in a particular higher education institution. This study recruits both student and lecturer participants for the practice of inclusivity to hear from both perspectives. Since interviews for this study were conducted individually, informed consent was direct, and harm was kept minimal as participants were free to withdraw their comments, unlike participation in focus group discussions (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). Participants were provided with a participant information sheet consisting of a summary of this study, potential benefits and harms, as well as how the collected data would be stored and used. Informed consent was obtained based on voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw at any time.

Participants were contacted via WhatsApp texts, and interviews (see Appendices A and B) were organised and conducted through the Zoom application. Interviews allow for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena, as well as the subjective experiences of individuals (Jain, 2021). Besides, interviews involve interactions, and the researcher can probe for unambiguous responses and look for complete answers in almost any subject matter. It also helps to deepen understanding of the phenomena being investigated and is closer to the phenomena in real life (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The identity of participants would be protected by assigning them pseudonyms such as "S1(student 1)" or "L1(lecturer

1)". Data collected are stored in a password-protected folder accessible only to the researchers. The data collected were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2012), which consists of six phases. The six stages of the thematic analysis process are becoming familiar with the data, identifying and generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, and defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis is an excellent method for picking out, arranging, and providing insights into trends and deciphering the meaning inherent within the data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Coupled with the flexibility and accessibility that thematic analysis affords, it is appropriate to analyse this study's interview data since knowledge of gratitude's role in higher education pedagogy is relatively scant.

Brown and Danaher (2019) emphasised the CHE (Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy) principles to facilitate semi-structured interviews in education research. The importance of connectivity was emphasised as semi-structured interviews probe participants' stories and personal experiences, which can be intrusive. Hence, it is important to ensure that participants feel valued when they share their personal experiences by the interviewers adopting a modest attitude and empathising with their experiences (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). This will potentially facilitate the development of novel approaches to humanising pedagogy and 'teach well' through the incorporation of gratitude. Humanness (Brown & Danaher, 2019) was another principle considered, leading to the recruitment of both student and lecturer participants for the practice of inclusivity to hear from both perspectives in order to minimise power imbalance in the research-participant relationship (Drolet et al., 2023).

Findings

The findings revealed that appreciation was an important part of gratitude's definition for most of the participants, although appreciation was slightly different across descriptions. Gratitude was associated with positive emotions and evoked prosocial behaviours that helped strengthen relationships. Culture was another recurring theme in participants' responses, suggesting its impact on gratitude. Student participants suggest that gratitude improves their wellbeing which in turn increases their motivation and engagement levels, leading to improved performance. In addition, the data revealed that lecturer participants endorsed gratitude's ability to be cultivated in the classroom and incorporated into pedagogy through altering discourses surrounding gratitude and intentionally creating space for gratitude. The next sections present the main themes of this study derived from a thematic analysis of the data (see Appendix C).

Positive emotions

Gratitude evoked positive emotions for all participants. The most commonly endorsed emotion among all participants is happiness. S4 mentioned that gratitude can "inflate the little things" and "focus on small things, preventing detrimental actions or impulsiveness in the long run", as well as "acting

as a barrier to maladaptive strategies". Furthermore, S4 added that gratitude helps one focus and expand on the small positive things. L1 mentioned warmth. S5 attributed the happiness felt to experiencing gratitude to the sense of achievement she felt. However, S2 suggested that gratitude contributes to the thankfulness of what has already been achieved. S2 also associated gratitude with having a more positive outlook on life. L5 similarly feels at peace with himself as gratitude reminds him of his achievements. S3 reported that gratitude helps her to learn to appreciate what she already has, hence feeling less stressed. She also experienced a sense of relief when she expressed gratitude as she placed importance on letting the giver know how much they had helped before it was too late.

When others express their gratitude to her, S3 verbalised feelings of fulfilment as she has done something that made someone else feel good. S3 also experiences a sense of pride due to the acknowledgement of the sufficient amount of effort invested. In addition, S5 feels more at peace. From a lecturer's perspective, L1 thought gratitude impacts students' emotional regulation.

Strengthening relationships

L1 introduced the idea of 're-membering', a concept derived from narrative therapy, which involves purposive engagement with significant people in one's past that helps shape one's present or future identity. However, S5 had more neutral inclinations of gratitude's effect on relationships. Although S5 agrees that "gratitude is part and parcel of relationship", gratitude is something that she 'won't put important emphasis on'. Furthermore, S5 is "unsure if gratitude will improve relationships but if we do not repay the favour, the relationship will worsen". S3 said that gratitude helps her to "appreciate present relationships". Likewise, S1 mentioned that gratitude helps with her relationship in the long term where she becomes closer to others. S1 further added that whether or not the benefactor is influenced by the benefit received depends on the relationship quality because "if there is a relationship, there is already rapport" and "those who know each other will feel stronger gratitude and rapport" but if the benefactor 'is a stranger then the stranger would not bother'.

Similarly, S2 pointed out that gratitude can strengthen relationships by "reminding us about the good things" of the other person since she felt that "with any relationship there are conflicts and when conflicts happen, the focus is usually on who is right or wrong" but "when you start to focus on the good of this person or what you are thankful for, then the negatives seem less important". S2 also revealed that gratitude results in mutual affirmation. S3 and S4 expressed similar sentiments as S3 felt that expressing gratitude helps her "understand how much the other person mean to me" and similarly, S4 suggested gratitude's ability to strengthen relationships since there is more appreciation and understanding for each other. S3 added that when gratitude is expressed to teachers, the student-teacher relationship improves. For L1, he thought about taking steps to let coworkers know that they are being appreciated, helps to improve his relationship with them since he was in

a managerial role and coworkers have commented that he seems to not appreciate others' efforts. However, according to S1, people express gratitude to varying degrees and hence, it is not feasible to impose one's own expectations on others.

Prosocial behaviours

Gratitude also seems to evoke prosocial behaviours. S1 mentioned she expresses feelings of gratitude to others through gifting to show appreciation and she would call people randomly to check on their wellbeing or text to show appreciation. S1 also considers the personality or love language of the other person and cited an example: "If they like to spend time with me then I will give them my time". Other behaviours cited by students are thanking people verbally, gifting and treating people to meals. L1 has the habit of recording gratitude in a gratitude journal and reaching out to people who have impacted his life. For instance, L1 talked about sending flowers to past teachers out of the blue, without any special occasions. L1 also mentioned that the expectation of gratitude when doing certain things is not helpful and he prefers not to talk about what he has done for others as "goodness should happen quietly". S5 defined gratitude as something self-sacrificial, such as time or something precious to oneself. This similarity was also observed in S2's response of the giver's choice of going the extra mile for her. Additionally, S5 said that when she experiences gratitude, she feels motivated to continue her work.

Appreciation

Appreciation was a prevalent theme across students' and lecturers' definitions of gratitude, albeit appreciation comes in different forms. For S1, L2 and L4, gratitude is about appreciation of the little things in life that are often neglected. L4 mentioned that having accommodation, good friendships, colleagues, a safe environment and basic essentials are things that people often take for granted, which S1 similarly mentioned. Analogously, L2 gives credit for the current times that individuals are situated in, the state of being alive and in a safe country with good governance like Singapore. For S3, gratitude is about appreciation for a kind deed done by another person. For S4, L1 and L4, gratitude manifests in forms of appreciation that are more intrapersonal. S4 stated that she was grateful for things she already has, and L4 mentioned the same but added that she also appreciates things that she does not have, whereas L1 stated that gratitude can also be self-appreciation. For L5 and L3, gratitude as a form of appreciation can be quite generic, as no specification of appreciation was mentioned. L3 noted that gratitude is something reciprocal or that gratitude is "two ways" where "one is the appreciation of gratitude while the other one comes from receiving kindness from someone else" while L5 mentioned that gratitude means to be appreciative of his family members and closest friends since people very easily forget and neglect people who have supported them in the past and he finds a need to be thankful and not take those people for granted. L2 mentioned that as a teacher, it is nice to be appreciated, such as when he

receives an email or word of thanks from students. L1 also finds that gratitude comes to him in words of appreciation from others, where he is able to see that people are "doing well or their lives are shifting because of the conversations we have" and also seeing that "people have appreciated and taken note of resources provided, whether they are advice or material things". L3 would explicitly express her appreciation for students' contributions and participation in class. S2 mentioned that gratitude broadens her perspective.

Students' wellbeing, engagement, and motivation in the classroom

Most of the student participants identified an improvement in wellbeing as a result of practising gratitude, which has led to higher engagement and motivation levels. Specifically, S2, S3 and S5 mentioned gratitude's association with wellbeing. S2 said that gratitude has a certain connection to students' mental wellbeing as "gratitude helps us to focus on the good parts of school" while both S3 and S5 added that gratitude helps with mental health, grades and performance. Other than academic performance, S5 thought that gratitude aids in self-improvement as well and gave the example that a more confident person would be able to express their ideas better to their friends and would be deemed more favourable in group settings. In a similar vein, S3 suggests that gratitude leads to a good social life. S3 also has better focus when she practises gratitude. S1 said that encouragement from others played a big role in increasing her motivation to learn and she is grateful that "we (classmates) are all in this together". S2 elaborated that gratitude prevents her from being too anxious so that she would not become dysfunctional. L2 mentioned that some students "are smart to engage teachers and show appreciation" and this enables them to "develop good relationships with teachers and experience a higher level of engagement so that they can learn things they really want to learn". L1 revealed that he only chooses to teach a certain module if he is able to personally connect with the module since he knows that in such modules, whatever he does can make a difference and students can at least take away practical things from classes.

From a student's perspective, S3 thought that teachers would feel more motivated to teach as their ultimate aim is to help students. Hence, they are more motivated to keep going if students express gratitude, implying that the student has had a satisfactory education experience with the teacher. S3 also feels more focused. L3 shares that the experience of gratitude increases the likelihood of students doing well as their motivation to remain in the programme increases. Gratitude boosts confidence which helps a student to write better theses and to be more efficient, according to S4. According to this student, with more confidence, a student can share opinions in class without holding back. A related input from S5 is that intrinsic motivation stemming from gratitude increases engagement as gratitude enables her to perceive that her efforts are appreciated and do not go unseen. Furthermore, S4 mentioned that teachers will be more motivated to teach in a way that is more engaging with gratitude in place. S2 hinted that gratitude helps a student be in a state of mind where they would be able to do their best and aids in long-term perseverance. S2 also

said that gratitude propels her to move forward regardless of her academic achievement, as she remains grateful for what she has already completed and looks forward to upcoming opportunities to perform instead of dwelling on the bad. Furthermore, practising gratitude reminds S2 of her purpose in life and focuses on her core values, which are truly important. L1 agreed that he has more energy when he is more engaged and when students are appreciative, they would similarly engage and be more connected to ideas and concepts taught in class.

Conscious and intentional space for gratitude

Another theme that prevailed is that gratitude is often not something that occurs naturally to many. L1 said that self-awareness was critical and precedes gratitude. L1 further added that in other countries, the training or academic prerequisite is to be engaged and vulnerable enough to ensure sufficient engagement. S2 believes that gratitude can be cultivated or obtained through practice. S1 thought that students need to know the objectives and purpose of studying, before they can determine areas to be grateful for. L1 and L3 similarly shared the idea of cultivating gratitude within oneself first; for L1, gratitude is living and practising gratitude as a lifestyle, and likewise, for L3, she sees gratitude as a mindset and a form of mindfulness, putting herself in the right mindset as that will affect the energy and relationships in class. L3 explained that she will never walk into a classroom with negative energy because "it doesn't matter what is happening in my life outside of the classroom", but when she steps into the classroom, she thought that "students come first, and they expect 100% from you" as a teacher. L3 also detailed that intonation should be intentionally adjusted to encourage students to feel welcomed, safe and comfortable. L4 mentioned that when gratitude is introduced, students enjoy gratitude and feel comforted. Additionally, L3 mentioned that she would share about herself openly before asking students to share in class to facilitate reciprocal conversations, as she felt that students would respond accordingly when they recognised her authenticity. L3 strongly believes in having kindness in the curriculum, and there is value in practising compassion in the classroom. L4 expressed concerns regarding students' willingness to share as gratitude can be quite a personal and intimate topic, hence having a safe space for students to share would be vital.

Gratitude discourses

The role of language and discourse seems to come out strongly amongst participants' responses as well. Interestingly, L2 shared that gratitude would involve appreciation if gratitude were to be related to people. L2 also mentioned that he has no elaborate language for gratitude. For L3, language plays an important role in introducing gratitude, and she also found that conversations, debates and discussions can be helpful ways to infuse gratitude into the classroom. L1 brought in ideas from narrative therapy, such as definitional ceremonies and re-membering where gratitude can be applicable. L1 shared that re-membering involves detailing what one appreciates about significant members in one's

life, while definitional ceremonies involve witness(es) and collective documentation of accomplishments or narratives. Modules on self-discovery were suggested by L1 to incorporate gratitude into the classroom, with the condition that students must be mentally present in class and with a certain level of vulnerability, as he thought that teachers could teach about gratitude, but it should begin with students' self-reflection. The idea of collaboration and reciprocity is also strongly evident. L2 shared about the Appreciative Pause technique (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016), which involves asking all students to verbalise what they appreciate about a classmate and the trick is that the lecturer is excluded. L2 also mentioned the Circle of Voices (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016), similar to the definitional ceremony and the re-membering conversations raised by L1.

Impact of culture on gratitude

All the lecturers touched on culture as a factor that might affect gratitude. L2 pointed out that Singapore has a "very materialistic culture", often "fast-paced" and "time is money". Singaporeans are also "not usually extroverted" and the fact that Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2011) commented that Singaporeans are oftentimes 'neutral', akin to poker players, in their emotional expressions. Analogously, L5 thought that Asians are not very expressive, and it may seem abrupt to introduce gratitude, though he recommended introducing gratitude right in the beginning during welcome orientations, and teachers can revise gratitude concepts at the onset of lectures. L1, L3 and L4 also shared similar sentiments with L2 about Singapore being competitive and specifically, L1 thought that students are "predisposed to asking what the benefit is" and that they are incentivised rather than being intrinsically motivated towards the practice of gratitude. L4 shared that students, especially international ones, struggle with financial success, and they are driven to do well in material wealth rather than in school examinations, possibly due to Singapore's status as a capitalist state. L4 further mentioned that survival is important to students, and they are very often trained to pursue financial success and material gain instead of something of interest. Additionally, L4 thought that for international students, gratitude may not be a familiar concept at first mention, and there is a need to simplify the term so that they are able to understand gratitude and "ideas start coming to them and start coming to life".

The next section discusses and summarises all the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the study.

Discussion

This study found that practising gratitude leads to experiencing positive emotions, strengthening of relationships and prosocial behaviours. Appreciation made up a huge part of gratitude. There are also promising accounts of gratitude increasing engagement in learning in higher education institutions, as well as gratitude increasing students' wellbeing. Possibilities of incorporating gratitude into higher education pedagogy and learning will also be discussed, including the effect of culture on gratitude.

The majority of the participants highlighted appreciation when asked to define gratitude. Essentially, appreciation involves reappraising the benefit, which increases its subjective value (Watkins, 2013). Gratitude is activated by a benefit (Watkins, 2013), and in order for one to experience gratitude, there are four cognitive patterns or recognition of gratitude that precede (Watkins, 2001). According to Watkins (2014), one must first recognise the gift in order to experience gratitude at all. In this study, this was demonstrated by the wide range of examples given, such as the often-neglected little things in life cited by S1, L2 and L4, which include having accommodation, good friendships, colleagues, a safe environment, and essentials. Similarly, L2 appreciates the current times which individuals are situated in, the state of being alive and in a safe country with good governance like Singapore.

The second part of recognition is recognising the goodness of the gift, though not explicitly mentioned by any participant in this study. Subsequently, the third part involves recognising the goodness of the giver, which S2 pointed out, feeling seen as the giver went the extra mile for her, implying that the gift or benefit comes at a cost. S2 also mentioned that the gift was something that the giver "didn't have to but chose to do that", which is also linked to the gratuitousness of the gift, something unnecessary. Although gratitude is typically directed towards another person or entity, like L5's appreciation of his family and close friends, gratitude is also experienced from events not directed to any giver or benefactor, such as appreciation of one's own abilities or environment that facilitates success (Wood et al., 2010). This was supported by S4 and L4's gratitude towards things they already have and L1's self-appreciation. Additionally, L3 noted that gratitude is something reciprocal or that gratitude is "two ways" where "one is the appreciation of gratitude while the other one comes from receiving kindness from someone else". Appreciation also manifests as expressions of gratitude, such as L2's receipt of email or word of thanks from students expressing their appreciation. When participants spoke about appreciation directed towards them, there seemed also to be a sense of accomplishment. For example, L1 found that gratitude comes to him as words of appreciation from others, where he is able to see that people are "doing well or their lives are shifting because of the conversations we have" and also seeing that "people have appreciated and taken note of resources provided, whether they are advice or material things". In terms of expressing appreciation, L3 explicitly acknowledges students' contributions and participation in class.

Gratitude also leads to positive emotions. All participants in this study, students, and lecturers alike, reported feeling positive emotions when gratitude is involved, and these positive emotions seem to point towards better wellbeing. S4 mentioned that gratitude can "inflate the little things" and "focus on small things, preventing detrimental actions or impulsiveness in the long run", as well as "acting as a barrier to maladaptive strategies". This suggests gratitude's potential as a buffer due to the protective effect of positive emotions (Wood et al., 2010). According to the positive affect hypothesis, as the experience of gratitude and positive emotions increases, life satisfaction increases as

well (Wood et al., 2010). S4 added that gratitude helps one focus and expand on the small positive things, conforming with Fredrickson's broaden and build theory of positive emotions (2013), which states that positive emotions expand individuals' transient thought-action repertoire Particularly, gratitude enables an individual to consider a wide range of prosocial behaviour and activates the urge for an individual to act prosocially, possibly towards the giver or others, or both, to reflect their gratitude (Fredrickson, 2004). Fredrickson (2004) also emphasised that the aforementioned prosocial behaviours inspired by gratitude are creative. Moreover, aligned with positive emotions' ability to build enduring resources, gratitude builds and strengthens social relationships (Emmons & Shelton, 2002) and drives reciprocal altruism (Trivers, 1971), which becomes a reserve of social support in times of need. Fredrickson (2004) added that gratitude also builds individuals' skills for loving and showing appreciation. Besides, S5 attributed her happiness when experiencing gratitude to the sense of achievement she felt. Analogously, S2 related having gratitude to having a more positive outlook in life.

Participants also endorsed that gratitude strengthens their relationships. S1 reported that gratitude enhances her relationships in the long term as she becomes closer to others, while S3 said that gratitude helps her to "appreciate present relationships", which coincides with the find, remind and bind theory's tenet that care, approval and understanding are present in the responsive individual (Algoe, 2012). Gratitude builds and maintains relationships through promoting social affiliation and facilitating socially inclusive behaviours, usually towards one's benefactor, even if such behaviours are cost-bearing (Bartlett et al., 2012). This was supported by Caleon et al.'s (2017) study, which revealed that gratitude was able to increase students' relatedness with their family and peers. Additionally, S1 considers the personality or love language of the other person and cites an example: "If they like to spend time with me, then I will give them my time". A possible explanation is Algoe's find, remind, and bind theory, which argues that the responsiveness of the act of kindness to the recipient's needs and preferences predicts gratitude (Algoe et al., 2008). The personalised expression of gratitude mirrors Fredrickson's (2004) take that gratitude also builds individuals' skills for loving and showing appreciation.

Furthermore, when a relationship is perceived to be valuable, gratitude changes from an immediate exchange of a favour received to a commitment to maintain the relationship (Gordon et al., 2012). For instance, when teachers make extra effort to help students, these behaviours are perceived to be additional investments to develop mutually beneficial relationships, absent from economic exchange (Fazal-e-Hasan et al., 2021). On top of that, L1 suggested that re-membering conversations could be useful for the introduction of gratitude into the classroom. Re-membering helps individuals appreciate the contributions of significant others towards their lives and identify the value of one's identity that has led to such contributions, as well as the inverse (Dulwich Centre, 2019). This was true in this study since S3 felt that expressing gratitude helps her "understand how much the other person means to me" and S4 felt that gratitude strengthens relationships since there is more

appreciation and understanding for each other. In another study, final-year students found that their relationships with peers became more collaborative, as compared to previous years (Cownie, 2017). Hence, this echoes Fredrickson's (2004) argument that gratitude builds enduring social relationships. S5 thought that gratitude aids in self-improvement and thought that a more confident person would be able to express their ideas better to their friends and would be more well-liked in groups; similarly, gratitude leads to a good social life, according to S3. S1 also specified that encouragement from others played a big role in increasing her motivation to learn. These responses were consistent with Kardaş and Yalcin's (2021) study that perceived social support is correlated with wellbeing and resilience positively, due to the satisfaction of needs. It is also interesting to note that participants' responses in this study constitute fragments of the PERMA model of wellbeing (Seligman, 2018), including positive emotions, engagement, relationship and meaning, with some mentions of reminders of achievements, which suggests gratitude's positive association with wellbeing.

Gratitude also seems to enhance students' academic performance, such as the academic thinking process (Howells, 2004). L3 felt that the experience of gratitude increases the likelihood of students doing well and increases their motivation to remain in the programme. L3's response was supported by a recent study which states that cultivating gratitude was also found to increase autonomous motivation (King & Datu, 2018). Effects of practising gratitude include improving the academic thinking process and deepening the understanding of concepts, being more engaged in learning, greater motivation, a higher sense of confidence, better learning strategies and a higher sense of interconnectedness (Howells, 2004). This is consistent with the theme of engagement found in students' and teachers' responses. L2 mentioned that some students "are smart to engage teachers and show appreciation" and this enables them to "develop good relationships with teachers and experience a higher level of engagement so that they can learn things they really want to learn" and similarly, L3 expressed that the experience of gratitude increases the likelihood of students doing well as their motivation to remain in the programme increases. From a student's perspective, S5 perceived that the intrinsic motivation stemming from gratitude would increase engagement while S2 thought that gratitude propels her to move forward regardless of her academic achievement as she remains grateful for what she has already completed and looks forward to upcoming opportunities to perform instead of dwelling in the bad. This is as such because intrinsic goals aid in failure recovery and increase happiness levels (North et al., 2014).

Interestingly, the effects of gratitude, like having more motivation, were only reaped by students who engaged in high intensities of gratitude practice, such as daily engagement with a gratitude journal activity (Nawa & Yamagishi, 2021). In a similar vein, L1 propounded that self-awareness and a certain level of vulnerability and engagement need to be present before gratitude responses can occur. Gratitude increases individuals' awareness of daily events that they are grateful towards, leading to greater appreciation towards the benefits that they receive (Nawa & Yamagishi, 2021). The intentional practice of gratitude

increases students' resilience in challenging periods (Ngo, 2015). Likewise, Howells (2004) proposed the 'State of Preparedness' approach, where students are invited to assume responsibility for their learning by asking them to put forward outcomes if they were to sit through a boring lecture with dissatisfaction and complaint and contrasting that with having an attitude of gratitude. Furthermore, this approach helps students gain awareness of their innermost attitudes and the impact of such attitudes on their learning (Howells, 2004). The timeliness of introducing gratitude at the onset or in the first year of commencing higher education was highlighted by L5 and supported by Teakel et al. (2024). L1 revealed that he only chooses to teach a certain module if he is able to personally connect with the module since he knows that in such modules, whatever he does can make a difference, and students can at least take away practical things from classes. When an inner attitude of gratitude was chosen, students and supervisors were prompted to explore alternative ways of perceiving and responding (Howells et al., 2017). Moreover, in the upward spiral of lifestyle change, Fredrickson and Joiner (2018) argued that positive emotions increase individuals' awareness, which brings about flexible and innovative behavioural choices. L4 mentioned that when gratitude is introduced, students enjoy gratitude and feel comforted. Concerns regarding students' willingness to share were raised by L4 as gratitude can be quite a personal and intimate topic; hence, having a safe space for students to share would be vital. Gratitude practice, therefore, helps students and lecturers see alternative perspectives by diverting focus to the positive contributions from and towards others, as well as the possibility of students being pedagogical partners (Chng, 2019).

To cultivate gratitude in the classroom, altering discourses surrounding gratitude and intentionally creating space for gratitude seem feasible. L3 argued that language plays an important role in introducing gratitude, and based on her previous teaching experiences, conversations, debates, and discussions can be helpful ways to infuse gratitude into the classroom. L2 mentioned that he has no elaborate language for gratitude, possibly implying the ease of accessing gratitude. For L3, language plays an important role in introducing gratitude, and she also found that conversations, debates and discussions can be helpful ways to infuse gratitude into the classroom. L1 brought in ideas from narrative therapy, such as definitional ceremonies and re-membering where gratitude can be applicable. L1 shared that remembering involves detailing what one appreciates about significant members in one's life, while definitional ceremonies involve witness(es) and collective documentation of accomplishments or narratives. Algoe's find, remind, and bind theory (2012) espouses a similar tenet of gratitude being essential in the formation and maintenance of people's most important relationships. This also corresponds to the idea that gratitude is a way of recognising the other as giving suggests voluntary recognition, and returning due to gratitude suggests a form of giving that parallels the first giver's recognition (Howells, 2014).

In this context, L2 also mentioned the Circle of Voices (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016), a discussion protocol similar to the definitional ceremony and the re-membering conversations raised by L1 as all three approaches prompt participants to actively identify others' contributions in conversations witnessed by others. Moreover, students and lecturers alike agreed on gratitude's potential to be cultivated through intentional practice. For instance, L1 and L3 similarly shared the idea of cultivating gratitude within oneself first; for L1, gratitude is living and practising gratitude as a lifestyle, and likewise, for L3, she sees gratitude as a mindset and a form of mindfulness, putting herself in the right mindset as that will affect the energy and relationships in class. Amongst participants' responses, collaboration and reciprocity are also strongly evident. L3 believes that role modelling as a lecturer helps students to start practising gratitude. She would share about herself openly before asking students to share in class as she felt that students would respond accordingly when they recognised her authenticity. L3 also intentionally creates a safe space for discussion without judgement and encourages different opinions so as to develop harmonious teacher-student relationships as L3 strongly believes in having kindness in the curriculum and that there is value to practise compassion in the classroom.

L3's belief in pedagogical kindness and being compassionate is consistent with Tan's (2022) framework for a compassionate teacher, starting with mindsight and mindfulness practice, involving a state of mind which is consciously aware of present happenings. Such a state of mind parallels the desirable prerequisites suggested by L1, like vulnerability and self-awareness, in order for students to be engaged in gratitude practice in the classroom. The humanisation of higher education pedagogy can possibly reference Rogers's (1961) conceptualisation of the therapeutic relationship, which he believes can be generalised to all human relationships, including those in the classroom. According to Rogers (1961), the development of a relationship between the teacher and the class that is characterised by unconditional positive regard, empathy and genuineness will most likely lead to self-directedness, less anxiety and more self-discipline in students.

Hence, this relationship between the teacher and the class also ameliorates the power differences between students and lecturers, though largely unmentioned (Chng, 2019). Besides, Lee et al. (2015) proposed that gratitude leads to better wellbeing as the basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence are met (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The provision of space and platform for students' learning ventures is not unfamiliar locally, as observed in the NUS Young Educators in Science (YES) programme that provides opportunities for undergraduates to come up with educational materials to educate the public about physics and such outreach activities contributes to students' portfolios which helps to track their individualised self-designed learning (Sow, 2018) and the use of podcasts to express students' interpretation in a 'Home' module, which is shared publicly, instead of traditional written assignments (McMorran, 2018). Furthermore, as Chng (2019) discussed the possibilities of students being partners in higher education, there is mention of creating the right conditions for learning, as well as reducing barriers to learning, achieved through some level of collaboration. The collaborative element is espoused by Aspland and Fox (2022), spelling out possibilities like infusing pedagogical kindness into the

academic community of inquiry. Taken together, building a collaborative academic climate that fosters gratitude is vital and sees the potential of constructivist learning.

Gratitude practices are also influenced by culture. In Asian collectivist cultures, students seem to have internalised teachers or lecturers as authoritative figures and motivation is not clearly distinguished as controlled or autonomous (King & Datu, 2018). Singapore's culture, however, is a unique blend of collectivist and individualistic culture (Yeo & Pang, 2017). In this study, L2 pointed out that Singapore has a 'very materialistic culture', is often 'fast paced' and 'time is money'. Singaporeans are also 'not usually extroverted'. L4 expressed similar sentiments about Singapore being competitive. L1 echoed the aforementioned challenges and thought that students are 'predisposed to asking what the benefit is' and are incentivised rather than intrinsically motivated towards the practice of gratitude. L5 finds that Asians are 'not so expressive' and the introduction of gratitude may seem abrupt. Culture can, hence, be a barrier towards students' access to gratitude practice. However, L5 suggested that gratitude can be introduced at the very beginning or start of a programme or in lectures so that students would be aware of gratitude, which in turn makes it easier for the lecturer to link back to gratitude once in a while. Alluding to L3's response, L4 also acknowledged language's role in facilitating gratitude and suggested that gratitude should be broken down and simplified to account for international students' comprehension.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined the potential of incorporating gratitude into pedagogy and the results from the thematic analysis showed that gratitude, in fact, leads to positive emotions and strengthening of relationships and evokes prosocial behaviours. Individuals are likely to engage in more creative ways of expressing gratitude by showing appreciation. In this study, we see gratitude as a way of humanising pedagogy and 'teaching well' by considering the wellbeing of students in the classroom and not simply metrifying the success of the class only through excellent academic results and outstanding performances. We believe that if students and lecturers display positive wellbeing, it will be very likely for the students to enjoy the learning process and produce excellent academic results.

To incorporate gratitude into the classroom, intentional space must be created for gratitude consciously, including the alteration of gratitude discourses. Based on the findings of this study, some suggestions of how lecturers can introduce and integrate the concept of gratitude into the classroom include:

- Creating a safe, collaborative, and conducive learning environment where students can express themselves freely and learn from their peers;

- Encouraging wellbeing literacy by having a discussion of what gratitude means to the individual students in the classroom;

- Having an appreciation activity where students can send one another post-it notes expressing why they appreciate that particular classmate or lecturer at the end of the module;

- Sharing and appreciating a light-hearted moment in class about their day before the lesson starts; and

- Conducting a short reflection session where students can share something they are grateful for in their lives with the lecturer.

Research studies can possibly investigate dismantling power differences and increasing sensitivity to culture so that introducing gratitude into the classroom can be more effective and seamless. The findings of this study can also be extended to create quantitative surveys to gather perspectives of stakeholders on gratitude from a larger sample.

In addition, the use of technology is not unfamiliar in wellbeing education (Rudolph et al., 2024). Technological tools have aided in the increase in youths' wellbeing and have observed success through the accessibility and allowance for creativity (Allen et al., 2024), hence being suitable for the planning and executing of engaging lessons (Lahtinen & Salmivalli, 2020). Moreover, advancements in technology have opened up the possibility of tapping into artificial intelligence to implement wellbeing education (Allen et al., 2024). It is now critical to explore how technology and AI can help integrate gratitude into classroom practices and positively impact the wellbeing of both students and educators.

It is very likely that humanising pedagogical approaches through gratitude, we can positively impact the development and wellbeing of students. It is worth remembering if we reflect upon the quote at the start of this article that the only genuine shield we have against a turbulent world is through the nurturing of a happy soul.

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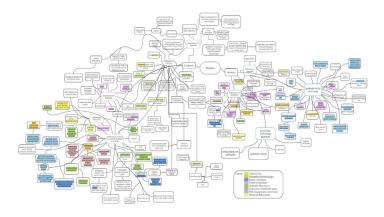
Appendices

Appendix A: Interview questions for students

1. How would you define gratitude?
2. How important is gratitude for you?
3. What are some ways to cultivate your own sense of gratitude?
4. What are some ways to express feelings of gratitude to others?
5. What changes does the experience and expression of gratitude bring in you?
6. What impacts does the above-described ways have on yourself and others? (eg. Teachers)
7. How do you feel when you are at the receiving end of gratitude expressions?
8. How do you feel when you are at the giving end of gratitude expressions?
9. Could you describe your current performance, both academically and non-academically, in school?
10. How do you think gratitude is related to a student's performance in school? (short term & long term)
11. Do you think your performance in school would improve if you were to practice gratitude? How so?

Appendix B: Interview questions for lecturers

1. How would you define gratitude?
2. How important is gratitude for you?
3. What are some ways to cultivate your own sense of gratitude?
4. What are some ways to express feelings of gratitude to others?
5. What changes does the experience and expression of gratitude bring in you?
6. What impacts does the above-described ways have on yourself and others? (eg. students)
7. How do you feel when you are at the receiving end of gratitude expressions?
8. How do you feel when you are at the giving end of gratitude expressions?
9. How do you think gratitude is related to a student's performance in school? (short term & long term)
10. Do you think that gratitude has an impact on students' performance (academic, social, emotional etc)? How so?
11. How can gratitude be integrated into the classroom?
12. How can gratitude interventions in classrooms be sustained?

Appendix C: Thematic Map