

# The Impact of Gratitude

by Kevin Long

**F**raming outdoor experiences for transformational learning and wellbeing.

Leaders have many tales to tell. This one was shared over coffee during my APIOL induction. I call this story *Famine to Feast* as it highlighted to me how much we have, and how easy it is to forget that we have so much. Over the duration of my APIOL process I thought about this story when working with my own students.

It seemed to me at times, that some of our children behave as if they too were short of resources. Not a famine of food but of belief. A world view with little confidence in effort, little hope in ability, little will to persevere, no belief in change. Some students clearly seemed to be in survival mode of sorts, for an acceptance, recognition and to get credit. There is no time for selflessness, for humility or empathy. Wouldn't that be for those who have given up? Or (paradoxically), those who are already abundantly well to do, 'famous' even? By losing their easy escape back to 'normality', the students in, Tim's story, were compelled to recognise the many things they had previously taken for granted. They had to find resources within themselves. Reality became immediate. The value of those everyday things became apparent only once they had been taken away.

Gratitude is a way of thinking that can turn disaster into a stepping stone<sup>1</sup>. By realising that the power one has to transform an obstacle into an opportunity is personally liberating. Gratitude reframes a potential loss into something of assured hope. Without hope change is spiritually inconceivable.<sup>9</sup> Gratitude recasts negativity in to positive channels for pragmatic action which, by its very definition, is pragmatic and solution focused.



Tim noticed a significant behaviour change over the following days– the students invested time on each other – they took opportunity to be of service to each other. They became more giving. The spirit of the group moved into a new frame of gratefulness.

Time and memory remould reality nearer to the heart's desire.<sup>2</sup> So is it not important to start here first? – by scrutinising the frame which we adopt – those assumptions which have a powerful hold on our ultimate behaviours to self, others and the environment. Should we not first fix the vices before building upon virtues? By looking at gratitude we address the spirit<sup>1</sup>.

According to Robert Emmons there are five possible obstacles to living a grateful life<sup>3</sup>:

1. Pervasive negativity – Our natural attentiveness to bad news
2. A sense of entitlement – a cult of celebrity and obsession with self
3. Making comparisons - focusing on what we don't have
4. Apathy, boredom and fear - laziness and insecurities.

As practitioners we will certainly identify with these traits in the groups we work with. They haven't changed for more than 70 years! Kurt Hahn wrote similarly when he addressed the six declines of modern youth and proposed his I.D.E.A.L.S.<sup>7</sup> For Hahn, a life of service was to be the beneficial outcome. Indeed, service is the ultimate outcome of a life of gratitude.

Our modern world view is greatly influenced by these pervasive obstacles. Our map of reality differs greatly from the cultures of other countries. This is often overlooked. As an example, I recently visited a school in which the staff were deeply impressed by the South African children they had seen on a school visit. They had seen the South African School children take ownership, plan and provide everything for the British students without the need for adult supervision. The African student's happy service on behalf of their school was remarkable. The British teachers wanted 'this' to exist in their children and they wanted to do it now, without delay and to do this they will put instructions in place to provide the same roles and responsibilities. Certainly a commendable and aspirational goal:

but worryingly to me, I felt there was something important missing from the plan. To expect that the outcomes will be the same for two completely differing groups of children with completely different world views and values overlooked the importance of starting from where the children are at. Perhaps we should first provide opportunities to challenge the assumed relationship between teacher and learner. This is a prerequisite for universal student participation. Secondly, we should present opportunities for students to construct a sense of gratitude – a prerequisite for a culture of service. These are two challenges for every practitioner to consider - they ask you to address the heart first.

### ***"Gratitude is the hearts memory"***

French proverb

Planning for Impact: A Cycle of Becoming  
We are continually practicing, continually becoming. Our individual biography is continually changing. We continually have to adjust our view in light of experiences. However, if we are to learn from experience we must process it – and what we choose to process accounts for much.



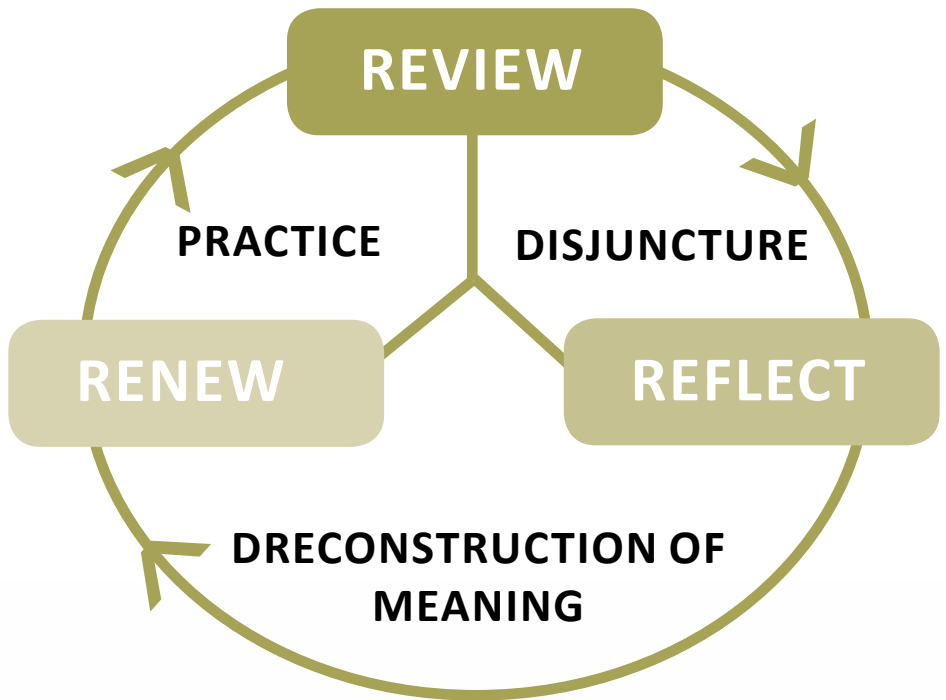


Typically we do not address our own thinking until challenged to do so. We take a lot of things as givens and we do not question norms. We need to pierce through our relationship to the assumptions that surround us.<sup>6</sup> By facilitating opportunities for our students to do exactly this we provide for high impact transformational learning.

Figure 1 depicts how this all makes sense on a personal level. It is built on the work of Jarvis<sup>5</sup>, who proposed that when we ask for a change in world view we effect a “Transformation of the Senses”.

**An example:** Tim’s students were faced by a real challenge and this was the source of great dissonance. They had to address their own thinking and

Fig1: “A Cycle of Becoming”





ways of behaving. The disjuncture was an assault on their assumed values. Through reflection the students individually processed their own situation, it led to reconsidered behaviour (some admitted the error of their ways and others began to share their precious chocolate). Importantly however the deepest impact, they addressed their own assumed values – they unlocked a personally lasting change in doing so. In finding their own solution over the following days on the Isle of Jura, they tested their new found values and saw how helpful and liberating this way of being was. Gratitude worked on a personal level – so they kept on doing it.

Expressing gratitude enhances the shared experience and the greater the number of people expressing sincere feeling of appreciation the more persistent people will feel positive.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately framing for gratitude can be quite straight forward - two methods for getting students to express gratitude are:

**1. Think about someone who they were grateful to** – Get students to answer generally at the start of the day and then move the attention to the team after their adventurous activity...see what happens.

**2. Use descriptors** – get students to describe something in their surroundings that they are grateful for. At the start of the day ask the students “what do they love?” You will be surprised to see how they move from loving their mobile phone in the morning to describing their love of the blue sky or sunlight on the water after a great adventure on a sunny day... it will be their waterproofs on other days!

Living with a frame of gratefulness is liberating. To begin to look at the things that we have, what our strengths are and what is working in our lives provides for a mindset of abundance. The benefits of an abundant mindset includes’ greater satisfaction from relationships, higher levels of trust and inclusion, higher levels of effort and authentic behaviour that is aligned with personal values. With a mindset of abundance, people are less likely to fear failure and are more resilient in the face of uncertainty.<sup>4</sup>

To quote Proust:

*“The only true voyage of discovery... would be not to visit strange lands, but to possess other eyes”<sup>8</sup>*

You don’t have to find yourself stranded on the far side of Jura in order to find such transformational moments. You can build gratitude into your practice, starting with your own personal example. See how well it works out when you do so. Keep it simple. If it works do more if it!

In doing so it is not so much solving problems, but dissolving problems. Focus on the present, where you are right now.

Life continually asks of us what we are to be. In turn we continually recreate ourselves through our choice of action. Through the freedoms of gratefulness we become abundant in our approach to life. We become the authors of our lives; not of a good life, but of a beautiful life ...now that’s a journey we should all take! ■

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## Autho Biog

**Kevin Long.** Kevin was a Senior Instructor at the Outward Bound Trust in the Lake District, Ullswater. He now liaises with schools across the Midlands to support their use of outdoor education and to ensure its impact is transferred back to school. He moved into Outdoor Education after

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**Photos:** from the author