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Grounding Ourselves in Gratitude



Walter McKenzie for xSELeratED

Autumn is the season of gratitude, when societies across the globe take inventory of all the things for which we are thankful. Unlike other times of the year when we pause to reflect on what the future may hold, or honor what came before us, the season of gratitude is based in the tradition of bringing in the harvest and counting our blessings.



In this turbulent time in education, this is an especially valuable opportunity. So much is in flux and change, it's imperative that we reclaim the narrative of our profession, re-asserting our value to society, and keeping that value in the front of everyone's mind as the very public dialogue continues about the future of public education. Gratitude elevates and amplifies the work we do in ways that resonate with everyone, rising above self-interest and contentiousness. And isn't that where we all want and deserve to be?

Instead of chasing external validation, we best serve ourselves and one another focusing on the small, yet powerful, moments in classrooms; those times when we make a real difference, helping others to learn and grow, and stretching ourselves, in the process. These moments are the true rewards of our work – the source of true gratitude – and when stakeholders see us grounded in them, they recognize our commitment to what is best for students, families and communities, freeing them from past experiences and assumptions to support us as partners in the future of public education.

Our current attempts to validate our work and set ourselves apart are undermining our status with stakeholders. While well-intended, using titles that like "Nationally Recognized, Award-winning, Bestselling, Visionary Authors and Educational Leaders," and in some forums even as "Disruptors and Rabble-rousers" don't reflect well on the work we do every day in service to students. Likewise, associating our good names with commercial brands to bolster our professional reputations does not serve us, communicating a loss of focus - and even a lack of seriousness of purpose - to stakeholders. Can you imagine doctors or lawyers or accountants branding themselves with the suppliers and support services companies of their industries? We need to reclaim our professional integrity in this time when the survival of entire industries and economies and democracies is at stake.



Reclaim the Narrative

Before we can reclaim the narrative, we have to reclaim our role as the keepers of public education, grounded in the real work we committed to before we were ever entrusted with a classroom. We can't claim the high ground of what's best for children if we are pursuing opportunities that prioritize our personal success. Each of us certainly has the right to pursue other career opportunities, but we need to be honest with ourselves and let go of the mantel of public education so that others may continue its noble cause in our stead. If we choose to continue in this work, we can ground ourselves by using the official title of our day job whenever and wherever we identify ourselves, removing any and all claims to educelebrity and career advancement beyond that of making a difference in the lives of children. This communicates to everyone the seriousness of purpose with which we dedicate ourselves to education, positioning us as trusted experts preparing children for their future, and laying claim to our role charting the future of our profession. How do we meet the needs of our quickly-changing society? How do we prepare ourselves with the skills and understandings we need? How do we redefine achievement? How do we measure excellence? We need to be more than simply grateful that we're being offered a seat at the table. We need to reclaim our story.

“Gratitude is the narrative-shifting tool that brings our focus back to what truly matters. This is worthy work, and our choices in how we speak of it, communicate it to others, and demonstrate our commitment to the success of each child helps us reset the very public dialogue about it in these troubling times. There is much damage that needs to be repaired, and while none of this can be done quickly, we need to start somewhere. Let’s begin with gratitude.”



Effective strategies for celebrating gratitude involve a blend of consistent, mindful personal practices and shared acts of genuine appreciation that focus on small, everyday moments we can share with our community to cultivate that grateful mindset throughout the year. This goes beyond rote lists towards a deeper, more intentional uplifting of people, experiences, and things that enrich our work and our lives. Using specific prompts, sensory details, available technologies and varied delivery formats, we can cultivate our very own authentic culture of gratitude as professional educators.

Consider these practices:



Subtraction Method

This technique, also known as "mental elimination," involves imagining what your life would be like without certain people or things. By considering their absence, you can gain a deeper appreciation for their presence. This is also a good way to appreciate the negative outcomes you may have avoided.

Gratitude Alarm

Use your phone to set daily reminders to pause and think of one thing you are thankful for, no matter how small.

Three Good Things

Developed by positive psychology researchers, this exercise involves writing down three good things that happened during your day. To make it more thoughtful, include a reflection on why each good thing happened. Studies have shown this can significantly increase long-term well-being.

Reverse Bucket List

Instead of listing things you want to do in the future, write down accomplishments and memorable moments from your past. Relive the joy of those memories and remember to appreciate how far you've come.

Gratitude Jar

Decorate a jar and keep it handy with small slips of paper and pen so that throughout the year you can jot down positive moments and save them in the jar. When you feel down, or at the end of the year, read through the notes to remind yourself and others of all the good in life.



6

Opportunities in Challenges

When life is difficult, acknowledge the challenging experience, but also look for the inherent growth opportunities and openings for impact to maintain a balanced perspective.

7

Focus on Lessons

Instead of just focusing on positive outcomes, reflect on obstacles you have overcome and the valuable lessons you've learned in the process. This reframes negative experiences as windows of resilience and growth.

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Gratitude Wall

Post photos, quotes, or objects that represent what you're thankful for around your home, office or classroom to serve as constant visual reminders of the good things in your life.

9

Social Media Challenge

Participate in or start a gratitude challenge on social media, using a unique hashtag like #30DaysOfGratitude2026. This can build an online community focused on thankfulness where likeminded colleagues can return again and again to contribute to and benefit from the sharing of everything we have for which we are grateful.

10

Peer-to-Peer Recognition

With the support of others, establish a platform where colleagues can publicly acknowledge and appreciate each other's contributions. It can be a wall in your workplace or an online sharing board, or any other venue that accommodates sharing and supporting one another, building a more collaborative and supportive work environment.

Living in gratitude doesn't solve or simplify life's challenges, but it reframes how we see them, grounding us in what is important and what we can influence in our lives. It keeps our focus on who we are and why we choose to do this important work. Most importantly, it reclaims the dignity and integrity of our profession, and invites everyone in the communities we serve to join us.

Make the holidays your opportunity to reframe, reset and recharge for the new year. We don't always have control over our circumstances, but we have a say in how we experience them. We can optimize our outlook by grounding ourselves in gratitude.



Your Bonus November Gratitude Resource!