

Lessons Learned: Becoming a Lifelong Learner

Greg Wright

I am a first-generation college graduate. When I was growing up, my father was a steelworker, and my mother was a part-time grocery store clerk and florist. I come from a large family with a blue-collar ethic. Despite how hard my parents worked and the sacrifices they made, I still grew up poor. In order to escape this poverty, my parents made sure that I knew education was my only way out and that I would have to pay for it myself. My path to success then was set. First, I would graduate from high school and then get a college degree. Next, I would get an amazing job, have a family, live in a mansion, and drive a nice car. Like so many students, I thought education was merely a means to an end. Now, looking back at those earlier years, I realize how naïve I was. I realize how absurd that thinking was. To be successful, one needs to spend more than just twenty years learning. At that early moment in my life, the concept of lifelong learning was completely foreign.

Lesson #1: Be flexible and adapt when the best-laid plans go awry.

Before I started my first semester of college, I had decided that being a pharmacist would be a great career. Although a pharmacy degree would require a substantial amount of work, I believed it would be worth it because of the financial stability and prestige I would gain. I began my college studies, like most incoming freshmen, by taking the “generals.” Biology, psychology, English composition filled my schedule. I saw these general education courses as a necessary “hoop” that I needed to jump through as all college graduates had. At that time, I did not think to question the purpose of a general education, but I did think that my time and effort would be better spent on classes that I thought were more relevant to my career choice. You may have asked yourself this question: “Why do I need to take (fill in the blank with a GE course) when I am not going into that field?” I soon found, during my first semester, why general education courses were necessary. The most important reason

for me came when I started my Intro. to Chemistry class: I didn't like chemistry, an essential area of study if I wanted to be a pharmacist. Should I continue to study a field that I no longer felt passionate about? Could I spend the rest of my life in a career that I did not enjoy even though it provided a good salary? While many observers today might say that my first experience with general education was a failure, I instead found possibility in these "required" courses. This lesson was the first of many that led to my becoming a lifelong learner.

Lesson #2: Be willing to try out new things and ideas creates new opportunities.

Instead of chemistry, I took an upper-level Spanish course—the only class available. I knew French from taking it in high school and thought, "Why not?" At the same time, I found a part-time job tutoring foreign-exchange students. I was learning a language and helping others to learn a language. I was fascinated to learn how others not like me saw and understood the world. My worldview was broadened when I ate Pakistani food, watched my first foreign-language film, and went on a date with a Japanese woman. My time spent inside and outside those classrooms helped me develop a love of language, appreciate the vibrancy in different cultures, and meet fascinating people. Instead of becoming a pharmacist, I wanted to travel the world and work in tourism.

Lesson #3: Learning doesn't happen only in a classroom and with a book.

After I finished my associate degree, I moved to Las Vegas, the tourism capital of the world—how perfect was that. I soon found an entry-level position working for an airline that flew commercial sightseeing tours to the Grand Canyon. My ability to speak French and some Spanish impressed my employers, but once I decided to also learn Italian in order to adequately communicate with more customers, I was promoted. Through hard work, I rose rapidly in my department and was given a supervisory role with more responsibility; however, just as I was getting comfortable in my new position, the airline was sold, and the new owners took the business in a different direction. I left Scenic Airlines and focused

solely on college. Although I was now out of work, I didn't see this setback as a failure. As I was becoming a lifelong learner, I saw how valuable my work experience had been; I learned that I need to always be aware of learning opportunities wherever and whenever they might appear.

Lesson #4: Critical reading, writing, and thinking skills are important for every part of life.

As part of my general education courses, I took a world literature course to meet the humanities requirement for graduation. While working towards a bachelor's degree, I decided to take as many literature classes as the local university offered. I liked to read even if the reading was frequently difficult. The writing requirements were even tougher. Slogging through Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* was hard enough but then writing a paper on its narrative structure was worse. My professors were asking me to read a novel a week and then to write a succinct position paper that outlined my interpretation of the author's or poet's meaning. Frequently when my papers were graded and returned, I found lower scores than I was accustomed to. My critical thinking skills lacked refinement. I learned that my reading of a text wasn't the only one and that my writing skills needed improvement.

Lesson #5: Having a good mentor will benefit you both professionally and personally.

To be successful, I realized that I needed a mentor: someone more knowledgeable and experienced that could teach me and guide me through my college education. The first time I met Dr. Jane Hafen, I was scared. She was so intimidating! I felt so small! She knew so much and was so articulate. I felt like a poser, pretending to be smart when I wasn't, yet Dr. Hafen believed in me. She helped me to develop confidence and to find my voice. Under her guidance, I became a better writer. I saw a master teacher change the lives of her

students, her peers, and members of her community. As a professor of Native American literature, she taught me to see beyond myself and my community, asking me to consider the views and ideas of other peoples. I thought more deeply and carefully about what I was learning. She helped me to see that I was meant to teach. I earned a doctorate degree from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and planned on finding a place where I could also help others become learners.

Lesson #6: Grit and perseverance are invaluable skills because complacency never leads to success.

I expected to find my own place in academia, teaching Native American literature and the literature of the American West. Almost immediately after I sent applications for teaching positions, the United States entered the Great Recession. Budgets were slashed, and rejection letters were sent. New professorships disappeared. I was worried that I had just spent fourteen years in college to earn a degree that would be useless. Instead of accepting failure, however, I reminded myself of the life lessons I had learned along my path. I was flexible in my job search. I accepted a job teaching English at a high school and willingly embraced an opportunity to teach French. When money was tight, I taught English composition as a part-time instructor both at Snow College and at UVU, which required me to drive back and forth to Orem twice a week. I persevered in the face of the worst economy that the United States had experienced since the Great Depression. Finally, I found a full-time position at Snow College teaching writing and philosophy.

Lesson #7: Learning that you don't know everything is humbling.

I knew how to teach. I knew how to communicate ideas. I knew how to help students become better readers, writers, and thinkers. I didn't, however, know how to teach philosophy. I had never done it before. For my new job, Snow College was asking me to learn and to teach philosophy at the same time. My first semester was extremely

challenging. Initially, I felt lost in the philosophy classroom, but I soon recovered. I enjoyed the material and the discussions I had with students. I began to consider the same big questions of life (i.e., Who am I?; Does god exist?; Are my choices my own?) that I was asking of my students. I saw them flourish and grow as human beings, and I underwent the same transformation.

Lesson #8: Always look for ways to learn.

Your life will be so much more fulfilling. Now that I have a career that brings me satisfaction and a good income, I continue to learn. I have worked as a member of the Snow College Strategic Planning Committee to help determine the future direction of the college. I served with many others on the Snow College General Education committee and learned about new ways to help students better understand the importance of “generals.” The Foundations courses are a result of that learning. Outside of campus, I learned how to cook traditional BBQ (i.e., low and slow with lots of smoke). I learned how to frame a house. Currently, I am learning to restore my 1965 Ford Mustang. I have a great friend, a mentor, who is patiently helping me to understand the intricacies of engine repair. There is so much more that I want to learn. My education continues long after I graduated with a college degree and beyond academia. So, why does this narrative matter? Why should you care? My education exemplifies what it means to be a lifelong learner. “What is that?” you may ask. Being a lifelong learner means that you believe that your education is never complete and that learning doesn’t stop when you graduate from high school, finish a college degree, or earn a trade certificate. It means you seek out occasions to learn as much as you can. It means you are willing to consider new ideas that challenge old ones. It means you know how to identify and capitalize on possibilities and opportunities when they present themselves. Being a lifelong learner means acknowledging what you don’t know and then finding answers. Life has many lessons to teach you. Will you be a lifelong learner?