

Enough With the 'Lifelong Learning' Already

By James M. Lang

I've invented a drinking game for academics to play when we're stuck in campus meetings. Everyone has to take a shot whenever the words "lifelong learning" or "lifelong learners" are mentioned. Play this game, and I promise you won't make it sober through very many meetings—which, I suppose, might make those meetings more tolerable.

If you don't want to drink at meetings because important things happen there (ahem), tweak the game and sponsor a faculty gathering in which people have to do a shot every time either phrase appears on your institutional website. Have an ample supply of lampshades on hand.

You can't throw a stick around this profession, in other words, without hitting someone who is extolling the virtues of lifelong learning, promising to help students embrace it, or citing it as the crowning achievement of some new course or program. We don't seem to be satisfied with wanting to help our students learn. We also want to bend their characters in some mysterious way that will ensure that they continue to read literature, study history, theorize about politics, solve equations, and conduct scientific experiments for the rest of their lives.

So with apologies to my colleagues over at [Lingua Franca](#), I want to

take issue with this phrase in order to demonstrate why it accomplishes little and means less.

First, the phrase is a silly redundancy. All human beings with working brains are lifelong learners. That's what our brains do: They constantly take in new information from our surroundings, compare and contrast it with what we already know, and make modifications. That's learning, and we do it like breathing. James Zull, in his terrific book *The Art of Changing the Brain*, has an excellent passage on the fact that in our classrooms, learning always takes place, no matter how poorly we are teaching. It just may not be the learning we expect to happen.

"A student may not learn history in our history class," he writes, "but he may learn that his history teacher thinks history is interesting. Or he may learn that his teacher dislikes students. ... The student has an experience of some sort. The brain processes that experience, and ultimately he acts on it in some way. His action may be to close the book and look out the windows, but that is because his experience has taught him that he doesn't need to listen, or that he doesn't care to listen."

Our brains are always engaged in learning acts of some kind, intended or not. My youngest daughter received a game called Mancala for Christmas, and she and her twin brother opened it up and started playing it at the kitchen table later that day. It took their agile little brains about five minutes to learn how to play it. I walked into the kitchen while they were in the thick of it, and found it

difficult to follow at first. Their hands were moving quickly, and they were talking about something else as they played. But after a few minutes of observation, I understood enough to ask a couple of questions, and those questions clarified the game for me. I learned how to play it, and took on the winner.

My visiting 82-year-old mother-in-law—who never attended college, and hence, was never promised any lifelong learning—wandered over and started watching our game. "I don't understand any of this," she said at first, exasperated. But she stood there and kept watching. She listened to the questions I asked and asked one of her own. Eventually she figured the game out as well, and by the end she was offering pointers.

She was learning. My kids were learning. And I was learning, and thinking about learning as I observed. So I was learning that, too. You're learning as you read this.

We're all learning all the time; that's how human beings are made. So let's stop crowing about how we're creating lifelong learners in our classrooms. That's no accomplishment at all.

I understand perfectly what we all mean when we use the phrase. We're not talking about learning games; we're talking about learning important stuff. But that understanding doesn't do much for me either. If cultivating lifelong learning in our students describes a desire for them to continue to pursue learning beyond college in the discipline-specific, task-oriented, and measured ways in which they have done so in our classrooms, I'm not holding my breath. I have 15

weeks with students in my introductory literature courses. In that time I am supposed to introduce them to basic literary genres, foster their ability to interpret the written word, and improve their writing and speaking skills. I'm working hard at all of those goals, I promise.

But now, on top of all of that, I should also be making them lifelong learners? What would that even mean?

Does it mean that I should expect them, at the age of 50, when they are deep into their careers as accountants, firefighters, or small-business owners, to pick up a book of poetry every now and again and write up their interpretations? Or read poetry, and literary criticism on poetry, as a substitute for the masterful interpretations they are no longer getting from me in the classroom?

I have a hard time envisioning that future for most of my students. Maybe the best of our majors will continue to read and think hard about poetry or creative nonfiction. Maybe. The nonmajors I teach and have taught in my general-education courses? Well, if you're out there, and you took a class with me and you're still reading and writing about poetry, let me know. I want to find out what I did right with you, and whether it might work on anyone else.

I don't mean to sound (too) churlish. I recognize that people who preach the faith about lifelong learning have good intentions. But what they are asking for is so imprecise. Lifelong learners of what? Unless we answer that question, the phrase means nothing. It belongs in the junk pile of shopworn academic platitudes.

So let's attempt to answer that question. I'll start. It should go without saying that I want my students to become more knowledgeable about literature, more effective in interpreting the written word, and more competent writers and speakers. Those are my primary goals. But if I had to articulate secondary, big-picture objectives, I would say that I want my students to become curious, open-minded, empathetic citizens.

- **Curious:** That word isn't too far from lifelong learner, but I see a difference. Everyone learns; not everyone is curious. I want students to continue to see the world as an interesting place. When they encounter something that puzzles or intrigues them—like a work of literature—I want them to wonder about it, and maybe look for some more information, or engage in conversations with other human beings about it. I don't care whether that thing is a poem or a plant, just so long as they want to know more about it.
- **Open-Minded:** I'm pretty convinced that the majority of the problems in the world are caused by people who believe they are 100 percent correct about something. Nothing breeds bad behavior like certainty. So I wish for my students to have passionate convictions—but to be only about 90 convinced. They should always allow for the possibility that they are wrong. They should remain open to the prospect that new information might change everything they believe. (Note that I am only "pretty convinced" about this; I could be wrong.)
- **Empathetic:** As thinkers like David Foster Wallace and Martha Nussbaum have argued, our species seems to do well when we

cultivate the capacity to imagine ourselves in the position of "the other." I feel fortunate in that I teach works of the imagination, and believe that such works can help instill that quality in students.

- **Citizens:** With some notable exceptions, we depend on each other for survival. We have an obligation to stay informed about what's happening in our cities and towns, and to help and support them when we can. Putting works of literature in historical context, and describing how they have shaped, or not, the societies in which they were produced, might just help students think more carefully about their obligations to their fellow citizens.

That's what I want for my students. I don't need them to become lifelong learners—drink a shot!—because they'll do that anyway. So what do you want for yours?

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