

# **Lifelong Learning Hacks: Becoming a Perpetual Learner**

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Catherine Takasugi teaches various courses at Aoyama Gakuin University, including two new seminars. One, entitled “A chapter a week: A taste of everything,” invites students to expand their reading repertoire and engage with the material on a personal level; and another that explores diversity and identity through experiential learning techniques that push boundaries, cultivates creativity, and notes refusals.

This paper summarizes the author’s contribution to the LLL SIG-sponsored forum “Lifelong Learning Hacks” that was presented at the PanSIG2021 Online Conference, co-presented with Andrew Reimann, Joseph Dias, Natsuki Suzuki, and Taron Plaza.

## **Introduction: Perpetual Learning**

As teachers we sometimes get wrapped up in what we think we know, what we need to know, and how and what to teach. Recognizing and creating rifts in our instructionist tendencies, reversing the roles to some degree, and assuming there is still much to learn, brings an entirely different atmosphere to the learning environment. Wearing the learner’s cloak as often as the teacher’s, approaching our teaching from a space of humility, one that recognizes the gaps in our knowledge, can be exciting, sometimes even risky, but allows our students greater opportunity to actively shape the classroom experience in a manner that is most meaningful for them.

## **Four Learning Lenses**

Within the context of university teaching, four main sources for instructor learning are discussed. Learning from students, sharing of knowledge between colleagues, learning from past and present teachers, and learning by working through the assignments alongside the students.

The students have the capacity to keep us current and help us maintain the assignments, so they are relevant for the students’ needs and interests. In just one week, from a homework assignment I discovered that an unexpected percentage of my students suffer from trypophobia, in a discussion it became clear that a new Korean drama

is popular and makes them laugh, and through a writing project I was introduced to a provocative manga that challenges stereotypes. My students, in both inconspicuous and grandiose ways, are constantly unveiling their identities. These small glimpses of their personalities and interests reveal who they are, what they believe, and what they value. I am learning to listen with genuine curiosity, sometimes I even follow-up with my own explorations, and then I find I am more relatable or at least more aware when the subject arises again. On occasion, students unwittingly give me insights into parenting when they share their own frustrations regarding their parents. Pockets of insight are constantly being revealed as I learn to ask the right questions and they learn to trust me. I find it a privilege to be welcomed into the hip young discussion of things I know nothing about.

COVID-19 has brought unfathomable fear, grief, and loneliness to many. Without negating those unfortunate elements, it is equally important to highlight the generous sharing of ideas, materials, and general support amongst colleagues that has been largely instigated by the need to shift to online learning. The teaching and learning amongst colleagues, far beyond technical needs, in some respects created a sense of community amongst educators over the past year. Colleagues teaching each other, sharing new Apps, online techniques, and materials has been inspiring and has also cultivated gratitude.

My teachers, past and present, faulty and formidable, are the models I use to become a better teacher. I tend to sandwich the criticisms I have for my students between two markedly positive statements. Lifting the students rather than squashing their efforts has been my long-term policy for feedback. However, in my own studies recently, I received some rather direct, unsugar-coated, written feedback that raised my shackles and circulated in my mind for weeks. While not always the best technique, I came to realize that sometimes hitting the target with precision and force, gets the message across most effectively. In the case of my slight misstep, while I did not enjoy the admonishment, I learned the lesson well. In my own classroom I might reserve this style of feedback for plagiarism

or similar uncommon, yet unpleasant, offenses. I often recall the teachers of my past and think about who I listened to and why, under what circumstances did I learn best, and what kind of teaching allowed me to grow as a person. I remember my physics teacher essentially dismissing me as a learner, sighing as he told me I was “as bad as my brother” in the subject. I recall another teacher, eyes closed, head thrown back, singing Cat Stevens with me on a school trip. One teacher gave up on me prematurely, undervaluing me publicly, and the other cultivated me as a whole person. How we teach and how we make students feel, stays with and shapes us, and it matters immensely.

Learning from the assignments I give my own students reminds me to keep the work relevant, meaningful, and worthwhile. If I assign a media-based presentation, I often provide an example, freshly completing the research and writing a report each year. This keeps the topic up to date for the students, reminds me of the challenges of the assignment, and sets an example of excellence for the students to strive for. It also allows me an opportunity to show the students who I am, what I believe, and what are my standards. Imperfection, humor, and graceful recovery is invariably modelled along the way. In some of my more original, unconventional, or newly designed assignments, I find going through each of the steps with my students allows for my own personal growth as well as a sense of fellowship. If I find the assignment too complicated, too boring, or too difficult, then my students likely do too. Approaching the assignment from the students’ perspective and maintaining an open attitude of continual improvement, keeps me reflecting, learning, and ultimately loving my work.

## **Final Thoughts for Engaging in Learning that is Gratifying**

Learning comes in many forms, gradual or instant, minute or life changing. When seeking a learning activity there are numerous approaches to take. Most commonly we tend to find an activity or area of interest which nestles comfortably within our range of predictable and safe. However, at some point, I encourage all teachers to

challenge themselves to pursue something that is unlikely, out of character, or even uncomfortable. Remembering that awkwardness, that grit, that inability to strike excellence, has intense value in cultivating empathy with our students. It reminds us of the value in the process of striving, the joy of trying something new, and the laughter and humility that may ensue. Let's all aim to be a little more transparent in our failures, these are moments of richness to draw from in our lessons. Re-learning that feeling even just a little may ignite, revive, or retain some fervor for teaching and lifelong learning.