

On Food After 50

What mindful eating can teach us about lifelong learning

by Frank Q. Christianson (Associate Dean, College of Humanities)

SOMETIME IN MY early forties, I crossed a metabolic threshold. It was not the first; I had been hurtling past them for some time and would continue to do so as my body aged and changed. The habits of a lifetime (of eating more or less indiscriminately) were beginning to pay the wrong kind of dividend. I could no longer shrug off the continuous carbo-load with a little extra exercise and the occasional junk food fast. I had to come to terms with the problem of sustainability when it came to my health, and food seemed to be at the heart of the matter. Since first becoming aware that I needed to change, I have been on an extended journey to understand myself, my motives, and the long-term health consequences of my choices. Now, pausing to consider for the sake of a magazine issue devoted to things gastronomic, I realize that my evolving relationship with food has been an important avenue for understanding a core aim of a BYU education: *lifelong learning*.

When I joined the College administration in 2014, I assumed responsibility for a range of student programs. For the past eight years, I have valued the chance to think about and work on the messaging, design, and assessment of experiential education, from study abroad to internships to mentored research. Under the auspices of our College's Humanities+ program, launched over a decade ago to support student readiness for life after graduation, I have worked with colleagues and students on the humanities version of a pathway to success. The initial priority—getting more students to do internships—was an important first step in promoting greater professional readiness. But the program has since expanded to help students integrate a course of experience

with their course of study as they explore ways to translate the value of their humanities training to the world of work. For humanities majors, that involves refining one's abilities to communicate, make sense of information, and navigate different cultural contexts. These are the core competencies that the study of language and culture, writing and research, and the ideas and values that shape human civilization, cultivate. They are also the most portable and durable outcomes of the work humanities majors do that bring value to any workplace or organization.

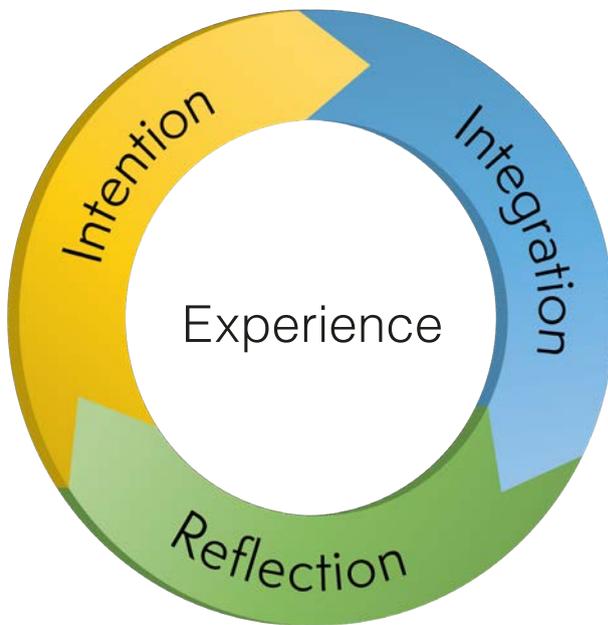
Mentioned prominently in the Aims of a BYU Education, lifelong learning is never explicitly defined. It is the promised result of an education that is "spiritually strengthening, intellectually enlarging, and character building." Students should leave BYU equipped to continue to learn and serve. But how did their time as undergraduates teach them to continue to learn outside of formal education? Lifelong learning comes up most frequently in vague association with Continuing Education—"come back (or jump online) and take classes with us on your favorite topic and experience the rewards of self-cultivation." But this has always seemed a narrow application for such a fundamental outcome.

A more foundational way to think about the concept of lifelong learning, what it must necessarily involve, comes from the discipline of experiential education, which emphasizes the mental habits of intention, reflection, and integration as a way of relating to our experiences so that they continually shape who we are becoming.

These principles have become central to the experiential activities, courses, and programs we sponsor in the College.

When combined with the humanities competencies—communication, information literacy, and cultural navigation—they constitute a formula for lifelong learning in and of the humanities.

At times I have felt fortunate that my career encourages me to continue to learn, realizing this may not always be the case in other professions. And I have wondered whether people are more likely to grow or stagnate based on the expectations and opportunities of their jobs. On the other hand, the “ExL cycle” suggests that it is less about the context and more about the mindset we bring to it. Not all experiences are equally educative. Some experiences offer more. And some people take more from their experience based on their willingness to mindfully engage in the learning opportunity that every moment potentially affords.



Our capacity to learn from experience can be a primary source of joy in life—that sense of progress that gives life purpose and meaning. It can also be a matter of life and death. Eat when you are hungry, Frank, and not when you are bored. Learn to eat sensible things in sensible quantities and live a longer, happier life. Over time I have found a relationship to food that is more age appropriate. The self-education of trial and error, of navigating among seemingly boundless sources of health advice (expert or otherwise) and drawing judicious conclusions, has taught me the need to develop a level of experiential learning literacy. I am more intentional about what and how much I eat, and I am more reflective about the ways my body responds to my choices. And that has led me to a healthier place more generally. ■

