

**Book Review: “*Learning Lessons*”**

***LEARNING LESSONS: BY JONATHAN JANSEN***

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*Learning Lessons* is a book that aims to provide inspiration and direction to young people seeking to pursue consequential careers in the education sector. In general, the book is a well-thought-out response to the question that is often posed to the author, Professor Jonathan Jansen, who is an eminent South African educator, distinguished academic, illustrious university leader, celebrated institution builder and public intellectual. The question is ‘*How did you achieve what you did?*’

The book offers ten lessons garnered from the author’s life and career trajectory and what he gleaned from the experiences of role models and achievers in different fields of human accomplishments. The lessons distil the author’s experiences through a series of anecdotes and prudently crafted narratives celebrating the brilliance, ingenuity and resilience of various individuals that the author has interacted with in his life and work. What makes the book interesting is that it draws illustrative examples from all levels of the academic expedition.

The first lesson is that paying attention is key to successful learning. This crucial nugget is introduced through the example of a former taxi driver from Benoni, South Africa, who saved his money to finance his undergraduate studies and through determined application and dedication ends up as a professor of curriculum studies at the University of Texas. The point that the author makes is that educators may exert both positive and influence on their charges. He underscores the importance of acknowledging the potential of students and giving them constant encouragement, support and guidance. He posits that students benefit a great deal when they know that their teachers are paying close attention to their progress and that they expect them to excel. Academic success, the author surmises, is dependant of all kinds of benefactors and influencers. He recognises the value of constructive support systems in the form of family, peers, and mentors in facilitating one’s progress and accomplishment in education.

The second lesson proffered has to do with spotting and nurturing talent and potential. It reminds us that individual learners are often smarter than they think. What they need is sufficient motivation and affirmative environments. The lesson highlights the importance of cultivating self-confidence in learners. This particular lesson is premised largely on the author’s eye-opening and life-changing opportunity to study at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, in the United States of America. He was awestruck by the confidence and the high expectations that his graduate supervisors placed on him. On the occasion of their first contact, Jansen’s

supervisor, a world-renowned expert in his field, requested his fresh graduate student to review a manuscript and provide feedback. Jansen was taken aback that the supervisor genuinely thought that he had something to contribute. He marvelled at the way graduate students were taken seriously as valued colleagues and were expected to do well in contrast to his previous experience in South Africa as an undergraduate student. This treatment galvanised him into exerting himself assiduously. He was motivated to muster confidence and participate actively in seminar discussions and develop a facility for formulating his own viewpoints of subject under discussion. Immersion in academic activities such as research, authoring manuscripts, presenting papers at conferences and interacting with diligent and buoyant academics enhanced his confidence. He also admired the humility and unassuming nature of many of the highly accomplished professors he encountered. Their research was presented in digestible forms. They had the facility to explain complex concepts simply. They were accessible and always eager to advance their knowledge and renovate their competence.

The third lesson puts a high premium on showing up, and the importance of paying one's dues through hard work. Jansen recounts his efforts to adjust to the high working ethic that characterised his doctoral studies program at Sanford where he learned the significance of doing collaborative work, comparative, and critical thinking as well as networking and establishing enduring international connections.

The fourth lesson has to do with resourcefulness. The idea that there are always ways to transcend inauspicious circumstances to achieve one's goals if one marshals effort, takes calculated risks and has sufficient drive. The author demonstrates through a number of anecdotes the importance of being enterprising and innovative. He shows how graduate students can benefit from designing research programs that are custom-made specifically for their own research interests and curiosities. It is this knack for 'making things happen when they do not' that enabled Jansen to successfully complete his doctoral thesis and augment it with a number of well-received scholar publications before his first-ever academic appointment at the rank of professor and chair of Curriculum Studies at the University of Durban-Westville.

The fifth lesson accentuates the need to set high standards. This segment is based on the author's experiences as Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria. Jansen narrates how, in the face of prejudice, academic lethargy and corruption as well as entrenched conservatism, he battled to encourage colleagues to upgrade their academic qualifications, invigorate graduate programs, boost research output and revamp promotion procedures to enhance the standing and prestige of his university.

The sixth lesson is about setting goals and doing everything possible to attain them. Jansen harps on his efforts at institution-building. He underscores the importance of cherishing academic projects, instituting robust research programmes, maintaining institutional stability and judicious mobilisation of resources. He gives an account of how he balanced consistent production of quality research output with gruelling administrative responsibility and community outreach projects.

Lesson seven warns against the tendency among many academics to lapse into mediocrity and yield to complacency. He is cognisant of the many debilitating currents that undermine the productivity and progress of many learners, educators, researchers and scholars. In addition to paying homage to the determination, resourcefulness, tenacity and resilience of many learners and academics in navigating the many forces that undercut their aspirations and efforts, he advocates for more investment in support systems and counselling services to cater for those who need succour in dealing with adverse circumstances.

Lesson eight is about finding one's passion and pursuing it relentlessly. Jansen argues in favour of a more broad-based common-core curriculum so that all students can benefit from an appreciation of big social, economic, political, philosophical and cultural questions before embarking in narrower disciplinary specialisation. He is alive to the fact that many learners at the beginning of their tertiary education may not be sure of disciplines and career tracks to pursue so they need close guidance and broader intellectual exposure offered by flexible liberal arts degree programs where they can sample various academic offerings before they are trained in a specific field.

The ninth lesson is about the importance of ploughing back into the community, rendering service to the community. Jansen urges those who have benefitted from education to be alert to and aware of the pressing needs of people around them. He exhorts beneficiaries of education to share their expertise, to lend support and avail their capacities to those in need. The notion of education as a priceless collective good animates the lessons of this volume together. Education is about creating conditions that make the lives of all human beings more congenial.

The tenth and last lesson of the book advises beneficiaries of education to stay grounded and to always see their success in perspective. It stresses the virtues of moral purpose, personal conscientiousness as well as self-assurance that enables one to attend to the most pressing and difficult situations with confidence that comes out of conviction rather than conceit.

The reader-friendly volume is rich in vividly rendered anecdotal examples. Jansen adroitly intersperses his personal experiences with valuable and timeless advice on the right attitudinal frame to adopt, the opportunities to take advantage of and the pitfalls to avoid in the pursuit of academic excellence. Jansen's ethos of forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion, diligence and gratitude shine throughout this big-hearted book. Learners, educators, researchers, institutional builders, policy formulators, legislators and general readers will certainly benefit from the sumptuous educational nuggets the book offers. The volume could do with an index.