

# 54

---

*Non vitae sed scholae discimus.*

We learn not for life, but for the classroom.

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, Book 17,  
Letter 106, section 12  
(translation by Michelle Wu)

## LIFE LESSONS

---

In the year 64 CE, the philosopher Seneca the Younger deplored in a letter to his friend, *non vitae sed scholae discimus*, “we learn not for life, but for the classroom.” The former tutor to the Roman Emperor Nero was criticizing his own students for lacking the proper motivation in their approach to knowledge. Yet, in our modern society almost two thousand years later, Seneca’s complaint is still pertinent.

As I approached the end of high school, faced with college applications and other important self-evaluations, I felt an unbearable pressure from teachers, parents, and classmates to choose a college major and a future occupation. Having breezed through the earlier years of high school, I now found that I had inadvertently taken the words of Seneca to the extreme. I was accustomed to passing that next test, fulfilling that next credit requirement, with little thought of what I truly enjoyed. My personal identity was buried under a mountain of classroom accolades and titles. And so, when it came time to ponder what *I myself* wanted to do for the rest of my life—no instructions, time limits, or due dates—I was lost.

My hollow mountain fell to pieces with a seemingly easy college application essay question: “Tell us about your most important accomplishment.” For weeks I pored over my certificates and medals, unable to find anything that gave me more than a small ego boost. It was only when I stepped back from academic awards that I found my real answer. I realized that my truest sense of achievement came from learning and performing the piano part of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*—not because of the audience’s applause, nor even because of the technical difficulty of the piece, but because I have always loved the song itself for playfully dodging conventional compositional rules.

## CLASSICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The mischievous musical beauty evoked my personal admiration for thinking outside traditional norms, and so it was a joy to learn Gershwin's subtle nuances and make them my own. Every minute of practice, frustration, and delight was striving for something that genuinely mattered to me, culminating in an accomplishment that truly became part of my personal identity.

Ever since that crucial self-discovery, Seneca's words have pushed me to examine closely my motivations in learning. Indeed, I have now formed a principle of my own: *vitae per scholam disco*, "I learn *through* school *for* life." School has become a place to explore my personal interests and enrich my growth. Doing well academically and professionally may be a measure of success in the eyes of others, but true fulfilment can only come from learning and developing my own passions.

MICHELLE WU