

A lesson from the past for the students of the future

Forty years ago this month I graduated from college. Except for a few stray classes since, everything I was going to learn from grade school, high school or college courses I had to learn before 1957.

There is a lesson for those still in school. The only good a college education will do is teach you how to study, because if you don't use school classes as a foundation, and keep on studying, by the time you get to my age, your fund of knowledge will be hopelessly out of date.

Take a lesson from Sarah Winchester. Keep the hammers going your entire life, building the house of your intellect. Never stop learning. To be precise, the most important sources of knowledge are public libraries, book stores, daily and weekly newspapers, radio and public TV. The most important lesson you can learn in school is: value your time. Put it to good, efficient use. College is valuable only if it gets you in the habit of learning more daily.

When I graduated, no one knew anything about plate tectonics, continental drift as it is understood today, or much about earthquake causes. Though Alfred Wegener had postulated continental drift before I was born, geologists could not figure out the how and why, and therefore could not believe it possible. Geology as it is understood today did not exist the day I graduated.

Though Hewlett and Packard were hard at work a few miles from my alma mater, San Jose State University, and the first few primitive computers were grinding out numbers from huge IBM mainframes not far away, my fellow graduates and I did not have a clue we lived in the middle of what would become Silicon Valley. We would have failed miserably if we had had to write essays about computers, transistors, semi-conductors, miniaturization, photocopying, clean rooms, fax machines, etc. No problem, though. Our teachers would have failed the same tests.

The only person I know who actually made a stab at predicting a future of extreme electronic miniaturization was the creator of the comic strip Dick Tracy, who let his imagination run wild. Of course, we all had a good laugh. We knew the wrist radio was a joke.

Most of the predictions for the future made at the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair were wide of the mark, often because we've overshot them or discovered what seemed important was not.

The brilliant science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke predicted geo-synchronous earth orbiting satellites in 1945, but science fiction was fiction! Right?

If you are a student today, the smartest thing you can do is to put yourself into a position to take advantage of new knowledge as it comes.

I was told by a colleague in 1960 to get into computers, but I thought I was too late. I didn't understand that what I thought were the ultimate in machines were only the Homo habilis of the computing revolution. It seems likely at this point in time that today's computers, advanced as they seem, are still Neanderthals, and "Computeris sapiens sapiens" is still in the future.