Letter to Students


Dear Student:

This letter is about computers and your education. Let me begin by asking you a question. Why do we have schools? Think of some answers before you go on to the next paragraph.

One answer is that schools help you learn things that will help you function as an adult in society. Schools teach reading, writing, arithmetic, speaking, listening, learning to learn, and working with other people because these are important skills for adults. They were important to your grandparents and will be important to your grandchildren.

However, things are changing very fast in our world. The teaching materials and methods in schools are slow to change. So are the testing system and requirements. Teachers and school administrators are slow to change. For these and other reasons, schools aren’t doing as good a job as most people would like. A different way of putting it is that you are getting cheated! Unless you are in a very special school, the chances are that you aren’t getting nearly as good an education as you could be getting.

This letter focuses on just one part of your education—computer-related technology. The main reason our world is changing so fast is technology, and computers are an important part of that technology. Technology has produced airplanes, television, Nintendos, and life-saving medicines, as well as environmental problems and weapons of war that threaten our very existence.

Suppose that people were going to build a house with a deep basement. One way to dig the hole would be with hand tools like shovels and buckets. Another way would be to use heavy equipment like trucks and backhoes as powerful aids to the human body. You can think of reading, writing, and arithmetic as hand tools to aid in storing and processing information. Computers are power tools for the same purpose. There are many problem-solving and work situations in which a person who has access to a computer and knows how to use it has a massive advantage over people who don’t.

Twenty-five years ago computers were quite rare and expensive. Now they are much less expensive, much more powerful, and commonly available. They are routine, everyday tools for millions of adults. Our schools have not done well in adjusting to this change.

In most schools, computers are still rare. (Do you have one to use whenever you want, both at school and at home?) Most teachers do not know how to use computers to solve the types of problems they are teaching you to solve. Even the most modern textbooks focus almost entirely on less powerful aids to storing and processing information. Most testing situations do not allow use of computers.
The result is that you are not learning to use computers as an aid to solving problems. This part of your education is not preparing you for adult citizenship in our society. There are a number of things you can do about it:

1. For each topic that comes up in a class, ask your teachers to explain the uses and limitations of computers in that topic area. If adults use computers in that area, ask why you are not being taught how to do the same.

2. Ask your parents and other adults how they see computers being used on jobs. Ask them to ask school officials why the schools aren’t teaching you more about computers.

3. Learn to use a computer yourself. The chances are that your school has some computers, and you may have access to computers in other places. Make it into a routine, everyday, personal tool.

You are responsible for your own education. You know that computers exist and are a powerful aid to the human mind. You know that you are capable of learning to use this tool. You can make the decision to do so, and carry it out.

I would like to hear from you on your thoughts about learning to use computers and making everyday use of them in school. Please write.

Sincerely yours,