

Mr Soh Wai Wah, Principal & Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Polytechnic
Ms Tang Soo Yin, Director of SP Design School
Distinguished Guests,
Parents and Graduands,
Staff of Singapore Polytechnic,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good Morning,

It is a wonderful privilege and honour for me to be in this ceremony with you today.

Standing here now and looking at you guys in your graduation gowns, reminds me of all the emotions running through my head when I sat there nine years ago.

"I better not trip over when climbing the stairs." "The next time I see my coursemates, how will they look without hair?" And the biggest question of all: "What's next after graduation?"

If I had a chance to give my 20-year-old self one advice, that would be "Everything will turn out fine. Never give up. And continue to follow the five rules in life."

Till this day I always have followed these five rules in life:

1. Seize every single opportunity that presents in front of you.

At 18, an opportunity came for an internship at Yahoo! India. Being a naive design student who only wanted to do t-shirt designs and graffiti at skateparks, Yahoo! felt like a dull tech place where nothing much exciting can happen.

When news came that I was chosen, I remembered my lecturer telling me this: "Justin, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that you've been selected among the 17 students who were interviewed, the bad news is that you will be going to Bangalore alone." Other than feeling awkward by being the only Chinese in the Silicon Valley of India at that time, I was grateful to be given the opportunity to experience the early applications of User Experience Design and identifying opportunities for emerging markets. The experience in Bangalore changed my worldview, and more importantly, made me realise the impact design has in different cultures.

2. Hard work and consistency is key

It all started out with a simple goal; to be the best designer I can ever be. I wanted people to respect the design profession.

Throughout the past ten years in design, no matter how hard I had to work, or how many late nights and weekends to burn. I persevered and never gave up.

As a student, I remember participating in multiple design and photography competitions to see where I stand. I would work during breaks between classes and finish my assignments two weeks before the deadline; so that I could spend the extra time to work on new competition entries. At every Crowbar Awards competition, I would end up submitting at least 20 entries ranging from TV commercials to editorial design.

All the sacrifices made for the hard work seemed hard to do at that time, but in the long run, it was all worth it. I knew that there was no shortcut to success and it was all leading up to my goal, to be a better designer.

3. Surround yourself with positive people.

It is natural to have negative comments and rumours when you have big dreams and goals, especially from people who are close to you. "There is no future in that, why bother..." At 15, when I said I wanted to be a designer, my peers immediately said, "Where is the future in that?" "How are you going to make money from drawing and painting?" I ignored them anyway.

In my second year of poly, I was fortunate to be a part of a talented team of like-minded people to set up The Student Agency, which was led by my lecturer Noor Azhar. It was indeed a big challenge; we bit off more than we could chew!

Back then, it was uncommon for students to take on real-life clients while still studying. The learning curve was steep. And we made many mistakes along the way. But we learned from it, and we progressed together, as we completed campaign after campaign.

The Student Agency started out as a students' and teachers' dream. Till this day, it has enabled students who want to seek out more, giving them the confidence to push their boundaries and fast-track into the design industry without breaking a sweat!

I am glad I have ignored naysayers and believed in myself. I am happy that I found positive like-minded people helped push my limits and achieved the unachievable.

4. Embrace failures and rejections.

Just before I finished my national service, I wanted to pursue an overseas degree. I started looking for the best universities and scholarships. I was thinking; I worked hard to be at the top of my course, getting a placement shouldn't be an issue. I was wrong!

I applied for Central Saint Martins and London College of Communication. They rejected me twice. My works were not raw enough, lacked experimentation and were too practical. What they were looking for went against my personal belief of doing purposeful designs that are straightforward and easy to understand.

Since then, I started reading widely, brushing up on more design theories and social design. Gaining a deeper understanding of the impacts of design on different cultures.

I eventually enrolled into Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, with a singular goal in mind: I will work harder than ever, and push my limits so that I can be the top student with a perfect GPA.

Little did I know, in the process of completing our final year project, that was when my roommate and I got inspired to set up our design company APT811, named after our room number. Our big aspiration for APT811 was to deliver purposeful design for Asia... Singapore, Malaysia and maybe Batam. With this purpose in mind, we have since managed to help various organisations and companies such as Samaritans of Singapore, Central CDC, Young NTUC and Community Centres to better engage with their stakeholders.

5. Do good with design

Contribute back what you have learnt and mastered back to the community. For everyone to embrace design, they must first experience it first hand.

A lot of people don't understand design, even clients who request for design services. Never assume everyone is on the same page as you. Be patient, take the time to explain to non-designers why considering another alternative is not a bad idea, co-create the design with them, include them in the decision making process.

In every project, miscommunication often happens when there is a lack of clarity on either side. It can quickly spin out of control when not handled with care and often have us designers dismissed as stubborn and egoistic. It never hurts to take the extra step to empathise with clients and stakeholders of the project. Every smile and positive experience from a design project goes a long way and will eventually benefit the entire community.

Educating the world what design is, starts with empathy and the intent of doing good with design.

There are so many Singaporeans and people around the world that can benefit from your contribution. And this is why I try my best to take every opportunity that I could to give back.

For the past four years, I have managed to help Samaritans of Singapore improve their brand image and outreach strategies to better deal with suicide prevention. Teach young students eight to 14 years old design thinking techniques, tackling environmental and health challenges we face now and the coming future.

I find it exceptionally meaningful to empower the next generation to be innovative, challenging them to redesign our lives for a better future.

Regardless what you do. Seize every opportunity, be consistent, embrace failures, do good with design. A day that you learn something is not a wasted day. Hang in there; it's not always easy.

The future is ever-changing, and we as designers all have this unique ability to be part of the change-making process. So don't be a byproduct of change, be an agent of change!