

**CITATION PRESENTED BY JAMES BOSCO HONORING SEYMOUR PAPERT
WITH THE FIRST CoSN LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD, WASHINGTON
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Seymour Papert was born in Pretoria, South Africa where his primary, secondary, and early college education occurred. His experiences in apartheid South Africa had profound impact on his personal and professional life. With considerable personal risk, he became an active opponent to the racist policies of South Africa. His major intellectual interest was focused on understanding the structure and functioning of the human mind. He chose a career in mathematics since it was politically neutral while still enabling him to cultivate his study of the mind. Even so, he never abandoned his passion for social justice for those who were underserved by society. Early on it was blacks in South Africa. Later it was children in the world in general and in the United States in particular.

Papert left South Africa to pursue doctoral studies at Cambridge where he received doctorate in mathematics. He received permission to do his doctoral studies in the Paris where he found a setting that was more stimulating than he had found at Cambridge. He flourished in an environment where one could challenge convention and explore new ideas. Paris was also the home of the Bourbaki Group which was the “avant-garde” in mathematics. As a consequence of Papert’s association with leading mathematicians in Paris and his deep interest in understanding mental processes and learning, he was brought to the attention of Jean Piaget who was seeking a mathematician to work with him for a year. It was a perfect fit. Working with Piaget, Papert had the opportunity to focus on unraveling the ways in which children build their understanding of the world around them. Their association actually lasted from 1958-1963. Piaget is said to have remarked, “No one understands my work better than Seymour Papert.”

Seymour Papert came to recognize the seminal importance of the intersection of the study of the mind with the development of computers even when computers were in a primitive state. In 1964, he was invited to MIT as a research scientist in a cross-departmental research lab that was developing computer systems to augment human abilities. He accepted a one-year appointment since he was not intending to stay in the U.S. but, the one year turned into an appointment as a tenured professorship in the Department of Mathematics. He was instrumental in the development of several units at MIT that played a vitally important role in advancing information technology worldwide. In 1959, along with Marvin Minsky, he was one of the founders of MIT’s Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. In 1980, when the MIT Media Lab was founded, he was one of the six faculty members who transferred to the Lab as part of the core faculty for it.

Long before there was any appreciable recognition of the role of computers as a resource for learning in schools, he understood the potential of computers to enrich learning opportunities for children. In the 60’s, at a time when computers

were seen as an devices for elite academicians, he created the Logo programming language which was one of the first uses of computers as a learning resource for children. Papert coined the term “constructionism” to define his conception of learning as active engagement in the creation of a product. Constructionism was his antidote to sterile, passive, teacher centered environments. His major works such as “Mindstorms,” “The Children’s Machine” and “The Connected Family” explain the role that computers can play in constructionist learning. These books as well numerous other printed and spoken presentations have had deep influence on hundreds of thousands of parents, educators, and policy makers throughout the world.

Papert played a key role in the establishment in Maine of the nation’s first one-to-one computer project at the state level and he is deeply involved in the development of the “100 dollar” computer. His involvement in both of these projects does not stem from his desire to get more computers into the world but to transform the environment for learning for children. He is a tireless advocate of the position that access to the learning opportunities that computer technology provides for children should not be contingent on parental affluence.

At present, he resides in Maine where he established the Learning Barn whose purpose is to develop methods of learning that are as yet too far ahead of the times for large-scale implementation. True to constructionist orientation, Seymour Papert is a man of action yet his action is always grounded in perceptive analysis and thoughtful reflection and, he is always able to find the right words to express his ideas in a compelling manner. His has indeed been a lifetime of achievement. He will continue to be the toughest critic and best friend for all who seek to make the promise of computer technology to improve the lives of children a reality.