Seymour Papert: Biography

For more than forty years, Seymour Papert has been a bold, visionary thinker in developing new understanding about how children learn and think. The Seymour Papert Institute and the Learning Barn in Blue Hill, Maine are capstones for his long and distinguished career in cybernetics, artificial intelligence, applied mathematics, digital technology and education.

A native of South Africa and an anti-apartheid activist in the early 1950's, Papert was in his early twenties when he joined the faculty of Witwaterstrand University. Upon completing his Ph.D., he pursued a research fellowship at Cambridge University in England where he began to make the connections between mathematics and the nascent field of artificial intelligence.

For four years, he worked in Geneva with Jean Piaget, exploring new dimensions as a scientist in how children learn.

In 1964 Papert was asked to join the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he helped to found the Artificial Intelligence Lab with Marvin Minsky. He developed the concept for computer language, LOGO, and new ideas for computers and education with major grants from the National Science Foundation. The LOGO language has been adopted world-wide and adapted for the use of new technologies for development in Africa and Latin American countries as well as in Europe and the USA. With Alan Kay, Papert pioneered early ideas in the use of computers by children that led to the development by Kay of the first concept for a laptop computer. In 1985, he was a founding member of the Media Laboratory at MIT with which he keeps an active association since his change to emeritus status. In recognition of his leadership, the Lego Company endowed the Lab with the "Lego-Papert Chair of Learning Research".

Papert is the author of many books including Mindstorms: Children, Computers and Powerful Ideas (1980), The Children's Machine (1993), and The Connected Family (1996). Mindstorms has been considered a seminal work on the subject of computers and education.

He has been the recipient of many awards and now holds the title of Distinguished Visiting Scientist at the University of Maine Department of Computer Science. In October 2001 Newsweek magazine named Papert as one of the nation's ten top innovators in education

Although his principal work has been in the US, Papert has led innovations in the use of digital technology in many countries. In 1981-3 he spent two years at the invitation of the French government on developing a center for informatics and development. In the mid-80's he worked with President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica to develop a nationwide program of intensive computer use throughout the public education system. Costa Rica, which now has the highest literacy rate in the Americas, continues to serve as a model for large-scale deployment of computer technology in public education. Papert has worked with innovators in several other Latin American countries, in Japan and in Thailand.

In the past few years Papert has concentrated on advanced projects nearer home. Working with educators in Iowa, he has shown how to adapt the educational use of robotic construction for very young children and across gender lines. He was the primary influence in convincing Maine Governor Angus King to boldly establish Maine as the first state in the world to embrace one-to-one computing with the placement of laptops in all seventh and eight grade classrooms in 2002-2003. He has also done seminal work in Maine on education in juvenile correctional facilities.

Seymour Papert established the Learning Barn and the Seymour Papert Institute in 1999 in Blue Hill, Maine. A non-profit organization, the Institute is an advocate for new ideas in learning and technology and provides consultant services to state governments, international institutions and communities committed to new approaches.