Computing Educators Oral History Project

Training interview transcript

Barbara Boucher Owens

Interviewer: William Aspray

Recorded Saturday, June 25, 2005

Location: Lisbon, Portugal

The audio is available on CEOHP’s website, ceohp.org, under training.

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We recommend that this transcript be cited as follows:


Conducted during the training session the ITiCSE 2005 Working Group meeting.

[0:00]

William Aspray: So this is an interview on the 25th of June, 2005, with Barbara Boucher [pronouncing it “Boo-shay”] Owens. Did I say your name right?

Barbara Boucher Owens: No.

WA: Would you tell me how it’s spelled … said?

BBO: Said? “Bow-cher”.


Let’s begin by having you talk a bit about your early life. What did your parents do?

BBO: My dad was a dentist and my mother was a housewife, but had a Master’s degree in business administration.

WA: And were there brothers and sisters?

BBO: I had an older brother.

WA: And did your parents, either or both of them, encourage you to take courses in math and science?
BBO: I think they did. I mean, my mother especially, but both parents did.

WA: And did they also encourage your brother to do so?

BBO: I think so.

WA: OK. And were you a good student?

BBO: Mmm hmm. A very good student.

WA: A very good student. Did you take courses in math and science disciplines, as well as in the other fields?

BBO: Well, in high school, I had … the football coach was a mentor who, in general science, said you can go anywhere you want to go with science, and tutored me on the side. I’d had terrible science teachers in high school. And I took advanced chemistry in college and I felt totally lost. So I didn’t take any more science in college. And in math, they did the switch from the old calculus to what we have now, they call college algebra, the pre-calc course. And they called it calculus I, because I was on the semester that they started it, so I couldn’t take calculus II. So I never took calculus again until after I got out of school.

WA: It seems sort of odd that the football coach would be a mentor for you. How did that happen?

BBO: He was … well, coaches have to teach something besides coach, and he taught general science.

WA: I see. So he was your general science teacher. OK. And how did you … did you know from early on that you wanted to go to college?

BBO: I don’t think it was a “know”. I think it was just expected in our family.

WA: Expected. Your parents both had degrees, right?

BBO: And my grandfather was also a dentist. My grandmother … other grandmother was a teacher. Great educations.

WA: And how did you choose where to go to college?

BBO: My mother. My father. My aunt. My cousin. My brother — all had gone to this college. And I went.

WA: And did you feel some … did you feel good about this?

BBO: I don’t know. Probably not. Probably the least … it was easiest.

WA: It was easiest. Why did … how did you choose your major?

BBO: Because of a mentor. I majored in psychology. And it was probably because a mentor chose me. The teacher in my introductory college psych course took an interest in me. And I ended up being his baby sitter and his research assistant and the person that I had my daughter stay with when she went to look at colleges.

WA: Did you consider any other majors?

BBO: No. It just happened that it was the easiest thing to do because, I think, of that interest.

WA: So you mentioned a little bit about your mathematics courses in college, and lack of them. But what about your other science courses, what …?
BBO: Well, I mentioned the chemistry, that was all I took. That was it. One semester of calculus and one semester of chemistry. I was in experimental psychology, however, and so I took physiology. I was the lab manager, so I wired plug boards. I was very interested in statistics in psychology, so that I had lots of statistics in graduate school. I really loved math.

WA: And what was your expectation of what you were going to do with this degree when you graduated?

BBO: I had no clue and had met somebody from the University of Texas at a conference, who suggested I go to graduate school there in psychology. And I thought, “Well, maybe I ought to find a job!” So I applied for a few jobs and got an offer to be the head of the Campfire Girls in the offices in Ponca City, Oklahoma. [chuckles] Chose to go to graduate school at UT.

WA: I see. And how did you choose to go there? Because of this contact?

BBO: No, because I had a boyfriend from Ohio Wesleyan who was in the Air Force in Texas. And so it was a way to be close to him.

[5:00]

WA: So were there other formative influences on you during your college or your Master’s program? People or courses you took that were particularly important.

BBO: In a way, I think what … there were two things that happened in graduate school that led me into computer science. And one was my thesis advisor in human learning had written a programmed instruction text — which was … you have a sentence and cover up the answer and slip down the page — in statistics. And he had physically had somebody change it into a computer-assisted instruction program and I was the debugger for that program. It was the first time I’d seen a computer being used for anything that I would be remotely interested in. And then I saw how it would relate to everything that I had been doing in experimental psychology and in statistics and everything fell together. “I want to play with computers. I REALLY want to play with computers!” And so I got out of graduate school. I had the … that wasn’t answering that question. But that’s …

So when I was almost through with my graduate program, I didn’t know what I wanted to do again. (Sounds like a constant theme in my life — I’m not sure what I want to do!) My mother thought that since I had some experience with computers, that I ought to be a programmer — because “every good girl should be a programmer” (those were exactly her words!) She cut out an ad for IBM, out of the newspaper, and said, “Go for that interview!” And I had been offered a fellowship to continue in psychology, with admission in the doctoral program. And I went to this IBM interview. And IBM offered … I told them I didn’t want programming. I wanted to use computers, but I did not want programming. And I got an offer from IBM to work in computer-assisted instruction at the IBM Research Lab. And I thought, “Boy, that’s great!”

WA: Mmm hmm. So what did you do there?

BBO: One of the major things I did there was manage some programs where we had computer terminals in maybe 15 different colleges in New York State. And it was in German, French, and maybe a little bit of Vietnamese. And then when I left Research, I worked for — I don’t remember the name of the division of IBM, but we did Russian for the Defense Language Institute. So I managed those programs, did some of the debugging of the programs, did a little bit of statistical analysis on the data from those programs.

WA: What did you like and dislike about these jobs at IBM?

BBO: It was … I liked the research, because we could work on what we were supposed to until 3:00. And after 3:00 we could work on whatever we would like. Which was just a wonderful atmosphere to be in. And after that we could work on what we wanted. I liked playing bridge at noon. I liked the hiking club at night. So there was a whole social cadre of young, bright scientists mapped my life. So I really liked working for IBM.

I had to leave IBM because the day that … I was married, that’s another story. Does that get told about IBM …
WA: We'll come back to that! We'll come back to that in a minute.

BBO: OK. So I lost my train, could you bring it back?

WA: Things you liked and disliked about the job.

BBO: I disliked a boss who would take my ideas and say they were terrible. And then read a paper that he had written where he’d used my ideas and got the credit for it.

WA: Did you feel like your education prepared you well to do this work?

BBO: Well, there were no preparations for any kind of computer work when I was young. It certainly didn’t train me, but the liberal arts background prepares you to do just about anything. So in that case sure.

WA: And were there other women doing the kinds of work that you were doing?

BBO: Yes. And, in fact, in retrospect it was mostly women. Management was mostly male. But the women I worked with … mostly women.

[9:56]

WA: And was that a point of interest or note or …?

BBO: I never thought about it until this minute.

WA: Until this minute?

BBO: Until this minute.

WA: Oh, that’s very interesting.

OK, so let’s come back and talk about this issue of IBM and marriage for women.

BBO: At the time that I worked for IBM … my husband and I had planned to get married. We met at IBM and his group was being transferred to California. And so I agreed to go along with him and look for a job within IBM. But IBM would not send me to California with him because we weren’t married and that would be moral turpitude. So I had to interview people meeting half-way across the country. They were willing to fly people to … I guess it was Kansas City. And I met the people in Kansas City that I interviewed with for my job. That was number one.

Then later, when my husband decided he wanted to go back to graduate school in computer science at NYU. And he found out that he was accepted at NYU the same day I had a positive pregnancy test. We had agreed on a five-year plan. I was responsible for five years for the economic viability of the family and then the other … he could do what he wanted for five years and then we’d switch. And I was in my five years of economic responsibility when I found out I was pregnant. And IBM said you can’t work past the seventh month because it’s unseemly to have pregnant women.

So that switched me into education. And a friend from IBM said, “Well, Brooklyn College is hiring and in the psychology department”. And they offered me a job teaching computer simulation of human behavior, which was a real map to what I was interested in, and a statistics class. So that was great. And the next year they formed the computer science department. And in those days, if you could program a computer to do anything, you could teach computer science. So I became … came in on the ground floor of the computer science department and have not stopped teaching computer science since then.

WA: And had you thought about a career as a faculty member?

BBO: Had I prior to that?
WA: Mmm hmm.

BBO: Never.

WA: Never. And what was your experience teaching?

BBO: I loved it. I loved it. I loved the students. I liked the individual students that I could do research with. I liked big classroom teaching. I liked … teaching.

WA: Were there other women at Brooklyn College on the faculty in computing?

BBO: There were a few. But at one point in time I was the only non-rabbi in the department, so there were a lot of males.

WA: Mmm hmm.

BBO: And except for the department chair. He was not a rabbi, but the rest of the department was. So it was very interesting finding about being that female for them and for me.

WA: So looking at your resume, I see that you taught there for seven years. Six years.

BBO: Mmm hmm.

WA: So then why did you change?

BBO: Again, my five years were up. My husband had a job at IBM Research and I had the choice of staying on — I’d gotten my Ph.D. at that time — and I could stay on at Brooklyn. Or I hadn’t … they hadn’t made the appointment for the year. It was kind of whether … I had to have the Ph.D. to be re-appointed in the tenure track that year. And I could get the job at Brooklyn if I wanted it, but my husband was in Westchester. And I had started the commute to go up … he had started to commute, couldn’t take the commute, so he moved to Westchester. I had the child at home. And then I couldn’t handle the job — I was just finishing my Ph.D. and the kid. And so, somehow, it turned out that I didn’t take the job at Brooklyn. I stayed in our little town of Peekskill and substitute taught for a year in high school. I learned a lot!

WA: [laughing]

BB: I didn’t want to do high school teaching. It was too hard. Especially because I had a Ph.D., so I could teach anything. So I taught biology, English, physical education. When I did get a math section, a fellow had had a heart attack and I got to take over his class for six weeks, so I taught them programming, that was a lot of fun. But that was the hardest job I’ve ever had.

WA: Let’s go back for a minute and talk about your Ph.D. education.

[15:00]

BBO: Mmm hmm.

WA: What did you do and why did you go where you went and what were your experiences like?

BBO: This is beginning to sound like a broken record, with the “least resistance” method of going through life! I had started taking courses at NYU because I was teaching one class at the graduate center of CUNY in computer applications to education. And met a guy at NYU and we were talking, we’d met at a professional meeting, and he was teaching some interesting courses, so I said, “Let me take a few.” So I started taking courses. And I just … all of a sudden, he said to me, “Barbara, you’re half-way through our program! Why don’t you enroll really?” I said, “OK!” And so, since I was already almost … more than half-way done with my coursework, I finished my Ph.D. And it was in a relatively new and didn’t-last-long program called “Computer Applications to Education”. It was in the Communications in Education Department. But it was
cross-curricular: I had somebody from computer science, somebody from ed psych, and somebody from the
Ed Department. It was a truly active committee for working on my dissertation. I had a lot of fun. I got a
Ph.D. for having fun. And the only thing that wasn’t fun was the end of the dissertation.

WA: And how was it balancing all these other duties: teaching, having a family …

BBO: Oh, except for the separation time, it was … it worked extraordinarily well. My husband took a lot of night
classes, so he was home from school and I was teaching. And we were … it was kind of transparent, we had
very little … In those days, it wasn’t … childcare wasn’t much of an issue, because there were so many
people that didn’t work. I had a next door neighbor that was a very good friend, and we could just … I could
just leave the baby with her. And it was not a difficult thing.

It got a little more difficult with two children. After we moved together from Westchester and we were
teaching at the next place, at Mercy, but not much, because I taught a lot of night classes. And they were at
nursery school and it was a very flexible schedule. So it was the best of all worlds. Our whole babysitting
pool was there. I didn’t have to arrange childcare. So that I look at my colleagues who are younger and their
struggle with children and arranging daycare and not having a whole support system of mostly stay-at-home
moms. It’s a different world. It’s harder.

WA: Were there other women in your graduate program? In this doctoral program?

BBO: I was not friends with really anybody in the graduate program. Which is unusual when I look around
…

WA: What about in your classes?

BBO: There were women and there were quite a few women, mainly because it was housed in Communications.
My advisor was the gentlest geek in the world. He put together one of the first Altair kits at the same time he
was building a perfectly green house outside of Trenton, New Jersey, and his son was living in a yurt. So it
was kind of technology and non-technology married to the program. So it was mostly my hanging out with
my advisor as my …

WA: And what did you choose to study in your doctoral work?

BBO: I was teaching programming in BASIC and seeing how students were always hitting a wall. And had read
some work by Mayer in which students were … couldn’t understand IF-statements. I realized that that was
blocking a lot of people. So I did a — and I was interested in how people learn and formulate ideas — so I
did a learning styles experiment in teaching the programming language BASIC based on Mayer’s work. And
it was fun. I mean, it was just … they gave me a degree for having fun!

WA: So you finished your … finishing up your degree. What were you going to do next?

BBO: Well, I was going to stay doing what I was doing. Because I was teaching … I was teaching — at the very
end, I was teaching at Mercy College.

WA: Which is nearby where you lived.

BBO: Yeah, when I moved to Westchester. I thought … well, I really hadn’t decided what I was going to do. I
knew I was going to teach, but I just didn’t know where and when. And Mercy opened up a campus in my
little town, so I could walk there. So I started with two classes when the baby was little. And I ended up a
tenured, full professor a number of years later.

[20:01]

WA: Mmm hmm. And what were the next set of things that changed in your life?

BBO: Again, it wasn’t my turn. And my husband wanted to go someplace warm. So he wanted to move to Texas.
And … and that … actually, there was a mentor in between. I did leave out something really important, that
got me involved in the computer science ed community. And that was having met a woman, Doris Appleby. Doris and I met at a meeting, had very similar interests; got roped into the very first Eastern Small College Computer Conference steering committee — in 1984 or 1985. And got really involved in having venues for people who were interested in computer science ed and were at small colleges, didn’t have a family. And Doris and I together bonded, and then became part of that group and bonded in that group. And then started a greater New York small college community. And Doris just kind of mentored me through the process of growing up in a profession.

And when I moved to Texas, I didn’t have Doris anymore. But then my name sort of came up. And Nell [Dale] involved me in the CS Ed community at the University of Texas when I was teaching in Austin.

WA: I want take a break at this point, because I’m mindful of our time.

BBO: OK.

WA: So extending out of our interview and back into the regular [working] group. Should we continue this or should we just stop with this as enough of an example?

Remote voice of working group member Lecia Barker: Well, I’d like to know how Barbara feels about that. Because you mentioned earlier that XX, once you get going.

WA: Talk about XX

Remote voice of Lecia Barker continuing: So it probably feels like stopping in mid-stream …

WA: Right. We are stopping in mid-stream, I mean …

BBO: Well, but for the group, there are two things. If we stop in mid-stream and this becomes a real interview, then we can continue. I don’t feel like I’m being shut down. I feel like enough of a rapport with Bill and his question-asking technique that I would be comfortable to stop and start again if he really wanted to. Because there are some issues about tenure and … that are really very important, very traumatic, informative in the way that I changed and how my career is at this point in my life.

WA: My guess is that we are about half-way done …

BBO: So …

WA: … is all.

BBO: I don’t mind …

WA: I’m just worried we are going to lose our afternoon.

BBO: I think we should stop. And I think, if it’s OK with you, that this can be a two-part interview.

WA: That often happens. Someone has something to say, or it takes a long time to get into things, or whatever, you often have to pick it up again and try to break in a nice place.

BBO: And after lunch is a deadly time for the ones … the people that are listening.

[23:12]
[removed about 30 seconds of indistinct discussion too far removed from the microphone]