

Computing Educators Oral History Project

***Harold (Hal) Abelson* video snippet transcript**

Recorded Thursday, March 1, 2012

Available both via the ceohp.org website and on CEOHP's YouTube channel
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7e01gqKsbew>

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Embrace the Randomness in Your Life

So, you asked me before about how I got into educational computing and technology and Logo and all of that. So the way that actually happened is when I first showed up at MIT — this was the end of the 1960s, and it was that wonderful time when students were doing demonstrations on campus. And I was a new graduate student and, of course, I got to walk around and smell the tear gas, which was one of the wonderful things about campuses in those days. And the Students for a Democratic Society at MIT had occupied the President's office. And they were sitting around there doing wonderful things like re-playing the tapes of the IBM Selectric typewriters so they could see all the official MIT correspondence over the last month or something. And they decided to hold open house in the President's office. And I was a new graduate student and I said, "Gosh, I'm never going to get a chance to see the MIT President's office. Never in my life will I ever be in the MIT President's office! I'm just a graduate student." So I figured I'd go in for the open house. So I walked in and there were a bunch of people sitting around on the floor in the President's office, talking and having a good time. And I ran into a fellow that I had gone to high school with, who I had lost track of when we were both undergraduates. And I said "Hi" and we greeted each other and he said "Hal, what are you doing?" And I said, "Gee, Ron, I'm just here at MIT. This is my first week as a graduate student. I'm looking for a job." And he said, "I heard the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory is a nice place to work. Why don't you go over and ask there?" So I walked over to the Artificial Intelligence laboratory and I found out there was going to be a talk by a guy named Seymour Papert. And I went to the talk and it was about this idea that kids, that *kids* could program computers. You know, this was 1969 when computers cost millions and millions of dollars. It just blew me away, the idea that you could be thinking like that. So I walked around the AI Lab some more the next

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week and at one point got in the elevator — was walking around looking — and then two floors later, the elevator stopped and the door opened and Papert walked in. So I introduced myself. I said, “I really liked his talk and I’m a brand new graduate student and I’m looking for a job.” And he said, “Well, who are you working for?” And I said, “I don’t know, can I work for you?” And he said “Well, yeah, you can work for me.” And that’s how this all got started. That’s how I got into educational technology and that’s how I got into the career that I’m in.

I like telling this story to MIT students who come in and are just very deliberate in having their life planned out. Just last week, I was supervising contest judging from students who were making applications they thought other students could use. And one of them was making a scheduler that you could use when you show up as a freshman at MIT and plot out what your courses would be over the next four years. And he was real proud of it. And I said to him, “Do you actually think that’s a good thing, that people should have that thing?” He sort of ... it’s like he never thought about that question before.

Students these days do not appreciate the critical impact of randomness in your life. I deeply believe that the way you sort of are going to be successful is to allow yourself to be carried by randomness to a certain amount and take advantage of the things that come along. My daughter, when she was in high school, we talked about, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” And I sort of said, “The important thing is that you don’t know. It’s really important not to know and not to have it planned out and not to decide at age 15 what you are going to be doing for the next 20 years.” And I like to tell that little story about how I got into what I am doing as an example of that.

[“Thank you” from interviewer.]