

# The **Promise and Problems** of CS for All

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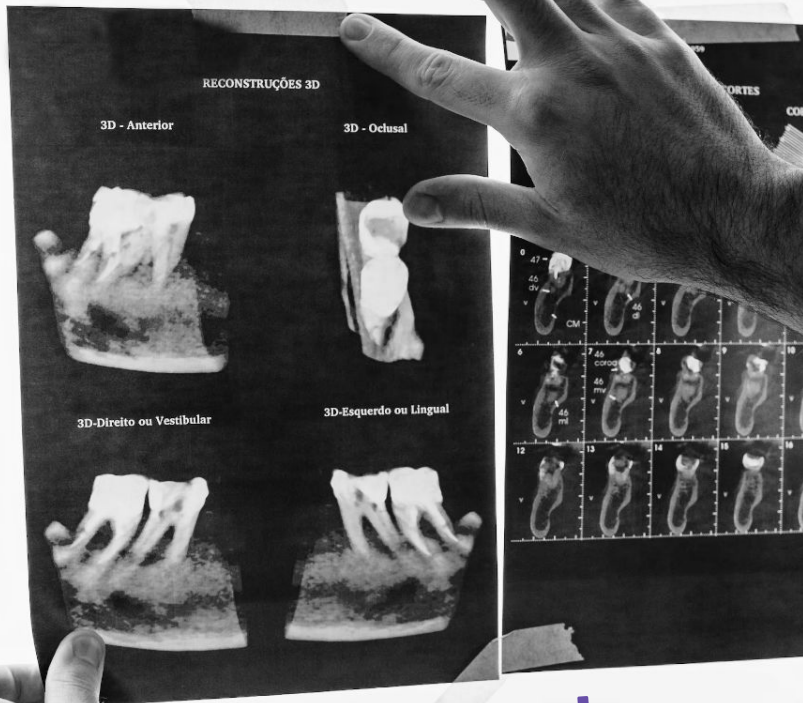
*The Information School*

*University of Washington, Seattle*

Follow along!

<https://bit.ly/sfu22>

Computing is **everywhere** and  
**everything**, for better and worse.



**It's transforming health and medicine**

**It enables globalized private surveillance infrastructure**



**It enables creative  
expression.**



**It isolates us.**



**It empowers**



**It disempowers**





# In post-secondary, **many** do.

- At some colleges and universities, **1/3rd** of students major in CS (!)
- Most CS departments are **overwhelmed** with demand
- Demand has led to **secondary markets** such as bootcamps, corporate training, online degrees, etc.
- Scale has also exacerbated deeply rooted problems with diversity, equity, and inclusion.

# But in primary and secondary, **few** do.

- Across the U.S., our best data shows that **<30%** of schools offer CS electives
- ... and **<1%** of students take a class.
- And most in North America who do are wealthy **white**, **Chinese**, and **Indian boys**, many of whom have family or friends in computing, or whose parents expect them to pursue tech to support their families.



# Why such disparities between **secondary** and **post-secondary**?

Margolis, Jane. Stuck in the Shallow End: Education, Race, and Computing. MIT press, 2017.  
<https://dl.acm.org/doi/book/10.5555/3153292>

It's partly **structural**.

- Unequal paths to develop **interest**.
- Unequal **capacity** for CS in schools.
- Unequal pathways to **college**.
- Unequal access to the **internet**.

But it's also **pedagogical**.

Despite teaching CS for decades, we don't know how to equitably and effectively **teach**, prepare **teachers**, make students feel **welcome**, make CS **relevant** to everyone, **assess** knowledge, **scale** learning, ...

## And thus the **status quo**...

- CS education tends to filter out diversity through narrow notions of **rigor** and **merit**
- CS education concentrates **power** and **wealth** amongst white and Asian men
- The public lacks **basic literacy** about CS and how it concentrates power and wealth
- We lack sufficient **research** to inform change
- We lack sufficient **capacity** to implement change

## But there is **hope!**

- **15+ years** of research funding for basic and applied research in the US, UK, EU, Japan, Korea, China...
- A global community of researchers, teachers, and activists that has grown an **order of magnitude** in the past decade.
- A public that is realizing the importance of **CS literacy** and beginning to wonder why youth (and politicians... even engineers) aren't learning it.

# This talk

Why I pivoted to computing education from HCI.

What I've **discovered** about structural and pedagogical issues in teaching CS.

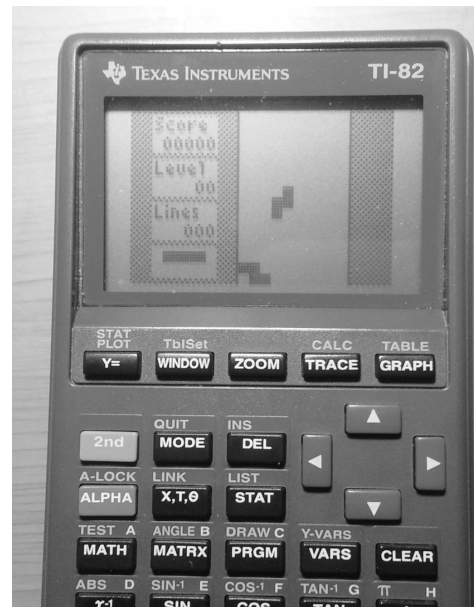
1. *What is CS knowledge?*
2. *How should we teach it?*
3. *How do we include everyone?*

What **grand challenges** remain in research and practice.

My quirky path to **computing  
education research.**

# I learned to code because of **pre-algebra**.

- My math teacher required us to have a **TI-82 graphing calculator**.
- A classmate showed me a version of **Tetris** his older brother had acquired. But it was too slow!
- I spent a summer reading the manual, and rewriting the **renderer**, so I could play in class.
- I shared with my classmates, became their **hero**, was praised by my teacher, and fell in love with computing's capacity for creative expression.





# I studied **CS** + **Psychology** in the 90's

- CS because I was **poor** and needed to make money
  - Most of what I learned was incredibly boring.
  - Classes leeches all of the joy from programming.
  - Most of my professors were unskilled teachers.
  - I watched most of my peers drop out
- Psychology because **behavior** was fascinating
  - I was captivated in every class.
  - It explained so much of the world.
  - But I couldn't get paid to study it.

# Or could I?

- I discovered research!
- I learned I could study **programming** for \$.
- I blended **human-computer interaction** and **software engineering**, studying struggles to understand code and inventing ways to make it easier.
- I earned my PhD at Carnegie Mellon, **inventing**, **theorizing**, **observing**, and **writing** about programming, then continued as a professor.

After tenure, I co-founded a **startup**.

I learned two things as CTO managing 8 engineers:

- Understanding code **is** hard.
- But it's hard because **learning** is hard.

Nearly every difficulty my engineers faced was because they **struggled to learn** a new programming language, API, platform, or how to collaborate. When I found ways of teaching them well, they excelled.

So in ~2012, I **pivoted** to computing education

I found a growing, passionate, collaborative community of **computing education researchers** who also wondered:

- Why is learning to code so hard?
- Why is CS mostly white and Asian boys?
- Why do so many students drop out of CS?
- How can we teach CS more equitably and inclusively?
- How can tools help with teaching + learning?

Here's what my lab and I have  
**discovered** in the past decade.



What is **CS**  
**knowledge**?

It's **not** what  
you think.

We usually think of CS as:

- Programming languages
- Data structures
- Algorithms
- Theory of computation
- Artificial intelligence
- Systems, etc.



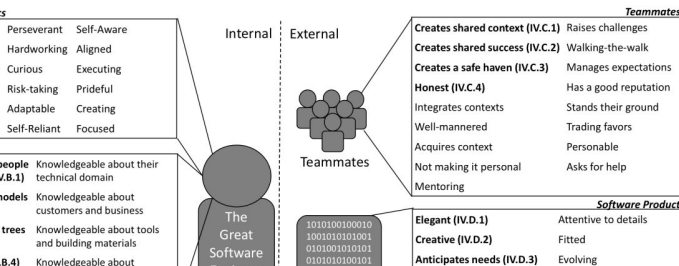
It is technical,  
but it is also  
far more  
**cognitive**,  
**social**, and  
**political** than  
we imagine.

Paul Li interviewed + surveyed **2,000+** software engineers, and while they CS knowledge as core, they often viewed it as less important than the ability to make **complex technical decisions** in the context of organizational, market, and social **uncertainties**.

Paul Luo Li, et al. (2019). [What Distinguishes Great Software Engineers?](#) Empirical Software Engineering.

Paul Luo Li et al. (2017). [Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Collaborations with Software Engineers](#). IEEE CHASE.

Paul Luo Li, et al. (2015). [What Makes a Great Software Engineer?](#) ACM/IEEE ICSE.





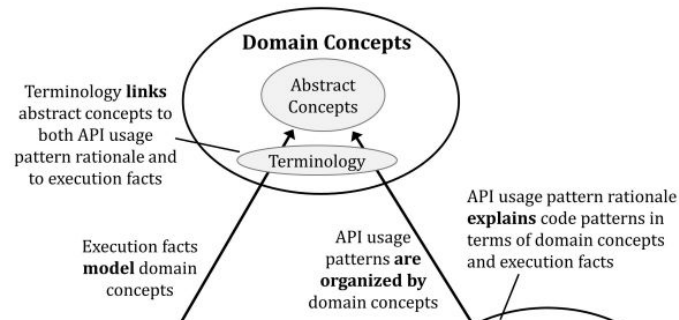


In practice, CS is also more about **API learning** and than algorithm design.

Kyle Thayer studied students in coding bootcamps and found that **API learning** dominated their time, far more than programming language learning. He developed a theory demonstrating that API knowledge quite unlike other kinds of learning, and often not well supported in or out of school.

Kyle Thayer et al. (2021). [A Theory of Robust API Knowledge](#). ACM TOCE.

Kyle Thayer et al. [Barriers Faced by Coding Bootcamp Students](#). ACM ICER.



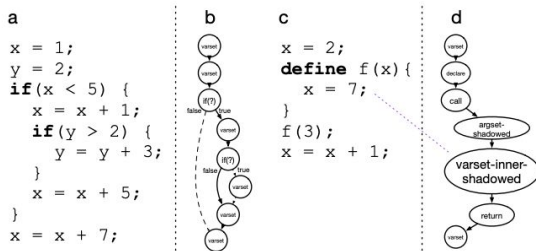


And despite our best efforts in CS to teach programming languages, we often **fail**.

Greg Nelson found that students' **programming language semantics** knowledge is often far more brittle than we think, and explains much of later failure in CS education.

Greg Nelson et al. [Towards Validity for a Formative Assessment for Language-Specific Program Tracing Skills](#). ACM Koli Calling.

Benjamin Xie et al. (2019). [A Theory of Instruction for Introductory Programming Skills](#). Computer Science Education.





And in primary and secondary, CS is necessarily **broader**.

Alannah Oleson analyzed CS learning standards and curricula and found that schools, teachers, and instructional designers lean hard on **design education** because the creativity in design resonates more with students than algorithms and data structures. But they call these design skills “CS”.

Alannah Oleson et al. (2020). [On the Role of Design in K-12 Computing Education](#). ACM TOCE.

Problem-Space Design					Program-Space Design				
UtC	CI	ES	II	Comm	UtC	CI	ES	II	Comm
Code.org CSD									
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
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AP CS A									
							✓	✓	

And CS broadly excludes **social, ethical, political, and justice** aspects of computing.

The past two decades of social science has revealed many **structural forms of bias and inequity**, some *amplified* by computing, some *created* by it.

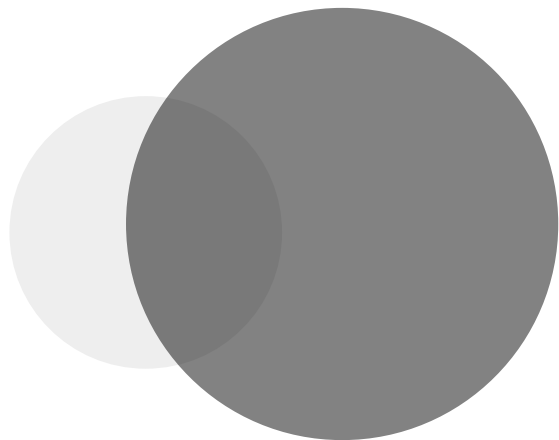
But none of this is taught at any level of education. Calls to teach it have only just emerged.



KAPOR CENTER

REIMAGINING EQUITABLE  
COMPUTER SCIENCE  
EDUCATION

# So what is **CS knowledge**?



**Language semantics** we rarely teach well, but aggressively assess.

**Problem solving skills** we rarely teach at all, but aggressively assess.

**API learning skills** we assume are trivial to learn.

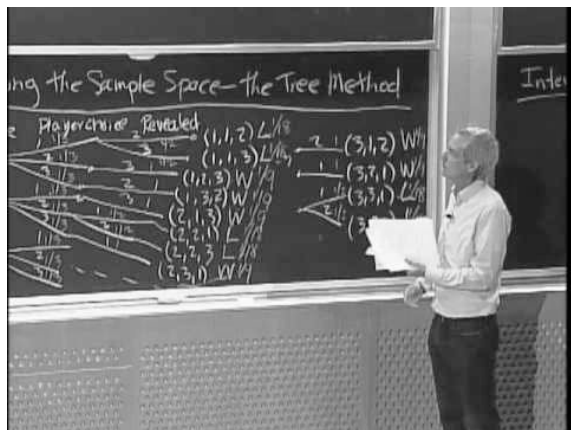
**Design skills** that resonate deeply with youth, but that deemphasize.

**Decision making skills** we rarely teach *or* assess, but are crucial in industry.

**Diversity literacy** that is essentially ignored, perpetuating oppression.

**How** *should* we  
teach CS?

# The typical pedagogy in CS classes involves...



- Teacher **explains** concepts, expects “osmosis” to programming skills.
- Transfer does not happen, so students learn skills **independently**, with each other or in office hours.
- Students are often punished for this behavior under the guise of **academic misconduct**.
- The only students who survive this process are ones who arrive with **prior knowledge** (like me).



We've known  
this doesn't  
work for  
**decades**. So  
what does?

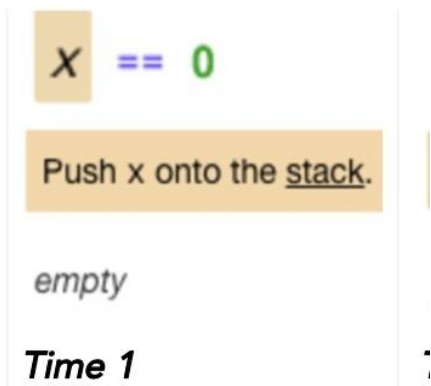
Through a series of projects,  
students Mike, Benji, and Greg  
found that teaching program  
**reading before writing**, and  
**explicitly assessing reading**  
skills, can be effective at  
promoting robust writing skills.

Greg Nelson et al. (2019). [Towards Validity for a Formative Assessment for Language-Specific Program Tracing Skills](#). ACM Koli Calling.

Benjamin Xie et al. (2019). [A Theory of Instruction for Introductory Programming Skills](#). Computer Science Education.

Michael J. Lee, et al. (2015). [Comparing the Effectiveness of Online Learning Approaches on CS1 Learning Outcomes](#). ACM ICER.

Michael J. Lee, et al. (2014). [Principles of a Debugging-First Puzzle Game for Computing Education](#). IEEE VL/HCC.







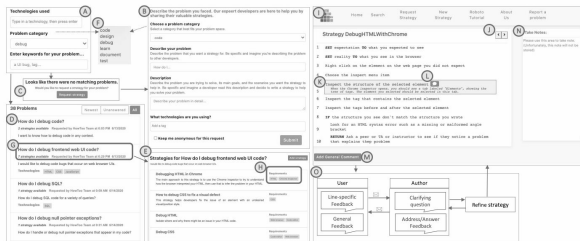
# Teaching explicit programming strategies can help too.

With collaborator Thomas Lazota and student Maryam Arab, we've found that scaffolding problem solving with **step-by-step procedures** can help novices match the performance of experts.

Thomas D. LaToza et al. (2020). [Explicit Programming Strategies](#). Empirical Software Engineering.

Maryam Arab et al. (2021). [HowToo: A Platform for Sharing, Finding, and Using Programming Strategies](#). IEEE VL/HCC.

Maryam Arab et al. (2022). [An Exploratory Study of Sharing Strategic Programming Knowledge](#). ACM CHI.





**Prosocial feedback** is key to preserving precious self-efficacy and motivation.

Many subtle changes in presentation of feedback – using personal pronouns, redirecting blame towards the machine, using personal data, even giving compilers eyes – can lead students to attend more carefully to instruction, improving learning.

Yim Register et al. (2020). [Learning Machine Learning with Personal Data Helps Stakeholders Ground Advocacy Arguments in Model Mechanics](#). ACM ICER.

Michael J. Lee et al. (2013). [In-Game Assessments Increase Novice Programmers' Engagement and Learning Efficiency](#). ACM ICER.

Michael J. Lee et al. (2012). [Investigating the Role of Purposeful Goals on Novices' Engagement in a Programming Game](#). IEEE VL/HCC.

Michael J. Lee et al. (2011). [Personifying Programming Tool Feedback Improves Novice Programmers' Learning](#). ACM ICER.

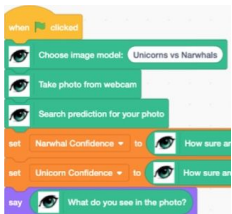


Engaging youth in creating with AI, especially in with family, quickly dispels **AI hype.**

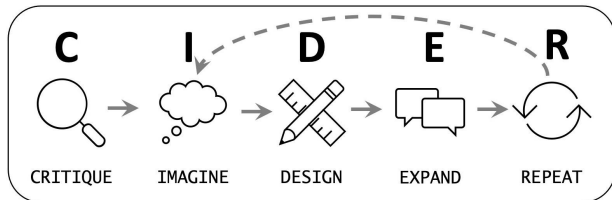
Through a series of studies, Stefania Druga has found that when youth make with classifiers, they quickly come to see how brittle AI can be, and how responsible its creators are for deciding who it serves and who it doesn't.

Stefania Druga, Amy J. Ko (2021). [How Do Children's Perceptions of Machine Intelligence Change when Training & Coding Smart Programs?](#) ACM IDC.

Stefania Druga, Fee Christoph, Amy J. Ko (2022). [Family as a Third Space for AI Literacies: How Do Children and Parents Learn about AI Together?](#) ACM CHI.



Teaching design skills can benefit greatly from focusing on **assumptions**.



Alannah Oleson developed and tested the **CIDER** technique, which systematically develops students' ability to identify assumptions made in a software design by showing them assumptions that they *didn't* notice that other students *did*.

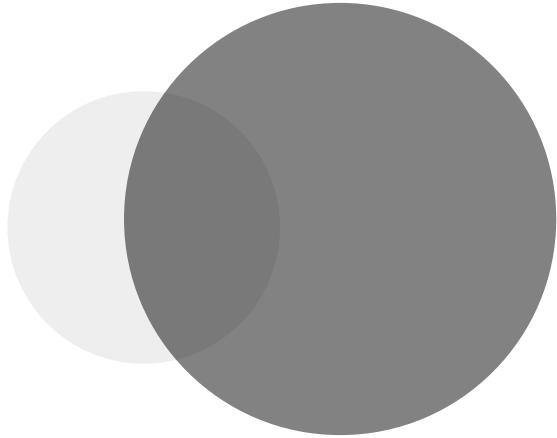
Alannah Oleson, Meron Solomon, Christopher Perdriau, Amy J. Ko (2022). [Teaching inclusive design skills with the CIDER assumption elicitation technique](#). ACM ToCHI.



Want to try it in your class?  
Sign up for AI's study!



So how  
**should** we  
teach CS?



Quite differently than we do now:

- Use **active learning**, with targeted, personalized, in situ direct instruction
- More **formative feedback** to diagnose what students do and don't know; less summative.
- More **explicit scaffolding** of programming skills, less “figure it out yourself, alone.”
- Centering **design** and **diversity** in how we define and contextualize CS foundations.

How do we **include**  
everyone?

It's more than just adding outreach programs, and tweaking curricula. It requires reconsidering **foundations**.

CS has notions of **rigor** and **epistemological commitments** that are counter to inclusion.

Some members in CS also have fundamental **political opposition to notions of equity** (the goal of ensuring students have what they need to learn, even if some need more than others).

Here are a few examples of these deep cultural tensions...



# Peer mentorship is fundamental to developing belonging and identity in CS

---

patient		patient	
helpful		expert	
inspiring		older	
supportive		similar age	
fun		easy to talk to	
interactive		understanding	
kind		comfortable	
caring		kind	
clear		positive	
encouraging		encouraging	
humble		fun	
African American		open-minded	

---

We've shown that **peer relationships** are essential. Students report that strict rules against collaboration disrupt their ability to form community by creating a culture of **competition** and **peer comparison**.

Amy J. Ko et al. (2018). [Informal Mentoring of Adolescents about Computing: Relationships, Roles, Qualities, and Impact](#). ACM SIGCSE.

Amy J. Ko et al. (2017). [Computing Mentorship in a Software Boomtown: Relationships to Adolescent Interest and Beliefs](#). ACM ICER.

Harrison Kwik et al. (2018). [Experiences of Computer Science Transfer Students](#). ACM ICER.





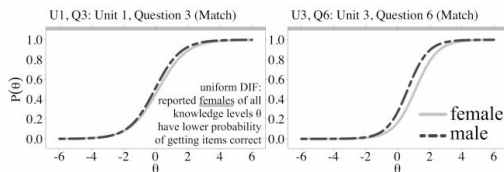
CS assessments are often biased in ways difficult to see without **psychometrics** expertise.

Benji Xie and Matt Davidson have shown how tests used in CS classes are viewed as objective, but actually have **systematic racial and gender biases** that impose structural disadvantages to students with marginalized identities.

Benjamin Xie et al. (2021). [Domain Experts' Interpretations of Assessment Bias in a Scaled, Online Computer Science Curriculum](#). ACM Learning at Scale.

Benjamin Xie et al. (2019). [An Item Response Theory Evaluation of a Language-Independent CS1 Knowledge Assessment](#). ACM SIGCSE.

Matt Davidson et al. (2021). [Investigating Item Bias in a CS1 exam with Differential Item Functioning](#). ACM SIGCSE.



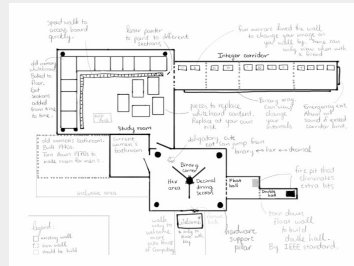
Integrating  
**social,**  
**ethical,** and  
**political**  
topics into CS  
can engage  
marginalized  
students.



But Mara Kirdani-Ryan has found that students with dominant identities are often **resistant** to such learning, deeming it off topic, irrelevant to jobs. But these sentiments come from faculty.

Mara Kirdani-Ryan et al. (2022). [The House of Computing: Integrating Counternarratives into Computer Systems Education](#). ACM SIGCSE.

Mara Kirdani-Ryan et al. (in review). "Taught to be automata": Examining the departmental role in shaping initial career choices of computing students



And talking about computing in social, political, and ethical terms requires a sense of **safety**.

Jayne Everson and Megumi Kivuva found in one study that a class of adolescents marginalized in CS **didn't feel safe** talking about CS critically until they were confident that teachers respected their lived experiences and shared their values about schools, CS, and technology.

Jayne Everson et al. (2022). ["A key to reducing inequities in like, AI, is by reducing inequities everywhere first": Emerging Critical Consciousness in a Co-Constructed Secondary CS Classroom](#). ACM SIGCSE.





Prospective  
CS teachers  
**internalize**  
**fears** about  
CS, rigor, and  
failure.

Jayne also found that a key barrier to aspiring teachers wanting to teach CS is a sense that they would **not belong**, they would be **judged**, and worse yet, they would end up **perpetuating** the same negative learning cultures they had experienced in CS in college.

Jayne Everson et al. (2022). [“I would be afraid to be a bad CS teacher”: Factors Influencing Participation in Pre-Service Secondary CS Teacher Education](#). ACM ICER.

None of this happens without **excellent teachers.**



We need pathways that prepare a diversity of CS educators passionate about teaching not only CS, but the intersections between CS and every other discipline.

We just launch our new **STEP CS** program at the University of Washington, preparing equity and justice-centered secondary educators:

<https://computinged.uw.edu/stepcs/>

We can teach diversity, equity, justice by reframing CS as a **sociopolitical** discipline.

We wrote a 25 chapter book, **Critically Conscious Computing**, to support our teacher education efforts.

Reframes computing in both technical *and* sociopolitical terms, helping teachers develop youth literacy about computing and society.



[Critically Conscious Computing .org](https://criticallyconscious.org)

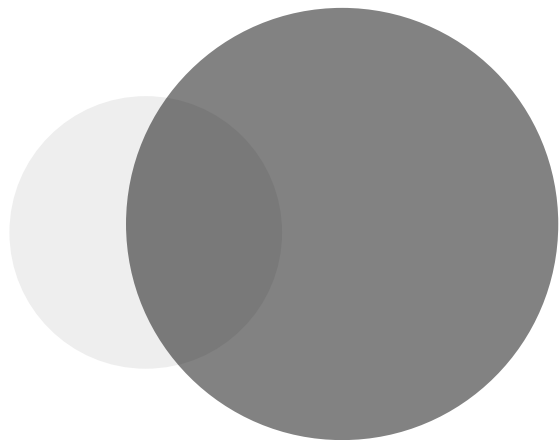
... and none of this happens works with our current **programming languages and tools.**

Students who are blind, low vision, have motor impairments, speak languages other than English, don't have devices have been **systematically excluded.**

In my sabbatical project, I'm building a creative programming system works for **all abilities, all natural languages, all devices**, ensuring everyone can learn. This requires an entirely new language, runtime, editor, debugger, APIs, docs, tutorials, etc.



So how do we  
**include**  
everyone?



Fundamentally, it means:

- Abandoning narrow notions in CS of **rigor** and **merit**
- Abandoning anti-collaborative assessment practices, which are **systematically biased** against marginalized students
- Signaling the centrality of **identity**, **inclusion**, and **politics** in CS
- Creating equity-centered **teacher education pathways**
- Reinventing our **computing infrastructure** for inclusion



What's **next**?

These are just the things **my lab** has learned.

There are **hundreds** of computing education research papers published every year that deepen our knowledge of problems in CS and ways to address them.

Some of these discoveries are **reshaping** how we think about what and who computing education is for...

... so what is CS **for**, if not supporting industry?

- Ensuring our future politicians, doctors, and HR managers know that AI isn't **infallible magic**.
- Educating a public that knows **when and when not** to use data and algorithms to solve problems
- Educating engineers that have a deep humility about their **ignorance** about how everyone else lives and what everyone else values.

# These visions raise questions about school

- What kind of **literacies** about computing are needed and possible for a functioning democracy?
- How do we prepare not only more CS teachers, but **excellent, equity and justice-focused** CS teachers, at all levels?
- What knowledge do educators need to bring **racial, gender, and ability justice** to their computing classrooms?

# These visions raise questions about capitalism

- Who does **industry** involvement in the CS curricula benefit and what other ways might we resource and shape school?
- What role might **automation** play in all of this, if any? Or is automation inherently problematic in learning?
- What **incentive** does industry have to support any equity goals in CS education, other than superficially bolstering their reputation?

# Are you CS faculty?

- **Join us!** It took me several years to gain competence in education + learning sciences, but a pivot is possible and fun. There's lots of funding, wonderful students, and endless challenging, open research questions.
- But come with **humility**. There are a hundred years of scholarship about teaching, learning, and education, and most CS faculty know little of it (and often believe long disproved myths about about learning).

# Are you education faculty?

- Although CS is not yet compulsory in schools, it is **less ignorable** every day. Now is the time to shift some of our precious attention – and money – to promoting computing literacy.
- **Hire** tenure-track CS education faculty, **integrate** CS into teacher education programs, and **grow** a robust community of scholars. The University of Washington, Seattle is doing it, why aren't you? 😏

# Are you a student?

We need contributions at all levels:

- **Teachers** and school leaders at all levels
- Instructional and curriculum **designers**
- **Designers** and **engineers** of CS ed tech
- Policy **experts**
- Computing education **researchers**

Pathways for all of these careers are emerging now.



# Thank you!



## Summary

- CS isn't what you think it is.
- If you teach CS, you probably are doing it poorly without knowing it.
- Including everyone means no less than redefining CS, rigor, merit, progress, and purpose.
- Come join us! We throw good parties :)