

Transforming Education Through Neuroscience Award Recipient: Kurt Fischer

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We are happy to announce that Kurt Fischer, PhD, recently received the second award for Transforming Education through Neuroscience for his seminal work in establishing the new field of *Mind, Brain, and Education*. The award honors an exceptional scholar whose work bridges the fields of neuroscience and education. Co-sponsored by the

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International Mind, Brain, and Education Society (IMBES) and the Learning and the Brain Conference, the award was announced at the 22nd meeting of the Learning & the Brain Conference in San Francisco on February 21, and presented at the second biannual IMBES conference in Philadelphia on May 30, 2009.

The mission of IMBES is to relate research and theory from all scholarly fields that are relevant to connecting information on mind and brain to educational issues and questions, to learn about biological influences on development and to improve theory and practice in education. Dr. Fischer's life work played an important role in establishing this enterprise, beginning with his seminal 1980 paper, "A theory of cognitive development: The control and construction of hierarchies of skills," in which he explicitly modeled the basic developmental process of *hierarchical integration*. His model described lifespan development and moment-to-moment learning as processes involving the coordination and complexification of cognitive and emotional knowledge structures into usable skills for thinking and acting in the world. The hierarchical organization of behavior and thinking had been an important but relatively implicit construct in developmental theorizing for nearly a century, beginning with the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, and other classic theorists. Fischer's work integrated and clarified these earlier theories, and helped lay the foundation for relating them to biological developmental evidence, including the development of the brain. His approach has influenced the fields of cognitive science, neuroscience, and education, because it allows for the developmental analysis of learning from a combined psychosocial and biological perspective that maintains validity and reliability without reducing the "messiness" of doing research in real-life contexts such as schools and families.

Kurt Fischer's research and teaching have profoundly influenced a whole generation of students, junior and senior colleagues, both in education and in the sciences. "At a time when few people were thinking about meaningful connections and interactions between neuroscience, cognitive

science, and education, Kurt was developing theories, teaching classes, and designing research projects that focused on such interactions, as well as connecting people with diverse interests in development and learning—essentially actively building the field of mind, brain, and education by doing,” said Donna Coch, Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Dartmouth College. Dr. Kenneth Kosik, co-director of the Neuroscience Research Institute at the University of California at Santa Barbara, stated that “more than a decade ago when we founded the Learning & the Brain conference, Kurt Fischer was already thinking about linking education and neuroscience. This award recognizes his steadfast vision that neuroscience research can enhance education in our schools.” Kurt continues to shape the next generation of MBE scholars; Joanna Christodoulou, doctoral student in MBE at HUGSE, said, “Kurt’s spirit of innovativeness, intellectual curiosity, and rigor, and his drive to explore ideas that matter for education, have been inspirational.”

From a personal perspective, it was Kurt’s research seminar in my first semester as a master’s student at Harvard University Graduate School of Education that put me on the path to what is now my life’s work, by revealing to me the power of an interdisciplinary, developmental,

contextualized approach to studying the complexities of human behavior. I had always been fascinated by the workings of the human mind and brain, and by the social and cultural nature of learning and teaching. But under Kurt’s wise and compassionate tutelage, I was introduced to a whole new world—a way of understanding human behavior that is at once scientifically rigorous, ecologically valid, and relevant to education.

Kurt Fischer is the Charles Warland Bigelow Professor and the Director of the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Mind, Brain, and Education program. He is founding president of the IMBES and founding editor of the journal *Mind, Brain, and Education*. “There is no one more deserving of the Transforming Education through Neuroscience award than Kurt Fischer,” says Dr. Charles Nelson III, Neuroscientist and Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School. “He is without a doubt the leader in the emerging field of brain and education. Prof. Fischer is a beacon of light for those striving to meld the brain sciences with the field of education.”

On behalf of IMBES and the Learning and the Brain Conference, and as one of the former students whose intellectual development continues to be profoundly influenced by his work, I offer my most sincere congratulations to my mentor, Dr. Kurt Fischer.