

To: "Niklaus Wirth" <wirth@inf.ethz.ch>
Subject: Re: A draft of a paper on CS Education
Nuenen, Sunday 26 May 2002

Dear Niklaus,

* thank you for your birthday card: I received it, I read it, I appreciated -
-as always--the quality of your handwriting, and then I mislaid it, having
missed the "geometric inspirations". My apologies.

* Regarding "Computing Science Education", the discussion is almost
as old as the topic. The idea of a book makes excellent sense. We both
did so in the 70, and that did have some effect. [I don't know how your
books are doing, "A Discipline of Programming" is still in stock and I still
get royalties for it.] At the time, our books had more or less the flavour of
monographs, the time for a textbook may have arrived.

But do not expect too much. One of the tragedies of the 70s was that
the mathematical nature of the programming challenge --while
technically becoming clearer and clearer-- was forcefully denied because
it was socially unacceptable that programming could require trained
intellect. Machines had been invented to solve our problems, not to
confront us with new ones. At the THE the political goal of the
mathematicians became to make programming so shallow that we could
process unlimited numbers of "computer science" students; this was the
reason that I went to Burroughs.

In the mean time the scene has not changed much, but it improved a
little. Our only hope of salvation is to make a clear separation between
the the teaching of computing science and the training in industrial
programming. [Whether the latter is an academic responsibility depends
on the tasks society gives to the universities.] The slight improvement is
that, compared with 30 years ago, there is now a solid body of relevant
knowledge that can be called "computing science": in 1970 they were
just hopes, now there is solid science.

* I have the feeling of getting weaker, otherwise I enjoy life. I read a
book with five lectures on theoretical physics d.d.1958. [The book came
from the shelves of my father.] They are written by five Oxford
physicists/philosophers. The funny thing is that all the authors remind
me of Tony! I had never realized that that Oxford culture had had such a
profound influence on him, but the way in which to this very day he uses
the word "Law" is pure Oxford vintage.

* Greetings and very best wishes from both to both,
yours ever Edsger