

Re: Why do so many people hate or have trouble with math? Your input is needed!

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- *From:* "Arturo Magidin" <[magidin@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:magidin@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)>
  - *Date:* 7 Oct 2006 22:18:10 -0700
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The poster formerly known as Colleyville Alan wrote:

"Arturo Magidin" <[magidin@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:magidin@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)> wrote in message

Many adults who hated math as kids still possess basic arithmetic skills but not basic algebra skills. Would it not be worthwhile to try and find ways of teaching algebra so that they had basic algebra skills years later?

Certainly. I just don't think that this is possible so long as algebra is being viewed the way Latin and Greek were once upon a time, a sign of education or a part of what "any educated person should know." If they knew what algebra is for (if the people teaching it knew what algebra was for) and used it on a regular basis, their algebraic skills would no doubt be about the same as their arithmetic ones. Then perhaps they could figure out what the gas mileage on their car actually is, how many gallons they can buy if they only have 20%, how much to leave for a tip when the service was good and you'd like to leave 18% instead of the usual 15%, and the like.

I am certainly not saying math is being taught ->well<- now. But I think part of the problem is an erroneous view of ->why<- math is being taught in the first place, and what the objective of that instruction should be.

I think we are tripping over each other in the use of "is" vs. "should be". I think algebra "is" being taught as part of a general education "this is what an educated person should know" philosophy. If you say that is should not be taught because of that, then you have one argument, but you have a very different argument if you are saying that it \*is\* not being taught for that reason. I think, for the most part, that algebra \*is\* taught for

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"educational" rather than practical reasons.

I agree with you. And part of my argument is that the problem is that this is how it is being taught. Yes, I think it should not be taught because of that.

The problem I find with "we should make math fun" is partly because of that. If you begin with the premise that this is something they "should" know, for "educational" reasons, then certainly you want to motivate them to want to learn it, and perhaps making it "fun" is the way to go. I'm all for making Shakespeare "fun" if that makes people more eager to read (or watch) the plays.

The math that is taught, at least up to grade 9, though, should be math that is taught for practical reasons, the same way we teach reading and writing and comprehension for practical reasons at those levels. The goal of teaching them algebra should not be to make them better educated people, but rather to give them tools to use.

Yes, the world can go on without algebra. The world got along with the vast majority of the population not knowing how to read and write, even in "advanced" countries. In one major civilization, reading and writing were so uncommon that the notion of cryptography never arose because simply writing something down made it almost unintelligible to pretty much everyone (China). And yet it "functioned". Surely the world doesn't  $\rightarrow$ need $\leftarrow$  people to know algebra to get along. And people don't  $\rightarrow$ need $\leftarrow$  to know algebra to survive. But anyway, that's a different argument, I think.

We are still teaching trig as a "basic skill". Why? Honestly, why? One could perhaps excuse it when the farmer needed to be able to do some measuring and surveying; but today, why do we spend a year teaching everyone trig (at least, we spent a year teaching trig in Mexico in 8th grade, if I recall the grade correctly; if not, it was 9th)? That time would definitely be better spent ignoring trig completely and teaching basic descriptive stats and basic probability. Instead of hoping for every high school graduate to remember "SohCahToa", how about having them remember that the odds of rolling a 6 with a single die, having just rolled a six, is still just 1 in 6?

I agree that basic probability and stats would serve most people well. In my intro stats book some 30 years ago, I read that "...the average person uses statistics like a drunk uses a lamppost, for support rather than illumination".

That's very good! I'm afraid I'm going to have to steal it. (—:

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