It All Adds Up

Applying Math Lessons to Life

by

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Some Highly Subjective Reflections On what Makes This Web site

Different From All Other Math Web sites

The "Platinum Rule"

As nice as the Golden Rule is, it is too self-centered when it comes to our trying to help other people. That is when we say "Do unto others as we would have had others do unto us", we are thinking in terms of what we would want rather than in terms of what the person we're trying to help wants. The "Platinum Rule", which I often refer to as "The Teacher's Golden Rule" says "Do unto others as others would have done unto themselves". We might not know what that is but it at least it gets us to think in terms of the person we're trying to help.

In this context, it is quite likely that a person who had any form of "math phobia" would also be afraid of any field that used mathematics. For example, suppose a student with "math phobia" tried to avoid having to learn fractions by asking the teacher a question such as "Why do I have to know how to compute using fractions?". If the teacher were then to say something such as "I like to do carpentry work and to do this I have to use fractions all the time", the student solves his dilemma simply by making the decision not be become a carpenter!

The point is that every time students cut themselves off from a possible career because of their fear of mathematics, they are robbing themselves of avenues that could lead to upward mobility. Thus, while we might feel comfortable seeing how mathematics is applied in various fields of endeavor, such applications might have a negative effect on the leery learner.

This is not to say that we should not teach practical applications of mathematical concepts; but rather that in addition, we have to find ways that appeal to students on levels that transcend practical applications; user-friendly ways that strive to elicit from students such remarks as "Wow! I never realized that. I can hardly wait to show my friends what I learned today".

To apply the above remarks to how we might motivate fractions to students in a non-threatening way, we could ask questions such as "If 'teen' means 'plus ten', why does the first teen come after twelve rather than after ten?" or "If 'dec' is a prefix that stands for 'ten', why is the tenth month called October rather than December? Such questions are non-threatening to any student and consequently they become quite eager to learn the answers.

As you may have already surmised, at the appropriate time, I will ask these questions; and in the course of supplying the answers I will manage to introduce you to the study of fractions in a very easy-to-internalize, non-threatening way. How this is accomplished is what tends to make our courses different from the way they are traditionally taught.