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COVER

Return fire: In this issue Stephen Sproule, Ted Eisenberg and Margaret Schaffer respond to last issue's article by Jack Dancis. In other articles Elena Marchisotto looks back on the life of Anneli Lax, and Paul Alper and Yongzhi Yang use Pascal triangles to examine the mathematics of a lady tasting tea.

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Humanistic Mathematics Network Journal #21

December 1999

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From Newsletter #1

Dear Colleague,

This newsletter follows a three-day **Conference to Examine Mathematics as a Humanistic Discipline** in Claremont 1986 supported by the Exxon Education Foundation, and a special session at the AMS-MAA meeting in San Antonio January 1987. A common response of the thirty-six mathematicians at the conference was, "I was startled to see so many who shared my feelings."

Two related themes that emerged from the conference were 1) teaching mathematics humanistically, and 2) teaching humanistic mathematics. The first theme sought to place the student more centrally in the position of inquirer than is generally the case, while at the same time acknowledging the emotional climate of the activity of learning mathematics. What students could learn from each other and how they might come to better understand mathematics as a meaningful rather than arbitrary discipline were among the ideas of the first theme.

The second theme focused less upon the nature of the teaching and learning environment and more upon the need to reconstruct the curriculum and the discipline of mathematics itself. The reconstruction would relate mathematical discoveries to personal courage, discovery to verification, mathematics to science, truth to utility, and in general, mathematics to the culture within which it is embedded.

Humanistic dimensions of mathematics discussed at the conference included:

- a) An appreciation of the role of intuition, not only in understanding, but in creating concepts that appear in their finished versions to be "merely technical."
- b) An appreciation for the human dimensions that motivate discovery: competition, cooperation, the urge for holistic pictures.
- c) An understanding of the value judgments implied in the growth of any discipline. Logic alone never completely accounts for what is investigated, how it is investigated, and why it is investigated.
- d) A need for new teaching/learning formats that will help discourage our students from a view of knowledge as certain or to-be-received.
- e) The opportunity for students to think like mathematicians, including chances to work on tasks of low definition, generating new problems and participating in controversy over mathematical issues.
- f) Opportunities for faculty to do research on issues relating to teaching and be respected for that area of research.

This newsletter, also supported by Exxon, is part of an effort to fulfill the hopes of the participants. Others who have heard about the conferences have enthusiastically joined the effort. The newsletter will help create a network of mathematicians and others who are interested in sharing their ideas and experiences related to the conference themes. The network will be a community of support extending over many campuses that will end the isolation that individuals may feel. There are lots of good ideas, lots of experimentation, and lots of frustration because of isolation and lack of support. In addition to informally sharing bibliographic references, syllabi, accounts of successes and failures. . . the network might formally support writing, team-teaching, exchanges, conferences. . . .

Alvin White
August 3, 1987