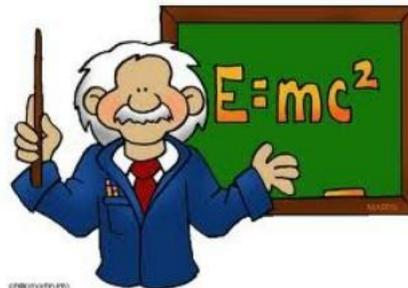


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What's wrong with having the right answer?

By Steve Bakke  March 17, 2021



The impact of Critical Race Theory (CRT) on our education system has become a popular topic. I've frequently discussed the attempt to rewrite our history books, but I've given only incidental attention to the teaching of mathematics.

Nancy Percy, a professor at Houston Baptist University, expressed her concerns about this "new math" in "Does mathematics equal western imperialism?" She discusses an idea held by some educators that the theory of "2+2 equaling four is cultural," a product of "western imperialism and colonialism." She also quotes a Professor Gutierrez who declares that "algebra and geometry perpetuate white privilege because the textbook version of math history is Eurocentric."

Initially, I was unmoved because I dismissed those ideas as a product of outliers in math education. But I quickly became concerned when learning that math teachers in Oregon are trained to follow the premise that "white supremacy manifests itself in the focus on finding the right answer." I can't help interpreting this as "lowering the bar" of Oregon's standards for math education.

Oregon partnered with California's San Mateo County to conduct "ethnomathematics" training to aid in "dismantling racism in mathematics." *The Daily Signal* columnist Jarrett Stepman reported that these two systems were conducting a course labeled, "Pathway to Math Equity Micro Course." This training "helps educators learn key tools for engagement, develop strategies to improve equitable outcomes for Black, Latinx, and multilingual students." That reinforces my "lowing the bar" theory.

But, how does white supremacy become the culprit. Investigating references in Stepman's article, I discovered that when students are required to "show their work" when solving math problems, it's white supremacy at work. Class materials explain that this requirement reinforces "worship of the written word as well as paternalism."

Other instructional materials direct teachers to "identify and challenge the ways that math is used to uphold capitalist, imperialist, and racist views." A course "toolkit" insists "the concept of mathematics being purely objective is unequivocally false, and teaching it is even much less so. Upholding the idea that there are always right and wrong answers perpetuates objectivity as well as fear of open conflict." This negative reference to "objectivity" reminded me of a short-lived exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum of African American History. The

exhibit identified “objectivity” as one of several attributes of whiteness that promote white supremacy.

While researching this issue, it occurred to me that competence in mathematics has traditionally been considered an individual talent, like golf. Individuals stand alone for evaluation, rather than collectively, as for a football team. In contrast, this “new math” reflects collectivist thinking. “Lowest common denominator thinking” describes it more accurately. This is consistent with CRT’s habit of replacing individual identity with group identity.

Lawrence M. Ludlow nails this difference by pointing out that unlike individuals, “groups do not suffer, bleed, undergo cancel culture and censorship, or die a painful death.” His intriguing thoughts appeared in an *American Thinker* article, “Architecture Goes Woke.” Think about the impact that attitude has on policy making. It trivializes the impact on an educational discipline that should be evaluated on an individual, not collective, basis.

An apologist for the left might explain that we shouldn’t get too worried about this controversial “new math.” After all, it’s only a small minority of educators proposing these ideas – like a small, lonesome voice “crying in the wilderness.” But I would remind those folks that Oregon isn’t a small voice. And I found numerous other examples of this training being conducted. Another interesting example is the “Seattle Public Schools, K-12 Math Ethnic Studies Framework (20.08.2019).”

Does trivializing the inherent nature and important applications of mathematics cripple hopes to land on the moon, Mars or Venus – or to build a canal, computer, or power grid? Does this cheapen accounting and engineering careers, or confuse the exchange of money for products and services? Consider brain surgery – is “approximate” going to be good enough? How can we hope to advance the possibilities for Black students if we emphasize the theory that getting the right answer isn’t important for advancement and success?

We must not submit students to this nonsense. If we don’t take issue with these radical ideas, America will soon be “yesterday’s news.”

“Ours may become the first civilization destroyed, not by the power of enemies, but by the ignorance of our teachers and the dangerous nonsense they are teaching our children. In an age of artificial intelligence, they are creating artificial stupidity.” – **Black economist Thomas Sowell**

“The idea that focusing on getting the ‘right answer’ is now considered among some self-described progressives a form of bias or racism is offensive and extraordinarily dangerous. The entire study of mathematics is based on clearly formulated definitions and statements of fact. If this were not so, bridges would collapse, planes would fall from the sky, and bank transactions would be impossible.” – **Princeton mathematics professor Sergiu Klainerman**