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Extended Cut: Bringing Math to the People with Professor Robert Jacobson

Math buff creates Google+ 's first mathematics community



November 12, 2014 | Jack Dunleavy '15

BRISTOL, R.I. – Think you know mathematicians? Spend a day with Assistant Professor of Mathematics Robert Jacobson, who pitches the wallflower stereotype right out the window.

“We just don’t cloister ourselves in our office everyday ‘doing the math,’” he says. “Communication is a huge part of what we do.”

As living proof, the assistant professor of mathematics pioneered the [first social math community on Google+](#). Snicker, you might – but the site has some 800,000 views to date. A social media guru, Jacobson has also spearheaded the website’s largest community for sharing graduate-level mathematics research and beyond.

From high school students to mathematics PhDs, all are welcome to share his interest in the concepts, history and (yes) fun of math, Jacobson says. “It’s an open space for *everyone* to talk about math.”

Were you always interested in computers?

My dad had been interested in computers my entire life, so he would bring me home a computer and I would play computer games. It just took off from there.

Back in your college days, why choose to major in math?

My undergrad career began in computer programming, but I became increasingly frustrated with my peers when they would often complain about the math. But that was the good stuff to me – the stuff I really loved. So, I decided to double major.

How do you answer the inevitable “when will I ever use this” question?

Math people can be our own worst enemy, because we often try to justify our existence by the value of math to society. Saying, "It's good for my iPhone; it's good for fuel-efficient cars," is such a good answer. But there are all kinds of things that math is good for, even those without direct application. Math is an important part of being educated because it permeates everything that we touch.

So should everyone study math?

Not necessarily. For example, I don't know how my car works – I'm not a mechanic, but I do think that it is very important to have an appreciation and to value it.

What inspired you to create the Google+ math community?

Math is a part of our culture, and a part of our culture that needs expression and discussion in a community. It's a very social enterprise.

How sociable is mathematics?

Very! When I go to conferences you meet people giving presentations and people doing interesting research. When you get all these people in the same room, ideas start flying.

How do you make math less intimidating?

Almost everyone recognizes math as challenging, but the Google+ community shows that we can talk about it, and even better, we can also laugh about it – we have a jokes section!

What would you change about math in society?

The perception that some people have that if you are good at math you are smart, and if you are bad at math you are dumb. This is a social problem that values and elevates someone who is good at this subject, and devalues someone who isn't good at this subject. It's unfortunate.

As a professor, what is your approach to education?

I really think we should teach education as something that is valuable in and of itself, because it's good to be an educated person. It makes you more able to connect with very different kinds of people.

How do you view math in relation to spirituality, belief, and non-belief?

Theologically minded people often talk about 'unboundedness' and infinity, or on the flip-side nothingness and zero, and it's interesting how they are the same and yet different from how those words are used in science. Also, the sense of awe and the sense of wonder and curiosity that some mathematicians have shares a lot with religious experiences and spirituality.

As a co-founder of Hawk Allies, what inspires your advocacy for LGBTQ rights?

Well, it's really unsophisticated – just a grade-school sense of morality that we should treat each other nicely. I just think there are people that are marginalized and struggle against discrimination, and I really want to do everything to stop that from happening.

Full Name

Robert Jacobson

Education

Ph.D., Texas A&M University

B.S., Math and Computer Science, Southern Adventist University

Fun Fact

Has a blog called "After Math" – check it out at <http://robertjacobson.herokuapp.com/>.

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