

## Sex and Maths

I'm writing something about functions on the board when I hear whispers on the table behind me.

*"Are you still going out with Danny? No, we split up, didn't you know? Why? He cheated on me! No!"*

In my experience, it is pointless to get uptight at this point. You have to take the conversation and work with it. With a sigh, I try this;

*"Let me tell about Fred, who started going out with a function he thought was nice and even, until it turned out she was a bit odd, so now he's with a periodic function, and yes, they've had their ups and downs..."*

The completely sex-free maths lesson does not exist. Every maths teacher will have lost count of the number of times they've said, 'That is NOT a pair of nipples, they're turning points!' (I pick my quartics carefully these days). The research literature quotes the example of a student struggling to get out the word 'infinity', but who instead says 'infidelity' every time.

That said, I usually find the way that students get distracted in their maths lessons by talking about their recent sexual conquests (or lack of them) a total bore. So I was interested to observe my colleague George the other day teach an English lesson on *Tis A Pity She's A Whore*. Sex here, far from being an annoying diversion, was the essential subject matter.

"I would like you to come up with five different seduction strategies used in this passage..."

Why chat off the subject when the subject matter of the lesson itself is so chat-worthy? 'Are you still going out with Danny?' Exactly the discussion required for the analysis of this text. There suddenly seemed to be a number of nodding faces amongst the students. Their lives, indeed, the most precious bits of their lives, were providing the raw material required for this lesson.

They reported back. "His first strategy was to lie to her."

Can lying really be a seduction technique? Young people relate to the idea of lying. Unless they are really extraordinarily virtuous, they will be experimenting with telling untruths themselves. To be able to explore this in the context of their learning, within a classroom, is exciting; an invitation to forbidden fruit.

Perhaps maths lessons can't be quite like this. Pythagoras's Theorem is hopefully a truth and not a lie. Yet there can be an easy conversation as we teach that does not exclude gentle laughter at diagrams that come out wrong, or that produce a giggle in the back row that can then be shared with everyone else. The lives of mathematicians often contained plenty of drama that can break up a lesson with human levity. Maybe then maths will not seem quite so chaste and pure, and our students will not feel the need to ask about Danny quite so much.

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