

Driven by the Data?

Regarding John Ewing's article "Mathematical intimidation: Driven by the data" (*Notices*, May 2011, pp. 667–673): In fact, there are serious scientific and statistical problems in trying to develop valid value added models for assessing teacher quality. The problem is separating the "teacher effect" from the entire "classroom effect". Statistician Howard Wainer has given a lucid explanation in "Value-added models to evaluate teachers: A cry for help", *Chance* 24 (1), accessible at <http://chance.amstat.org/2011/02/value-added-models/>, with further comments in "The first step toward wisdom", *Chance* 24 (2), accessible at <http://chance.amstat.org/2011/05/visualrev/>. Each article includes suggestions for further reading. *Notices* readers may also be interested in Wainer's forthcoming book, *Uneducated Guesses: Using Evidence to Uncover Misguided Educational Policies*, Princeton University Press.

—Martha K. Smith, *emerita*
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The State of Textbooks

For the past thirty years, I have tried to get my foot in the door of the textbook publishers. I have published research articles and expository articles, professional fiction, and light verse. I have submitted many proposals, with sample chapters, to essentially all of the publishers of grade school and high school textbooks in the United States. I have never gotten a reply.

Let me say that again. It is not that my proposals have been rejected, not even with a form letter. None of my proposals have ever received a reply from any publisher.

Would the textbooks I want to write be better than the books quoted in Guershon Harel and W. Stephen Wilson's article, "The state of high

school textbooks," *Notices*, June/July 2011? I think so, but I could be wrong. But I'm not wrong about this. There are many professional mathematicians who are excellent writers, know math well, and would love to write textbooks. Do they also experience the silence of the textbook publishers?

Why doesn't the American Mathematical Society publish its own series of textbooks?

—Rick Norwood
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Response to Norwood letter: The American Mathematical Society has a robust textbook program covering all areas of mathematics on the graduate and advanced undergraduate levels. High school textbooks are very different, and currently the AMS is not well positioned to properly publish and promote them.

—Sergei Gelfand, *Publisher*
AMS

Mathematics or Not Mathematics

Teaching mathematics in schools is quite important. Yet it is known that most students will not be mathematicians. Hence teaching math as an abstract subject, I believe, is harmful. Relating math to real life is important, especially for such students. Almost every student should feel that math will be relevant to his/her career. Regrettably a strong tendency in many mathematicians is to neglect applications or even consider them as nonmath. Such a tendency will arise in their students who will be the future teachers!! I hope that this problem is seriously studied soon.

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Plea to Publishers and Authors: Please Help Blind Mathematicians

For more than twenty-five years, $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ has imposed itself as the most efficient software for editing mathematical texts, and its use by publishers is nowadays standard. A marginal but notable consequence of this general use of $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ is that the whole present-day mathematical production is in principle accessible to blind people. Indeed, $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ typesetting is based on source files consisting only of ASCII characters, and each of these characters has a Braille translation, so every $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ source file can be read directly by a blind person using a Braille display connected to a computer. Of course, the readability of source files is sometimes questionable and strongly depends on the carefulness of authors, but it can easily be improved with very little effort (in particular, by removing all $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ commands which are useless for understanding the content and the structure of the text), and, anyway, it is infinitely better to have these files, which contain the complete information, rather than text without formulas (as one can get sometimes using converters from PDF to TXT) or just nothing. On the other hand, as for writing mathematics, it is remarkable and commendable that $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ puts blind people exactly on the same footing as sighted people.

All this is really great. The only problem is that $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ source files, though they do exist, are most often not available. Subscriptions to electronic versions of journals only give access to PDF files, in which mathematical notations and formulas are no longer encoded in ASCII characters, and therefore cannot be faithfully translated into Braille. Similarly, articles and books that can be found on professional webpages of their authors are available only in PDF or PS format. There is actually one important exception: the mathematical

Professor of Mathematics

The Department of Mathematics at ETH Zurich (www.math.ethz.ch) invites applications for a professor position in Mathematics. We are seeking for candidates with an outstanding research record and a proven ability to direct research of high quality. Willingness to teach at all university levels and to participate in collaborative work both within and outside the school is expected.

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Please apply online at www.facultyaffairs.ethz.ch. Your application should include your curriculum vitae and a list of publications. The letter of application should be addressed to the **President of ETH Zurich, Prof. Dr. Ralph Eichler. The closing date for applications is 30 November 2011.** With a view towards increasing the number of women in leading academic positions, ETH Zurich specifically encourages women to apply.

Letters to the Editor

arXiv, where the $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ source files are (almost) systematically available—and hence, electronic journals which post the papers they publish on arXiv make the source files available. This is something for which I am personally thankful every day.

As a conclusion, here is my plea to publishers and authors: please find a way of making the $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ source files of your publications available. Remove from them, if you wish, all the editing parameters which are necessary to print out but not to understand the text: the files will be even more readable. But please be aware that, for a (small but nonzero) number of mathematicians, $\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}/\text{L}^{\text{A}}\text{T}_{\text{E}}\text{X}$ is the only accessible document format.

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I invite readers to browse the mathematical holdings at Project Gutenberg and to contact me with comments, questions, or suggestions.

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Correction

Due to a production error, the “References” section for the article “*Scripta Manent: Journals in Flux*” by Peter Olver (*Notices*, September 2011) included five references from a previous article. The correct list should have included only references [1] through [8].

Correction

Incorrect information sent to the AMS Membership and Customer Services department led to the erroneous listing of the name of Adriano M. Garsia in the “Deaths of AMS Members” in the September 2011 issue of the *Notices*. The *Notices* regrets this error and apologizes to Professor Garsia.