
Letters to the Editor

Nathan Rosen and Black Mountain

Thank you for your excellent article in the February 2013 *Notices* on von Neumann and the book review of *Transcending Tradition*. Having been educated in North Carolina, I was especially interested in the discussion of Black Mountain College in the latter. One prominent faculty member there not mentioned in the review was the Jewish physicist (and disciple of Einstein) Nathan Rosen. Although I earned my Ph.D. in physics at Duke University, I was allowed to take courses at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. I took advantage of this leniency to take three courses from Professor Rosen who had left Black Mountain to join the U.N.C. faculty. This was a real thrill for me, as Professor Rosen was famous for his studies of the hydrogen molecule and, more so, for his discovery, along with Boris Podolsky and Einstein, of the so-called “EPR Paradox” of quantum mechanics, a subject of much theoretical debate and experimental study throughout the twentieth century. (It was the inspiration for the seminal work involving Bell’s Theorem, for example.) Rosen was more or less forced to leave U.N.C. by the threat of a U.S. government investigation of his alleged “communist sympathies”. (The university was by no means complicit in his departure.) He and his wife emigrated to Israel where he lived to a ripe old age and did very well, becoming, as I recall, president of the Ben-Gurion University. I had the opportunity to visit him twice in Israel and once he visited me in Ann Arbor, where I was teaching at the time. He always greeted me as an old friend. If I am not mistaken, the vacancy created by Rosen’s departure was filled by a close friend of mine, Eugen Merzbacher, who went on to become chairman of the U.N.C. physics department, president of the American Physical Society, and author of a definitive textbook on quantum mechanics. He is still in Chapel Hill, living with his wife now in a retirement home and still active, although well into his nineties, in various activities related to physics and

Judaism. Merzbacher has informed me that Professor Rosen used to return to Chapel Hill during the summers where he collaborated with Merzbacher on various research projects.

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In Defense of Technology for Mathematical Talks

In response to V. V. Peller’s commentary, “Utilization of technology for mathematical talks: An alarming situation” [*Notices*, February 2013]:

I sympathize with many of the author’s points, but disagree with the tendency to blame the computer as a platform for mathematical presentations, and by extension the conclusion that conferences should be required to provide blackboards for presenters. I, too, dislike heavy reliance on slides, especially when cluttered with dense notation. For short presentations, I use slides myself, but few of them, typically fewer than ten for a fifteen- to twenty-minute talk. Slides should provide only some linear structure, not much content, for a talk. I frequently switch between slides and other software to show graphics or interactive demonstrations.

The same has been true since before computers became a mainstream mode for presentations: when giving a short talk using an overhead projector, I would always have a few prepared slides, and carry blank slides and dry-erase pens so that I could be prepared to take a different path based on audience response. In a longer talk or class, I frequently use a computer, but almost never slides: I use a tablet computer with an app such as LectureNotes (by Acadoid, for Android) or Notability (by Ginger Labs, for iOS), which turns the tablet into a portable whiteboard when connected to a projector.

The author acknowledges both the advantage of computers for presenting difficult graphics and the problem of having to turn lights on and off and put screens up and down when using both a blackboard and a computer.

There is another advantage of tablet apps which, being unfamiliar with them, the author doesn’t anticipate: no matter how many blackboards are available, total space is limited, but the apps can store an unlimited number of handwritten screens. If an audience member wants a copy of the notes after a talk, I can either print a copy or email the stored document. The apps can even record audio from the presentation.

I think what the author observes about use of computer-based slides today represents not a failure of the computer as a platform for the presentation, but rather inadequately creative use of the platform for a dynamic presentation. All I ask is that the author not blame the computer for presentations by people who don’t know how to take advantage of such a powerful tool.

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Displaced Mathematicians: A Plea for Accuracy

I was a little bit puzzled by the front cover of the February 2013 *Notices* (Vol. 60, No. 3). Who is counted as “displaced”? For example, Heinz Hopf moved to Zurich in 1931 as the successor of Hermann Weyl, who then took up a chair in Göttingen (see, e.g., <http://www-gap.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/history/Biographies/Hopf.html>). Weyl thereafter left Göttingen in 1933 because of the Nazis. So Hopf was not “displaced”, but left Germany when he accepted a regular job offer (he stayed in Switzerland until his death; in 1943 he took Swiss citizenship because the Nazi authorities caused trouble). But I might consider Weyl as “displaced”, even though he moved out of Germany of his free will, before he was forced out.

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