

The Importance of Mathematics to the Software Practitioner

Doug Baldwin and Peter B. Henderson

In the spring of 2000, Timothy Lethbridge released a study of the knowledge that practicing software professionals find important.¹ One of his claims is that practitioners find little use for mathematics in their jobs; they particularly feel that a significant disparity



exists between math's prominence in their educations and its actual day-to-day importance. In a subsequent Loyal Opposition column, Robert Glass discussed this finding, suggesting that educators should rethink the attention they devote to mathematics in computing curricula.²

On the contrary, we believe that properly educating students to use mathematical reasoning as a tool for software development makes them better professionals. We consider any use of the techniques, concepts, and processes of mathematics or logic to solve problems, whether that use is explicit or implicit, to be mathematical reasoning. As computer scientists and educators, we find such reasoning invaluable in our own

work. In this column, we review evidence that mathematical reasoning increases a software developer's competence. We suggest that a resolution of the apparent conflict between this evidence and that gathered by Lethbridge lies in what it means to "properly" educate developers in mathematical reasoning.

Math and educational success

The oldest indications come from studies of factors associated with students' success in learning computer science. Researchers have conducted a number of such studies since the early 1980s. All found a strong correlation between mathematical ability and success in introductory computer science courses. For example, in 1980, John Konvalina and his colleagues compared students who withdrew from a first computer science course to students who stayed.³ They found that the number of previous college math courses and total number of previous math courses (college and high school) were the statistically most significant differences between the groups, with students who stayed in the course having more math. In 2000, Brenda Wilson and Sharon Shrock correlated midterm exam scores in an introductory computer science course to 12 possible success predictors.⁴ They found that high school math background was the second-most important predictor. While both Konvalina and Wilson studied US students, another study correlated various background factors to final exam scores for Irish students in an intro-

ductory programming course for non-computing majors.⁵ They found a statistically significant positive correlation between final exam scores and scores on a secondary school “leaving exam” in mathematics.

Although none of these studies tried to prove that mathematical aptitude causes students to succeed in computer science courses, finding a strong correlation in multiple generations of students and in multiple educational systems certainly suggests some connection between mathematical ability and programming ability. Also, all these studies examined first programming courses; explicit use of math typically has little if any place in such courses and so cannot account for the correlation between math background and success.

Keith Devlin suggests that the connection between mathematical and programming ability lies in abstraction’s essential role in both math and software development.⁶ He argues that facility with abstract reasoning in mathematics also improves your ability to reason abstractly about software. Although no one has empirically tested this argument, it is certainly interesting.

Formal methods and programming success

Another strand of evidence lies in attempts to empirically validate the claims made for formal software development methods. For this discussion, we define “formal methods” as any use of mathematics or logic to specify or verify a software system’s features. Many claims made for formal methods remain untested and are probably exaggerated, but evidence exists that formal methods can help improve software quality. For example, Peter Larson and his colleagues describe a head-to-head comparison of the development of a trusted gateway system both with and without formal specifications.⁷ The system produced using formal specifications had fewer defects, ran faster, and had a simpler code structure. Shari Pfleeger and Les Hatton reviewed an air traffic control project

where some parts were developed with formal methods and some without.⁸ They cautiously concluded that formal methods in conjunction with other techniques did improve software quality.

The benefits attributed to formalism in these studies were often due to simple uses of it, little more than using mathematics to state specifications or designs. Even this modest use of mathematics, coupled with otherwise traditional development practices, produced these benefits:

- Developers could identify important conditions early in design instead of when nearly complete code failed tests.
- Bugs introduced during coding were easier to detect in testing.
- The bugs were correctable with less drastic repairs.

So, although formal methods are not the silver bullet for all software evils, developers do appear to benefit from using mathematics, even in modest ways, alongside other tools.

Interestingly, some of the arguments against formal methods are that they are “too mathematical,” that only specially trained people can use them, and that providing this training to most developers is too expensive. These are, of course, all reasons why software engineers need more, not less, mathematical education.

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Applied, not isolated, math

On the basis of the evidence we just described, we feel that an ability to think and communicate mathematically does benefit software developers. At the same time, we do not doubt Lethbridge’s finding that practicing developers find math relatively unimportant. How to explain this contradiction?

First, it is important to realize that what ranked low in Lethbridge’s study was relatively pure mathematics—calculus, differential equations, and so on. Mathematically based elements of computer science—for example, computational complexity and algorithm analysis, and formal methods—ranked around the middle of the surveyed topics. So, developers appear to value areas of computer science that draw heavily on mathematics more highly than they value mathematics in isolation from computing.

This leads to a second, more important, point: “mathematics in isolation from computing” is exactly what most undergraduate computing curricula teach. These curricula teach math in “related” (a word that students inevitably translate as “not central to computing”) courses in a separate department, and seldom if ever use math in software development or programming courses. It is no wonder that such treatment leaves students with little understanding that math might apply to computing problems, let alone with any practical ability to apply math. As the old saying goes, “If you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail”—to developers educated only to use “hammers,” very little looks as if it requires other tools. Yet those who can wield the other tools reap benefits.

If we are right, then software education needs to better integrate math into the main computing curriculum and to more systematically apply math to computing problems. Attempts to do this to parts of the curriculum exist (for example, both

of us have developed mathematically integrated introductory sequences), as does at least one complete experimental curriculum.⁹ No one has yet compared graduates of such programs who are in the workforce to graduates of less mathematically integrated programs, but such a comparison would be quite useful. In the meantime, it is premature to conclude that mathematics is unimportant to software practitioners or that it should be reduced in undergraduate computing education. ☐

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Further Reading

See www.math-in-cs.org/relevance.html for further references to the ideas discussed in this column.

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