

Mr. D Math

An Interview with Dennis DiNoia

C2C Podcast Episode #11



Jody: Today, we get to talk to one of our buddies. We've known him for nearly 10 years and he's one of the most positive, uplifting and generous people we know and he's done some pretty amazing things in the world of math and especially for homeschoolers.

Jenni: Well, I'm excited, Jody, that I get to introduce our friend, Dennis DiNoia. He's been immersed in education for more than 30 years. Dennis holds an M.A. in education from the University of South Florida and has been a Florida state certified secondary mathematics teacher since 1988. He's affectionately known to all of his students as Mr. D. Now, after recording over 500 instructional videos, writing thousands of quiz questions and course practice problems with step-by-step solutions, the Mr. D Math Curriculum ranges from pre-algebra to pre-calculus. His online students span across the U.S. and Mr. D has worked with students on five different continents. This math program infuses problem solving and treating math as a language, as the basis for its delivery, and it offers the equivalent of a personal teacher in your own home or in your co-op. Mr. D is a master of distance learning platforms with his highly successful live online classes for students. And we're going to tell you more about that as the show goes on. He's a featured speaker for the, um, Florida Parent Educators Association conference, the Great Homeschool Conventions and the Southeast Homeschool Expo. We are so excited to have him here talking with us today on the podcast. Welcome, Dennis. Thank you for coming.

Jody: Hi, Dennis!

Dennis DiNoia: Hey, you guys, I'm so excited to be here with you. Yay!

Jenni: Dennis, tell us, um, how long, specifically, you've been teaching math.

Dennis DiNoia: Oh, my gosh. Well, let's see, I started, uh, 1988. So, you know...

Jody: 31 years. My boy was born in '88. So it's been 31 years.

Dennis DiNoia: Oh my gosh, that's amazing. You know, I just renewed my teaching certificate. So, my teacher's certificate, it's going up to 2025. And I was like, "Oh my gosh. That's like, that's going to be like, you know, year 37. I'm thinking, do you keep going up to that point? Like, what do you do?"

Jenni: Well, tell me why you think students just get it when they use your program, even if they haven't gotten math before.

Dennis DiNoia: Well, you know, that's a great question. So, you know, where I've been a teacher since 1988, where I got educated is the best way to say "Well, I really learned about math," was I was living in St. Petersburg, Florida, and I opened a tutoring center and in the tutoring center, I started working with students from grades one all the way up through college. And literally in my office every week I might see a student that came in, maybe they were in an Algebra II class. And this happened more often than not with the high schools and they would come in, I would see five different students with five different teachers, five different textbooks and five different learning styles. So, when you do that for 15 years, next thing you know you're pretty good at math. And I think that for me, yeah, I was like, what it was was it's like no matter where a kid was or where they were thinking or what was happening or what the teacher was presenting to them, what textbook they were using, I had already seen it. And so really it was like working with all those students. The students taught me, because I had so many opportunities to be able to go through everything. So from young people all the way up to that college level. So I always started to notice what was coming. It was kind of like if you play- if you're a chess player, you know a chess player has got to think about three to four moves ahead and what your opponent's going to be doing three to four moves coming towards you. So, I've kind of feel like, you know, my background and in teaching has been more like playing a game of chess, kind of thinking about, "Well where is this- Where- Why are we learning this now? Where is that taking it to?" And if you're a young person and you're going to struggle, what are the kinds of things you might struggle with? So we tried to address all of that in the curriculum.

Jody: So one of the things, we're going back a long time in our relationship, here, I think the first time that Jenni and I met you was at our local homeschool...

Jenni: Bookstore.

Jody: Bookst- It was a bookstore.

Jenni: It was at the bookstore.

Jody: And he- You were talking about- It was mind-blowing. You're talking about how math is a language and I don't think I could get past that. And you start- You put up- You- No, seriously and you put- Because it was for- it was foreign to me and I was like, "That's why I don't understand it." It's like trying to learn Italian. That's why.

Jenni: Well, what you did at the time, which was really good, you asked the parents to, um, define addition.

Jody: Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

Jenni: And we tried all different things. We- I mean, we gave you a million different answers and finally you said "No, it's just counting." And I think every jaw in the room dropped. We were like, "Well, yeah, that's right. That's what it is." And that's when we started to explain math as a language, which really kind of blew all of our minds.

Dennis DiNoia: Oh, that's so great. You know, I was in Spain and I get to travel a lot now, and so my family spends there...

Jody: Yes, you do.

Dennis DiNoia: ...from there most of the year and the first year I was there I wanted to see what a classroom was like in Spain and so I went into the class and I was- it was an upper level algebra class and the teacher didn't speak English, which was even funnier. So she's giving the whole lesson in Spanish. But I knew what she was doing, because I understood the symbols, right? I actually ended up help- I helped this student with a problem who also didn't speak English, but we worked out the problem by writing the symbols down, pointing back and forth, nodding her head, you know? It was so great.

Jody: That's crazy!

Dennis DiNoia: But for me it was like- It was amazing, right? Even the teacher looked at me, she goes, "How'd you do that?" Because she knew that I couldn't- I didn't understand a word the girl was saying to me, but the girl got it and it was, it was amazing.

Jody: It was a common language.

Dennis DiNoia: Common language. Absolutely.

Jody: Wow. Okay, so, how does a mom- Does she need to know and be good at math to use your program? Because, you know, I'm speaking for myself, here.

Jenni: Yeah, math is not our strong point.

Jody: Do you know what's happened in my house? Every time we start a math- Well, you know, the kids are all up and gone now, you know that. But, every time they do math, I'd be like- Tony's the math guy in my house. He's my husband. He's pretty good at it. And I'd be like, "Tony, they need help in math." And every time, they would leave the table bawling their eyes out going, "Mom, don't make us do with him again." So, you at least didn't make my kids cry. I'm going to say that.

Dennis DiNoia: Well that's good. Uh, and, you know, I actually- I hear that more often than you might think. So- Or exactly as often as you think. So, you know, moms, you don't have to be good at math, use our program. The idea was to bring what I do right in your home. Right in your living room, we'll sit down, we're gonna, you know, they're going to hear me talking, we're gonna go through the- everything there is to do. There's detailed solutions that kids can follow step by step. And the idea was to write the program so that it addressed as many learning styles, if not all learning styles as possible. And to give students as much flexibility in how they wanted to schedule their time to do the course, how they wanted to do the course, how to ask us questions when they need to. We provide help sessions for the kids so they can meet us online and ask questions, they email us all the time. So, it's really great. So, moms don't need to be good at math and sometimes maybe they want to learn

as well. So, I do know that I get messages from moms and the moms, as they're watching the videos with their students, they'll send me a message, they'll be like, "Oh!" They had that happen so often. It's like, "Oh, I get it now." So, you moms are getting it too. So, they don't have to be there to do it, but they certainly can if they want to.

Jenni: Okay. So, um, if the mom decides not to do that, how can she be sure that her child's actually learning?

Dennis DiNoia: I love that question. And I think- I don't actually get asked that enough. I wish I would get asked that all the time, because I have the great answer for that. And for me, it's really simple. Um, and I think sometimes people forget. It's like the opportunity, what it is when someone's learning. So, one way is you can always check their grades, right? You can look and see our assignments, everything stored online, you can see exactly what they're doing, how they're doing it, when they're doing the practice problems. They've written all that out. They can check the solutions, they can check it together with mom. But I think for me, the biggest way that moms can find out how it's going with their young person is really to have what I call that 10-minute conversation. And the 10-minute conversation is schedule a time every week and sit down and have them teach you, you know. So moms, your young person is teaching you the material. And if you think about when you've been teaching them as a homeschool mom, now, if you notice the subject that you liked doing, so I won't say math is one of them, but the ones that you do like to do, if you notice when you're doing them, that you probably find that when you're teaching the material, it opens up to you in a whole different way. And you understand it in a way that you didn't understand it when you were a young person or a first-time student.

Jody: Right, yeah.

Dennis DiNoia: So, letting the student be the teacher literally gives them that same experience. And so, a lot of times, they can teach you, my kids do the same, taught me what they're learning in Latin. I have no idea what they're talking about, right? That I can tell that what they're talking about, they are understanding it more, because- I- Even like when they're telling me, they'd be like, "Oh, I just figured this out!" and they'll tell me that while they're telling me what's happening.

Jody: That's cool.

Dennis DiNoia: So, I love that. But I think the best way, ever, is to have young people explain what they're doing. Because the more that they talk about it, they talk out loud, they show their stuff, they start making connections that they may not have made when they were just doing the problems the first time.

Jody: Yeah.

Jenni: Okay. So, um, one of the great things about having our kids teach us or teach someone else is that it also helps them find holes in their knowledge base. They come up to a point they can't explain it and they

go, "Oh, maybe I don't totally understand that." So, if one of your students hit that wall and they were like, "Oh, wait a minute, hold on, I can't explain this part, 'cause it- Maybe I don't totally understand it." What would they do? So they're registered for your classes. Um, they realize, "Ooh, there's this part I don't get." Now, what's their recourse?

Dennis DiNoia: Well, there's a couple of different things. So the first thing they can do right away is they can send us an email, they can email us right from the course. So, the course has a messaging system in it. And this is so cool, because it also has this messaging system from a quiz or a test. And if there's something on the quiz or test they don't understand, they can send us a message after they've taken it, they'll be like, "Hey, you know, I didn't quite understand this one. Can you help me with this?" And let them take it more than once. They can go back, they can figure what they did wrong and take it again. But they can email us anytime. And I have to say it's a- this is actually- This year, we've added teacher assistants this year. And so we found two college students who've completed our entire curriculum. One of the young fellows, he answers all of the kids' questions, now. And he's down- He's somewhere- I think he's down in an Fort Lauderdale area and he's finishing college. He's taken more math than I have. He's just brilliant! And he actually sends me a message almost every day to thank me for letting him work with our students.

Jody: Wow, that's really awesome.

Dennis DiNoia: It was so amaz- Yeah. And he's so great. And you know, I, uh, somebody said- They said, "Well-" They said, you know, "Wow, you're going to let someone else like, you know, talk to the students and answer their questions." And they said, "How are you going to know if he's doing a good job?" And I said, "Oh my gosh, the students are gonna tell on him. Of course, right?"

Jody: Yeah.

Dennis DiNoia: You know- And you know what's great? They do, but how they tell on them is they send me a message and I see the messages that go back and forth, anyway. But messages are always like, "Thank you," and "That was so helpful," and "Oh my gosh, that makes more sense now." It's just amazing. So we actually have someone who loves math and probably loves it even more than I do. And I love it already, but he's interacting with all our students and they love it. So that's the first way they can email us and we have a policy of getting back to them within 24 hours. And we're really good at that. The next thing we do is three days a week we do online live help sessions for the kids and they can come in and they can join the help session. It's a live session where they come in and they can work with the teacher. So, they might come in groups of four or five and then the teacher worked individually as one student kind of round robin, because to the next one, works with them, goes to the next one, works with them. And the teachers are all teachers that teach our programs, so they know everything that we do. They either teach online or they have their own co-ops that they do. Um, so whenever they're, you know, we always feel like we've surrounded them with

support and if it's really, really tough, then we get on the phone together, we'll open up an online chat and we'll do it that way too.

Jenni: Well, I have to tell you, I was- As you were talking about the email portion and writing back to your people, we um, we are also on your site. We'll talk about that in a minute. And one thing that has really impressed me is how quickly you respond to emails. In fact, you don't usually respond within 24 hours. You respond much faster. Um, you respond almost right away. I mean, you guys are great. You are great communicators with your students.

Dennis DiNoia: Yeah. That, that's on purpose. You know, we're an online company, right? We're online program. Our whole staff, every- You know, everybody that works with us, they're all over the, you know, they're all over the place, right? All over the U.S., and so it's like if you're an online program, you would think if the way you're going to communicate online, you want to get back to somebody as quickly as possible. And I find that doesn't happen very often out there. And I think it's a, uh, something that doesn't work about online programs. And I'm not talking just about education programs. I'm talking about if I need to send a, uh, a question to a company that I do, uh, have a service with and I've got a question about- Right?

Jody: Yes.

Dennis DiNoia: You know, sometimes, I get the email back that says "we'll respond to you," but they don't respond right away, right? So all I get is that automated email, which is more frustrating as opposed to getting an email back with an answer to your question. Right?

Jenni: Yeah.

Jody: Right.

Jenni: You've definitely inspired us in this area. You guys are masters at getting back to people. Um, and that kind of leads me into, um, you are kind of broadening your base now from just math and you're really becoming more and more of an online solution center for a wide range of education choices. Um, and we get to be a part of that cause we have a couple of classes, we've got a study skills class that we're working on with you and an advanced writing class.

Jody: And more to come.

Dennis DiNoia: I am so excited. There's so much more to come. Absolutely. And when we, when I first started looking at this, and so when I put the math program online, you know, and I don't know if you guys remember, but how, you know, in the old days, right? So the old days was like 10 years ago. That's the old days of when we started all this, right? But I mean the old days was literally, I was making, you know, DVDs and I was, you know...

Jody: I have some of those, Dennis! I have them!

Dennis DiNoia: You know, they're just, it's so funny to think about, you know, where we are now. It was just so great. But whenever I start- When I found the learning management system to use to put the curriculum online, I realized that it was, you know, the system was much more than just being a math program. It really was set up that you could actually have a whole school online. And so one of the really great things is that I- instead of going out and finding people that have great curriculums, what I'm always looking for is people that find me and say, "Hey, is there a way we can work together? Can you help support and get our stuff online and you know, share with your students?" I'm like, "Absolutely." And so all of the programs that we have on there have been because someone has come and said, "Hey, I've got this idea for a program." When we put our American Sign Languages classes up, it was one of our students who was a math student who also was going to college for American Sign Language. And I think it's called the Gallaudet University. It's in, it's up in the DC area. And I probably said that wrong, but that's where she's, um, she's finishing up school. So she gets to work with their professors, uh, under their guidance of putting the courses together and our kids love them. And so she's made three different American sign language classes and it's just great. Another student is finishing college and she asked if she could put together a American History class this year. And I was like, "Absolutely." So she's working on that and again, she's doing it as a project inside of her college experience. So it's like, what better than having university support to help her do that. And then we'd come across seasoned veteran amazing homeschool moms like you, and I was like "Okay, we've got this course." And so, you know, having the Study Skills Course, our kids love it. They love the Study Skills Course that's up right now. And then the writing class. And in this year as the writing class is getting created and more and more developed, it's so great because we're going to be able to offer that just everywhere and our students now and literally, they are all around the world. It's amazing because there's so many homeschoolers can travel and be different places and still be a compelling homeschooler. Yeah. Okay, so, can I tell you a sneak peek of something that's coming...?

Jenni and Jody: Yes!

Dennis DiNoia: Okay. So, um, because of our relationship with so many people in Spain, um, my son is a dancer and he's a Flamenco dancer. So- I probably said that wrong. It's not the bird, it's actual Flamenco dancing, right?

Jenni and Jody: Yep.

Dennis DiNoia: And he, so he's in a conservatory in Madrid, and we've been working with some of the choreographers there and a guitar player that plays the classic flamenco guitar.

Jody: Wow.

Dennis DiNoia: So we're working on- And we're- So we're- right now, it's on schedule to have it ready before Christmas time to have it available for people that we're going to have. You can take an online class and learn Flamenco dancing or Flamenco guitar.

Jody: Okay, so I want to learn that.

Dennis DiNoia: Okay. It's going to be awesome. So we have it, everything's being translated, which is awesome. So my son actually speaks Spanish and English. So when he's doing guitar, the guitar teacher's talking to him in Spanish and then he's translating what's being said. So even though that the instructors are talking in Spanish and then, uh, the dance teacher talks in Spanish, but we try to get that translated as well. And so while the translation is happening, it's getting- You know, so you can- You're gonna hear it in Spanish, you're gonna hear it in English and you get to see what's happening all at the same time. So again it's- again, it's still, you know, working with all the learning styles. You get to hear the, the culture of Spain and at the same time, uh, hear it in your language. It's your native language is English.

Jody: That's awesome. Okay, so I want to do that class. I'm in. Seriously.

Jenni: I know. I think that's one of the coolest sounding things I've ever heard. We're going to take an online dance class. I love this.

Dennis DiNoia: Right?

Jenni: I think that's amazing. Well, and you've got plans- You've got really some really exciting plans in the future to meet, um, the needs of a wider base of age ranges and you've got all kinds of fun things coming out. So I have a big question for you. If somebody is listening to this and they want to keep, um, abreast of what's happening at the Mr. D site and what new, amazing things are coming down the pipe, what- How would they do that?

Speaker 2: Oh, they just, uh, you just go on our website, mrdmath.com, and in our contact area there's a contact form, so it will let us- Let you get in contact with us. So first say hi, but also then we can- we'll have you, um, have you subscribe to our mailing list and we'll keep you up to date with all the things that are going on. We usually send out something about once a month. So we try not to bombard people with information. Um, our students, we talk to them weekly, but just general information, we've tried to send something out about once a month. And the other place to check out is Facebook. Through our Facebook page is Mr. D Math Live. Um, and/or Mr. D Math. And you'll find us on there- On Facebook, too. And we've got all kinds of stuff on there. We do- and I do have to share this, 'cause this is just exciting. So every February, we do something called Student Appreciation Month. You know, there's like, uh, there's, you know, there's like Mother's Day, Father's Day, there's Grandparents Day. I saw there was like National Puppy Day or something.

Jody: No, it's crazy.

Dennis DiNoia: Right? And I'm like, "Well where's Student Day? Where is the day where we really acknowledge and appreciate the students? They're the ones doing all the work, you know!" I'm not gonna say all the work, cause moms are working hard, and you are working hard, but literally they're doing the work, right?

Jody: Yep.

Dennis DiNoia: And so we declared February as the entire month, it's what we call Student Appreciation Month. And so with our students, we do contests and we give away Amazon gift cards for them just for being great and they join people in the contest. But one of the things that we do, well, we'll make a video out to them just to acknowledge them and all the different teachers will record something to send out to them. Um, but we do a video contest and I love this. So, every year, we invite the students and it's totally optional. It's up to them, but they can send us a one minute video of what they love about the course and how it's working for them. And we have 10 top first prize winners. We give \$1,000 away.

Jody: Oh my goodness! I'll do the video!

Dennis DiNoia: Right? Yeah, yeah. Yes, you could win a \$100 gift card, right?

Jody: That's right!

Dennis DiNoia: We had, I think we had a hundred and- I don't know, it was a hundred and- 110 or 120 videos that came in last year. We ended up, actually- We gave everybody some kind of a prize just for participating, which was great, because people took their time to really share with us about what's working about the program. And I watched every single one of those videos, because for me, getting the feedback from the students about what's working, lets us know what we're doing right. And that's important for all of us. You know, so it's like, you know, we write it and we think that what we're doing is- It's what's making a difference for them. But when you hear back from the students about what's working for them and the success they're having, the colleges they're getting into, you hear all these different things, whether they do one of our SAT prep classes or they, you know, they just were- They just finished their class and they applied and got accepted into a university, whatever it is, or just that they're learning something for the first time. It's never made sense in them before, now it is. They're creative. They're funny, they're fun. They're inspiring. I mean we've had where you know, you got tears in your eyes to where you can't stop laughing. And so when the kid- It's just so great when the- When the students send us those videos. So that'll be coming out in February. We put some of those on our Facebook page as well.

Jody: Awesome.

Jenni: Awesome. Well, I hope if you're listening, you're going to hop over to Mr. D Math, we will link to those in the show notes, your website and your Facebook page. And we're excited because, um, we've got some fun things coming down the pike that we're doing with you, Dennis. So, um, we hope that everybody will stay plugged in and find out more about it.

Speaker 2: Absolutely. And you know, there's- I can't even- Let's see, is there a way to tell you how excited I am that we're doing this together?

Jenni and Jody: Aww.

Jody: Us, too.

Dennis DiNoia: Everything I've ever seen you all do has been top notch, top of the line. It's just kind of like, you know, "Can't Touch This" kind of thing. It's like so great. And it's- The detail's there. You've thought through, you've done everything that needs to be done, so every time there's something new, bring it on.

Jenni and Jody: YEAH!!!

Jenni: We love you, Dennis. Thank you so much.