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An Amends Letter From a Recovering Mean Professor

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Synopsis

The following is an amends letter written by a recovering professor enrolled in a twelve-step program for mean professors. The letter is directed to current and past students who have been hurt by the insensitive behavior of the professor in response to the students' mathematical anxiety and other emotional defenses in their learning. As common in twelve-step programs, the purpose of an amends letter is for the recovering person to clearly identify their hurtful actions and the effects on their victims, and to take responsibility for them. By sharing this letter openly, the professor, identified by their twelve-step program name only, hopes to reach as many as possible of their students. They also hope that other professors will be encouraged to look at their own behavior in the classroom and make positive changes in their own behavior to provide a more psychologically safe classroom environment to their students.

January 16, 2022

Jessie L., A Recovering Mean Professor
Some Public University
Some Place in the USA

Dear Current and Past Students:

I have reached the time in my Twelve-Step Program for Recovering Mean Professors where I am ready to write this amends letter to you to take responsibility for my actions and inactions in the classroom that may have inhibited your learning of the content and your growth as learners in general, or worse, may have caused you pain and confusion.

I want you all to know how sorry I am for my past behavior and the damage it might have caused. Up until recently, my teaching mostly focused on your learning of mathematics from a narrow cognitive perspective. Most of the time, I did not take into account the emotional side of learning from your perspective. Furthermore, I often did not think of how your personal beliefs, previous mathematical beliefs, interests, and goals might affect your learning. None of this was intentional, but still, it caused damage. I deeply regret not being the best professor I could have been to help you learn the most in my classes. I apologize for all the pain and confusion I have caused by ignoring the affective side of teaching and learning.

I recently came across a nice phrase which summarizes what I did not do in my teaching: Maslow before Bloom. Until recently, I did not fully understand that cognitive learning builds on psychological safety in the classroom. Many times in my classes, I treated the content to be learned as something anyone can learn if they *just* spent the effort, while mostly ignoring how your personal

beliefs or emotions might have caused you to be confused or even panicked about learning the content. These beliefs and emotions about mathematics also likely led to underdeveloped mathematical background and skills, and thus caused you to further struggle in learning new content. I occasionally addressed some cognitive beliefs in class, such as the fact that learning mathematics takes time and is not easy; however, I was often unaware of other emotions caused by beliefs about what success means to different students or how doing well in class might be associated with how an individual student feels about themselves. I now know that my ignorance of the affective aspects of learning might have inflicted further confusion, pain, or panic in you.

When teaching, I incorrectly assumed all of you knew that failing to understand a topic or making a mistake a problem did not mean anything about you as a person or your worth as a human being. I did not know until recently that people could have a fixed mindset that completely changed their perspective about what failure meant. It did not occur to me to emphasize in class that not knowing how to do something simply means that a person does not know it yet, and that failing means nothing about them as a valuable human being. I truly did not understand why you, my students, apologized to me when you did badly in their exams. I did not think of helping you by deliberately and regularly sharing my own struggles in my K-12 or college learning, so that you could be more at ease with our natural human fallibility.

I did not spend any time on letting you air out your confusions, your frustrations, your fears and any other negative emotions you have about math before we started doing "the real math." I mistakenly thought that the real math was the facts, concepts, and ideas of math, and I mostly ignored the feelings, beliefs, and motivations that are also attached with learning and doing math. I thought everyone knew how to deal with learning new and challenging topics.

I was also completely blind to the fact that not everybody in my classroom saw math as this beautiful, exciting, and fun subject that was to be played with and investigated. Although learning math was often challenging for me, it was never scary, and I did not realize that was not the case for others. I now know that playing with math might sound as scary as playing with a dangerous tool to some. I did not associate math with any negative feelings and could not imagine that others did. I was naïve in my understanding of how the rest of the world saw math.

I look back and see all the opportunities I missed in the classroom. I could have given more time and attention to the emotional and motivational side of your learning and made my classroom a more enjoyable and comfortable place for you. We all could have jointly shared our feelings about math and our stories about learning math without judgment to build a community. We could have spent more time on general learning strategies, such as on how to think productively in math, how to learn from our mistakes, how to strategically make mistakes, how to dust off ourselves after a bad mistake and get up again, how to take responsibility for our failures and also successes, etc. We could have had more "low-stakes math play time" with no right or wrong answers just to help you become more at ease with truly playing with math.

I promise you that I am a changed instructor. From now on, my teaching will focus on both the cognitive and affective sides of learning. I will take into account your emotions and motivations alongside your mathematical thinking skills and knowledge in my lesson planning. I will make time in my classroom to address how to overcome the emotional and attitudinal challenges in learning, as well as cognitive challenges. I will always remember Maslow before Bloom when I teach math, both the mathematical content and also the healthy mathematical learning habits. I will be an ally to you, my students, in all aspects of your learning process and not just in the cognitive aspects.

I am sad that I have failed until now in supporting your learning fully, but I am determined to do better in the future. I will continue to seek support and counseling, and practice the tools and techniques I learned in this twelve-step program to act responsibly in my teaching in the future.

Sincerely,

Jessie L.

Postscript

1. Logo generated by DesignEvo free logo designer.

2. This letter is a true confession from a "mean" professor about the professor's failure to understand the emotional and attitudinal challenges that some of their students faced until they gleaned some understanding of the students' emotional world by reading many articles on psychology, mathematics education, and theory of learning and human development.