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Summary

Uncomfortable with the transition from “learner” to “expert”, many new course instructors question whether they are capable of performing their role (Craddock et al., 2011; Parkman, 2016). This workshop delves into the “Impostor Phenomenon,” a term used to describe feelings of incompetence despite evidence of competence. In general, the literature suggests that greater awareness of the Impostor Phenomenon, both in oneself and others, is the first step towards breaking the cycle of behaviour (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hutchins, 2015). To foster this increase in awareness, this workshop encourages participants to engage in self-reflection and discussion to help break down the barriers normally associated with thoughts of perceived weakness or failure, and normalize these feelings. Participants have the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences with the Impostor Phenomenon, as well as those of their students, and discuss different strategies that can be applied to minimize impostor feelings in the classroom.

Keywords

impostor phenomenon; faculty development; coping strategies

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Overcoming the Impostor Phenomenon in the Classroom

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SUMMARY

Uncomfortable with the transition from “learner” to “expert”, many new course instructors question whether they are capable of performing their role (Craddock et al., 2011; Parkman, 2016). This workshop delves into the “Impostor Phenomenon,” a term used to describe feelings of incompetence despite evidence of competence. In general, the literature suggests that greater awareness of the Impostor Phenomenon, both in oneself and others, is the first step towards breaking the cycle of behaviour (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hutchins, 2015). To foster this increase in awareness, this workshop encourages participants to engage in self-reflection and discussion to help break down the barriers normally associated with thoughts of perceived weakness or failure, and normalize these feelings. Participants have the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences with the Impostor Phenomenon, as well as those of their students, and discuss different strategies that can be applied to minimize impostor feelings in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: impostor phenomenon; faculty development; coping strategies

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Identify reasons why novice instructors feel like impostors.
- Describe strategies that novice instructors can use to overcome their impostor feelings in the classroom.
- Apply strategies to minimize the impostor phenomenon among undergraduate students.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Chapman, A. (2015). Using the assessment process to overcome Impostor Syndrome in mature students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 41(2), 112-119.

In this article, the role of assessment is discussed in relation to confidence building and developing a sense of belonging among mature students. Chapman’s recommendations include making feedback more dialogical, allowing draft submissions with feedback that feeds forward throughout the assessment process, and low-stakes assessments to enhance confidence/self-efficacy. The notion of assessment anxiety is used in this workshop for an activity in which participants brainstorm strategies for reducing the impostor feelings among students (i.e., during the “Supporting Undergraduate Students with Impostor Feelings” component of the workshop). Participant responses can be supplemented with Chapman’s suggestions.

Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The Impostor Phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241-247.

This seminal article is used to explain what the Impostor Phenomenon is and how it develops. The authors describe what the term Impostor Phenomenon means, and provide insight into how family dynamics can contribute to its development. The article also explores the difficulties in overcoming the Impostor Phenomenon by looking at types of behaviours that tend to maintain symptoms, as well as suggestions for breaking out of this cycle. Here, facilitators present content from this article during the “What is the Impostor Phenomenon” segment of the workshop.

Parkman, A. (2016). The Impostor Phenomenon in higher education: Incidence and impact. *Journal of Higher Education Theory & Practice*, 16(1), 51-60.

This article explores a number of strategies that address the Impostor Phenomenon at the individual and institutional level, including timely, consistent and effective feedback, increasing self-awareness, and clear institutional expectations. Facilitators can synthesize and share these coping strategies during the “Coping Strategies” portion of the workshop to initiate discussion and/or supplement responses provided by workshop participants.

Hutchins, H. M. (2015). Outing the Impostor: A study exploring Impostor Phenomenon among higher education faculty. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 27(2), 3-12.

This article examines the prevalence of the Impostor Phenomenon among faculty, and how it affects their emotional exhaustion and coping skills. Contextual factors of the academic environment (e.g., vague performance standards, isolation) can foster impostor feelings and affect the personal well-being of instructors. Facilitators can use findings from this study to supplement reflections offered by participants on their own experiences with the Impostor Phenomenon as instructors during the “Impostor Phenomenon and Teaching” component of the workshop.

Studdard, S. S. (2002). Adult women students in the academy: Impostors or members? *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 50(3), 24-37.

This article identifies classroom and institutional issues that may be contributing to the incidence of Impostor Phenomenon among female students, emphasizing unwelcoming climates in the classroom or on campus, differences in learning styles, and a lack of female faculty or administrators. Facilitators can refer to these issues when participants are asked to brainstorm strategies for reducing impostor feelings among students (i.e., during the “Supporting Undergraduate Students with Impostor Feelings” component of the workshop).

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Brems, C., Baldwin, M. R., Davis, L., & Namyniuk, L. (1994). The impostor syndrome as related to teaching evaluations and advising relationships of university faculty members. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 65(2), 183-193.

Craddock, S., Birnbaum, M., Rodriguez, K., Cobb, C., & Zeeh, S. (2011). Doctoral students and the Impostor Phenomenon: Am I smart enough to be here? *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48(4), 429-442.

Gardner, M. & Aurora, V. (2013, October 15). Impostor Syndrome-proof yourself and your community [Blog post]. *USENIX Women in Advanced Computing (WiAC) series*. Retrieved from: <https://www.usenix.org/blog/impostor-syndrome-proof-yourself-and-your-community>

Shorten, K. (2013, December 10). High-achievers suffering from ‘Impostor Syndrome’. Retrieved from: <http://www.news.com.au/finance/highachievers-suffering-from-imposter-syndrome/news-story/9e2708a0d0b7590994be28bb6f47b9bc>

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

DURATION (MIN)	SUBJECT	ACTIVITY	PURPOSE
10	Introduction	<p>Facilitator introduces him/herself and the topic of the workshop to the participants, and outlines the workshop structure and the learning outcomes.</p> <p>Participants are invited to introduce themselves to another person in attendance and explain why they are interested in attending the session.</p>	<p>Familiarize the participants with the topic and the structure of the workshop so that they know what to expect as the workshop progresses.</p> <p>Initiate conversation via introductions at the one-on-one level to create a comfortable atmosphere, which is important when discussing potentially sensitive topics.</p>
5	What is the Impostor Phenomenon?	Describe examples of famous individuals to portray what the Impostor Phenomenon looks like (list of examples provided in Appendix A). Follow with an explanation of the origins of the term as described in Clance & Imes (1978).	Explain what the Impostor Phenomenon is and how it differs from low self-esteem.
20	The Impostor Phenomenon and Teaching	<p><i>Self-reflection:</i> Ask workshop participants to respond to 4 questions posed in Handout 1 (see Appendix B). They will reflect on when they feel like an impostor as an instructor, why they feel this way, how they respond, and the impact this response has. Allot ~5 minutes for participants to work independently.</p> <p><i>Group discussion:</i> After participants have had an opportunity to reflect, invite participants to share their responses. Supplement this discussion with information from the literature to expand on participants' responses.</p> <p><i>Why do you feel this way?</i> Describe personal factors (e.g., family dynamics and perfectionism) that predispose an individual towards feeling like an impostor (Clance & Imes, 1978), and explain how contextual factors of the academic environment (e.g., vague performance standards, isolating) can</p>	Encourage participants to reflect on their own experience with the Impostor Phenomenon as an instructor.

		<p>foster impostor feelings (Hutchins, 2015).</p> <p><i>How do you respond?</i> Describe two common negative coping strategies, 1) over-preparation and 2) procrastination, and explain how each contributes to the cyclic nature of the Impostor Phenomenon, as detailed in Clance & Imes (1978).</p> <p><i>What impact does this response have?</i> Describe how the Impostor Phenomenon can affect instructors' emotional well-being and coping skills (Hutchins, 2015), and effectiveness in the classroom (Brems et al., 1994).</p>	
30	Coping Strategies for Instructors	<p>Put participants in small groups and give them 10 minutes to brainstorm positive strategies that can be used to build their confidence as instructors. Encourage participants to refer back to Handout 1 to identify specific strategies that address why they feel like an impostor in certain teaching contexts.</p> <p>Take 10 minutes to debrief by asking each group to highlight one or two key points from their discussion. This can be supplemented with additional coping strategies suggested by Parkman (2016). See Appendix A for specific examples.</p> <p>Ask participants to apply one of the suggested coping strategies by going through a thought record activity (Appendix C). Give 5 minutes for participants to reflect on an experience where they felt like an impostor, while identifying evidence that demonstrates the feeling is unsubstantiated. Then ask participants how it felt to go through the exercise and challenge their impostor thoughts.</p>	Equip participants with ways to address impostor feelings when they arise by developing a list of different coping strategies.
20	Supporting Undergraduate Students with Impostor Feelings	Provide participants with 4 scenarios derived from Chapman (2015) and Studdard (2002) found in Appendix D. For the first 10 minutes, encourage small group discussion that focuses on impostor	Highlight different situations that can lead to students feeling like impostors and identify ways instructors can minimize these feelings.

		<p>feelings among students, and the strategies an instructor can use to reduce these feelings.</p> <p>In the following 10 minutes, debrief by asking each group to highlight one or two key points from their discussion. Supplement the discussion with additional coping strategies found in Chapman (2015) and Studdard (2002). See Appendix A for specific examples.</p>	
5	Conclusions	<p>Underscore the notion that overcoming the Impostor Phenomenon requires a shift in mindset. Recap the main points, including why instructors experience the Impostor Phenomenon, and how participants can address their own impostor feelings as well as those of their students.</p> <p>Take the time to respond to any final questions or comments that arise.</p>	Summarize the key messages of the workshop and review the learning outcomes.
Total Time: 90 minutes			

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

This workshop is structured around three primary activities that encourage self-reflection and discussion. Each of these activities relates to one of the learning outcomes identified at the beginning of the workshop. In the first activity, participants identify reasons why novice instructors feel like impostors by reflecting on their own experiences with the Impostor Phenomenon. In the second activity, participants are asked to brainstorm different strategies to overcome their impostor feelings through group discussion. In the third activity, participants are expected to apply their knowledge of the Impostor Phenomenon strategies to scenarios undergraduate students encounter that cause impostor feelings. Supplementary material to help facilitators lead these activities is found in Appendix A.

Rather than simply presenting participants with supporting evidence from the literature, this information is instead used to supplement discussion and participant responses to encourage greater recognition and awareness of the Impostor Phenomenon through active learning. Reflections and discussions are structured around the questions posed in Handouts 1, 2, and 3. In Handout 1, participants are asked to reflect on when they feel like an impostor as an instructor, why they feel this way, how they respond, and the impact this response has. Participants can then use their own experiences with the Impostor Phenomenon from the generated responses to brainstorm specific strategies to address impostor feelings. In Handout 2, participants are asked to challenge one of their impostor thoughts by identifying the evidence that supports and refutes this feeling. Finally, in Handout 3, participants are presented with different classroom scenarios and asked how each scenario might contribute to students feeling like impostors, and strategies instructors can use to mitigate these feelings.

Because the nature of the conversations concern perceived weakness, it is important that a comfortable atmosphere is established so that participants feel willing to share their experiences with one another. The facilitator should state that participants are free to disclose as much about their feelings as they are comfortable doing. The facilitator should also welcome questions and comments throughout the workshop. The opening introduction sets the tone in this respect by having participants share their interest in attending the session, thus establishing commonalities across experiences. Discussion among participants begins in small groups (pairs or groups of 3-4), before being brought to the larger group. In this way, those who are comfortable sharing their experiences are able to do so, and no one feels put on the spot.

APPENDIX A

Supplementary Material for Facilitators

List of examples of famous/influential individuals who have experienced the Impostor Phenomenon with quotations to provide supporting evidence from Shorten (2013):

- Maya Angelou, Award-winning author: "I have written eleven books, but each time I think, "Uh oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out."
- Kate Winslet, Academy award winner: "Sometimes I wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot, and I think, I can't do this. I'm a fraud."
- Darren Lockyer, Australian rugby league champion: "Every time I go to a game I always have that fear of losing or a sense of failure."
- Dr. Margaret Chan, Chief of the World Health Organization: "There are an awful lot of people out there who think I'm an expert. How do these people believe all this about me? I'm so much aware of all the things I don't know,"
- Alan Dye, Vice President of Apple: "I'm scared to death that at some point I'm going to get found out. You know, Tim [Cook] is going to realize the truth about me, which is I'm terrible."

A list of coping strategies for instructors compiled from Parkman (2016) that help address personal impostor feelings:

- Challenge your thinking, i.e., what evidence supports your impostor thoughts? What evidence does not support it?
- Celebrate your successes. Keep a record to refer back to when feeling less competent.
- Chronicle when you feel like an impostor. Are there observable patterns?
- Distinguish between teaching skills/abilities and knowledge of content matter.
- Become more comfortable with receiving feedback. Seek out feedback from people whose opinion you trust (e.g., get feedback from a colleague through a teaching observation). Learn to recognize when feedback is unfounded.
- Participate in regular staff meetings, even as a faculty member, to help establish one's identity as an academic.
- Find a mentor.
- Become a mentor to junior instructor (e.g., new hires, teaching assistants).
- Attend workshops or conferences that focus on teaching and learning, or other professional development opportunities that cultivate fundamental teaching skills and knowledge.
- Identify mentorship and academic support groups that provide spaces for open dialogue regarding impostor syndrome in order to normalize the experience, and foster working relationships.
- Use discussion/conversation with others to normalize impostor feelings.
- Create/join a support group of peers outside academia (for perspective).

Coping strategies compiled from Chapman (2015) and Studdard (2002) intended for course instructors who would like to address impostor feelings among students:

- Lay out a code of conduct at the beginning of the course to encourage a welcoming classroom environment.
- Establish support groups for women students.
- Establish mentoring relationships early in the academic experience.
- Educate students on the Impostor Phenomenon and its impact.

- Employ feminist pedagogy in the classroom.
- Use a variety of teaching methods to cater to different learning preferences.
- Be more open and encourage more interaction and discussion.
- Use a diverse range of texts and examples.
- Make feedback more dialogical.
- Engage students during the entire assessment process.
- Allow students to submit draft writing.
- Give students more feedback (feed-forward) throughout the assessment process.
- Incorporate early, low-stakes assessments.

APPENDIX B

Handout #1 - Impostor Phenomenon and Teaching

When do you feel like an impostor as an instructor? (check all that apply)

When I'm preparing lesson plans	
When I'm giving lectures	
When I'm facilitating group activities in class	
When I'm marking	
When I'm meeting with a student one-on-one	
In discussions with colleagues	

Why do you think you feel this way?

How do you typically respond to these feelings? For example, do you over-prepare? How?

How does this behavioural response impact your teaching? Your personal well-being?

APPENDIX C

Handout #2 - Thought Record Activity

This activity is designed to challenge your impostor thoughts with evidence. Think about a time you felt like an impostor in the classroom (or another teaching context) and fill in each of the columns. Adapted from Gardner and Aurora (2013)¹.

Where were you	Thoughts/feelings	Evidence that supports this	Evidence that does not support this	Alternative thoughts/feelings
<i>What were you doing? Who were you with?</i>	<i>Thoughts going on in your mind; how you felt at the time</i>	<i>Facts that support the truthfulness of this thought</i>	<i>Facts/examples that indicate this might not be true (e.g. what would you say if someone else had this thought?)</i>	<i>New thought that takes into account evidence for/ against original thought?</i>

¹ Gardner, M. & Aurora, V. (2013, October 15). Impostor Syndrome-proof yourself and your community [Blog post]. *USENIX Women in Advanced Computing (WiAC) series*. Retrieved from: <https://www.usenix.org/blog/impostor-syndrome-proof-yourself-and-your-community>

APPENDIX D

Handout #3 - Supporting undergraduate students with impostor feelings

Below are four common scenarios identified by Studdard (2002) and Chapman (2015) that students may encounter in postsecondary education. As a group, discuss how each scenario might contribute to impostor feelings among students, and the strategies you can use as instructors to alleviate these feelings.

Scenario 1:

The traditional university classroom encourages students to answer questions quickly, to probe the reasoning of the instructor and other students, and to challenge assumptions. To be successful in this environment, the student must be assertive, combative, and challenging.

Scenario 2:

Texts and curriculum can reinforce stereotypical gender roles by including few readings about or by women, or they fail to acknowledge women as positive examples in classroom discussions.

Scenario 3:

Learners often position their identity through academic success. In particular, the first assessment in higher education can be seen as a rite of passage, and is an important element of the first-year experience.

Scenario 4:

Positions in university and college administration are commonly filled by men. In addition, there are many fewer female than male professors in some disciplines.