

Overcoming Imposter Syndrome: How My Students Trained Me to Teach Them

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Abstract: Starting a new job can be very stressful, and often brings out feelings of insecurity. These insecurities can come in the form of feeling like an imposter, especially in situations, like teaching, when we might feel like a great amount of expertise is required. Much can be learned from listening to our students. In this reflection, student feedback fell into seven themes: 1) teaching methods and style, 2) clear communication, 3) instructor “personality,” 4) real world application, 5) relationship, 6) organization and structure, and 7) accessibility and responsiveness. This article concludes by encouraging openness to feedback and vulnerability in order to move beyond our insecurities and feeling like an imposter.

Keywords: imposter syndrome, higher education, teaching, vulnerability, shared vulnerability

On my first official day as a tenured associate professor, I thought it would be valuable to look at what I had learned about teaching in my years in academia and how far I had progressed. After all, this event suggests that I have somehow “arrived” and that I know my craft well. Ironically, I have spent much of my time in academia feeling somewhat like an imposter. I spent my first two decades after my MSW working clinically, often supervising other professionals and field students, but I had never had a class on how to teach. When I started teaching, some insecurities crept in. After all, I thought that I was supposed to be the “sage on the stage,” teaching my students how to use critical thinking skills to better understand and intervene in a wide range of complex client situations. I have learned there is an actual “imposter syndrome” and that is not a new phenomenon. It describes feeling that others perceive you as being more competent and expert than you actually feel and it correlates with perfectionism. Dr. Pauline Clance was conducting research about it in the 1970's and eventually wrote an entire book on it (1985). Brems, Baldwin, Davis, & Namyniuk (1994) later applied this concept to teaching and academic advising. As with any set of “symptoms,” they are experienced on a continuum, and most everyone experiences these to a greater or lesser degree.

This was not the first time I felt like an imposter in my career. I recall starting my clinical practice immediately after I received my MSW and quickly feeling overwhelmed with the complexity of the problems that my clients faced. I felt a substantial obligation to them; after all, they were coming to me for help, and that alone takes a significant amount of courage. In those early days as a clinician, I purposefully capitalized on establishing a strong therapeutic relationship. This was one skill with which I felt most comfortable, and I knew that building rapport was a necessary (but not sufficient) part of the helping process. Over the years, I've learned that when the situation feels overwhelming, focusing on the relationship tends to be my fallback position. Therefore, it is no surprise that I placed a lot of my focus on building relationships with students when I began to teach. I quickly discovered that building relationships with students is a far different process than building a therapeutic relationship. I was accustomed to seeing individuals clinically, and students are taught in a classroom

environment. Clients are also there for a specific and individualized purpose, whereas students are in our program to learn and to receive a degree so they can begin or enhance their social work careers. While there was a benefit in focusing on the teacher-student relationship, it wasn't very effective at reducing my feelings of being an imposter in the classroom.

As I considered writing this, I began by writing down the lessons that came to mind about what my students have taught me regarding being the most effective teacher. These were the lessons that helped me feel like less of an imposter. I realized that I had access to many of their thoughts on teaching in the student evaluation forms that I had collected over the years. Our university uses a University Student Assessment of Teaching (USAT) survey that is administered at the end of each course. This survey asks a number of questions on a Likert scale about effective curriculum delivery, instructor behaviors (approachability, communication, respectfulness), and overall course satisfaction. There are also three open-ended questions that ask students to 1) describe some aspects of this course that promoted your learning, 2) what specific, practical changes they recommend that might improve learning in the course, and 3) if they would recommend this course from this instructor and why. Once I started reviewing them, I realized this provided me with a wonderful source of information about what my students feel is important, as they would have actually had to make the effort to sit and write about it. I created a list of all of the comments students provided me in the last eight years about what they thought was helpful or what they wished I had done differently. They fall into seven main themes.

The Teaching Methods and Style

There is a great deal of information available about effective teaching styles and methods. There are also some spectacular teachers to learn from. Recently, I was able to ask someone who I believe is a master educator about what they felt made them so consistently effective. Teaching style was identified as one main aspect but not quite in the way I was expecting. This instructor explained that they are not a particularly engaging lecturer, so early on, they recognized that a wide variety of teaching modalities would need to be used in order to keep students engaged. Student surveys seemed to support this idea, as they listed several teaching methods and styles they found to be effective:

- Small group-oriented learning exercises—students feel they learn a lot from their classmates' experiences
- A balance between instructor teaching and assigning students to present topics
- Keep things engaging and interesting
- Desire for learning to be enjoyable
- Encourage class participation
- Give clear, useful examples
- The use of videos, class discussions, and personal experiences that enhance my learning
- Class discussions—hearing others helped my learning
- Using material in a way that encourages students to want to read further to promote learning without making them feel they are forced to

Clear Communication

It's no surprise students prefer clear communication. They eventually need to create products (papers, tests) that satisfy the instructor's desire to assess their learning. One of the main themes to come out of the student surveys was about communication. Everyone communicates in a unique way, so I've found that I have to continually work at this, no matter how thoroughly I may have explained something in a syllabus or in class:

- Expectations are reasonable, clearly delineated and consistently applied
- Promote good communication
- Explain things in a way that is understandable yet makes the student think critically
- Ability to use common language and not rely on psychobabble
- Clearly explain ideas and concepts

I had an interaction with a graduate student who received a "B" in one of my classes and she was devastated by losing her 4.0 overall grade point average. Fortunately, she felt that the class expectations were reasonable and understandable so our conversation could focus on this as a learning opportunity (about the impact of perfectionistic thinking on social work practice) rather than a debate as to whether her grade was deserved. Too often, these conversations focus on the fairness of the grade and the teaching moment is lost.

Instructor "Personality"

Like it or not, popularity is a part of the education process, and students may learn better from instructors they like. This should come as no surprise. After all, our colleagues in the business sector have long realized that people do business with people they like (e.g., Anderson, 2013). My undergraduate social work advisor had a powerful influence on my learning, and his "personality" was a big part of that. Teachers are role models and the use of self can be a powerful tool. For instance, I want my students to "know they don't know" everything. My experience has taught me that unfortunate events are more likely to occur when helping professionals become overconfident and believe they can quickly and easily assess nearly every complex situation. When imposter syndrome kicked in, I felt as though I needed to have a cogent answer for every question asked of me in class. Now, I actually thank my students when they ask questions that stump me and have congratulated them at the end of the class for the number of difficult questions they asked. It gives me an opportunity to model how we try to handle complex situations with clients when there are no quick and easy answers. Student surveys identified some other personality aspects they found to be useful for their learning:

- Enthusiasm for learning
- Respect for the profession
- Incorporating humor
- Approachable and friendly

- A desire to feel like an equal in the learning environment
- Enthusiasm—appearing to take a general liking to the material presented
- Approachable, knowledgeable, and fair
- Kind, understanding, compassionate
- Fun and passionate about what he was teaching

One student interaction really reinforced the importance of being approachable and humble. While I was walking across campus, I came across a group of graduate students who were all sitting together and enjoying the beautiful spring weather. They waved me over to ask me a question. One of the students asked, “why are you so humble, when you have so much education and experience?” This provided me a teachable moment to discuss the trap of overconfidence when it comes to working with complex, unique client situations (and often indicates the presence of reductionist thinking.) In this way, humility provided the double benefit of reducing feelings of imposter syndrome while also allowing me to model behavior that reinforced the value of being approachable to our social work clientele.

Real World Application

Although we are in an academic environment, we are primarily training future professionals to go out and provide a service to clients, communities, institutions, and other stakeholders. It was a difficult transition to move from teaching as a field instructor to teaching in the classroom. The classroom environment automatically creates some artificiality, and students expect a real-world connection to the information being presented in their coursework. Student surveys support this idea in several creative ways:

- Relate what we learn in practical ways
- Focus on what will help us in the field
- Incorporate real-life experience and real-world examples
- Make instruction useful and understandable
- Create useful assignments—apply assignments to real-life situations
- Practical teaching methods
- Think outside the box since most of our clientele don’t fit “the box”

It is difficult to find a single student interaction that reinforces this principle, as there have been so many. The literature widely supports the idea that students desire real-world examples (e.g., Laurillard, 2013; Edwards & Mercer, 2013). When I first started in academia, I struggled with the tension that we are a professional program within an academic setting. I found myself designing assignments and activities that focused on professional writing rather than academic writing. I felt a bit like an imposter when I interacted with my academic colleagues, as if I were cheating my students academically. Now, after hearing how much former students value the professional skills and knowledge I taught them in their new jobs, it is much easier to have more confidence in my choice to focus on activities that are more professional than they are academic.

Relationship

As was mentioned earlier, I learned the value of focusing on relationship through my years as a clinician. Fortunately, that seems to translate well to the classroom, too. Deresiewicz (2014) contends that students are looking for emotional mentorship, and good teachers strive to get to know their students as individuals. He believes students are seeking parental figures with whom they can connect, be validated by, and who can serve as role models for how to think about and interact with one's environment. This notion that we seek others to meet many emotional needs that were met by our primary caregivers is becoming more popular in the clinical realm as well (e.g., Johnson, 2012). Below, students identify several relationally oriented factors which impact their learning. Much of this is related to creating a sense of safety that allows students to more easily drop some self-protective behaviors in order to vulnerably grapple with the complex and challenging material presented. The benefits of shared vulnerability in the classroom are many and have been very successfully encouraged by the likes of Brene' Brown (2012). One issue that may make it more difficult to successfully create this environment by being more vulnerable is the concern that we, as educators, might be taken advantage of by students who are seeking to manipulate us for their own gains. Yet, the ability and willingness to assist in a time of need are some of the most powerful tools we possess as helping professionals:

- Flexibility and consideration for our needs
- Approachability
- Respect for students
- Responsiveness when students have personal problems
- Accommodating, supportive, and patient
- "Believing the instructor wants me to achieve" and is willing to go the distance
- Committed to the success of every student
- Supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere that allows for great discussion amongst the students (vulnerability)
- Treats students as adults and recognizes we do have busy lives outside of the classroom
- Add a "personal touch" to class by sharing personal/professional experiences

A student interaction that supports these ideas came in an unexpected form. This student was struggling with her assignments but was avoiding any communication with me about them, despite my requests. I was finally able to have a meeting with him and discuss my concerns about how I felt that he was avoiding this communication as well as some other classroom behaviors that concerned me. It was a difficult conversation, but I was determined to maintain a strengths-based focus despite my frustrations. In the end, we had a productive conversation. Later, he requested that I become his advisor and direct his final independent study project. His rationale for selecting me was that if I cared enough about him to have a difficult conversation and discuss how his behaviors weren't helping him reach his goals, then he thought I would be a good advisor.

Organization and structure

Like clear communication, it is easy to see why students like organized and thoughtfully constructed classes. However, this is not always true, especially if the level of organization for a class feels almost constrictive to students. The comments below would suggest that students value a certain amount of flexibility. This has been particularly true in situations when all of the content for the class has not been covered, and time is running short. I've learned that very little is retained by students once they have reached the saturation point in a class, so more flexible teaching methods or deviating from the structure in certain circumstances is valued. Student comments below seem to validate this idea:

- Well-constructed class
- Organized and prepared
- Allowed us to go off track every once in a while when a student has questions that were somewhat related

Students learn a great deal from one another (e.g., Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2014). What I have learned is that when students ask questions in class, it is important that I be flexible enough to engage in those discussions rather than feeling compelled to adhere to rigidly to my original lesson plan. At first, my imposter syndrome took the form of feeling guilty that I was not covering all of the material that I intended to. However, students made so many comments about how much they appreciate the flexibility to discuss information or issues they have questions about that I frequently do not get through all of the material that I have posted for each class. This has even become somewhat of a joke with my students because I routinely end class by encouraging students to review the material posted for a class in order to cover the information that we didn't have time for.

Accessibility and responsiveness

Clearly, connection is very important, and accessibility is a big part of that. Being available, accessible, and responsive seems to lead to better learning outcomes. Some instructors demonstrate this by making concerted efforts to provide timely, useful feedback on assignments. Our colleagues in business have capitalized on this idea through providing good customer service. Indeed, higher education administration seems to be moving towards adopting a customer service model in order to attract and retain students to help meet budgetary demands. Some educators are concerned that a "customer" orientation on the part of our students might bring about a certain degree of entitlement where students are "paying for this degree" and we are to accommodate them because of it. Whatever the case, it is clear that students value this and feel it has an impact on their learning:

- Quick turnaround on grades
- Good at answering questions outside of class while students are working on assignments
- Quick responses

I interacted with a student about this topic recently and she remarked that she really appreciates when an instructor is available and responds promptly to her questions or concerns. However, she reminded me that these interactions are not just about timeliness. She also stated that when she sets up an appointment with a professor, she expects to have their undivided attention for the duration of that meeting and this provides her with a role model for how she should interact with her clients.

Conclusion

Feeling like an imposter when we start something new appears to be a fairly common experience. My conversations with colleagues throughout the years suggest that when we are thrust into new situations where there appears to be little room for error, our insecurities can really be triggered. The path to overcoming these feelings seems to involve at least two important factors. First, we have to have an openness to feedback we get from those we are working with. In higher education, we seek ways to assess our effectiveness and there are several avenues to receiving this feedback, such as the USATs described above. But evaluations and feedback can create feelings of vulnerability. Therefore, the second important factor is having the confidence and/or courage to embrace vulnerability. Brene' Brown (e.g. 2012) has done an excellent job to illuminate the importance of vulnerability in recent years and has been a wonderful role model for professional helpers. It has also been my experience that being vulnerable with people you trust can be contagious and extremely helpful.

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