Overcoming Imposter Syndrome by Creating Intentionally Inclusive Cultures in Online Doctoral Classrooms

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Abstract: Establishing an online class community that promotes belonging through open, honest communication and collaboration can alleviate doctoral student Imposter Syndrome.

Keywords: imposter syndrome, online doctoral study, community, class culture

Creating intentionally inclusive cultures in online doctoral classrooms requires accepting, fostering, and promoting cultural differences that reduce othering, alleviate learners' anxiety, and diminish Imposter Syndrome (IS). Online educators play a key role in boosting students' morale by establishing socially just spaces that lessen marginalization of students who question if they belong (Askew et al., 2012; Colbert, 2010). As adult students begin their online doctoral study, a culture clash can develop due to some students' moving from professional life back to school and becoming part of diverse online programs. Online doctoral program directors, department chairs, instructors, and students all have a role in building class and program communities that recognize and value individual cultural identities, address mental health difficulties, respond to the social justice aims of adult education, and substitute IS with strength-based self-images that can increase academic success.

This conceptual paper aims to suggest ways to mitigate the effects of IS on doctoral students pursuing an online degree. Developing program and class cultures that use effective collaboration and communication can foster inclusion and generate belonging (Palvia et al., 2018; Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016; Trespalacios et al., 2021). This approach is timely, innovative, and essential as the internet has transformed the educational landscape (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Fraenza, 2016). The growth of online academic programs (Palvia et al.) attests to the "paradigm shift in attitudes toward online education. Online learning is no longer peripheral or supplementary, yet an integral part of mainstream society" (Bozkurt et al., p. 331). Existing empirical studies demonstrate graduate students are highly susceptible to impostor feelings (Parkman, 2016); however, fewer have sought to understand IS among online doctoral students (Garcia & Yao, 2019). In one study, researchers show that IS is associated with anxiety, characterized by perfectionism and fear of failure that lead to over-preparation. This same study found that individuals in physical classrooms experienced heightened levels of social influence and pressure, whereas those in online classrooms did not (Fraenza, 2016).

Imposter Syndrome Experiences of Online Doctoral Students

People experiencing IS attribute their success to luck or the mistakes of others and fear being perceived as less intelligent or competent than others believe them to be (Clance & Imes, 1978; Clance & O'Toole, 1988). Even when these individuals are successful, their fear of never being good enough and feeling like a fraud pushes them to set extremely high standards for themselves,

resulting in high-level stress, anxiety, or other psychological disorders (Fraenza, 2016). Institutions of higher education are often high-stakes and competitive environments because a person's success often is assessed by the quantity and quality of their research (Cutri et al., 2021). Many doctoral students do not graduate, and symptoms of IS contribute to those low graduation rates (Baum & Steele, 2017; Cassuto, 2013). The consequences of IS can be educational, physical, emotional, familial, and psychological. Students may experience illness and debilitating emotional trauma; those affected by IS may lack confidence or energy and suffer from insomnia and migraines (Steinberg, 1987).

Students in online doctoral programs can feel like outsiders due to professional, academic, and ethnic othering based on differences in work and family responsibilities, learning engagement, and ethnicity. Instructors can help build more inclusive communities (Askew et al., 2012; Colbert, 2010) by facilitating interaction across these differences and limiting a focus on particular group norms (Phirangee & Malec, 2017). Students arrive in class with established ideas of how to learn based on their professional, academic, and ethnic backgrounds. For example, "the cultural background of students influences both how they prioritize the benefits they have gained from their online study, and how they view the challenges it posed" (Hewling, 2005, p. 338). Those in the minority due to these backgrounds may "silence themselves or take actions to make their differences invisible" (Dennen & Bong, 2018, p. 390), increasing the feeling of IS.

Understanding how culture affects building inclusive online communities in doctoral courses is critical to addressing IS (Askew et al., 2012; Colbert, 2010). The significance of diverse professional experiences and family responsibilities adult learners bring to their doctoral study must be considered when building inclusive class communities that counteract cultural othering and address the presence of IS. In online education, class culture plays a significant role. IS occurs when individuals cannot believe in their success or acknowledge they legitimately earned their achievements due to their knowledge, efforts, or skills. Enhancing the class community can offer learning opportunities to limit fear and help students succeed. When they feel a part of the community, students are more likely to believe they can achieve academically (Berry, 2017, 2019; Rovai, 2001; Rovai & Wighting, 2005).

Imposter Syndrome Mitigation Practices

Online programs enable instructors and learners to meet and communicate synchronously and asynchronously in separate spaces. Adult learners with career and family responsibilities demanding time and attention recognize the potential of online learning to create a supportive educational environment and offer unique opportunities to enhance education and build community. However, social cues, such as body language that may influence individuals, often go unnoticed in online settings. Adult learner traits include self-direction, application of previous experience to new educational settings, and strong motivation to solve specific problems (Ross-Gordon, 2003). However, Brookfield (1995) argued, in "learning across the lifespan the variables of culture, ethnicity, personality and political ethos assume far greater significance in explaining how learning occurs and is experienced than does the variable of chronological age" (para. 2). This understanding is crucial in terms of IS since factors such as culture, ethnicity, personality, and politics affect whether an individual feels like a valuable member of the doctoral community

or believes they do not have the right kind of capital to fit in and contribute. Doctoral students studying in online courses where the instructor's role is to facilitate student-driven learning discover "through a collaborative process of sharing and balancing control between teacher and student, the appropriate balance between educational norms and personal choice [are] ensured" (Garrison, 2003, p. 165). In collaborative online learning, peers also play an important role in supporting each other. Students from different backgrounds may feel pressured to adopt hegemonic ideas as self-directed learning is inseparable from culture.

Doctoral study can provide a means for "[d]eveloping in adults a sense of their personal power and self-worth" (Brookfield, 1985, p. 47), yet those with IS struggle with this process. A significant piece of this development is the student's aptitude for critical reflection, where they think deeply about their values, perspectives, and culturally derived positionality. Even though focusing inward on one's competencies can lead to IS, Brookfield's (1995) critical reflection framework provides an IS mitigation technique as individuals examine their learning in relation to others. Students experiencing IS can feel validated when they recognize similar values, beliefs, skill levels, and practices in the situations and responses of others as well as in the literature. Self-reflection can bring a greater degree of self-awareness and an understanding of what one can control personally and what evolves from intuitional structures and culture (Gillaspy, 2020), allowing the student to focus on their path to learning and success.

When learners practice critical reflection, they consider their assumptions and gain knowledge about themselves, others, and their environments. Reflection can provide a clearer image of the way forward in an academic or professional setting. Reflective learners may take more calculated risks in facing obstacles because they may be able to place themselves more clearly in juxtaposition to others and find more similarities, which is essential to diminishing IS. Individuals may avoid critical reflection when they fear what they might find; yet, students must recognize the presence of IS and acknowledge it is a common phenomenon. If students can share their IS feelings IS with receptive peers, they may discover IS is more widespread within their community than they realized and may be able to decrease its effects through peer support. Institutional culture can contribute to the occurrence of IS (Bowman & Palmer, 2017; Zorn, 2005), so cultivating a strong, welcoming, and inclusive community can be one way to mitigate feelings of inadequacy among students. Being part of a community where others validate one's abilities allows individuals to internalize more feelings of confidence and competence (Bowman & Palmer).

McMillan and Chavis' (1986) definition of community — "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9) — has been widely applied in research on educational programs and classrooms (Berry, 2017, 2019; McElrath & McDowell, 2008; Rovai 2001, 2002; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016; Trespalacios et al., 2021). These community elements are closely connected to IS because students with feelings of inadequacy often believe they do not belong or matter to peers; likewise, they doubt the group will help them become proficient and meet their needs. While a community can be defined geographically, community can also be based on relationships rather than a specific place.

Perceptions of community boundaries can be problematic for students with IS. Boundaries define people who belong and those who do not and are established by groups to increase feelings of safety; however, students outside those norms can feel rejected and isolated when boundaries are based on group norms. When lacking identification with others in the group, it is more difficult to become invested in the group; without this investment, students will not feel that they have earned a place in the community and will not find membership valuable (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Vesely et al., 2007). To mitigate IS, inclusive class communities can focus on establishing strong emotional connections by spending time together, building commitment to group goals, and creating a shared history through similar experiences within the same space. Communities maintain cohesiveness through frequent interaction. The more time individuals spend together, the more likely they will become close. Similarly, the more positive experiences individuals share, the greater their bonds will be (McMillan & Chavis).

The significance of communal interaction is clear for IS because students judge themselves in relation to others. Students who view themselves as outsiders in some ways have difficulty trusting other group members. Collaborative activities can increase learning and provide support, bringing more students into the group as learners recognize "the need to have more social interaction, relating it to emotional support and learning. [When meeting] only online, it can be challenging to achieve the level of trust required to make the most of the opportunities group work offers" (Jaber & Kennedy, 2017, p. 20).

Instructors can incorporate several techniques into course design to enhance community building and mitigate IS. Collaborative learning through interactive undertakings, where student endeavors support socially constructed meaning, is important. Resource sharing and expressing encouragement, not only on the part of the instructor but also among peers, strengthen group cohesion. Student bonding increases through communication activities such as introductions, discussion forums, and whole class or small group dialogue that shares personal experiences and knowledge (McElrath & McDowell, 2008; Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016). The academic community has unique characteristics. Within doctoral programs, students find distinct sub-communities such as the cohort, the class and its small groups, the friend circle, and the study group (Berry, 2017). Each of these groups has ways for program and course designers and instructors to use IS mitigation practices, such as building inclusive communities and including self-reflection in the curriculum. The result will be academic achievement and improved online doctoral students' physical, psychological, and emotional well-being.

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