Confronting the impostor: the role of conference presentation for confidence-building in academics

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Abstract

We often hear that facing our fears is the best course of action towards conquering them. It seems that many individuals are choosing to confront their deepest inner fears; data show that a fear of being an 'impostor' *"runs thick in the veins of academics, from newly arrived graduate students to those nearing retirement"* (Revuluri, 2018, p.1). This reflection piece shares the authors' personal experiences of planning and delivering a workshop on 'Impostor Syndrome' (IS) that, ironically, helped to confront and conquer their own fears. This article highlights the key role that conference presentation can play in helping academics to overcome feeling like frauds through five key processes: reflection, feed-forward, perspective, support network and talk.

Keywords: Impostor syndrome, identity, confidence, conference, higher education

Article

- *"Do you tend to feel crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your 'ineptness'?*
- *Do you believe that other people are smarter and more capable than you?*
- *Do you sometimes shy away from challenges because of self-doubt?*
- *Do you live in fear of being discovered or unmasked?"*

(Young, 2018, p.1)

We often hear that facing our fears is the best course of action for conquering them. It seems that many individuals are choosing to confront their deepest inner fears when we explore the data that show that a fear of being an 'impostor' *"runs thick in the veins of academics, from newly arrived graduate students to those nearing retirement"* (Revuluri, 2018, p.1). Answering 'yes' to even one of Young's above four questions may reflect that you suffer from 'impostor syndrome'.

Impostor syndrome and IS in higher education

The term 'impostor syndrome' (IS) was coined in 1978 by clinical psychologists Clance and Imes (1978), who defined it as *"internal experience of intellectual phoniness in people who believe that they are not intelligent, capable or creative despite evidence of high achievement"* (Clance and Imes, 1978, p.241). People may suffer from IS at any age or stage of their education or career, but the one unifying feeling is that of a *"secret fear"* inside (Qureshi *et al.*, 2017, p.107; Giles, 2010), a fear that *"they are not adequately able to*

perform a delegated role or that they lack the skills and knowledge" (Gibson and Coombes, 2018, p.3). It is important both to recognise IS and to understand that, as this internal fear can result in anxiety, depression, and burnout, it may have negative impact upon people's professional and personal lives as they *"battle with this identity crisis"* (*ibid.,* p.3).

Why is IS rife in higher education (HE)? In academia, where IS is reported as being 'endemic' (Parker, 2019, p.1), many factors – from gender, ethnicity, age or experience – may influence the development of IS. Being an early career researcher (ECR), for example, involves trying to find an academic platform and developing an academic presence while also taking on the workload of planning and delivering teaching at HE level. IS means that an academic is *"continually plagued with the* feeling that *you're not qualified"* (Parker, 2019, p.1) which can be detrimental to teaching and learning when the individual in question is, ironically, supporting students with gaining their own qualifications. The authors of this article suggest that conference presentation may be a key strategy for confronting IS.

The role of conference presentation in confronting IS

The authors of this article, having both experienced *"deeply painful and damaging, almost paralysing"* IS (Revuluri, *op.cit.*, p.1), faced their fears through offering to present a workshop at the annual SHIFT conference at the University of Greenwich, 2019. As lecturers working in HE, the authors had analysed how students at university may suffer with IS and how this inner fear could be hampering progress and damaging student outcomes. Five key strategies emerged from a meta-analysis of the literature, presented in figure 1.
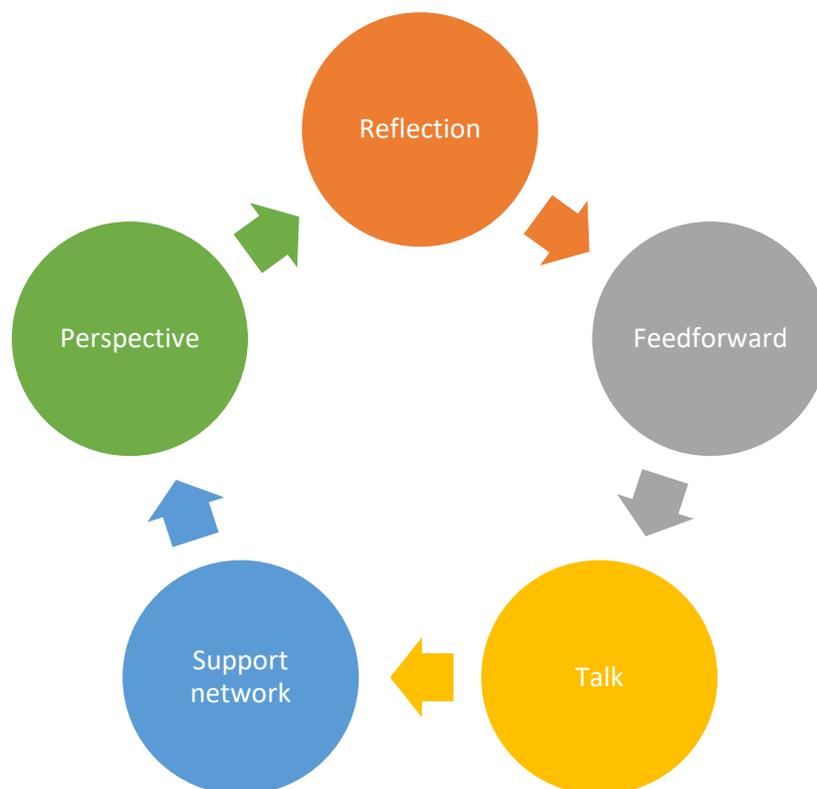

Figure 1: Five strategies for helping students to confront and conquer IS

Grayon and Mateo (2019) highlight that IS also leads us to believe that our achievements and our successes are down to being in the right place at the right time, or to luck, rather than a result of our abilities. Worrying that our performances are not good enough may have negative impact upon confidence, self-esteem and mental health.

Successful conference presentation

Drawing upon the strategies to support students with IS (figure 1), the authors found of great interest that to present a workshop to colleagues, peers and delegates at the SHIFT conference helped them to admit to, and reflect upon, their own sense of IS. The five strategies that could be used to support students with their studies in HE also applied to the context of the conference and these are expanded below.

Reflection

As presenters, the authors were able to consider previous practice as classroom lecturers and this gave them confidence when addressing fellow professionals. Considering the mentor research of Grimmett, Forgasz, Wiliams and White (2018), the authors also gained confidence in being able to reflect on their own research with their colleagues, who gave positive feedback and reinforced the insights that the authors were sharing during the conference.

Feed-forward

The authors' peers responded to the conference presentation and collaboration with some very constructive and supportive suggestions, encouraging them to take steps forward with their presentation and delve deeper into researching the feelings fellow professionals experience when they first join a new organisation, team or environment.

Support network

Colleagues' support networks also improved confidence and sense of ownership, making it easier for the authors to share their thoughts and express their inner emotions. The mentoring relationships reviewed in the research of Jekielek *et al.* (2002) showed, in young people, enhanced scholastic confidence and improved adult relationships, as well as, importantly, an overall development of their sense of self-worth when aware of close support from a network of friends and fellow professionals. The authors recommend the promotion and use of mentorship schemes within higher education.

Perspective

From a presenter perspective, in contrast to that of a teacher or coach, more listening is involved in presenting at an academic conference than in teaching and coaching. Listening will take place as academics discuss and debate with their peers the focus of the presentation and presenters may well feel at this point a loss of power and prestige. However, such feelings of inadequacy and lack of agency are misplaced, for colleagues merely act as sounding boards – or as mentors, where the focus is on guidance (Sipe, 2002; Miller, 2002). The authors' experience demonstrated that a positive professional relationship is likely to develop when the insights and experiences of the presenters (in our case as new researchers in an area) bring a fresh perspective to established academics with pre-existing perspectives on the topic being presented (Zachary, 2002). This differs from a didactic

teaching or coaching relationship, which tends to have set patterns and formats for the way the knowledge is directed and perceived by the recipient. Confidence-building through conference presentation is therefore much more of a synergistic relationship (Mullen, 1999, pp.38-9).

Talk

The key strategy underpinning all the four processes mentioned above is 'talk'. Without communication, whether with others or with our inner selves, reflection and perspective cannot be achieved. By confronting IS and finding the confidence to speak out and share our thoughts, we can gauge the reactions in others. We can challenge our ideas and develop our understanding. As academics, we try to encourage our students to engage in debate in seminars and we, too, should put ourselves outside our comfort zones on academic conference platforms to find our 'flow'.

Conclusion: can IS be conquered?

This article began with the advice that we should confront our fears in order to conquer them. Additionally, writing this journal reflection piece post conference has confirmed us in our absolute determination to confront IS. Jensen (2017) comments that many of us – academics and professional services staff – resist finding time to write or publish, fearing because of the influence of IS that, though we may have *"fooled everyone about our abilities", " the current writing project will be what blows our cover"* (Jensen, 2017, p.52). Boice (1990, p.9) agrees that our *"fear of failure"* (Wilson, 2019, p.196) is often what causes problems with our writing.

If, as the literature and many self-confessions by academics seem to suggest, IS is indeed rampant throughout academia (McMillan, 2016, p.1), then conference presentation may be one significant measure towards eventually overcoming it.

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