Understanding Impostorship in Adult Learners

by Stephen Brookfield

In researching my book The Skillful Teacher (published last year by Jossey-Bass), I was struck by the number of adult students—and their teachers—who spoke about feelings of impostorship. Impostorship is the sense that one doesn’t really belong in a situation and that as soon as one makes a slip, one’s inadequacies will be revealed, resulting in being asked to leave under a cloud of shame.

In researching how adults experienced education, I expected to uncover these feelings in students whose educational experiences had been humiliating. I had not expected impostorship to be expressed so frequently by adults who, to my eyes, appeared confident and successful.

Impostorship Among Adult Learners

In adult learners, impostorship takes two forms. The first is the sense that other students are more talented than they are. When adults look back at the first meeting, with its inevitable round of introductions, many speak of feeling that other members of the class were more articulate, confident, and capable than they. So, instead of these introductions reducing learner’s anxieties, they often can push anxieties to almost intolerable levels.

The other form of impostorship voiced by adult learners concerns the feeling that it’s not their place to criticize respected experts. When asked to undertake an analysis of commonly accepted ideas in a field of study, or to comment on the shortcomings of major pieces of writing, students will often say that to do so smacks of impudence. There is a kind of steamroller effect in which the status of “theorists” or “major figures” flattens a student’s fledgling critical antennae. This is perhaps most evident when the figures concerned are heroic in the student’s eyes, but it is also evident when students are faced with a piece of work in which the bibliographic scholarship is seen as impressive. Students say, “How can I, with my limited experience, begin to critique all the studies and research documented here?”

The feeling of impostorship comes partly from their perceptions that their critical analyses are a rather unconvincing form of role-playing. The assumption is that, sooner or later, their critiques will be revealed to be the products of unqualified minds.

Impostorship Among Adult Educators

In adult educators, impostorship is expressed as the foreboding that, sooner or later, colleagues and learners will “find them out,” see through their facades of professional competence to the unqualified charlatans who lurk behind their titles, résumés, and degrees. Two typical events trigger these feelings: presenting a paper at a professional conference and receiving student evaluations.

Educators who feel confident and authoritative in their classrooms can become paralyzed with terror at the prospect of having to present a paper at an association meeting. I know superb educators who stay awake till three or four in the morning making overhead after overhead and drafting speech after speech for an 8:30 a.m. presentation. It is as if these teachers say to themselves, “I know I’ve managed to con my students into thinking I know something, but now comes the moment of truth when those who really know will see my pathetic essence.”

Student evaluations also trigger feelings of impostorship. Educators who have worked with a class of 20 can receive 15 good to excellent evaluations, three that say their practice was satisfactory, and two that castigate them for their ignorance, unpreparedness, and discourtesy. Immediately, the two highly negative evaluations are seized upon and the writers of these are granted a disproportionate degree of credibility and perceptiveness. The 18 positive evaluations are regarded as products of naive minds.

Removing the sense of impostorship entirely is impossible and there is some merit in teachers and learners possessing a healthy degree of self-doubt. However, when impostorship eats away at self-confidence and cripples the desire to learn or help learning, something must be done. When I speak to adult students about impostorship, I can see the recognition and relief in their faces as they realize that they are not unusual in believing themselves undeserving. In faculty development efforts with adult educators, I often ask admired and respected teachers to talk publicly about their own feelings of impostorship. Teachers have told me that hearing their feelings of impostorship openly expressed by others has saved them from leaving the field of teaching.

Perhaps we can look forward to a national videoconference on the phenomenon of impostorship in adult education. Then, perhaps major figures can “go public” with their own feelings of impostorship.

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