

Teaching Tip Tuesday

Avoiding Imposterization

Imposterism is a psychological phenomenon that often affects college students. Although they may enter college with confidence and optimism, Imposterism saps their vitality. It is characterized by persistent feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt despite ample evidence of competence and success. People with imposterism are less likely than their peers to experience the sense of belonging that is crucial to academic success, and more likely than their peers to experience chronic anxiety and burnout. Unfortunately, many instructors unknowingly exacerbate their students' imposterism—a phenomenon aptly named “imposterization.” Although unintentional and avoidable, reinforcement of the sense of inadequacy can occur in the following situations. Mindfully approaching these situations can help you to avoid imposterizing your students.

1. **Delivery of negative feedback.** When negative feedback is provided without noting positive aspects of student performance or offering constructive tips, it is easy for students to feel that their work is not, and will never be, good enough. Be mindfully aware that your feedback style impacts student self-perception. Remember to focus on more than the negative, and to provide comments that will help the students to correct any deficiencies.
2. **Having unrealistic expectations for student performance.** Although high standards benefit both students and the institution, only when expectations are within the zone of proximal development can a student develop a sense of capability. When expectations veer into the zone of distal development, they become demoralizing and invalidating. Be mindful of the range of your students' zone of actual development so that you can target your learning goals to be within their reach.
3. **Assuming “basic” understanding.** Telling students that they “should know” something that that you have not covered, even if it was covered in prerequisite courses, can cause students to doubt their abilities. Because students have diverse educational backgrounds, they are likely to all have different existing knowledge, even from courses in your program. Mindfully embracing a growth mindset and providing students with prepared resources that will help them fill in the gaps in their understanding demonstrates your conviction that they are capable of learning.
4. **Comparing the work of different students.** Judging students against one another promotes a competitive environment that can worsen feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy because it focuses attention on what students “aren’t” rather than on what they “are.” Being mindful of the unique contributions and skills of all students will help you to focus on each student as an individual with strengths and weaknesses that can be improved upon.
5. **Being distracted while meeting with students.** The lives of university instructors are busy. There is always more to do. However, glancing at the time, or multitasking when meeting with students who have reached out to you for help, communicates that their questions and concerns are not worthy of your time. Being mindfully present and listening attentively to students communicates that you place a high value on them and their concerns.
6. **Not providing adequate support for students.** Student success is directly related to the support and mentoring that instructors provide. Being mindful of how your interactions shape students and their success promotes effective mentorship and mitigates students' feelings of unworthiness.

Gutierrez, A.S. [More vexing than imposter syndrome](#). Inside Higher Ed. October 4, 2022.

Orozco, D. et al. [Helping our students understand and fight imposter syndrome](#). Faculty Focus, February 24, 2023.