

REFLECTIONS

ON EDUCATION & LEARNING



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HELLO, MY NAME IS “IMPOSTER”



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“WHY ARE YOU TEACHING THIS CLASS”?

Recently, I was asked this blunt question by a student. And, despite the snippy undertone, I will openly admit it is a fair question. Dissatisfied with my methods, the student rightfully wanted the rationale for the hiring of this poser standing before them. Regrettably, I was caught so off-guard that I had no justifiable answer to the question. Rather, it brought me back to the very same haunting feeling of Imposter Syndrome (Abrams, 2018; Huecker et al., 2023; Silver, 2022) I experienced a year prior.

In September 2022, I embarked on a journey to begin my PhD with the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Pursuing further education posed an excellent opportunity to upskill,

while quite literally getting a change of scenery by venturing to the east coast. While on the “Rock” I was immediately immersed in a world of academics and intellectuals who have written scores of scholarly articles and regularly attended worldwide conferences in education. In theory, I was in a position to grow and learn as an educator in ways I had never experienced before. Though, just as quickly as I began rubbing elbows with my scholastically-esteemed colleagues, a recurring question nagged at me: *what am I doing here? I do not possess any significant awards. I am unable to list any professional, peer-reviewed publications on my CV. I have not been a speaker at a conference.* And, just like that, my sense of belonging disappeared. I was downstream without a paddle in the fast-flowing river of academia.

In taking on the role of student, I automatically perceived the various doctorate-holding individuals with whom I was now working as the more intelligent people than myself in every conversation I was in. It seemed moot that I had developed a unique skill-set managing a restaurant in my early 20s, or that I once bungee jumped off a bridge. What good were those experiences if I could not properly format my essays in APA? How could I possibly discuss research methodologies with people who had actually done accredited research when my claim to fame was editing student-written articles for the BASH?

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Which, although fulfilling work (it has been a tremendous opportunity to see the evolution of student-written work since its inception), was simply too esoteric for a crowd of this stature used to the likes of publishing giants Taylor and Francis, Sage, and Routledge.

Imposter Syndrome was first introduced by Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978 (Abrams, 2018; Huecker et al., 2023), describing instances where high achievers unjustifiably expect to be found out as frauds (Silver, 2022). Such causes of imposter syndrome include "anxiety and neuroticism"

(Abrams, 2018), both of which I have in spades. To combat these feelings, one must be able to first acknowledge them and then put them in perspective.

Ultimately, perspective did come. Midway through my second semester I gave a seminar presentation to my peers and colleagues about my research topic. I am investigating higher education decision-making within the Canadian Modern Orthodox community. Understandably, this is not the sort of topic that many in Newfoundland are familiar with. And, just like that, the roles were reversed and I was the expert on compelling subject matter. And, after the better part of two semesters, I realized that I *did* belong. That I *deserved* to be there. At long last, I understood that those very same people on the other end of the conversations, who held degrees that I did not, had their respective fields of expertise and I had mine. This whole time they were more interested in the person I am, not the scholar I hoped they'd see me as.

Fittingly, I can now carry forward that very epiphany into my own classroom pedagogy by embracing the students I have as the people they are—because everyone brings a unique experience to the table that we can learn from. In doing so, I must take what I have learned from the student-perspective and apply it to the educator-perspective to be able to help students self-diagnose and nip any potential seedlings of imposter syndrome they might see in themselves in the bud. A student may struggle in math, but excel on the basketball court. How can we inject confidence from one area into the other? Another student may lack literacy skills but spend copious amounts of free time volunteering. How might that same positive energy

be translated into commitment to improving in reading and writing? The classroom, regardless of the subject matter, should be a place to foster and encourage individuals, and do our best not to alienate anyone in the process.

It would be naive to suggest that there is no inherent power dynamic in the classroom between teacher and student. Though, for anyone to presume that the teacher is the most knowledgeable person in the room would be an error of judgment by teacher and students alike. A committed teacher will learn just as much from the students as the students do from them. The root of this back and forth learning, both from the standpoint of curriculum and personal growth, is founded in mutual respect.

The second bullet of the Bnei Akiva School's mission is "To offer a dual curriculum of Jewish and General Studies that will arm our students with the methodological tools needed to become self-reliant in classical Jewish texts and give them a broad-based secular grounding in the classical world disciplines" (Bnei Akiva Schools, N.D). Whereas I had all of two courses in my first year of doctoral study, BAS students will, in some cases, have five times that amount in a single year. Over the course of a high school career, students will be privileged to work with many teachers, administrators, Rabbeim, RGCs, and Shlichot. Throughout the course of the experience of developing this diverse tool kit, there are going to be countless times when students are sitting in their seats feeling the painful unease of imposter syndrome while simultaneously doing their best impressions of students fully equipped to discuss Math, Science, English, History, Visual Arts, Media Arts, Ivrit, and Gemara ... all in the same day!

If you had asked me a year ago, I might have told you it was my belief that being an educator was more difficult than being a student. But then I had the chance to re-experience what being a student was like, and my perspective changed. Sitting at the back of the classroom isn't necessarily any easier than standing at the front of the room. Fittingly, my imposter syndrome continues as an educator. Who am I to manage a classroom full of vibrant teenagers? Perhaps putting that out in writing here will help my students know that, at the end of the day, we are all just doing our best to try to understand one another. And, surely, no matter how well-equipped we might be, we *all* feel a little like imposters throughout the learning process. It is through acknowledging this pitfall that we can move forward as a collective unit and strive towards our ultimate goal of learning from one another. ■

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