

Imposter Syndrome in Teaching

This tip sheet was crafted in response to a “Lunch with EDNA” online workshop that occurred on January 15, 2025. The document is a consolidation of participant responses as well as facilitator experience.

Imposter syndrome is a psychological phenomenon where a person begins to question their worth and doubt their accomplishments causing them to feel like a fraud. It is especially prevalent in academia where there is pressure to prove expertise (publish or perish?). **Our EDNA workshop focused explicitly on “Imposter Syndrome in Post Secondary Teaching” where professors and instructors might question their ability as educators and facilitators** regardless of their accomplishments as subject matter experts, researchers, or scholars.

Defining imposter syndrome in teaching

Imposter syndrome can also be known as:

- Stage fright
- Performance anxiety
- Fear of public speaking
- Communication apprehension

Imposter syndrome is a *normal and anticipated part of teaching*. In fact, instructors with many years of experience can continue to feel the common signs and symptoms of imposter syndrome in teaching which include but are not limited to:

Physical Responses

- Feeling butterflies in the stomach
- Experiencing dry mouth
- Sensing a racing heart or increased heart rate
- Feeling sweaty or noticing excessive sweating
- Blushing, flushed face, or feeling warm/hot in body temperature
- Experiencing shaky or wobbly hands
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Having a runny nose
- Noticing sudden desire to void the contents of the stomach
- Feeling a drop in the stomach sensation
- Experiencing adrenaline rushing through the body

Behavioral Responses

- Pacing back and forth
- Fidgeting with jewelry, pens, or other small items
- Making repeated trips to the washroom
- Checking teeth incessantly

- Mumbling or speaking in a high-pitched voice
- Speaking at a rapid rate
- Avoiding eye contact

Cognitive Responses

- Having racing or overthinking thoughts
- Feeling your mind go blank or unfocused
- Forgetting small but important details, like locking keys in your office
- Second-guessing everything
- Experiencing self-doubt and insecurity
- Worrying about how students perceive you
- Fearing failure or making mistakes

Emotional Responses

- Feeling nervous or anxious
- Experiencing panic or dread
- Worrying excessively
- Feeling an overwhelming desire to flee the situation (classroom, building, or Zoom room)

These feelings can be uncomfortable (even debilitating) for instructors until, with more experience and skill, they can be managed.

Getting ready to teach with confidence

Workshop participants suggested that certain practices can help inspire confidence. Before teaching ask yourself:

- Have I reviewed the class agenda or plan?
 - Does this class require a steady pace, or do I have flexibility to allow for more interaction?
- Have I practiced my delivery or key points? (With friends, family, or in front of a mirror?)
- Am I prepared for class?
 - Am I organized and realistic with my expectations for myself and my students?
- What is my internal monologue before teaching?
 - Am I framing the experience positively, such as “relax and go with the flow of the learners’ attention and energy,” instead of negatively, like “let’s just get this over with”?
- How might I reduce social anxiety for myself and my students?
 - Remind myself that I’m here to connect with, challenge and support students not to impress!
- Can I remind myself that the hardest part is getting started?
 - Once class begins, will I feel more at ease and find my rhythm?

One significant strategy in dealing with imposter syndrome in teaching is in centering yourself prior to teaching. Some of the suggestions shared in the workshop include:

- Walking outdoors in the hour before class
- Preparing for class in a quiet peaceful place
- Playing theme music before you enter class. What is your theme music going into class?
 - Classical Music

- Nature sounds
- "Eye of the Tiger", Survivor
- Queen, "We are the Champions"
- "Gonna Fly Now" Theme to the Movie "Rocky"
- Saying a Cree Prayer before class
- Doing the "Superman" pose before you head off to class
- Taking a quiet moment of mediation and grounding yourself at the start of class
- Meeting the students at the door and making small talk as they come in then having the students do a "do now" activity while you prepare your notes/presentation.

What worsens imposter syndrome?

Certain actions and avoidances can actually exacerbate imposter syndrome. Do you find yourself guilty of any of the following practices?

Preparation and Delivery

- Waiting until the last minute to prepare your lesson.
- Over-preparing and getting lost in your notes, making the lesson plan too detailed.
- Scripting nearly every word of your lesson: Teaching is more than reading to your students; it is about interacting with them, even if you need to refer to your notes occasionally.
- Rushing through the content for fear of not hitting all the necessary points.
- Talking too fast... and knowing you're talking too fast but not being able to stop.
- Getting frazzled by tech problems.
- Drinking too much coffee before class.

Stress and Anxiety

- Thinking that students are noticing your shakes or nerves.
- Worrying about going over time.
- Not breathing enough.
- Oversharing, especially when you get nervous.
- Being nervous about making grammatical mistakes.
- Arriving just on time or late for class.
- Feeling uncomfortable in the classroom space or distracted by external noises (e.g., construction).
- Fearing that students know more about technology than you do. They just might, and that's OK.

Classroom Management and Student Interaction

- Fearing silence in the room and over-talking to fill pauses - interpreting silence as disapproval or disengagement.
- Being scared to ask students questions.
- Moving too quickly when asking questions and not giving students enough time to think and respond. Think time is important!
- Looking to students for reassuring feedback.
- Assuming students' giggling or side conversations are about you.
- Over focusing on and getting bothered by non-engaged students or students spending more time on their devices than paying attention.

- Getting flustered by questions unrelated to the content of the lesson. Not having a strategy to defer these.
- Worrying about not knowing the answer to a student's question.
- Feeling the pressure of needing to answer every question.

Self-Doubt and Perfectionism

- Seeking perfection in class delivery and fixating on flawless transitions, perfect timing, or impeccable delivery instead of focusing on student engagement and understanding.
- Doubting yourself and internalizing student feedback, even when it's constructive or unrelated to teaching ability.
- Doubting whether you're being clear enough with your intentions.
- Comparing yourself to your peers.
- Setting unrealistically high expectations and feeling inadequate when they're not met.
- Apologizing too much.

What makes imposter syndrome in teaching more manageable?

Building Relationships with Learners

- Getting to know your learners and let them get to know you. Be authentic!
- Looking for ways to connect with learners. Finding common interests or experiences to build rapport.
- Chatting informally with students before class and during breaks. Casual conversations help create a more approachable atmosphere.
- Inviting students to participate in discussions and answer questions. Acknowledge that you cannot know everything and encourage student involvement.
- Starting class with icebreakers or warm-up activities to create a relaxed and welcoming environment.

Self-Reflection and Mindset

- Accepting that you are flawed and don't expect perfection. Adopt a growth orientation.
- Drawing on your strengths (organization, humour, illustration, storytelling...)
- Reminding yourself that you are skilled and capable.
- Recognizing your expertise and value as an educator.
- Acknowledging mistakes quickly and with some humour, it's okay to be imperfect.
- Failing well. Some of your best teaching moments come from things not going as planned, demonstrating how to adapt and "fail forward."

Preparation and Organization

- Preparing for class, but not over-planning. Have notes, slides, and activities ready, but remain flexible for unexpected moments.
- Pacing yourself. The more you teach, the easier it becomes. Practice presentations beforehand to improve confidence and delivery.
- Explaining to students that you may mispronounce words and encourage them to help you. Show openness to learning and invites student participation in your growth.
- Having a snack and some water before class. Take care of your physical needs.

Managing Stress and Energy

- Talking to friends about how much you enjoy teaching. Keep a positive mindset.
- Using humor, such as GIFs and memes, to show personality and break tension.
- Drinking less coffee.
- Imagining you are having an informal coffee conversation with a student. This mental shift can help you feel more relaxed, speak directly to the class, and make eye contact.

Final advice on imposter syndrome in teaching

1. After teaching, decompress. When classes run successfully, a kind of heightened emotional state is commonly experienced after teaching. You are likely highly stimulated or exhausted (or both!). Take care of yourself by:
 - Having a quiet moment in your office or car
 - Go for a walk
 - Breathe in nature
2. Reflect on what kinds of teaching and learning interactions cause you the most stress or discomfort. What steps can you take to improve these aspects of your teaching?
3. Build on your strengths and leverage these. What aspects of teaching are you more comfortable with or good at?