For the Field

Navigating Imposter Syndrome: A Workshop for Emerging Librarians

Inspiration

How did I get into this program? I'm the only one not following this lecture. Don't ask that question, it's stupid! Thoughts like these have plagued us since we entered Western University's Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program in January 2017. We have consistently overlooked our skills, dismissed our successes, and fallen victim to "Imposter Syndrome (IS)" – a term coined by Dr. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes (1978). The term has since been adapted by John Harvey and Cynthia Katz (1985), and it is now taken to mean:

1. A belief that one has fooled others into overestimating one's own abilities;
2. Attribution of personal success to factors other than one's ability or intelligence;
- and
3. Fear of exposure as an imposter.

Consistent with the many who "go to great lengths to hide their 'fraudulent' feelings" (Harvey & Katz, 1985), each of us went through the early months of our MLIS program experiencing IS in silence. At that time, we believed our feelings of fraudulence were unique, but after later sharing our misgivings with peers, we came to recognize that IS is widespread across Western's MLIS program.

If existing research is any indication, IS will persist even once we begin our careers as librarians. Melanie Clark, Kimberly Vardeman, and Shelley Barba (2014) studied IS among college and research librarians, revealing that one in eight librarians

experienced IS to a significant degree at the time of the study. IS was shown to be especially prevalent among librarians in their first three years of employment, and the study found that it had negative effects on job performance.

Fortunately, initiatives to reduce IS among early career librarians are underway. For example, the New Librarians Symposium (NLS), established in 2016, is dedicated to discussing and overcoming challenges unique to early career information professionals. At the NLS in 2017, librarians Sanji Lacey and Melanie Parlette-Stewart (2017) facilitated a workshop titled “Confronting Imposter Syndrome.” The pair have also led this workshop elsewhere, including at the 2017 Ontario Library Association Super Conference.

Given that IS is so prevalent among early career librarians, we saw an opportunity to discuss it at an earlier point. Perhaps, we thought, by learning how to combat IS *before* entering the workforce, our peers could avoid joining the population of librarians for whom IS poses a barrier to workplace success.

Workshop

Acting on this realization, we led a one-hour interactive workshop designed to create a dialogue around IS in librarianship. Attendees were presented with research from the field, given tools to combat IS, and encouraged to participate in activities and discussions.

We began by sharing personal anecdotes about our recent experiences with IS. For example, we described being on co-op and feeling ashamed for asking experienced colleagues “simple” questions. We also shared our ever-present feelings of being under-qualified now that graduation is approaching and our job searches have begun.

Our anecdotes prompted participants to reflect on their own experiences with IS, which they wrote down to be shared anonymously with the group. Anonymity encouraged candid participation, ultimately producing responses to which most participants could relate. An experience shared by a number of participants, for instance, was not answering questions in class for fear of being wrong and facing ridicule from fellow classmates.

We followed the discussion by sharing Clark, Vardeman, and Barba's (2014) research, which supported our initiative while also legitimizing the experiences shared by participants. In drawing attention to this research, we sought to eliminate the shame associated with IS by reinforcing that participants were not alone in their experiences. However, we also wanted to use our workshop to empower participants by providing them with tools to combat feelings of IS. Drawing from research and from exercises that we have found helpful, we encouraged participants to reflect on the following questions and write down answers to be shared with the group:

1. What skills have you acquired in your classes so far? How might these skills help you in the workplace?
2. What unique qualities would set you apart in an interview?
3. Reflecting on a job that you had or a project that you're really proud of, describe how you contributed to its success. How do your contributions highlight your strengths?

These prompts encouraged participants to counter feelings of not being qualified or skilled enough to succeed in the MLIS program and in the workforce. As such, we

encouraged attendees to reflect on this exercise from time to time in the future, so as to remind themselves of their strengths and skills.

To conclude our workshop, we initiated a discussion through which participants could share their suggestions for overcoming IS. Suggestions included recording positive feedback, joining groups or volunteering, following relevant library and information-related social media accounts, and keeping the IS dialogue open with their peers. These are practical tips that can help students improve their skills and build confidence in their abilities before finishing school, which we hope will assist them in feeling less discouraged or deterred by future career prospects.

Reflections and Next Steps

In order to gauge how participants benefited from the workshop, we requested anonymous feedback at the end. The feedback we received suggests that the workshop was well received by our peers. Participants shared their relief at not being the only one to feel like an imposter in the program, and many reported that they would continue to use the suggested tools to work through feelings of IS in the future.

The feedback also provided us with ideas for how to improve the workshop. For instance, participants suggested making a handout with tips, websites, and exercises that were mentioned. We were also asked to broaden future workshops to include other programs in addition to the MLIS, on the grounds that most graduate students experience IS at some point. The positive responses and suggestions for improvement indicate not only the value of our workshop, but also a clear desire among graduate students to foster an open dialogue about IS. The value of our workshop therefore makes a case for incorporating conversations about IS into MLIS programs, in order to

provide the tools needed to overcome IS before it has already surfaced as a barrier to one's early career success.

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