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Using the Assessment process to overcome Imposter Syndrome in Mature Students.

Abstract

This research draws on the experience of a group of mature students' studies during their first year at university. All experienced varying degrees of Imposter Syndrome, feelings of fraudulence and a lack of confidence in their ability. The process of 'becoming' a mature student is one of identity change and risk. Gaining a sense of belonging to the institution and academia is an important part of the transition year, but the assimilation into the culture of university life can be problematic.

The first assessment for all students can be seen as a 'rite of passage' on the journey of 'belonging'. So for mature students who may have had a substantial gap in their education, this can be a critical moment in their progression through the transition year. Negotiation through the culture and language of academia can lead to misunderstanding and self-doubt, and the process of assessment can be an emotional journey for some students.

In this article the students describe their experiences of the assessment process and their need for feedback. Facing the judgement of their peer group and the academic staff was a particular fear of most of the students, as was the difficulty in both 'getting started' and 'letting go' of their written work. The article will conclude with a discussion of the role of assessment in relation to confidence building and to overcoming Imposter Syndrome.

Keywords:

Imposter Syndrome, Assessment, mature students, identity

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Introduction

Successful transition to higher education is often coupled with the need to develop a sense of 'belonging' to an institution, programme or body of students. Mature students (defined as over 21 at commencement of course) often suffer from Imposter Syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) and feel that higher education is not for them and they should not be there. Developing a sense of belonging therefore is especially crucial for the retention of this group of students. To enable socialisation, students, particularly non-traditional students, often choose institutions where they can relate to the predominant existing student body (Hutchings & Archer, 2001; Reay et al, 2001; Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Reay et al, 2010). However, mature students often have limited choice of university as they tend to choose the institution closest to home. This is especially the case if the students are also parents or carers (Marander & Wainwright, 2010; Brooks, 2012). These extra responsibilities may limit their opportunities for socialisation and delay the sense of belonging. This article looks at how the assessment process can be used as part of the first year to develop a sense of belonging, and ultimately help them overcome any Imposter Syndrome feelings they may have.

Literature Review

Research has indicated that entering higher education as a mature student is fraught with risk (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Johnson & Watson, 2004; Jones, 2010). This risk can take many forms; financial, personal and educational. Mature students have often left careers and successful jobs in order to enter higher education so their sense of being and their identity is challenged.

Clance & Imes (1978) witnessed Imposter Syndrome when researching high achieving women who felt that their success was due more to luck than ability. It is a phenomenon that is well researched in education (Heinrich, 1997; Studdard, 2002; Wilans & Seary, 2011) affecting not only undergraduates but also doctoral students (Gardner & Holley, 2001; Coryell, Wagner, Clark & Stuessy, 2013) and academic staff (Knights & Clarke, 2014). It is typical of mature students who feel they do not deserve to be in higher education and constantly need to prove themselves (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Their confidence in their ability may be tested by unfamiliar academic practices making them feel vulnerable and marginalised (Housee & Richards, 2011).

In order to overcome Imposter Syndrome these students need to feel a sense of entitlement and belonging to help them develop a 'student identity'. For the doctoral students Coryell et al (2013) described this as becoming a *real* researcher. From an undergraduate perspective, Scanlon et al (2007) argued that the process of forming a student identity through the transitional first year occurs through the interactions with other students and lecturers. Therefore, academic staff have a role in enabling the construction of the *learner identity* through classroom activities and the assessment process. Lave & Wenger (1991) claim that learning and identity are part of the same phenomenon so as you learn your identity shifts and realigns. Yorke (1999) found that social integration and developing a *social identity* was as important as academic integration for student retention. Shakouri (2013) claims that the process of identity formation is not linear and that an individual's identity is influenced by, and influences, others in the group. Therefore the social and learner identities are often intertwined.

This new identity of student can be both 'life-changing' and 'transformational' (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). Kasworm (2010) stated that adult learners position their identity through academic success, as well as through their life experiences and maturity so the assessment schedule, design and process is therefore a vital component to both overcoming Imposter Syndrome and identity construction.

The first assessment in higher education can be seen as a *rite of passage* (Krause, 2001) and is an important element in the first year experience. One of the key skills that students need to acquire for a successful progression is academic literacy, especially developing their academic language which is often recognised as a problematic area for students (Lea et al, 1998; Williams, 2005; Fung, 2006). This can lead to the assessment period becoming a *critical moment* (Morgan & Nutt, 2006) for retention, a time when if students lack confidence in their ability they may withdraw. Imposter Syndrome heightens this lack of confidence but the assessment process itself can be seen as a vital step in overcoming this syndrome as it brings with it a confirmation of entitlement in terms of grading. Mann (2001) stated that the judgement process that goes with grading *locates them in a hierarchy of success* and allows them to see their ability in relation of the rest of their cohort.

The assessment process needs the feedback cycle to be completed so that the student, if successful, can begin the process of belonging and fitting in. Therefore, for retention purposes, the speed of feedback or the 'turnaround time' is crucial. The timing and value of the assessment is important too. An early low-stakes assessment can be used to enhance confidence and self-efficacy (Meer & Chapman, 2014a). This can allow mistakes to be made but the consequences to be minimal.

Formal written feedback can be of a monologue nature which compounds the problem with academic language. Dialogue with feedback is important (McDowell et al, 2008; Nicol, 2010) as this can help to demystify the process and allow for feed-

forward. Tett et al (2012) showed that mature students do learn from feedback but it is more relevant if it is feed forward and is structured in such a way as to enhance future assessments.

Whilst all of these issues apply to all students, they may be intensified for mature students who may have had a significant gap in their education and may be feeling 'lost' in the process.

Methodology

The research followed eight mature students through their first year. Using an interpretive paradigm, four individual 'semi-structured' interviews were carried out at various points through the academic year. Ethical approval was given by the university to carry out the research, with the students all volunteering to take part. The participants came from across the university; from English, History, Social Science, Business and Education. Confidentiality and anonymity were paramount and all names used are fictitious. Whilst it needs to be acknowledged that this was a small-scale study, the results are useful for wider discussion. The research used thematic analysis and one of the key themes to emerge was that of identifying 'as a student', the problems with fitting in and the feelings of being outsiders.

Findings

As previously discussed, Imposter Syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) is a condition where the sufferers feel they are in the wrong place and manifests in a *fear of exposure* whereby someone might realise that 'they shouldn't be here' and ask them to leave. These feelings of being 'out of place' were mentioned by all of the students in this small study with phrases such as:

Everyone else is cleverer than me

I knew I'd be the oldest one

Everyone else knew what they were doing

In order to *belong, fit in* and to start to *feel* like a *real* student, all the students in the research group said they had to go through at least one assessment/feedback cycle. They recognised that this would help them engage with their subject area, the library, academic writing and help them bond with their fellow students.

However, along with the importance of assessment comes the 'threat' and for those with Imposter Syndrome this threat is one of fear: fear of judgment, fear of failure

and ultimately fear of exposure and being 'found out'. This was a genuine debilitating emotion for some of the students who found it difficult knowing 'where to start'.

Mann (2001) discusses the assessment process as positioning students in a hierarchy of success. But for mature students with Imposter Syndrome, these feelings can lead to an (often unfounded) fear of the *hierarchy of failure*. Other studies have shown that it is the higher achieving students that suffer the most with this syndrome. Initially the research in this area concentrated on high achieving women but recent research has found Imposter Syndrome is gender neutral and can apply to anyone. Measures of success in terms of qualifications or previous career paths appear to compound the feelings of fraudulence rather than to mitigate them. The emotion is of 'scaffolded' unease, accumulated over years of self-doubt.

One of the unfamiliar academic practices that students face on entering higher education is that of academic writing. 'The essay' is still one of the most common forms of assessment in higher education and is therefore a critical skill for students to learn and develop. The students in this study highlighted concerns in all aspects of the writing process which appears to them at first to be a mysterious and elusive skill.

The process of academic writing *for academics* is usually one of drafting and redrafting text based on feedback from reviewers. This can go on for several iterations until the piece is considered 'finished'. However, *for students*, once their essay has been handed in, it's irretrievable, considered a 'final' piece and marked accordingly. This finality increases the fear factor, at precisely the time when you are still learning about academic writing and acquiring the requisite literacy skills.

Some of the students spoke about this finality and their difficulty of seeing their essay finished and 'letting it go'. Charlie, in particular, found the process of writing a difficult and challenging one:

I'm worried about the research, the writing and the collating of thoughts, putting it together into a coherent essay. It takes me ages to draft a few paragraphs, it's exhausting. Each word has to be thought through. It's a good thing but it's painstaking. It has to be perfect. I can't hand it in til it's perfect.

The judgement in this case is not just from the academic staff in the form of grading but from the student himself who needs his writing to be perfect before he can 'let go'. Charlie was studying English so his identity was closely aligned to his writing. Indeed he felt that it should be something he excelled at so the fear of failure, and of judgement, was heightened. This drive for perfectionism is a classic symptom of Imposter Syndrome.

For some of other students, academic writing appeared to be a question of trial and error.

Eleanor said:

You're writing it and all the time it's 'Am I doing it right?' I don't really know what I'm meant to be doing.

There is a tacit nature to the process of academic writing that needs trial and error, but again the finality of student writing increases the pressure and anxiety surrounding the assessment process. Lewis Elton (2010) suggested that in order for students to improve their academic writing they need to gain a deeper understanding of words and that by discussing their work with their lecturers they will begin to overcome the challenges of academic writing.

When asked about discussing her approach to her assessment with her lecturer, Frances said:

He's a different person to me. We speak a different language. Every time he says something, I have to translate it into my language and when I reply to him he has to translate it back.

This unease about assessment meant that the students were very self-reflective and acknowledged their weaknesses and inexperience. They sought out help when it was offered and attended the Student Support workshops

Importance of Feedback

For most of this student group, the first piece of writing and subsequent feedback was the first step towards gaining a sense of belonging to academia, the institution and the discipline. If this is a positive experience then it can allow students to relinquish some of the Imposter Syndrome feelings that they brought with them into higher education, if however, it is a negative experience then it can reinforce those problems and issues.

Andy was typical of the group with his comments:

I value feedback a lot, any kind of feedback. I feed off feedback. I work harder if I know I've done something well and I'll try and get my feedback as soon as I can

Whilst the formal written feedback is important, a less formal approach can also be used, especially if the recipient doubts their ability. Eleanor summed up her feelings:

I would like them to tell me if I'm doing OK

The language of the feedback was an issue for some:

It would be nice to see the lecturer with the feedback. There are questions I'd like to ask. I usually need the feedback explaining to me.

Nicol (2010) offers ways in which feedback can be made more dialogical, one of which is to develop peer feedback. A number of the students in this group were studying Creative Writing which uses peer feedback extensively. While the students valued the opportunity to offer feedback, their experiences were mixed:

We have to read our work out and we give feedback to each other. Some of the younger ones don't like reading their own stuff, they lack confidence. But I don't know why, some of them are really good.

It can be quite intimidating. I don't want to sit there and slate someone. It brings out the diplomat in you. It's very useful. At first we were all so polite, not v useful at all. You'd think OK I know what's right with it, tell me what's wrong with it.

It's hard to give feedback. I tend to point out strengths and weaknesses. The others just say that was good, or I liked that character. You don't get much out of it.

Peer feedback can be very powerful and offers a wider range of opinions. It can also be useful in overcoming some of barriers concerning language. However, students sometimes struggle with the legitimacy of feedback that is given by their peers.

Engaging the students through the entire assessment process, from developing their own marking criteria to using it for self and peer assessment can be a way to overcome language barriers and to improve all students integration in their community of practice (Meer and Chapman, 2014b).

Contested Identities

The students in this group had conflicting ideas about what it means to 'be a student'. The *social identity* was seen as predominately negative where students were seen as stereotypical; drinking alcohol, lazy and only doing enough to get by. This was an identity that the majority of the students in the group wanted to distance themselves from. When asked about his expectations and priorities for the coming year, Andy said:

I don't think I'll be socialising much while I'm here. I don't want to be going out, that's not because I'm unsociable, I'm just in my own environment.

However the *learner identity* was considered positive and the one which the students could embrace. Andy, again:

The way I see it, university life for me is going to be coming in here, learning as much as I can, passing on as much as I know and then going home.

Six of the students were also parents and this gives another layer in their identity construction. They can feel disconnected from non-parent students as pressures on their time can be very different. This can be problematic when trying to engage in extra-curricular activities or arranging meetings for group work. The parent-students in this research articulated a number of common pertinent issues. Eleanor discussed her feelings of guilt.

I wanted to come to uni sooner, but I felt if I left my youngest, it wouldn't be fair because I stayed at home with the other two.

Providing a role-model for their children was also highlighted, as were the difficulties juggling university and home life. For a number of the students, the biggest issue was finance. Gaynor, who was both a parent to her son and a carer for her parents, said:

I'm really struggling with money at the minute. I find money a big, big problem. Before I came I earned a lot of money but now I haven't got my salary. You've got this little bit of money that even on paper you can't work to stretch. It doesn't, mathematically, it just doesn't.

Mature students have many external influences and constructions to their identity, which need to be balanced with their 'new' identity as a student.

Charlie described the overwhelming feelings he has experienced all year towards his studies:

I was expecting to be engaged but it's taken over my life and has been emotional at times.

Charlie described earlier how he found it hard to 'let go' of his academic work and found it hard to hand it in at the deadline. He grew in confidence throughout the year both socially and academically, finding a peer group through his extra-curricular activities. Frances also reconstructed her social identity away from the university and joined a political party. This gave her a sense of belonging to the town. The students in this group were relatively unconcerned about finding a peer group from within the wider student body. They were socially self-contained, and found that their sense of belonging was directed more towards the academic staff and the institution (Chapman, 2012).

When asked about her student journey Debbie said:

I've found it to be a confidence booster and am almost seeing it as a cross between a job and a hobby. It's given me a focus and a purpose whereas at secondary school I didn't see it in that light but coming back into it I've found out a lot more about myself on so many more levels than I could ever have hoped for and I think this has played a huge part in my confidence building as well. You do just find out so much about yourself which I think if I'd come into higher education from secondary school it wouldn't have brought about so many realisations and I wouldn't have learnt so much about myself.

Seeing her journey as a confidence boost and transformative has enabled Debbie to stay engaged. Of all the students she suffered the most from Imposter Syndrome and had significant doubts about whether she should persist in higher education throughout her first undergraduate year. The self-awareness and confidence building came about through her creative writing and validity gained from academic success.

Mature students can become independent learners relatively quickly because they have accumulated a wealth of prior experience, and are usually leading independent lives. The student group all immediately recognised that university is all about independence and being self-motivated. Frances summed up her feelings:

It's what I like to do, learning. I like to have a project on the go all the time. I've needed that focus, as the children have all left home – gets me out of bed in the morning. The course gives me that focus, fills up my day and makes me feel busy.

Discussion

This research has made me question what assessment is for. The process of assessment appears to have multiple uses. Obviously it is used summatively to ensure that learning has occurred (Assessment of Learning). Assessment can also be the method through which learning takes place, directed by academic staff (Assessment for Learning) or by the students themselves, true independent learners (Assessment as Learning).

Is there a place in the curriculum for assessment purely for confidence building: Assessment for confidence (Meer and Chapman, 2014a)? Or one to help overcome the fear factor and help with settling in? Pre-university study skills programme may be an answer here such as the Enabling Programmes in Australia (Wilans & Seary, 2011) which promote resilience and collaborative relationships between students before they start their university course. This helps alleviate some of the tensions around the clashing of 'old' and 'new' identities and can smooth the transition from one to the other.

The students in this group constructed their student identity around learner identity. The Imposter Syndrome that gives them the self-doubt and lack of confidence initially, forces them to seek out help, attend writing workshops, engage with their subject literature etc. Unwittingly they are becoming embedded in their community of practice. The assessment/feedback loop has enabled these students to feel part of academia and their discipline, encouraging them to develop the academic language, discourse and tacit academic literacy along the way. Coryell et al (2013) describe this settling in transition, in terms of their doctoral student group, as 'a precarious adventure' with self-doubt, in time, transforming into self confidence. It could be argued therefore that Imposter Syndrome has elements within it that can be channelled into a positive experience with the appropriate resourcing.

The perfectionism feature of Imposter Syndrome can be both a hindrance and a help. An issue often associated with post-assessment feedback is it is too late to act upon so feedback needs to be timely to be useful to the learner (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Allowing students to submit draft writing with more feedback/feedforward given through the assessment process would reduce the anxiety and stress associated with the final 'handing in'. This would also encourage the students to engage with their feedback as it would have a direct influence on the grading of the final piece. Feedback is always more useful to the students if there is a direct relevance and beneficial consequence to acting upon it. Wingate (2010) found that formative feedback on drafts was useful to, and acted upon, by students with high motivation. Those with lower motivation or a reduced confidence in their ability chose not to engage with their feedback. She advocates more attention to be paid to tone and style of feedback so as not to further disengage low motivated students. Court (2014) had a similar result with her research, raising a particular concern about the quantity of feedback and its detrimental impact on weaker students. A feedback dialogue with the students would be useful here to avoid misunderstandings and unnecessary criticism.

Conclusion

The fear associated with assessment should not be underestimated and anxiety-reducing measures could and should be built in to a programme design. Early, low stakes assessment may help with academic confidence and can help those students suffering from Imposter Syndrome. Feedback is vital for this too, together with a quick turnaround time as the anxiety is as much about being judged as it is about intellectual ability. The feeling that 'I shouldn't be here, they made a mistake on the admissions form' is very common with Imposter Syndrome so allaying those fears through assessment and feedback is crucial for retention and progression. To this end feedback does not always have to be formal written, post-assessment feedback. A 'You're doing fine' may go a long way to reassure a student who may be struggling and thinking about withdrawal.

Feedback on assessments needs to be timely and concise. Too much can swamp a student and may compound their Imposter Syndrome. Short, clear feedback with explicit detail on how to improve for the next assessment is of far more use to the learner. A dialogue is crucial if the academic language is a barrier. Feedback needs to be understandable to the reader if they are expected to act upon it.

Year-long modules can pose a challenge to learners if there is a long gap between assessments and hence, the ability to act upon feedback. A series of smaller, more frequent assessment tasks along the lines of a patchwork text may mitigate these issues, especially if the emphasis for feedback is at the formative stage (Winter et al, 2003; Marcangelo, 2011).

A number of studies have highlighted the role that mentors could play with overcoming Imposter Syndrome (Coryell et al, 2013). These could be final year students with similar backgrounds and circumstances, who can empathise and offer advice. Peer support is also crucial. Many institutions have Mature Student Groups within the Students' Union which can help with isolation. Belonging to an institution/subject discipline/body of students is crucial for progression and retention, and the assessment/feedback cycle helps the student engage with their community of practice. Mature students have 'layers of identities' that need to be juggled and manipulated. Unpicking students' wider life challenges and helping them to cope, especially those student-parents or student-carers, acknowledges their many roles and gives them validity and entitlement to be in higher education. Overcoming Imposter Syndrome may be a personal challenge but is one that institutions need to recognise and resource.

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