Lesson Plan: Feeling like a fraud? Imposter syndrome and the confidence gap

Designed by: Ellen Crocker for UK300-03, #IAmAWomanInSTEM March 2016

Summary: Highly successful women, and especially women of color, frequently lack confidence compared to their male colleagues, feeling like imposters despite excelling. In this class we will explore both the causes on imposter syndrome and what you can do to overcome them.

Class discussion session outline:

- Introductory icebreaker activity (10 mins): Values affirmation essay
  - Provided students with a list of commonly held core values. Asked them to take a moment to reflect on this list and values that are important to them and then pick one value in particular that matters to them and write for a couple minutes on this.
  - Invite students to share the values they picked and why
  - Ask to student to comment on how this exercise makes them feel
  - Explain purpose of exercise, “values affirmation” reflections have been shown to remove gender gap in classroom performance
  - Discuss with students why this might be
  - Background info on this activity: "With nothing but his fifteen-minute exercise, performed twice at the beginning of the year, he virtually abolished the gender divide and allowed the female physicists to challenge their male peers. The exercise is designed to affirm a person’s values, boosting their sense of self-worth and integrity, and reinforcing their belief in themselves. For people who suffer from negative stereotypes, this can make all the difference between success and failure.” http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/notrocketscience/2010/11/25/15-minute-writing-exercise-closes-the-gender-gap-in-university-level-physics/#.Vt8uH5MrKv4

- What is imposter syndrome? (10 mins)
  - Students reflect on the reading, discussion questions may include:
    - Have you felt this way?
    - Who do you think is most likely to feel imposter syndrome?
    - What do you think the difference is (if any) between a general lack of confidence/self esteem and imposter syndrome?
  - Watch clip of “Overcoming Imposter Syndrome” video of Denise Paolucci during a 2013 women computer programmers’ conference, part of The Ada Initiative training, watch a clip ~0:45 or 1:40-5:40 http://adainitiative.org/continue-our-work/impostor-syndrome-training/
    - Can pause at various times if desired (ex. when presenter offers up scenarios and how you perceive them with imposter syndrome)
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- Why do people have imposter syndrome? (10 mins)
  - Very common, especially for underrepresented groups like women, people of color, first generation college students
  - Might not be an issue for you but important to recognize that it is for many people and to be a good advocate
  - Reasons offered for imposter syndrome (and student discussion)
    - “Your brain is a jerk” hypothesis offered in video
    - Your brain is also incredibly smart and it’s picking up on all sorts of stereotypes and social cues, whether you realize it or not
      - Stereotypes of who scientists are and what women do
      - Lack of visible role models to identify with
      - Unconscious bias of fellow classmates, student, teachers, employers in rating women lower than men, throwing of baseline for assessing your own performance
      - Dunning- Kruger effect warping your sense of reality
  - Particularly prevalent among academics, students discuss why
    - When you are an academic, your personal identity and your subject matter become very intertwined. “You are your work, or at least you are often judged that way”

How can we address the problem? (10 mins)
- Different things will work for different people so pick what works for you, ignore the rest
- Solicit examples from students of what works for them and discuss how they find confidence
- Other advice on overcoming imposter syndrome:
  - Talk with others about the problem and recognize that you are not alone
  - Learn to recognize self-reinforcing language: just, only, sorry, i think, etc…. (showed first minute of Amy Schumer’s “Sorry Panel” clip: http://videos.nymag.com/video/Inside-Amy-Schumer-I'm-Sorry#c=8680372DVZQJ0MY&t='Inside%20Amy%20Schumer':%20I'm%20Sorry
    - Discuss with students the problems of “language policing” women and people of color
    - Is it empowering to emphasize the “male” way of saying things as the “right” way?
    - Discuss with students their perspectives on why women use words like “sorry” more and if they think it is a problem
  - Ask your friends what they think of you / perspective checks
  - Ask questions, helps you escape the fear of people finding out you don’t know all the answers
  - Practice accepting compliments
    - Activity with students: Give each student a compliment and ask them to respond in a way that accepts that positive feedback instead of deflecting it
Get background info for comparisons
- Teach others about your field
- Keep a file of people saying nice things about you
- Take a moment to be proud of yourself!
  - Activity with students: Ask each student to share something they did in the past couple weeks that they are proud of
- Remember (and repeat to yourself) “Nobody Belongs Here More Than Me!”

Questions for reflection essay after class (choose any subset):
- Does this “confidence gap” sound familiar to you or have you had different experiences?
- Reflect on your experiences in STEM classes or research settings.
  - What types of situations or experiences made you question your abilities?
  - What types of situations or experiences made you more confident?
- Women tend to attribute their success to external sources (or luck) instead of taking credit for their active role. Think of an academic accomplishment you are proud of and describe at least three ways you perseverance to achieve your goal.

Assigned readings (a few to choose from but lots of great resources online):
- "Overcoming Impostor Syndrome," Denise Paolucci, linux.conf.au 2013 Haecksen miniconference, , (see esp. ~0:45 to 5:30 minute markers in the video), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZg9rax-ky4&feature=youtu.be