

ADDRESSING MICROAGGRESSIONS In the Classroom

Definition:

Microaggressions are commonplace and brief verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights (whether intentional or unintentional) that communicate hostile, derogatory, or otherwise negative messages to a specific group based on identity (such as race, socioeconomic class, gender, sexuality, nationality, citizenship, ability, etc).

Students face:

- Cognitive - questioning whether or not to respond.
- Emotional - exhaustion, anger, sadness, and anxiety.
- Behavioral - diminished attention, careful attention to word choice, tone, and body movement.

...consequences of microaggressions from other students in class.

Common Classroom Microaggression Types

1. **Ascription of intelligence** - assuming one is unintelligent or smarter than average based on appearance or accent.
2. **Denial of racial reality** - e.g. dismissing claims that race was relevant to understanding a student's experience.
3. **Denial or devaluing of experience or culture** - e.g. ignoring the existence, histories, and systemic injustices against cultures or groups of people.
4. **Making assumptions based on appearance** - e.g. assuming people speak or don't speak a certain language because of their appearance; questioning someone's membership status such as "you don't look disabled".
5. **Assumption of immorality** - (e.g. assuming that poor people, undereducated people, LGBTQ people, or people of color are more likely to be devious, untrustworthy, or unethical).

What To Do When Microaggressions Occur

1. **Be calm.** A part of unpacking our biases is making mistakes. Approach the conversation from an intent versus impact standpoint. Good intentions can have a harmful impact, and this can be a valuable teaching moment for students.
2. **Acknowledge** the moment and take the lead in guiding the conversation (slow down or stop the previous conversation).
3. **Inquire:** Give students the benefit of doubt. Ask for clarification, then hold students accountable as necessary.
 - Example: "Could you please say more about that?" or "It sounds like you have a strong opinion about this. Could you please tell me why?"
4. **Reframe:** Create a different way or perspective from which to view the situation.
 - Example: "Let's reframe this to explore other perspectives/interpretations. Consider for a moment that... What if...?"
5. **Identify:** Explain why a certain statement is problematic. Support critical thinking. Avoid villainizing and speak from "I" statements where possible. Reference previously established discussion guidelines if needed.
 - Example: "Saying ___ often comes up in popular culture. Some might find it problematic because of ___".
6. **Acknowledge** visible and invisible emotions in the room. Ask students if they'd like to stay or take a break/end class for the day and return to the conversation later.
7. **Validate** the students who have been impacted.
8. **Follow up** as needed. See individuals after class, briefly check in at the start of the next class. Identify if more resources are needed.

What NOT To Do When Microaggressions Occur

1. Ignore the situation.
2. Respond with hostility.
3. Be passive and let students guide.
4. Focusing on right or wrong.
5. Looking to marginalized students/instructors to be experts on issues related to their identity group.

Sources: • Carnegie Mellon University, "If you notice a microaggression, mention it."
• University of Washington, "Addressing microaggressions in the classroom"