

Addressing Microaggressions in the Classroom

Definitions of Microaggressions

Microaggressions are defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Microinsults are behaviors, actions, or verbal remarks that convey rudeness, insensitivity, or demean a person’s group or social identity or heritage (Sue, et. al. 2007).

Microinvalidations are actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of people who represent different groups (Sue, et. al. 2007).

Microaggressions cut across all social identities including race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability status, socio-economic class, and other important social dimensions. We all participate in microaggressive behavior but what is important is how we respond to that behavior when we recognize it or someone else points it out to us.

Examples of Microaggressions

- Continuing to mispronounce the names of students after they have corrected you time and time again.
- Calling on and validating men and ignoring women students during class discussions.
- Singling students out in class because of their backgrounds. “You’re Asian! Can you tell us what the Japanese think about our trade policies?”
- Expressing racially charged political opinions in class assuming that the targets of those opinions do not exist in class. “I think illegal aliens are criminals because they are breaking the law and need to be rounded up and sent back to Mexico.”
- Denying the experiences of students by questioning the credibility and validity of their stories.
- Ignoring student-to-student microaggressions, even when the interaction is not course-related
- Making assumptions about students and their backgrounds

Suggestions for Addressing Microaggressions in the Classroom

Taking action to stop oppressive behavior can be difficult. It is easy to feel awkward or caught off guard. Factors in deciding how to respond will be important but it is just as important to take proactive steps to curb microaggressive behavior before it happens (McClintock, 1990).

1. Most students are not experts on any experiences beyond their own and are not capable of speaking for their entire group (or others) for which they identify. For example, just because a

student is Latino does not mean that they have an academic background in the study of Latinos. The same can be said about African Americans, members of the LGBTIQ community, Jewish students, Students with Disabilities, etc.

2. Keep in mind the Identity Iceberg, student's cultural and social identities are not always on the surface so it is best not to assume that any of the various identity groups being discussed in class are not represented in the room. It becomes especially important to make sure that pejorative statements made about people from different areas of the region, U.S., or the world are discussed and acknowledged.
3. Do not assume that all students in your class have good command of the English language or have intimate knowledge of U.S. culture. Many International students are not familiar with U.S. slang words or other language idiosyncrasies. Often, many of these students are using electronic translators in class as you lecture and present information.
4. When studying and discussing different group identities or issues related to specific groups (immigration, same sex marriage, affirmative action), it is best not to lock eyes with a student whom you think represents one of those groups. Your action assumes the identities and opinions of the students, potentially "outs" that student, and puts the individual on the spot. In addition, all the other students in your class will also notice what you are doing.
5. Work to create a safe environment for all identities in the classroom by establishing ground rules and expectations regarding discussions about and presentations on issues of diversity
6. If you are going to express your political opinions in the classroom, understand that there is a risk of silencing students who do not agree with your views. As a faculty member, when you express your views to students you are doing so out of a position of power. That is, students maybe afraid to express themselves given that they know your position on an issue and that their grade maybe on the line. Similarly, be aware of how balanced you are in challenging student opinions that do or do not agree with your own.
7. If you are going to bring in guest speakers, make sure that your objectives are clear in bringing those individuals to class—clear to you, the class and the guest. If the reason is to introduce a particular perspective, try to balance the discussion by inviting different guest speakers with other perspectives.
8. Using humor in class is a wonderful to engage the classroom but it is important to make sure that the humor does not target or degrade any student in the class or group of people overall. Classrooms are for engaging issues and learning concepts and new ideas; not having students, faculty or guests mock or denigrate people.
9. Be cognizant that microaggressions are also directed by students against other students. Be prepared to respond to those incidents, too. Even if you are not sure how to address the climate issue in the moment, it is still important that you not ignore it. You can follow up with individual students or the entire class later, after reflecting and/or consulting with colleagues on how best to do so.

10. In those cases where students do have the courage to contact you and point out that they were offended by a remark that you made or an action that you undertook, listen to them. As indicated above, given that you are in a position of power it probably took a lot of courage for them to raise the issue with you. Consider it a gift that the student trusted you enough to approach you with their concern.
11. Speak from your own experience without comparing your oppression to theirs
12. Know that there are resources at SMC to support you in addressing microaggressions in the classroom:
 - a. Intercultural Center <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/intercultural-center> 925-631-8545
 - b. Bias Incident Response Team (BIRT) <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/student-life/your-safety-resources/bias-incident-response-team-birt>
 - c. College Committee for Inclusive Excellence (CCIE) <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/inclusive-excellence/college-committee-on-inclusive-excellence-ccie>

References:

- McClintock, M. (1990). How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior. *Camping Magazine*, 63(2), 32-34.
- Solorzano, D, Ceja, M, & Yosso, T (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69, 60-73.
- Sue, DW; Bucceri, J; Lin, AI; Nadal, KL, & Torino, GC (2007). Racial microaggressions and the Asian American Experience. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 13(1), 72-81.

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<http://otl.du.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/MicroAggressionsInClassroom-DUCME.pdf>