

MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Microaggressions come in many forms in the classroom: instructor to student, student to instructor, or student to student. All have a negative effect on classroom climate. When discussing the merits of a group project, for example, an instructor might exclude the lone female participant, implying that male members of the group had done all the work. Or, a male student might inappropriately challenge a female instructor on a grade.

When addressing student-to-student microaggressions in the classroom, an instructor needs to consider the learning needs of all the students. Dealing with them is not about punishment or finding consensus or avoiding disagreements. It's about creating a space where students can address difference and diversity in productive ways. Further, research shows that leaving microaggressions unaddressed can have as much of a negative impact as the microaggression itself. Here are some example situations and techniques for responding:

When XX suggests that a statement by a character in a novel is offensive to Asian women, another student objects by saying that it's not offensive, it's just reality.

RESPONSE: Inquire. "I see that you disagree with XX's perspective. I'm curious about your reasoning. Can you elaborate on what you mean?"

A white student says, "I don't see why we have to talk about race all the time, it's not always about race."

RESPONSE: Use paraphrase as a means of reflection and focus on reflecting feelings as well as content. "It sounds like you are concerned and frustrated about the focus of the discussion. What is it that concerns you the most?"

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.

Source: Sue et al. 2007

A male student responds to a comment with a joke, "Does your mother know you're gay?"

RESPONSE: Use an "I" statement: "I didn't find that joke funny. Please remember our class ground rules and be respectful of one another."

When asked a question about terrorism, a student suggests that XX (who wears a hijab) would be better able to answer the question.

RESPONSE: Redirect and reframe. "XX can decide if she would like to comment. I'm interested in the perspectives of all the students in this class so that we can think about this topic together. Over the years, many groups have engaged in what we now would call terrorism. Can anyone give me some examples?"

Sources: Interrupting Microaggressions, G. Kenney, Diversity Leadership and Education, Holy Cross College, http://academics.holycross.edu/sites/all/files/Center_for_Teaching/2014%20January%20Workshop/Interrupting_Microaggressions_January2014.pdf; Microaggressions: Power, Privilege, and Everyday Life, <http://www.microaggressions.com>; Microaggressions in the Classroom, Center for Multicultural Excellence, University of Denver, <http://otl.du.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/MicroAggressionsInClassroom-DUCME.pdf>