

MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

WHAT ARE MICROAGGRESSIONS?

Microaggressions are brief and subtle actions, remarks, or visual cues in our everyday interactions that communicate negative ideas about a group of people, usually a socially marginalized group (Sue et al., 2007). They can be intentional or unintentional, but have hurtful impacts regardless of the intent.

Impact on Teaching & Learning

Studies suggest that microaggressions happen in almost 30% of college classrooms (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). They can happen in both face-to-face and online classrooms (Clark, Werth, & Ahten, 2012).

Microaggressions inside and outside the classroom create an unwelcoming campus climate. Students who repeatedly experience microaggressions such as invalidation, denigration, and insult are affected by disruptive emotions, like frustration, anger, and lower self-esteem, resulting in a depletion of the energy needed to fully engage in learning processes (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

Addressing microaggressions in your classroom is a small but crucial step toward creating learning environments where all students feel a sense of belonging and thrive to their full potential.

Impact vs. Intentionality

Because studies primarily rely on self-reports, some people question the claims of harms caused (Berk, 2017c). Remember, though, that we live in a society dominated by the perspectives of privileged groups (Rivera, 2010). Questioning the legitimacy of someone else's experience can be a form of microinvalidation, and aggravate the damage.

Each act of microaggression may seem minor and unintentional. However, consider the constant, cumulative, and corrosive nature of microaggressions. For those who continuously experience slights and indignities, even a small and unintentional incident can be felt like an 'aggression' and seriously damage their emotional and mental wellbeing (Berk, 2017a).

Micro vs. Macro

The prefix "micro-" indicates that these acts happen at a micro as opposed to a macro level - that is, they occur in our daily interactions in relatively private settings, as opposed to public, organized, or institutional discrimination.

The fact that they are "micro" doesn't make these acts insignificant. In fact, the hard-to-name and often subtle nature of microaggressions is what makes them so harmful and persistent.

TYPES OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microassaults

Microassaults are usually conscious and deliberate acts that can be communicated verbally or non-verbally.

For example:

- Hateful comments or graffiti left on the blackboard.
- Use of a derogatory or hateful term to refer to a group of people in class discussions.
- Student consciously avoids forming a group with peers of a minority group for a group assignment.

Microinvalidations

Microinvalidations are communications that negate, dismiss, or deny a person's worldviews, feelings, or lived reality.

For example:

- Instructor denies or dismisses an accusation of racism: *"I don't see race in my students."*
- Student negates a peer's lived experience of discrimination as a just matter of perception: *"You are oversensitive."*
- Instructor denies systemic inequalities by telling minority students: *"You will succeed if you work hard enough."*

Microinsults

Microinsults are subtle verbal or non-verbal communications that demean a social group or identity. Microinsults are often unconscious and unintentional, but the demeaning message is clear to the person in the receiving end.

For example:

- Student questions the qualification or intelligence of a woman instructor of colour.
- Instructor gives an example that communicates a negative stereotype of a developing country.
- Student silences or alienates a peer in small group discussions with dismissive comments or ignores the peer's opinions.



WAYS TO ADDRESS MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

1 As a witness

Instructors have a responsibility to respond to microaggressions, regardless of how small or imperfect the response may be. Doing nothing can send a message to students that microaggressions are acceptable.

Start by following the **A.C.T.I.O.N.*** steps to the right. Writing down the steps on the blackboard can help guide the conversation with students.

Disrupting the Moment

If you cannot remember the **A.C.T.I.O.N.** steps on the spot, you should still disrupt the moment. You can do this by:

Disagreeing:

"I must disagree with that."

Questioning what happened:

"Can you tell me how you know that?"

Delaying your response:

"I'm not sure what to say right now, but I feel that this is something important. Let's talk about this in our next class."

If appropriate or necessary, you can follow up with students individually. One option might be to invite the student who initiated a microaggression to come talk to you to help them reflect and grow.

In addition, reaching out to the student who was targeted by the incident shows your care and support.

TAKE A.C.T.I.O.N.

A

Ask clarifying questions

to the perpetrator to gain understanding of the scenario:
"I want to make sure that I understand what you were saying. Were you saying that...?"

C

Carefully listen

to what the person has to say.

T

Tell your observation

in a factual manner. Focus on describing what the person did, instead of evaluating the action or the person:
"I noticed that..." instead of *"You are homophobic."*

I

Impact

Discuss the potential impact of the microaggression on others without singling out the person whom you think was affected by the incident. Focus on the impact of the microaggression, instead of the intent:
"How do you think this type of comment would make other people feel?"

O

Own your thoughts and feelings

about the impact of the microaggression. *"When I hear your comment, I think/feel..."*

N

Next steps

Request or inquire desired outcomes. *"What are some of the actions we can take to create a classroom environment where everyone can feel a sense of belonging and respect?"*

*Adapted from Cheung, Ganote, and Souza (2016).

2 As a target

When you become the target of microaggressions in the classroom, you can also follow the **A.C.T.I.O.N.** steps above to help you navigate the moment.

Instructors can also experience microaggressions through negative student evaluation of teaching (Berk, 2017c). Instructors of minority backgrounds tend to be put in a vulnerable position in their tenure and promotion processes as a result (MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2015; Wagner, Rieger, & Voorvelt, 2016).

In these cases, seek support and advice from others, such as your mentor, colleague, and the Equity & Inclusion Office.



3 As a perpetrator

One study found that instructors were the most common perpetrators of microaggressions, questioning the intelligence and competence of students (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).

Because microaggressions are often unconscious and unintentional, we may not realize the impact of our behaviour until someone points it out.

When someone questions your action or comment, you can follow the steps below to understand and act on your mistake (Utt, 2013):

Listen

to understand the impact of your behaviour.

Reflect

to gain some understanding of the harm caused.

Apologize

without caveat. Focus on the role you played and the impact it had, instead of asking the person to trust that your act was unintentional.

Do better

Translate your learning into action, and continue to learn more about related issues (e.g., implicit bias, privilege) to avoid making the same mistake again.

This guide was created collaboratively by the Student Diversity Initiative and Indigenous Initiatives at the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology.

For a complete list of references and more resources for inclusive teaching practices, please visit inclusiveteaching.ctlt.ubc.ca.



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