

## Addressing microaggressions in the learning environment

### What are Microaggressions?

“The everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.”

- Social exchanges in which a member of a dominant culture says or does something, often accidentally and without intended malice, belittles, and alienates a marginalized group member.
- A distinction, “Micro: in terms of perception by the aggressor NOT in the hurtful impact it can have.”
- Perpetrators of microaggressions may not always be aware that their comments and behaviors are hurtful. It is important to note that it doesn't mean that it's okay for them to continue it if someone doesn't know.
- **Microinvalidations:** Comments or actions that ignore or dismiss the thoughts, feelings or experiences of a group member.
- **Microassaults:** Conscious/intentional acts by an aggressor intended to convey negative ideas about a person or group
  - Microassaults can be verbal, nonverbal, or environmental
    - Verbal microassaults include name-calling/use of epithets (e.g., Use of racial, sexist, social-identity based slurs)
    - Nonverbal microassaults include behavioral discrimination (e.g., Not allowing gay persons to join a group)
    - Environmental microassaults include offensive signs, posters, or other visual displays (e.g., Displays that feature women as sex objects, ethnic/racial caricatures with exaggerated features, swastikas)
  - Microassaults most frequently occur:
    - When the conveyer can remain anonymous (e.g., a blog with a pseudonym)
    - When people believe that the person hearing the comment or seeing the action will not be offended because they hold the same beliefs
    - When persons lose inhibitions (e.g., due to loss of emotional control, alcohol or drug use, or other reasons that keep them from filtering their comments or actions)
- **Microaggression Trauma (Re-Trauma):** The excessive and continuous exposure to subtle discrimination (both interpersonal and systemic), and the subsequent symptoms that develop or persist as a result.
  - Emotions experienced: anger, sadness, worry, resentment, hopelessness, regret, self-doubt
  - The experience is now considered PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome
  - Remember that microaggressions, including those that experienced vicariously, may be traumatizing; educators must respond accordingly

## Strategies

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Address the comment.	Ignoring these comments can be tempting, especially if you feel uncomfortable, but that will send the message that such comments are okay.
Decide if immediately pursuing the topic is in the best interest of the students.	If necessary, count to ten and take a deep breath. If you feel unprepared to engage the topic, tell the class that you will talk about it at the next class meeting. Then prepare in the meantime and revisit the topic at the next opportunity.
If you decide to pursue it, legitimize the discussion.	Avoid changing the subject or dismissing topics of race, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, disability, etc. as they arise (unless you are clear that you will return to the topic in the near future). This dismissal is itself a type of microaggression against some students.
Use a direct approach to facilitate the discussion.	Don't be a passive observer, or let the class take over the discussion. Similarly, try not to expect students to be "representatives" speaking for their identity groups, or to make up for your lack of comfort or knowledge. The PAIRS: Effective Dialogue Skills is one method for effectively responding to microaggressions in your classroom.
Validate the feelings of your students.	Avoid questioning, dismissing, or playing down feelings that your students have about issues of difference and power. They are trusting you when they share their feelings.
Be willing to accept a different reality than your own.	It's likely that if you have a different background and circumstances than your students, and the stories, feelings, and views they share may not resonate with your own.
Consider sharing the ways in which you have been conditioned by the circumstances of your life and society.	Revealing yourself as "flawed" will encourage students to take risks by sharing their experiences and thoughts and communicates courage in approaching conversations about difference and relationality.

### If you notice a microaggression, acknowledge it (Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University)

As an instructor, be vigilant about the comments that may arise during the discussion no matter the course modality. Research has shown that students will take their cues from the instructor about how to react to a hot moment or difficult dialogue – if the instructor ignores it, it can further marginalize students and squander an opportunity to dispel stereotypes and promote mutual understanding (Huston & DiPietro, 2007; Sue et al., 2009; Bergom et al., 2011). There are many ways to respond to a hot moment, based on the context and your personal preference.

- **Take a deep breath:** collect your thoughts before responding.
- **Acknowledge:** know and recognize that the other person's perspective is their reality and truth.
- **Inquire:** Give students the benefit of the doubt. First, ask the student to clarify, elaborate, or further explain. This step will give you more information about where they are coming from and help the speaker become aware of what they are saying.
  - "Could you please say more about that?"

- “Can you elaborate on your point?”
- “It sounds like you have a strong opinion about this. Could you please tell me why?”
- “What is it about this that concerns you the most?”
- **Reframe:** Create a different way or perspective from which to view a situation.
  - “Could there be another way to look at this?”
  - “Let’s reframe this to explore other perspectives/interpretations. Consider for a moment that... What if...?”
  - “I’m wondering what message this is sending and how it’s received. Do you think you would have said this/drawn this conclusion if...”?
- **Identify:** Directly respond to student comments as problematic. Calmly and politely explain which specific words or phrases you experienced as disrespectful (or that someone else might have). Use an “I” statement to express feelings, as appropriate, rather than commenting on or labeling the speaker.
  - “Saying \_\_\_ often comes up in popular culture. Some might find it problematic because of \_\_\_”
  - **“When you said X, I felt like Y. In the future, please Z...”**
  - “This seems like a good time to revisit and remind ourselves about the guidelines for discussion that we agreed upon as class.”
- **Diffuse to allow effective re-engagement:** Sometimes, a hot moment can get out of control.
  - Ask students to pause and write individually for a moment about what just happened and how they feel about it.
  - Use this time as an opportunity to formulate a strategy for re-engaging the hot moment in a productive, inclusive way.
  - Remind your students which discussion guidelines are relevant to the situation.
- **Revisit:** Sometimes one is caught by surprise, misses an opportunity, or wishes they could have a do-over in response to a microaggression or “hot moment”. Even if the moment has passed, it’s ok to go back and address it later in class. Research indicates that unaddressed microaggressions may cause a negative impact as the microaggression itself.
  - “I want to go back to something that occurred previously in our class.”
  - “Let’s rewind \_\_\_ minutes.”
  - “I think it would be worthwhile to revisit something that happened \_\_\_\_.”
- **Check-in:** in person, talk with the targeted student(s) after class. Let them know that you value their experiences and perspective and see if they have any suggestions about better supporting them in class.

### **PAIRS: Effective Dialogue Skills (Obear)**

#### **P: PAN (Pay Attention Now) the environment and yourself; describe what you notice or engage others based on what you see**

- I’m noticing I’m feeling...anyone else?
- I saw how quiet everyone got; I’m wondering what is going on for folks?
- It seems that statement impacted some people, am I right?
- I’m noticing you’re speaking with a lot of energy and emotion...

- I'm noticing that people get interrupted as they try to share...
- You seemed to react to what I just said...

### **A: ASK about the specifics behind the person's comment or behavior**

- Could you say more about that...Tell me more...
- Can you give us an example of what you're saying...?
- Help me know what you mean by that?
- What were you hoping to communicate with that comment?
- Can you help me understand what your intent was when you said/did...?
- Can you give me some background on this situation...?
- How were you impacted when...? What were you feeling when...?

### **I: INTERRUPT the dynamics**

- Let's slow down the conversation and talk about what just happened... I'm going to interrupt and try a different approach to this conversation... We are not engaging according to our group norms.
- Let's take a breath...

### **R: RELATE to the person or their comment/behavior**

- I relate to what you're saying, I...I have felt the same way...
- I remember a time when I... I did the exact same thing...
- How do others relate to that comment?
- What you're saying seems to relate to what so-and-so just said...

### **S: SHARE about yourself ~ self-disclose with a story or example; your feelings in the moment; the impact of a comment or behavior, etc.**

- When I hear you say that I think/feel....
- Just last week I...I remember when I...
- I was socialized to believe...
- I'm beginning to feel ...
- My heart aches as you tell that story...
- I notice I'm feeling a little triggered...

### **Use the NAME Steps (McInroy et al., 2019)**

- **Notice** that a microaggression has happened in the class/group. As soon as you can, take the opportunity to name what you noticed. Whether in the moment or later.
- **Acknowledge** [you are] responsible for helping the group name and address microaggressions when they come up, regardless of who commits them.
- **Make** space and allow students to reflect on their feelings about what happened and attempt to understand it.

- **Engage** in a discussion about how to move forward as a group.

## Restorative Responses (Restorative Justice Center at the University of California-Berkeley)

### If you experience a micro-aggression

#### Recognition

- Recognize that a micro-aggression occurred.
- Accept your feelings in the moment and outreach to someone you can talk to.

#### Critical Reflection

- Take a step back and think about how you want to respond.
- Assess the level of harm and your options for addressing the damage.
- If possible, take the incident and turn it into a teaching/learning moment for the person who said the micro-aggression and the bystanders who did not address the situation.

#### Appropriate Action

Speak to the aggressor or ask a third party to do so if you feel uncomfortable and take action to protect yourself. Ask questions like:

- "What did you mean by that?"
- "This/that makes me feel uncomfortable."
- "Can I give you some feedback."
- "I'd prefer you don't use language like that."
- "I'm offended by that."
- "I think what you said was \_\_\_\_\_; is that correct? Can you elaborate on what you mean by that?"
- "I know you didn't intend this, but when you said \_\_\_\_\_, I felt \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."

### If you witness a micro-aggression

**Check-In.** Ask the party what happened, how the micro-aggression impacted them, and what help they may need.

#### Support

- Be responsive.
- Reach out to the person who caused the harm and discuss why/what the intent behind their statement/action.

#### Take Action

- Offer restorative transformation options to the party who caused harm.
- Take the event as a learning experience and develop ways to promote fair inclusivity through meaningful circles and discussions
- "I overheard you make the comment that \_\_\_\_\_. I used to think that too, but then I learned \_\_\_\_\_."

## If you cause a micro-aggression

### Awareness

- Engage in self-reflection.
- Become aware of your own biases, anxieties, and motivations behind the harm.

### Acceptance

- Take accountability for your actions. Move away from shame, denial, and embarrassment.

### Action

- Educate yourself about your actions and take this as a learning experience to improve yourself. Engage in critical thinking.
- Seek help from others.
- Make things right by listening to the harmed.
- “Can you help me understand what just happened?”
- “Thank you for letting me know how my comment made you feel. No one has ever brought this to my attention before. If you’re willing to talk more about it I’d like to better understand the ways my comment was problematic so I can learn from this and also help educate others. However, I do recognize that it is up to me to learn more – not up to you to teach me.”
- “I’m sorry that what I said hurt you. That wasn’t my intention, but I will be intentional about trying to avoid hurting others in that way in the future.”

## Microaffirmations

As a positive strategy to prevent microaggressions, you can use “microaffirmations,” or small acts that foster inclusion, listening comfort, and support for people who may feel isolated or invisible in an environment (Rowe, 2008). These can include welcoming facial expressions, making concerted efforts to use correct names, pronunciations, and pronouns, affirming students’ feelings and experiences and rewarding positive behaviors. Consider using “affirming messages” such as these from Powell, Demetriou, and Fisher (2013):

- “I’m glad you’re here.”
- “I see you’re making progress in this area.”
- “I’m concerned about you. Please come visit me my student office hours.”
- “What do you think you did well in this class/situation/assignment?”
- “What will you do differently next time?”
- “Have you thought about utilizing \_\_\_ (campus resource)? Many successful students find this resource helpful.”

## Mapping your response

Remember what you wrote about during the Think & Ink. Choose a strategy. Map out how you will proactively respond to future conversations or incidents.

## ISU Campus Resources

**Important:** Anyone encountering a situation that requires immediate police assistance, medical or other emergency services should call the Iowa State University Police Department (ISUPD) at 515-294-4428 or 911.

- **ISU Ombuds Office**, the term “ombuds” (pronounced “ahm–buhds”) comes from a Swedish term meaning “a person who has an ear to the people.” The ombuds are an independent, neutral, confidential and informal resource for ISU staff, faculty, and graduate community. The ombuds supplements but does not replace ISU’s formal administrative channels at ISU or talking with your manager. To make an appointment, web: <http://www.ombuds.iastate.edu/> or call 617-895-4026
- **Office of Equal Opportunity**, 3410 Beardshear Hall, phone: 515-294-7612, email: [eooffice@iastate.edu](mailto:eooffice@iastate.edu), web: <https://www.eoc.iastate.edu/>
- **Do you have concerns about a campus climate incident, but you are not sure what to do?** Campus Climate Reporting System (<https://www.campusclimate.iastate.edu/system>)

## References

- Bergom, I., Wright, M. C., Brown, M. K., & Brooks, M. (2011). Promoting college student development through collaborative learning: A case study of hevruta. *About campus*, 15(6), 19-25.
- Burton, S., & Furr, S. (2014). Conflict in multicultural classes: Approaches to resolving difficult dialogues. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 53(2), 97-110.
- Center for Educational Effectiveness [CEE]. (2018). Microaggressions and Microaffirmations Series. Just-in-Time Teaching Resources. Retrieved from <https://cee.ucdavis.edu/JITT>
- Center for Educational Effectiveness [CEE]. (2018). Microaggressions and Microaffirmations Series. Just-in-Time Teaching Resources. Retrieved from <https://cee.ucdavis.edu/JITT>
- Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University. (n/d). If you notice a microaggression, acknowledge it. Retrieved on October 30, 2019 from <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/classroomclimate/strategies/microaggression.html>
- Ganote, C. (2018, March 12). Microaggressions and Microresistance in the Classroom. Presentation at University of Nebraska-Omaha. Retrieved from <https://www.unomaha.edu/faculty-support/teaching-excellence/microaggressions-classroom.pdf>
- Goodman, D. J. (2011). “Interrupting biased and stereotypic comments.” *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice: Educating People from Privileged Group*, 2nd ed., Routledge.
- Goodman, D. J. (2011). “Responding to and talking about microaggressions and bias.” *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice: Educating People from Privileged Group*, 2nd ed., Routledge.
- Huston, T. A., & DiPietro, M. (2007). In the eye of the storm: Students perceptions of helpful faculty actions following a collective tragedy. In D. R. Robertson & L. B. Nilson (Eds.) *To Improve the Academy*. Vol 25. Resources for faculty, instructional, and organizational development (pp. 207-224). Bolton, MA: Anker.
- Lopez, Marcos D. and Wendy Zepeda. “Ethnic/Racial Microaggressions.”
- McInroy, L. B., Byers, D. S., Kattari, S. K., & CSWE Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression. (2019). The NAME Steps: How to name and address anti- LGBTQIA2S+ microaggressions in social work classrooms. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education. Retrieved (August 13, 2020) from [https://cswe.org/CSWE/media/CSOGIE/6861\\_cswe\\_CSOGIE\\_TheNAMESteps\\_Guide\\_WEB72\\_REV2.pdf](https://cswe.org/CSWE/media/CSOGIE/6861_cswe_CSOGIE_TheNAMESteps_Guide_WEB72_REV2.pdf)

- Nadal, Kevin et al. "The Adverse Impact of Racial Microaggressions on College Students' Self-Esteem." *Journal of College Student Development* 55.5 (2014): 461-474.
- Niemann, Y. F. (n/d). The everyday bullying of microaggressions: Recognizing and intervening. Presentation given at University of Buffalo.
- Obear, K. (2018). Recognizing and interrupting microaggressions. Retrieved (August 5, 2020) from <https://drkathyobear.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Microaggressions-Handout-Formatted.pdf>
- Powell, C., Demetriou, C., & Fisher, A. (2013, October). Micro-affirmations in academic advising: Small acts, big impact. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*. Retrieved (August 5, 2020) from <https://journals.psu.edu/mentor/article/view/61286/60919>.
- Restorative Justice Center at University of California – Berkeley. (n/d). Micro-aggressions workshops. Retrieved from <http://rjcenterberkeley.org/microaggression-workshops/>
- Solorzano, D. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1-2), 60-73.
- Souza, T. (2018). From Fear to Freedom: Managing hot moments & facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom. [Presentation]. Boise State University, Boise, ID.
- Souza, T. (2018). Responding to microaggressions in the classroom: Taking ACTION. Retrieved from <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/responding-to-microaggressions-in-the-classroom/>
- Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15(2), 183-190.
- Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. Racial microaggressions and the Asian American experience. *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 5.1 (2009): 88-101.
- Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2011). Microaggressions in institutional climates: Race, gender, and sexual orientation.
- Yosso, T., Smith, W., Ceja, M., & Solorzano, D. (2009). Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(4), 659-690.



This work, "Recognizing and Responding to Microaggressions in the Classroom" from the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT), Iowa State University is a derivative of the following resources Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University's, "[If you notice a microaggression, acknowledge it](#)," Ganote's University of Nebraska-Omaha presentation, "[Microaggressions and Microresistance in the Classroom](#)" and the Restorative Justice Center at University of California – Berkeley, "[Micro-aggressions workshops](#)" used under a Creative Commons Attribution -NonCommercial -ShareAlike 4.0 International License. This "CELT Active Learning Institute" by the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, Iowa State University is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution -NonCommercial -ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>)