Managing Microaggressions in the College Classroom

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happened in those moments to help you feel comfortable? (Facing History, 2015)
Identify when you have had ideas or questions but have not shared them. Why not? What was happening at those moments? (Facing History, 2015)

The questions above were adopted from Facing History and Ourselves (2015), a nonprofit organization that provides resources for educators worldwide to address controversial topics, specifically in history courses. I then divide the board into two categories—Safe and Not Safe. The students then place their Post-it note responses accordingly. They are instructed to omit their names from the Post-it. This permits anonymous sharing of ideas. I then proceed to read aloud various responses, and each response serves as the foundation for discussion. Ultimately, we are creating safe spaces through our exploration of defining what a safe space is.

Safe for students and instructors
The “Creating a Safe Space” activity cultivates a climate where all opinions are respected and students can demonstrate the ability not only to think critically, but also to connect the content discussed to a broader context. More importantly, the sense of community in the classroom is strengthened through the process. My commitment to creating safe spaces has decreased tension in my classrooms, improving discussions and making the overall learning experience more enjoyable—even if my students don’t always agree with each other. Creating safe spaces directly supports and engages various pedagogies. For me specifically this includes social justice pedagogy, hip-hop pedagogy, and popular culture pedagogy. When entering an academic setting, the identities and experiences brought by students and instructor alike should not be ignored. Embracing such differences and seeking to learn from the uniqueness we offer enhances the learning experience for everyone (instructor included) and allows progressive, respectful dialogue to occur.

References:

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By Gayle Mallinger, PhD, Jay GabbarD, PhD, anD saunDra sTarKs, eDd

College students are increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, ability, religious/spiritual beliefs, immigration status, social and economic class, veterans’ status, and the intersections therein. However, microaggressions—subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination—continue to occur inside our classrooms. Although most faculty members are mindful of overt biases in the classroom setting, the recognition and management of microaggressions present more of a challenge. This article adds to the nascent literature on microaggressions in higher education by defining the multifaceted nature of microaggressions, discussing the damaging consequences of microaggressions for faculty and students, and examining various methods of effectively managing microaggressions in college classrooms.

Unlike overt prejudice and discrimination, microaggressions are defined as subtle verbal or nonverbal communications, intentional or not, resulting in harmful consequences to members of marginalized groups (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Sue and colleagues (2007) discuss three specific types of microaggressions. Microassaults are considered explicit derogatory attacks consciously meant to harm the intended target, such as a student’s use of the word “gay” as a pejorative. Microinsults are more covert and demean a person’s identity through rudeness and insensitivity. A microinsult, for example, would occur if a professor did not take the time to properly pronounce the first name of a student whose ethnicity differs from her/his own. Microinvalidations are messages that exclude or deny the individual’s statements, feelings, and/or experiences, such as a white
professor’s pronouncement about living in a “post-racial America” or claiming “color-blindness.”

Although or perhaps because microaggressions are elusive, this vague form of prejudice has damaging effects on students. Nearly one-third of college students have experienced microaggressions (Boysen, 2012). Peers and professors can be perpetrators of these covert attacks. Smith and associates (2011) suggest that microaggressions create a hostile and stressful environment for college students. Due to the subtleties of microaggressions, recipients often doubt their own perceptions. Student victims of an unwelcoming classroom climate are at risk for psychological stress, decreased self-esteem, reduced participation, diminished academic performance, and decreased persistence (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015).

Overall, the literature addressing overt and covert biases in college classrooms discusses student coping mechanisms. Although support from faculty and institutions is considered essential in buffering these negative effects, there is a dearth of literature regarding the effective management of microaggressions within the classroom environment. While professors may be tempted to ignore instances of bias, identification of microaggressions presents an opportunity to address difficult issues. Research suggests class discussions are effective in ameliorating the negative effects of microaggressions (Boysen, 2012; Sue, et al., 2011). Faculty can set the stage for facilitating difficult dialogues through the creation of a supportive culture. At the outset, educators must question assumptions they may hold about those different from themselves. Biases that affect perceptions and treatment of students should be challenged. For example, instructors might ask themselves, “Do I assume Asian-Americans are ‘good students?’” “Do I tend to ask a lesbian-identified student to be the spokeswoman for all LGBTQ students?”

Statements defining respectful communication within the classroom setting should be included in syllabi. For example, educators could include the following statement: “Classroom discussions are designed for the expression of divergent viewpoints in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Thus, all communication will be civil and respectful of diverse perspectives.” Syllabi should also include definitions of prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and microaggressions. When designing course content, professors have a duty to vet the resources with regard to bias and to ensure the inclusion of multiple perspectives for each course topic. Are authors of multiple backgrounds represented in the selection of materials? Do the videos appropriately address the experiences of marginalized groups?

Professors are also charged with creating an inclusive classroom community where students feel safe to express their views and are comfortable identifying and confronting subtle biases. One such way to facilitate student comfort is to initiate a “word watch”—identifying various terms used in common conversation that are considered microaggressions. Students and the instructor are charged with keeping a list of pejorative terms used within the classroom (Gabbard, Starks, Mallinger, & Luckett, 2013). The instructor first writes “Word Watch” on the board and begins listing, with the class, words that should be mindfully avoided. Students then analyze these expressions and present alternatives.

Recognition of microaggressions related to issues of power may also be enhanced through a class exercise teaching about the Oppression Olympics—the tendency of members of oppressed groups to compete with those in other oppressed groups (Martinez, 1994). The instructor writes “isms” on separate sheets of paper and adheres each to the wall. Students are asked to stand under the paper they believe has the most negative impact on members of each disenfranchised group. Students are then asked to discuss why they chose that particular “ism” and select a spokesperson to argue why that “ism” has the most negative influence. If no students stand under a particular “ism,” the instructor should explain why this failure to acknowledge the “ism” has the most potential to harm. Students are then given an option to change where they stand. Once this is complete, the instructor discusses the concept of competition among individuals who are marginalized (Gabbard, et al., 2013) and how this rivalry among oppressed groups has the unintended consequence of helping those with privilege maintain their power.

Simple acknowledgement of biases is key, as lack of response may indicate tacit support of microaggressions. However, instructors should also assess the efficacy of responses. This may be accomplished through soliciting feedback from students (Boysen, 2012). Equally important, educators should continue to self-assess their understanding and awareness. A faculty consciousness-raising group can also be effective in providing support and sharing strategies to manage microaggressions.

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**Classroom Tools to Defuse Student Resistance**

BY CAROLYN IVES

While we instructors have good intentions when trying to integrate understanding of cultural diversity into our classrooms, many of our efforts can have the opposite effect of the one we desire. As a result, guilt and resistance can overshadow the goal of increased student awareness and understanding. Many of the negative student reactions can be lessened, however, with an increased emphasis on awareness of one’s own identity and social location and a decreased focus on those of the other (those that are different from one’s own or the dominant culture in one or more ways, such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, ability, etc.). As Kowal, Franklin, & Paradies (2013) explain, focusing on the other through cultural awareness training can actually lead to a false sense of mastery of another culture, which not only reinforces problematic power relationships, but can also grossly oversimplify the culture such training seeks to reveal.

**Power flower**

In order to shift the emphasis from the other to the self, I like to use a number of different tools and strategies. One such tool is the power flower. For the purposes of this article, I will be referring to the version outlined on the University of Toronto Educational Activism site (http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/edactivism/Activist_Resources/The_Power_Flower.html). Through the use of this tool, instructors can help students unpack their own social locations, placing emphasis on the self rather than the other.

Although most websites that share power flowers offer slightly different flower graphics and instructions, they all serve a similar purpose: they allow the group to identify prominent features of the dominant culture, often focusing on what some perceive as social ideals; then students can examine those “norms” or “ideals” to see how many elements of the dominant culture figure into their own lives. For example, my classes may identify “white,” “Christian,” “affluent,” “educated,” “able-bodied,” “heterosexual,” and “healthy” as social norms or ideals based on their communities, and they would label each petal of the flower with one of those terms. Students would then individually determine how close they are to each of those norms to see where their social privilege exists—or doesn’t, as the case may be. Results may or may not be shared, depending on the class and the purpose of the activity; the goal is to allow students to identify where they are privileged in their societies and where they are disadvantaged. In any case, the best discussion comes not necessarily from asking students to fill in their flowers with their own experiences, but often from the preliminary discussion about what their particular communities perceive as ideal. It’s also interesting to see how ideals and norms shift from group to group.

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