

CETL Weekly Teaching Tips presents

microaggressions

Microaggressions are the ways language, behavior, and climate subtly communicate prejudice and other biases. While those who deliver microaggressions might not be aware of their actions, they still communicate to certain groups that they are looked at as “other.”



Researchers offer different ways to classify and define types of microaggressions. Sometimes microaggression come out in well-intended compliments (“You speak English so well!” and “You don’t write with an accent.”) or simply trying to get to know someone (“Where are you from *originally*?”). The trouble arises in the assumptions one makes based on someone’s appearance. These examples are microaggressions one might experience if their name or race seems foreign.

Other microaggressions may be less complimentary, such as words used to identify groups also used as derogatory terms (“That’s so gay.”) to holding lower expectations (“This writing doesn’t sound like you.”). Even these microaggressions may not be

malevolent or intentional, but they can still offend marginalized group for valid reasons.

Criticisms claim that fixation on microaggressions can create a “victimhood culture,” which could cause students to dwell on the harm such intentional or unintentional comments could cause them (if they are, indeed, microaggressions) rather than brushing them off and moving on. Some also fear that by making people afraid of committing microaggressions, people in turn will be less likely to engage with people unlike themselves for fear of saying the wrong thing. Lilienfeld (2017) finds that while microaggressions are a valid concern, the data on their impact on mental health is lacking.

Applications for Faculty

Faculty want their students to learn in an environment that is welcoming and inclusive but not at the cost of discussing challenging ideas. Faculty are not expected to perfectly know how to define and navigate microaggressions, but they should be prepared to detect and act when microaggression takes place before it disrupts the learning environment.

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Suggestions for Faculty

1. **Beware of setting learning expectations** Even if we are committed to treating students fairly and not discriminating, it is hard to guard ourselves from making assumptions about students from the first time we read their names in the class roster. Always suspend judgment until you have clear evidence of someone's learning and abilities.
2. **Relate microaggressions to your courses** Consider whether certain microaggressions likely to arise based on your discipline, discussions, activities, and typical student population.
3. **Mentally walk through a plan for handling microaggressions** What would you do if a student-to-student microaggression surfaced in class? Imagine the situations that could arise and how you would deal with it. If one surfaced in class, when would it warrant an open discussion with the class versus talking with the student outside of class or ignoring it. When does a microaggression warrant consultation with the Dean of Students? Hypothesizing these situations could help you make calm, sound judgments in a potentially tense moment.
4. **Reflect on your vulnerability** Everyone carries cultural biases with them. Reflect on whether things you say or judgments you make could make a student feel uncomfortable. Such practices could include assuming that a student of another race, gender, or other group can speak for that entire group (called a "token minority"). Microaggressions can surface with benign or even benevolent intentions, so we should not underestimate their power to seep into our communication with students.

Related Readings

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