Microaggressions in the Classroom

In their 2018 annual letter, Bill and Melinda Gates wrote, “Optimism isn’t a belief that things will automatically get better; it’s a conviction that we can make things better.” The focus of this editorial is on microaggressions in the classroom. It is written in response to the heightened sensitivity surrounding diversity, difference, and inclusivity; the current political climate that normalizes microaggressive behavior; cases of biased expressions on university campuses; and the challenges associated with retaining a diverse cadre of students. It is my hope the information will be of value to those who have invested considerable resources in the recruitment and retention of students from diverse backgrounds since microaggressions can affect student progress and achievement.

Microaggressions are defined as the brief and commonplace daily, verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities or insensitivities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to members of marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral, and decent individuals who may be unaware they have engaged in demeaning speech or behavior (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2019). These acts can be distinguished from everyday rudeness or nonrace-based acts of incivility because the microaggressions tend to be constant and continuous and cumulative, and are reminders that the person’s status has been relegated to that of a second-class citizenry (Sue et al., 2019). It is important to note that microaggressions also can be delivered through media images, mascots, monuments, and symbolism as witnessed by the recent apology of University of Michigan officials for the display of black figures hanging on tree-shaped displays in a gift shop (Griffith, 2020).

Microaggressions may be responsible for inequities in education and can significantly impact the successful matriculation of students from marginalized groups. Not all students feel that classroom environments are conducive for learning despite the resources and expertise available within the classroom walls. When students find the academic environment invalidating, characterized by persistent patterns of being overlooked, under-respected, and devalued as the result of belonging to a certain group, they tend to underperform despite having the ability to succeed (Sue, 2010).

According to the stereotype threat theory, the risk of being evaluated based on a stereotypical belief can trigger a disruptive state that undermines performance and aspirations (Pennington, Heim, Levy, & Larkin, 2016). Stereotype threat posits that members of marginalized groups tend to underperform through fears of confirming a negative societal stereotype and that fear alters the cognitive and motor performance of the individual (Pennington et al., 2016). Stereotype threat can be minimized by letting students know they are welcomed, supported, and valued (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). A listing of validated strategies for reducing stereotype threat can be found on Stanford University’s website at https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/interventionshandout.pdf.

How might acts of microaggression play out within a classroom setting? The following lists include examples of how respected faculty members demonstrate microaggressions in the classroom (Lynch, 2019; Sue, 2010).

Prejudging academic ability:
• Setting low expectations for students from certain groups or backgrounds.
• Believing that a student’s dialect or language skills are problematic.
• Stating how a nonwhite student is articulate or well-spoken.
• Devaluing culture, heritage, and religious traditions:
• Scheduling assignments, projects, and examinations on cultural or religious holidays.
• Disregarding religious traditions.
• Expressing Eurocentric and ethnocentric views.
• Criminalizing behavior:
• Referring to undocumented students as illegals.
• Making assumptions about students and their backgrounds.
• Banning certain ethnic clothing, head coverings, such as hats or hoodies, or hairstyles.
• Disregarding income inequality:
• Assigning class projects that disregard socioeconomic status and penalize students with fewer financial resources.
• Assuming all students have access to and are proficient with the use of computers, technology, and applications for communications related to academic assignments.
• Excluding students from accessing certain activities due to the expense of the activity.
• Making politically charged statements:
• Expressing racially charged political opinions in class.
• Using inappropriate political and partisan humor in class that degrades members from other groups.
• Hosting debates in class that place students holding opposing views in bad predicaments.
• Dismissing difference:
  • Conveying only heteronormative examples in class.
  • Calling on, engaging, and validating one gender, class, or race of students while ignoring other students during class.
  • Requiring students with nonvisible disabilities to identify themselves in class.

These classroom practices can be offensive, hurtful, and devastating. What can you do? Acknowledge your cultural conditioning and how your background influences your behavior. Faculty should be cognizant of their choice of words, behaviors, and actions when interacting with students in the classroom. They should make every effort to understand the reality of microaggression and its harmful impact. Accept that perspectives matter and develop habits of cultural humility.

What can you do to help students who may experience microaggressions? Students should be advised to talk with an academic counselor or administrator about the experience. They also should be encouraged to seek help through their social support systems and spiritual or religious advisors. Students often may seek self-affirmation through peers. This can be seen when students of certain social, cultural, or ethnic groups congregate on breaks or during free time. Oppressed groups tend to rely on each other for a collective sense of identity, support, shared experiences, and coping strategies to face the situation (Sue, 2010).

Administrators should ponder the following questions and take actionable steps to foster a climate of inclusivity. To what extent do you ensure that diversity and inclusivity are reflected in the mission, core values, policies, and practices of the institution? Are the faculty and staff held accountable for receiving professional development, education, and training on diversity and inclusion? To what extent, with intentionality, does your institution cultivate an inclusive environment with cross-cultural interactions (Crandall & Garcia, 2016)? Are efforts made to cultivate a diverse and inclusive faculty? When students see faculty members who look like them, they feel that they too can be successful.

Finally, institutions should create sustainable inclusive environments that cultivate positive climates, attend to history and context, break down barriers that prevent cross-cultural engagement, and nurture cross-cultural interactions (Crandall & Garcia, 2016).

References

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