

Microaggressions in Online Courses

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Presentation Disclaimers

- This is a summary of the author's observations, (along with cited literature), as publication of specific microaggressions and management strategies could violate student, instructor, and institutional confidentiality.
- The content herein is not symptomatic of a specific institution; the author has observed online microaggressions in multiple universities, programs, student levels, and majors.
- The majority of classroom discourse does not consist of microaggressions; these are not obvious in every class.

“Isn’t it a shame there are at least a million ways to make a person **feel badly** about themselves?”

Source: A friend/colleague

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

Eleanor Roosevelt

[Yet, the cumulative effects of microaggressions can be difficult to deny.]

Online **Macro**aggressions

- Are deeply, unambiguously, and undeniably offensive.
- Are easily recognized and agreed upon by most in the culture.
- Often violate codes of student conduct, and/or anti-discrimination policies.

Online **Micro**aggressions

- Can be less overt violations of civility...yet, deeply hurtful
- **Racial Microaggressions** were described by Sue et al. in a classic and oft quoted article.
- **(Other) Demographic Microaggressions** can target numerous demographic characteristics (e.g., age, country of origin, religion, gender, disability, profession, socio-economic status)
- **Personal Microaggressions** disparage personal characteristics (e.g., weight, height, health, attractiveness, relationship status)

Where Might **Online** Microaggressions Appear?

- Online discussions
- Online group work
- Electronically submitted assignments:
Word/PowerPoint
 - Microaggressions in these formats can be directed toward the instructor.

Harwood, Choi, Orozco, Browne Hunt, & Mendenhall (2015)

- Described a range of microaggressions that occur in the in-person classroom:
 - Exclusion from being selected as a group member
 - Harassment
 - Negative comments about race or religion
 - Asked to “perform” their race
 - Excluded from discussion
 - Assigned easier tasks
 - Minimization of contributions.
- These same behaviors can be seen in the online group work environment.

Microaggressions Can Be Difficult to Recognize.

- They might be beyond an instructor's awareness of another culture's sensitivities or experiences. They can be subtle.
- Offended students quickly perceive the insult.
 - Students are often reluctant to alert the instructor.
- Aggrieved student strategies
 - Ignore the behavior (no posted responses)
 - Agree to disagree
 - Attempt to positively engage the peer, often with a high level of sophistication
 - Vigorously and angrily contests content; doesn't grant "the last word."

Microaggressions Are Often Embedded in Voluminous Text Entries.

- Microaggressions can be easily missed by well-meaning instructors who “speed read” through hundreds of posted discussion threads.
- Microaggressors are often repeat offenders.
 - The discovery of one microaggression should activate an instructor’s careful review of all prior posts by that student, and vigilant attention to future posts.
- Students who habitually post microaggressions, often do so in tandem with one or two other students.
- Some become so obsessed with producing offensive discourse and the attention this affords, that they do not complete the required assignments.

Tips-offs to Potential Microaggressors in Online Discussions

- *“I don’t mean to offend, but here is what I think.” “Allow me to apologize in advance.” “I’m so sorry if I offended.”*
- A cheerful and gleeful affect; little or no remorse.
- Brazen posting of a thinly veiled variation of a highly offensive word.
- Persistent, lengthy, opinionated, and unsubstantiated responses.
 - Two or three students consistently respond and validate one other.
 - Long and even longer responses, delivered with increasing rapidity, as if the responses were “canned.”

Recognizing Microaggressions in Online Group Work

- When an otherwise competent (but “different”) student under-achieves because they are diminished, or “shut-out.”
- When others take credit for a student’s accomplishments.
- Instructor strategies:
 - Review the required data (posts and e-mails) documenting group process.
 - Don’t totally rely on “peer ratings”
 - Aggrieved students typically don’t complain; ask them what occurred.
- Microaggressions have been seen directed toward racial minorities; students who work with less flexible schedules; identifiable student athletes; students with serious health issues; and anyone who is perceived as “a different” person in a group.

Was the Microaggression Deliberate?

- Instructors and students might not be certain whether the microaggressions were intentional or non-intentional.
- A lack of intent does not mitigate the damaging effects to students and the learning environment.

Who Bears Responsibility for Dealing with Microaggressions?

- **Laissez-faire approach/The Peer Community:**
 - “The online community will monitor itself.”
- **Proactive, risk avoidant approach/The Instructor:**
 - The faculty member is an agent of the University, and should therefore discourage and contest microaggressions.
 - Unlike within the in-person classroom, online microaggressions are committed to text and preserved.
 - Students deserve a comfortable, non-hostile learning environment.
 - Failure to contest a microaggression can suggest instructor agreement or complicity.

Preventative Management Strategies

- **Set Expectations for Civility**
 - Via syllabus, announcements and discussion board management.
 - Articulate expectations for inclusive, respectful, and documented group work.
- **Model Inclusive and Respectful Behavior**
 - Respond to discussion posts ignored by other students
 - Select inclusive readings, graphics, and videos
 - Employ “bias free” language
 - Construct web accessible courses to accommodate students with disabilities
- **Exercise “Mindful” Topic Selection**

Potential Instructor Responses

- **Remove a highly offensive microaggression**
 - React quickly, but first consult with your department and/or university legal counsel; take care not to violate freedom of expression.
 - Invoke university processes and codes.
- **Discuss an ambiguous microaggression**
 - Encourage the student to revise or remove their own microaggression.
 - Diminishes “freedom of expression” issues.
 - Follow-up (2-3 times) may be needed.

Potential Instructor Responses (#2)

- **Create “teachable” moments.**
 - Engage in a **private** e-mail exchange or conversation with the student.
 - Ask, if others are avoiding their posts, and if so, why do they think that is occurring?
- **Avoid humiliating the student. Allow for a “win-win.”**
- **Maintain student confidentiality.**
- **Remain calm and firm; invoke codified boundaries (syllabus) and university codes of conduct.**

Healthy System-Wide Approaches

- The management of online microaggressions often requires resources beyond the faculty member.
 - Departmental and dean level leadership, and offices of diversity, legal counsel, and Title IX can provide valuable guidance and support.
- When university leadership is dedicated to upholding learning environments that are safe and free of microaggressions -- faculty and students need not shoulder this burden alone.

Survey: Student Perception of Online Class Climate

This is an anonymous survey, designed to determine students' perceptions of the class climate in our online course:

{T=True; F=False; N/A= Not applicable to this class)

- **T F N/A** 1. I have been asked to serve as a representative of my own demographic group (i.e., age, major, gender; disability, racial, religious, etc.)
- **T F N/A** 2. When working on group assignments, I am frequently assigned "easy work" that is not commensurate with my higher level of skills or experience.
- **T F N/A** 3. My fellow students often ignore or co-opt my ideas and fail to acknowledge my contributions.

- **T F N/A** 4. My group members often exclude me from some or all group discussions, e-mail or conference calls. They do not make an effort to accommodate my schedule.
- **T F N/A** 5. I feel invisible much of the time in this course.
- **TF N/A** 6. I do not feel comfortable posting my work and opinions in our class's online discussion posts.

Range: 0-5; 0 = do not agree at all 5 = agree to a great extent

- ___ 9. I feel comfortable with the respect afforded to me by other students.
- ___ 10. I feel comfortable with the attention/respect afforded to me by course faculty.
- ___ 11. This online class provides a comfortable and respectful learning environment.

Thank you!!

Questions and comments???

References

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