Navigating Microaggressions in the Classroom

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This document has emerged from working group discussions and is intended as a preliminary resource to assist instructors and TAs who are responding to situations involving microaggressions in the classroom. Work is ongoing, both at UTSC and on a tri-campus level, to develop further resources in this area, recognizing that microaggressions are a systemic issue. This connects also to UTSC's broader work in ensuring that its commitment to inclusion, Indigeneity, and anti-racism is embedded in our programs and pedagogical supports. We invite members of our University community to join the conversation and to contribute insights and suggestions towards this process (adteaching.utsc@utoronto.ca). In the meantime, we hope that this resource provides some basic information that will assist instructors and TAs as they are preparing for the winter term, since microaggressions have been exacerbated in online classroom contexts.

Navigating Microaggressions in the Classroom: Supports for Instructors and Teaching Assistants

Microaggressions in the classroom create an unwelcome environment and negatively impact the teaching and learning process for both students and instructors. Microaggressions may be peer-to-peer or directed towards the instructor or TA; they may also be perpetrated by the instructor or TA towards a student. Microaggressions can be exacerbated in the online context, particularly in emails, breakout rooms, chats and online forums. Recognizing the pervasiveness and the impact of microaggressions is critical to the development of inclusive and anti-racist learning environments.

What are Microaggressions?

Microaggressions are intentional or unintentional acts of discrimination, which are often rooted in personal bias and systems of power and may have hurtful impacts regardless of the intent. While their impact on individuals can be significant, the term "micro" reflects that these are brief and pervasive occurrences, which may be verbal or non-verbal. They encompass the following:

Examples of Microaggressions

- Hostile, derogatory, dismissive or negative actions, remarks or visual cues that convey negative ideas or stereotypes, usually against people from socially marginalized groups.
- Communications that negate, dismiss or deny a person's worldviews, feelings or lived reality.
- Subtle communications that demean a social group or identity that, for those who continuously experience them, are often more psychologically damaging than overt actions.
  - Questioning the qualifications or intelligence of a woman instructor
  - Challenging the authority of an instructor of colour
  - Making an offhand comment about accent or hairstyle
  - Using offensive language or the wrong pronoun to refer to someone
  - Questioning identity or ability
  - "I don't see colour."; "You're too sensitive."; "I didn't think you would do so well."; "Where are you really from?"; "Oh, you're so well spoken!"

Please note that individuals may also experience microaggressions in relation to a number of different aspects of their identity.

Creating an Inclusive and Anti-Racist Environment in the Classroom

Instructors and TAs are encouraged to build explicit statements into their syllabi that underscore the University's commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, respect, and anti-racism. The following offers an example:

Equity, diversity, inclusion, respect, and civility are among the fundamental values of the University of Toronto. The university is also committed to anti-racism and decolonization. These are the foundations on which behavioural expectations for this course have been set. Outstanding scholarship, teaching, and learning can thrive only in an environment that embraces the broadest range of people and encourages the free expression of their diverse perspectives. This is a shared responsibility, which requires us to foster an inclusive community and promote an equitable and anti-racist institutional culture inside and outside of the classroom, in person and online.

The syllabus can also be used to remind students of the University's Student Code of Conduct:

No person shall engage in a course of vexatious conduct that is directed at one or more specific individuals, and that is based on the race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status, or disability, and that is known to be unwelcome. The University takes the Code of Conduct very seriously and will impose sanctions on those who violate it.
https://governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/secretariat/policies/code-student-conduct-december-13-2019

Building on these institutional commitments, instructors and TAs are encouraged to proactively establish an inclusive and anti-racist classroom environment. The following suggestions may be helpful:

- Address the values of the University at the beginning of the term, setting out clear expectations for civil and respectful conduct, with no tolerance for racism or other forms of harassment. If you are the instructor and you are working with TAs, ensure they are aware of these institutional expectations and advise them that you, your department, and the University will provide support.

- Explain to students your own values as an instructor or TA and how they are reflected in your pedagogical approaches. Share your teaching philosophy so that students will be aware that it encompasses equity, diversity and inclusion, that it reflects a commitment to anti-racism and decolonization, and that these values will be supported, fostered and championed.

- Model inclusive and respectful behaviour in your own interactions with students. Set limits and convey authentic care and high expectations for students' interactions with each other and with you.

- Invite students to help set ground rules and a collective framework for your course that will encourage discussion while adhering to principles of respect, civility inclusion, and anti-racism.

- Recognize that stress and uncertainty about the world can impact students' behaviour in class. Acknowledge the impact that stress may have on students' behaviour. Address and share resources on resiliency, self-care, coping strategies, and social justice advocacy. Provide contact information for student support services such as Health and Wellness, Access*Ability* Services, Academic Advising and Career Centre, UTSC Library, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, and the newly launched mental health hub for students at the University of Toronto. Have these contacts handy to refer to when needed and provide a list of resources for students in your syllabi.

- Advise students that the University takes the Code of Conduct seriously and will impose sanctions on those who do not follow it.

- Anticipate resistance and consider explicitly teaching students how to create an anti-discriminatory, anti-racist learning community so that everyone in the community holds each other accountable.
    - Set procedures and expectations, and repeat them at the beginning of each class.
    - Set up an inclusive and safe space in the classroom, and prioritize opportunities to build community. (Build in social/sharing support moments; acknowledge challenges and disturbances.) Explain what community is going to feel like in your classroom.
    - Be intentional in establishing and modelling community expectations, values and behaviours; rely on them in addressing microaggressions and call out and call in people who do not respect them.
    - Address power and learning relationships. Be aware of power dynamics and the authority that you as the instructor or TA have over students.

- Recognize differences between/across populations group and model microaffirmations, especially to students who may be likely to feel underrepresented or invisible. For example, provide positive feedback to students who participate, acknowledge their perspectives and validate the experiences they share.
- Monitor virtual communities, recognizing that people may say things online that they would not say in person. Develop explicit expectations for collaborative learning. Provide guidelines and structure for students in breakout rooms and in online chats, reminding students that the framework for the course as a whole extends to all group and online interactions. If students don't exhibit respectful behaviour, consider closing the breakout room and disabling the chat.
- Critically unpack your own privileges and help students understand equity and unconscious bias. You and your students can take the Implicit Bias test and training through the following links: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/canada/takeatest.html and https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/vpdean/unconscious-bias

It is important to underscore that faculty are not solely responsible for these kinds of proactive strategies for teaching and learning. The current campus curriculum review is taking up these questions as a part of its priorities; tri-campus work in this area is also underway. One of the most immediate sites for systemic change is at the department level, and we encourage departments to consider ways to embed equity, inclusion, and anti-racism within discipline-specific training and supports for instructors and TAs.

Responding to Microaggressions in the Classroom

Even with proactive frameworks in place, microaggressions may occur. If you are an instructor or TA and you witness a microaggession in your class, you have a responsibility to respond. Do not ignore the behaviour without a set plan to address it. It is important to intervene and address inappropriate, disruptive, derogatory or offensive behaviour from the beginning. Do not wait to see if it happens again. Doing nothing may send a message to students that the behaviour is acceptable.

If you witness a microaggression directed to another student:

- Identify the specific behaviour of concern.
- Disrupt the moment by asking for clarification, listening to the response, discussing the potential impact on others.
- Explain the negative consequences of the behaviour to encourage students to change it.
- Guide the response and consider creating a word or a phrase that people can use to safely call out and call in their peers.
- Encourage students to use "I" statements to call out their peers (e.g., "I feel like," "I think," "I was disappointed," "I was uncomfortable," etc.), followed by an explanation of their peers' offensive
- behaviour.
- Use clarification words/phrases such as, "What do you mean by…" or "I want to make sure I understand you…"

If a student reports a microaggression to you:

- Listen and validate their experience.
- Recognize the emotional labour and the difficulty they may experience when coming forward.
- Consider intervening on their behalf or discuss what intervention and response may entail. Sometimes equipping a student with the tools to respond can be empowering, depending on the context and needs of the moment. In other cases they may need support.

If you are the recipient of a microaggression in class, by email or through comments in course evaluations, you should seek support from your mentor, supervisor, or Chair/Director.

- If you do not feel that you can address the microaggression yourself, consider asking your Chair for support. If you are a TA, you should seek support from your course instructor. The Centre for Teaching and Learning, and the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Office are also available for support.

If someone is critical of your inclusive teaching practices or if your class is resistant to them, reiterate why they are important and do not hesitate to seek support if needed.

If someone else questions your action or comment, be accountable.

- Understand and take ownership of your mistake.
- Acknowledge the realities of social inequities.
- Listen, reflect, apologize.
- Learn more about unconscious bias and racial microaggressions.
- Take the implicit bias test and unconscious bias module. https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/canada/takeatest.html and https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/vpdean/unconscious-bias

In all cases:

Recognize the significant impact that microaggressions have on individuals.

Try not to personalize the situation.

- Slow down, be reflective, consider actions.
- Take a breath and try to look at the situation as objectively as possible.
- Respond to inappropriate remarks in a professional manner and try to avoid creating an adversarial relationship where there is no room for movement.

Try to find out why the student is being disrespectful.

- Ask if their behaviour was intentional and if so why they thought it was a good way to proceed.
- Is the student trying to avoid the given task or request?
- Are they trying to gain control of the situation?
- Are they getting attention from you or their peers?
- Does the disrespectful behaviour constitute a pattern that extends beyond the classroom?

Look for learning opportunities.

- An educational conversation with a university professor or administrator can have a lasting effect on a student. Seek an opportunity to engage in dialogue about the situation.

Provide space for explanations and apologies.

Seeking Support and Reporting Microaggressions:

We acknowledge that the above strategies are not always sufficient and that microaggressions are a systemic issue. Some student behaviours may be resolved in the classroom or in a follow-up conversation while some may be serious enough to warrant formal disciplinary action. In all cases, if instructors and TAs encounter microaggressions they should seek institutional support.

If you experience microaggressions in the classroom or any other code-related incidents, you should report these to your Chair/Director. TAs should report incidents to the course instructor who may, in turn, contact the Chair/Director. Chairs/Directors may consider escalating issues to the Dean's Office.

Remember to document all incidents and maintain records of your interactions with students in an attempt to resolve them. Be factual and objective, and use quotations if possible. Keep and report any offensive emails. Take screen shots of inappropriate language used in an online chat.

All members of the UTSC community may seek guidance and assistance from the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and/or the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Office (EDIO). ctl@utsc.utoronto.ca   edio@utsc.utoronto.ca

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