3 Approaches for Confronting Microaggressions

Tyrone Fleurizard gives advice for reducing subtle yet discriminatory actions and comments in the classroom.

BY
Tyrone Fleurizard
July 20, 2018

Phil Goodman -- a pseudonym -- has been teaching the psychology of prejudice for almost a decade. He has every lecture memorized and every punch line down. Throughout the semester, students explore the many ways prejudice manifests, interrogate prejudice research and, at the conclusion of the semester, develop ways to reduce prejudice in their own lives.

Goodman's favorite lecture is on stereotypes. His reading for this particular lecture includes an experimental study from Stanford University social psychologist and 2014 MacArthur "Genius" fellow Jennifer Eberhardt and her colleagues. They sought to determine how stereotypic associations influence visual processing and attention. To do that, participants were primed with either black faces, white faces or no faces and then shown images on a computer screen of crime and noncrime objects that started fuzzy and became progressively clearer.

The researchers were testing reaction time, so participants were instructed to press a key as soon as they could make out the object. What they found was astonishing: participants took less time to identify a crime-relevant object when primed with black faces than with white faces. When primed with white faces, participants took longer to recognize dangerous objects -- so much so that if in a real situation, they could have been in fatal danger. During the class discussion, one student eager to contribute began reciting the study's methodology. When they described the primed faces, however, they referred to the white faces as "white" but the black faces as "colored." After they finished, there was a long pause. Microaggressions like these happen all time.

Microaggressions are subtle, discriminatory actions and comments toward people of color that may be racist, sexist or ableist. The late Chester Pierce, emeritus professor at Harvard Medical School, first coined the term in the 1970s as "subtle, stunning, often automatic and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put downs'" by offenders. These seemingly trivial slights have been shown to be related to negative health and academic outcomes for black students.

In a landmark paper, Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues at Columbia University described microaggressions as taking three forms: microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. Microassaults are explicit verbal or nonverbal attacks meant to hurt someone, such as using racial epithets. Microinsults are verbal and nonverbal insults that often carry hidden meaning, including, "You're pretty for a black woman" -- the implication being that black women are not attractive. And microinvalidations invalidate the experiences and existence of the victim, such as, "I don't see color. I see people for who they are." While microassaults are typically conscious, microinsults and microinvalidations are often unconscious. That doesn't excuse their use. It means we are not immune.

A challenge for education practitioners is how to effectively address such microaggressions in the classroom. While recognizing this is a delicate issue with no absolutely correct answer, I have three suggestions to attempt to address and reduce classroom microaggressions.

Use the syllabus to create the classroom culture. Faculty members and university regulations can often overlook the syllabus as a powerful tool for classroom socialization. Beyond outlining guidelines and policies à la carte, it's an opportunity for professors to communicate to students the classroom culture in a meaningful way.

Specifically, language plays a critical role in syllabus design. Researchers at Pennsylvania State University found that a syllabus's language influences students' perceptions of the professor, including how approachable and motivated to teach they believed the professor to be. Design a syllabus that lets students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, know that they are supported and that their existence, experiences and opinions are valid.

For example, a possible statement might be "I am committed to affirming the identities, realities and voices of all students, especially those from historically marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds. This course values the use of person-centered language and preferred gender pronouns, and respect for the experiences of others."

Use microaffirmations. According to Mary Rowe, adjunct professor of negotiation and conflict management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management, microaffirmations are "small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed." She originated the term in 2008 when she was tasked with figuring out ways to improve the workplace for underrepresented MIT students, faculty members and staff members. She saw that the "little issues," what she called microinequalities, could have destructive, long-term effects on an organization. She hypothesized that if microinequalities can have negative effects, then microaffirmations could have positive ones. She was right.

These small affirmations can be done by giving nonverbal cues, such as head nodding when students are speaking, giving credit to students by name, asking for students' valued opinion and endorsing students' ideas, among others. The effects of microaffirmations can be manifold. Not only do they affirm the identities of marginalized students, but, if used consistently, they may also be effective in reinforcing the classroom culture.

Address microaggressions when they happen. This is what Goodman did. After the student finished, he chose to address the microaggression by saying, "Before we leave, I want to point out what just happened. I don't think you're aware of what you said. What you said is an inappropriate term to refer to black people. I just want to make sure that you know that it's not OK, and it's hurtful. In the future, use person-centered language." This can be the most challenging way to address microaggressions in the classroom, as doing so involves risk and responsibility. But, regardless of potential conflict, direct but empathetic discussion may be most effective in dealing with microaggressions.

The alternative -- being passive -- may communicate a lack of empathy and concern for the well-being of targets of microaggressions, in addition to communicating that denigration is normal. In one study, professors and students were given vignettes describing incidents of microaggression and asked whether a direct response to the microaggression was more effective than being passive. The researchers hypothesized that teachers would perceive direct responses as more effective than would students. But that isn't what happened. While both teachers and students perceived direct responses as more effective, students did so at a higher rate than professors, suggesting that students may want their professors to confront microaggressions as they happen.

To support the most marginalized students, practitioners should make an effort to address the barriers associated with marginal identity. It's hard to contribute and thrive in the classroom when your existence is invalidated and you are made to feel like a bit player. Acknowledgment that microaggressions aren't so micro is key to creating an inclusive learning environment for all students.