

Microaggressions: Awareness and Action

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PURPOSE

This job aid outlines one practical strategy instructors can use to respond to microaggressions in the classroom. While it can be challenging to know how to respond in the moment, having a framework—like the one described below—can help you address these situations with care and confidence. This approach supports the creation of safer, more inclusive learning environments where all students can thrive.

BACKGROUND

The term *microaggression* was coined by Chester M. Pierce in 1970 to describe subtle, often unintentional, verbal or behavioral slights that convey bias or reinforce harmful stereotypes. These acts can cause real and lasting harm—particularly when they go unaddressed.

Over time, researchers have demonstrated the widespread occurrence of microaggressions and their negative impact on student well-being and learning (Boysen, 2012; Solorzano et al., 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Sue, 2010).

As educators, we play a key role in addressing microaggressions and interrupting harm. By being intentional with our language and actions, we can foster learning spaces rooted in respect, equity, and belonging.

TAKE ACTION: A FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONDING

The ACTION framework is one of many strategies you can use to respond when a microaggression occurs in your classroom. Practicing this approach can help you respond effectively in real time, while supporting dialogue, accountability, and learning.

Each letter in the acronym represents a step in the process:

A – Ask Clarifying Questions

Create space to better understand what was said and the intent behind it.

“I want to make sure I understand. Are you saying that...?”

C – Come from Curiosity, Not Judgment

Approach the conversation with openness and active listening.

If the speaker clarifies and you believe their intent was different than how it was received, it's okay to end the conversation—or gently acknowledge the potential harm of the original comment.

“I’m glad I misunderstood, because comments like that can sometimes come across as...”

If the speaker confirms your understanding, ask:

“What were you hoping to communicate with that comment?”

“Can you help me understand what you meant?”

T – Tell What You Observed (Objectively)

Name the behavior or language as you experienced it, without accusation.

“I noticed that when you said... it could be interpreted as...”

I – Impact Exploration

Ask about or share the potential impact the comment may have on others.

“What message do you think that sends to others?”

“What impact do you think that comment might have?”

“In my experience, statements like that can reinforce harmful stereotypes.”

O – Own Your Feelings and Perspectives

Share your own thoughts and feelings about the comment’s impact.

“When I hear that, I feel...”

“That comment reminds me of assumptions people often make about...”

“I don’t believe that was your intent, but it could be harmful in this context.”

N – Next Steps

Request a change and affirm the importance of a respectful learning environment.

“I want to remind us that our learning environment should reflect the values of respect and inclusion outlined in the Respectful College Policy. That kind of comment can be harmful, so I’m asking you to consider different language in the future.”



CONCLUSION

Using the ACTION framework can help you respond to microaggressions in ways that support learning, reduce tension, and model respectful communication. Like any skill, it becomes easier with practice.

If you’d like additional support in responding to classroom microaggressions or building inclusive learning environments, please contact the Centre for Learning and Innovation or review Assiniboine’s Respectful College Policy M10 for more information.

REFERENCES

Souza, T. (2018). *Responding to Microaggressions in the Classroom: Taking ACTION*. Faculty Focus. Retrieved from [Faculty Focus Website](#)



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