

Addressing Implicit Bias & its Impact on Teaching & Learning

Implicit bias is defined as “attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” (Kirwan Institute, 2015). While this bias is generally unintentional, it can do significant damage to the instructor-student relationship, and can ultimately negatively impact student learning (see studies conducted by Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh, 2012 and Cheryan et. al. 2009, 2013). The following are some examples of implicit bias common to higher education classrooms (see the Yale Center for Teaching and Learning’s “Awareness of Implicit Bias” website for more examples):

- Instructors assuming that students belonging to a specific identity group are experts on issues impacting that group.
- Instructors attributing a certain learning preference or ability to a specific population of students (e.g., African-American males prefer kinetic learning; Asian students are better at math and science than other student groups).
- Instructors assuming that comments and questions from certain student populations are meant to be inflammatory.
- Instructors assuming that students with physical disabilities also suffer from learning disabilities, and therefore require more attention.

Conversely, microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

The following graphic includes categories of and relationships among racial microaggressions (adapted from Sue et. al., 2007).

Racial Microaggression: Commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults.

Microinsult: Often unconscious. Behavioral/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity.

Microassault: Often conscious. Explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions.

Microinvalidation: Often unconscious. Verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.

Ascription of intelligence: Assigning a degree of intelligence to a person of color based on their race.

Environmental Microaggressions (macro-level): Racial assaults, insults and invalidations that are manifested on systemic and environmental levels.

Alien in Own Land: Belief that visible racial/ethnic minority citizens are foreigners.

Second Class Citizen: Treated as a lesser person or group.

Color Blindness: Denial or pretense that a person does not see color or race.

Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles: Notion that the values and communication styles of people of color are abnormal.

Myth of Meritocracy: Statements that assert that race plays a minor role in life success.

Assumption of Criminal Status: Presumed to be a criminal, dangerous or deviant based on race.

Denial of Individual Racism: Denial of personal racism or one’s role in its perpetuation.

Tips to Address Microaggressions in the Classroom

Adapted from the University of Denver's Center for Multicultural Excellence [website](https://tinyurl.com/udcme):
<https://tinyurl.com/udcme>

Do not expect students to be experts on any experiences beyond their own and do not make them speak for their entire group (or others).

Do not assume that the groups that you are talking about are not represented in the classroom.

Set high but reasonable expectations for all students.

Do not assume that all students in your class have good command of the English language or have intimate knowledge of U.S. culture. Many International students are not familiar with U.S. slang words or other language idiosyncrasies.

Work to create a safe environment for all identities in the classroom by establishing ground rules and expectations regarding discussions about and presentations on issues of diversity.

Debates are one technique that instructors often use in class to explore and get students engaged in issues. However, it is important to distinguish between debates and dialogues. Debates are about people discussing issues and competing to see who has the “best” response. They have the explicit assumption that someone will win and someone will lose. Dialogues, on the other hand, are about achieving greater levels of understanding by listening to each other as we delve deeper into issues. In the end, whichever technique you use, make sure that you establish ground rules and set the context for the activity.

Should you decide to express your political opinions in the classroom, understand that there is a risk of silencing students who do not agree with your views. As a faculty member, when you express your views to students you are doing so out of a position of power. That is, students may be afraid to express themselves given that they know your position on an issue and that their grade maybe on the line. Similarly, be aware of how balanced you are in challenging student opinions that do or do not agree with your own.

When bringing in guest speakers, make sure that your objectives are clear in bringing those individuals to class—clear to you, the class and the guest. If the reason is to introduce a perspective, try to balance the discussion by inviting different guest speakers with other perspectives.

It is ok to use humor in class. However, make sure that it is appropriate humor that does not target or degrade any student in the class or group of people overall. Classrooms are for engaging issues and learning concepts and new ideas; not having students, faculty or guests mock or denigrate people.

Recognize that microaggressions are also directed by students against other students. Be prepared to interrupt those incidents, too. Even if you are not sure how to address the climate issue in the moment, it is appropriate classroom management to stop problematic behavior immediately. You can follow up with individual students or the entire class later after reflecting and/or consulting with colleagues on how best to do so.

In those cases where students do have the courage to contact you and point out that they were offended by a remark that you made or an action that you undertook, listen to them. It takes a lot of courage for students to raise the issue with you.

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