Microaggressions in the Classroom: Realities, Suggestions, and Possibilities

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After an international student introduces herself as Aishah, another student asks, “Is there something easier we could call you?”

A black student asks his academic advisor about majoring in biology to which the professor replies, “Maybe you should look into humanities instead. Have you thought about African-American Studies?”

A math professor poses a challenging question that is answered by a female student. The professor seems shocked and says, “Wow, that’s right. How did you know that?”

What are Microaggressions?

These are three microaggressions that can occur in the college classroom. These often unintended slights can make a person feel demeaned, underestimated, or ridiculed on the basis of their identity. The term “microaggression” first emerged in the 1970s and has been adopted by the wider academic community after Professor Derald Wing Sue published Microaggressions in Everyday Life in 2010. For Sue, microaggressions define a “constant and continuing reality of slights, insults, invalidations and indignities [are] visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral and decent family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, students, teachers, clerks, waiters and waitresses, employers, health care professionals, and educators.” More likely than not, you have uttered a microaggression without realizing it.

Why Should You Care about Microaggressions?

Stanford’s campus is not devoid of microaggressions. Specific examples are described in an article by Alona King of Stanford’s Computer Science department. In “No, I Am Not Lost”, King describes how she is frequently stopped by other people in the Gates Computer Science building who ask her if she is lost. This microaggression communicates the idea that she, a black woman, would not belong in the computer science department. Frequent encounters like this one could have far-reaching effects on diversity in the tech industry.

As teachers, letting microaggressions go unchallenged in our classrooms can propagate stereotypes about the abilities of students belonging to a different race/gender/class. Moreover, not taking action against microaggressions can be interpreted as endorsing these
prejudices, which in turn can cause students to experience imposter syndrome or be vulnerable to stereotype threat.

**The Debate Around Microaggressions**

The 2014 student-led “I, Too, Am Harvard” project brought similar inequalities on college campuses into focus. In photographs, students of color held whiteboards with scrawled examples of microaggressions they had experienced: “Wow, you’re so articulate for a black person” or “Don’t you wish you were white like the rest of us?” The rhetorical project made visible implicit biases so deeply ingrained in American culture that, for some, they’re nearly invisible. It’s our job as instructors to make ourselves—and our students—aware of such biases, preconceived notions, and prejudices.

The “I, Too, Am Harvard” project sparked a flurry of national conversation, with dissenters claiming its messages had morphed into a culture of “vindictive protectiveness” that, in fact, hurt students by “coddling” them. Others claimed outspoken discussion of microaggressions used feigned moral righteousness as a tool to silence conservative viewpoints.

But outspoken promoters of microaggression awareness—people like Simba Runyowa in his compelling “Microaggressions Matter” published by The Atlantic—are helping to illuminate the importance of an instructor’s attitude in the classroom space. We as teachers have the ability to turn a moment of microaggression into a teaching moment. If teaching is fundamentally based in helping students acknowledge and understand biases, stereotypes, and assumptions that influence our own worldviews, why shouldn’t this extend to our sociocultural landscape? As Runyowa noted, “the lexicon of social justice invites students to engage with difference in more intelligent and nuanced ways, and to train their minds to entertain more complex views of the world.” If an instructor is able to turn a microaggression in the classroom into a teaching moment, there is the potential to help students realize that implicit bias is human—and, more important, that grappling with assumptions is something we all must do to advance social justice.

**How to Address Microaggressions**

Ana Perez’s *Facilitator’s Guide* to microaggressions explains how teachers can address microaggressions in class. A teacher might pause class following an offending comment to discuss the entrenched history behind the microaggression. Alternatively, the teacher could teach students the distinction between intent and impact: a key component of the “Brave Spaces” idea put forth by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens. Regardless of the specific approach in responding to microaggressions, pausing to acknowledge and address the comment and its impact can promote a more inclusive and positive learning environment for all students.