Managing Diversity and Controversy in the Classroom

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What’s Happening in the Classroom?

• “Students report that they are often subjected to [microaggressions,] microinsults … and microinvalidations by faculty and other students based on race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender expression, gender identity, disability, age, socioeconomic status, and other diverse dimensions.”

(Portman, Bui, Orgaz & Trevino, n.d.)
## Definitions of Microaggressions

- **Microaggressions**
  - “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)
Definitions (cont’d)

• Microinsults
  • “Behaviors, actions, or verbal remarks that convey rudeness, insensitivity, or demean a person’s group or social identity or heritage” (Sue, et. al. 2007).

• Microinvalidations
  • “Actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of people who represent different groups” (Sue, et. al. 2007).
Microaggressions vs. Fighting Words

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UNCC Policy 503
“Fighting Words”

• “This Policy prohibits the face-to-face use of "fighting words" by a student, faculty member, or staff member to harass any person or persons on the University campus or other property under University control. "Fighting words" are those personally abusive epithets which, when directly addressed to any ordinary person are, in the context used and as a matter of common knowledge, inherently likely to provoke an immediate and violent reaction, whether or not they actually do so. Such expressions include, but are not limited to, those terms or gestures widely recognized to be derogatory references to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, and other personal characteristics.”

(For full policy see: https://legal.uncc.edu/policies/up-503)
Microaggressions

- Microaggressions may be committed by well-intentioned people who do not mean to hurt
  - May occur on an unconscious level by those who are well-meaning

- Microaggressions may result in hostile and unwelcoming classroom environments.
  - This can result in students feeling angry and frustrated, and may cause them to withdraw

(Portman et al., n.d.)
Concerns

- What do I say?
- How much time should I spend addressing a comment made?
- Was it a microaggression toward an entire group or feelings towards a specific person?
- Others?
Suggestions

1. Do not expect students to be experts on an entire group. Avoid making them speak for their entire group.
   - When discussing different issues related to specific groups (immigration, same sex marriage, affirmative action), do not lock eyes with or call on a student whom you think represents one of those groups.

(Portman et al., n.d.)
Suggestions

• 2. Do not assume that the groups that are being discussed in class are not represented in the classroom.
  • Students identify with many identities that may not be readily apparent.
Suggestions

3. Create a safe environment for all students in the classroom.
   - Establish ground rules for discussions and presentations centered around issues of diversity at the beginning of the semester.
Suggestions

4. Be aware that comments made by students can be hurtful toward other students, intentionally or unintentionally. As the authority figure in the classroom, failing to address these comments can seem as though you are condoning them.
5. Address and challenge the comment, not the student.
   - You cannot force the student to believe what you believe, but you may be able to make them question their beliefs.
   - i.e. “That comment is very different than what I personally believe. Can you tell me why you believe that comment is true?”
Example 1

- A professor is teaching a lesson on current immigration laws in class. The professor asks a couple students to debate the topic; one student taking the position that all illegal immigrants should be deported, the other that these illegal immigrants should not be deported and instead be put in a program that works toward citizenship. Instead of asking for volunteers, the professor assigns a student of latino/a descent to present the position against deportation.
Example 2

- When discussing welfare reform, a student makes the statement that “Everyone on welfare should be drug-tested. My taxes shouldn’t go toward someone’s drug habit.”
Example 3

A male student says that “the Fair Pay Act is unnecessary. Everyone is paid according to their ability and if women deserved it, they’d be paid as well as men. Or they just need to be more assertive when asking for a raise.”
Questions
References

