

Microaggressions in Online Courses

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Abstract: A relatively small number of students post content in their online courses that is overtly and deeply offensive to other students and/or the instructor. Termed “macroaggressions,” these insults are easily recognized and may even be actionable when they violate universities’ codes of conduct and anti-discrimination policies. “Microaggressions,” the focus of this paper, can be less overt but equally hurtful. In the online course environment, such slights can be detected in posted class discussions, within submitted assignments, and in the work of online groups. Online microaggressions take many forms, both verbal and non-verbal. Moreover, it can be unclear whether a specific microaggression was intentional or accidental. Whatever the motivation, a microaggression can be detrimental to the learning environment. This paper addresses the challenges presented by online microaggressions and suggests strategies to prevent and manage their occurrence.

Introduction

Universities typically strive to uphold the expectation that learning should occur in inclusive and respectful environments. These expectations are typically codified via “anti-discrimination policies” and “codes of conduct,” with student transgressions subject to university judicial proceedings. Faculty members, by virtue of their service on the “front-line” of educational delivery, are by extension responsible for fostering and upholding civility in the classroom.

In this author’s experience, a relatively small number of students in online courses post content that is overtly and deeply offensive to other students and/or the instructor. Termed “macroaggressions,” these insults are easily recognized. “Microaggressions” are less overt violations of civility that are nonetheless hurtful. A now classic article defined racial microaggressions as: “. . .brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). These authors offered categories and examples of racial microaggressions, that while beyond the scope of this paper to describe, are recommended reading for instructors.

It is important to note that microaggressions can also disparage many other types of demographic (e.g., age, country of origin, religion, gender, disability, profession, socio-economic status) and personal (e.g., weight, height, health, attractiveness, relationship status) characteristics.

Because the publication of specific examples of microaggressions and management strategies in the online classroom could violate student, instructor, and institutional confidentiality, this paper offers a summary of the author's observations, and cited literature as available.

Microaggressions in the Online Classroom

Microaggressions in the online classroom can appear within class discussions (Hoekman & Spikes, November 17-20, 2015) and in the work of online groups. They are also seen in individually submitted assignments (e.g., when a student includes content about all but one major religion -- that of the instructor).

From an instructor's vantage point, there are many reasons why some microaggressions may be more challenging to recognize than others. First, a microaggression might fall outside of an instructor's awareness of another culture's sensitivities or experiences. Though offended students quickly perceive the insult, they are often reluctant to alert the instructor or respond directly to the aggressor.

Second, some types of microaggressions are so subtle, that they are not readily obvious to the instructor. Harwood, Choi, Orozco, Browne Hunt, & Mendenhall (2015) describe a range of microaggressions that occur in the in-person classroom, including exclusion from being selected as a group member; harassment; negative comments about race or religion; being asked to "perform" their race; being excluded from discussion; being assigned easier tasks, and the minimization of contributions. These same behaviors can be seen in the online group work environment. Behaviors that ignore, diminish, or under-utilize the skills and contributions of fellow students can be difficult to recognize by a faculty member.

Third, microaggressions can be embedded in voluminous textual entries – and therefore easily missed by well-meaning instructors who "speed read" through hundreds of posted discussion threads. In this author's experience, microaggressors are often repeat offenders. The discovery of one microaggression should therefore trigger an instructor's careful review of all prior posts by the student, and vigilant attention to future posts. In this author's experience, students who habitually post microaggressions, often do so in tandem with one or two other students.

Fourth, instructors and offended students might not be certain whether the microaggressions were intentional or non-intentional, though arguably, a lack of intent might not mitigate the damaging effects.

Finally, instructors struggle with the tension between limiting a student's freedom of expression and confronting the offensive content.

Management Strategies

Faculty members employ a variety of strategies to manage this uncomfortable issue. Some instructors proactively SET EXPECTATIONS within the syllabus even before the work of the class begins. A multi-disciplinary collection of chapters edited by Branche, Mullennix and Cohn (2007) describes strategies for constructing syllabi, courses and curricula; leading classes; and constructing and assessing assignments in in-person classes. This content can also inform online teaching.

Faculty can MODEL BEHAVIORS in their online courses that promote civility and respect. Strategies include responding to the discussion posts of class members that other students ignore -- ostensibly because of religion, ethnicity, gender, appearance (perceived via posted photographs), etc. Faculty can select readings and videos that are demographically inclusive, so that all class members see themselves represented in the class. It is also expected that faculty members use "bias free" language (Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force On Bias-Free Language Association of the Association of American University Presses, 1995) and inform students how to do so.

Non-verbal communication in the online course should also model culturally competent behavior. Graphics and photos posted on the website should be inclusive of all segments of the population. Faculty should construct web-based courses that are accessible to persons with disabilities. The use of time to communicate (i.e., chronemics), can be highly expressive; students notice when instructors communicate promptly and profusely with some students, but not with others. Faculty can examine their own response patterns, to be certain they are not inadvertently under-communicating with one or more segments of the population.

Some faculty AVOID TOPICS that might "open the door" to the posting of microaggressions, realizing that certain topics are more likely to "activate" and provide reinforcement to offenders of civility. An even stronger case can be made to not exclude topics that are germane to a course.

A particularly ill-advised strategy is to IGNORE overtly offensive posted microaggressions, and wait instead for COMMUNITY CENSURE. Passive instructor behavior can provide the impression that the instructor endorses the microaggression. A lack of instructor response unfairly places the burden on the student's peers to mediate the behavior, and can expose the university to grievances for failing to provide a non-discriminatory class environment. The online classroom is especially vulnerable to complaints, because instructor and student responses are typed and posted.

In this author's experience, even when fellow students provide the most diplomatic of feedback, microaggressors often persist in posting increasingly lengthy responses. Some provide a long list of opinionated, unsubstantiated references, as if citing fallacious references justifies the microaggression. On occasion, a dyad or triad of microaggressors may form. (Often, they know each other from prior online classes.) These students

voluminously respond to each other's discussion posts, even repeating the theme of the microaggression. Early tip-offs to this behavior are statements such as: "I don't mean to offend anyone," and later, "I'm sorry if I offended anyone." An offender may even deploy an invented but suggestive variation of an offensive word. Student responses vary. Some students ignore the behavior; some patiently offer diplomatic responses that contest the behavior and then praise subsequent positive interaction; and others engage in direct and angry confrontation.

If a discussion post is obliquely and ambiguously offensive, another instructor strategy is to PRIVATELY COMMUNICATE WITH THE STUDENT via a concise but directly worded e-mail. (This author transmits the e-mail with a request for a delivery receipt, a high priority designation, and a response date requested.) The student is encouraged to reflect upon how their post might offend others (including the instructor), and to consider immediately revising or removing their post. In one instance, this strategy resulted in a second and third posted revision that while less offensive, still constituted a microaggression. The instructor communicated with the student a second and a third time until a non-offensive revision was posted. Often, such students apologize profusely and thank the instructor. Some students repeat the behavior; others learn from the experience.

When a discussion post is sufficiently offensive that other students avoid commenting, it can be effective to ask the student if they have observed that no one has responded to their post, and ask them to posit why that is the case. Some students who post microaggressions seem to crave attention – even if that consists of negative reinforcement in the form of arguments or condemnations.

Instructors can POST AN ANNOUNCEMENT that restates the value they place on civility. The announcement need not specifically refer to the offending microaggression. This tactic can effectively shift the behavior of a microaggressor—without violating student privacy. This action very importantly sends a clear signal to the entire class that the instructor is aware and attentive to such matters.

Still other instructors quickly REMOVE a highly offensive macroaggression or microaggression from the course site, with or without directly censoring the post. As a cautionary measure, faculty might CONSULT WITH THEIR DEPARTMENT AND UNIVERSITY LEGAL COUNSEL, to be certain that any removal of content, or suggestion of a negative grade, does not violate a student's right to free expression.

A final option is to INVOKE CODES OF CONDUCT AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION POLICY. The instructor ultimately has a responsibility to provide the entire class with a hospitable learning environment and uphold the values of the institution.

Set Expectations for a Positive Classroom Climate and Check Perceptions

An effective approach to increasing positive behaviors in the educational setting is for leadership to express clear and attainable expectations, collect data, and report and act upon the findings. A survey of class climate can be posted as an addendum to the

syllabus, with the expectation that all students will anonymously complete the survey mid-course and/or the final week of course, or, at their discretion as the course progresses. A sample survey is included in the Appendix.

System Wide Approaches

Most recently, universities are developing strategies to recognize and manage microaggressions. Within a comprehensive report on microaggressions authored by Harwood, Choi, Orozco, Browne Hunt, & Mendenhall, (2015) the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign has developed campus recommendations to train faculty and staff; evaluate campus leadership; educate and empower students; and encourage a campus-wide dialogue. Their recommendations apply well to online classes.

The management of online microaggressions often requires resources beyond the faculty member. Departmental and dean level leadership, and offices of diversity, legal counsel, and Title IX can provide valuable guidance and support. When university leadership is dedicated to upholding learning environments that are safe and free of microaggressions, faculty and students need not shoulder this burden alone.

References

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APPENDIX

Survey: Student Perception of Online Class Climate

This is an anonymous survey, designed to determine students' perceptions of the class climate in our online course:

{T=True; F=False; N/A= Not applicable to this class)

T F N/A 1. I have been asked to serve as a representative of my own demographic group (i.e., age, major, gender; disability, racial, religious, etc.)

T F N/A 2. When working on group assignments, I am frequently assigned "easy work" that is not commensurate with my higher level of skills or experience.

T F N/A 3. My fellow students often ignore or co-opt my ideas and fail to acknowledge my contributions.

T F N/A 4. My group members often exclude me from some or all group discussions, e-mail or conference calls. They do not make an effort to accommodate my schedule.

T F N/A 5. I feel invisible much of the time in this course.

TF N/A 6. I do not feel comfortable posting my work and opinions in our class's online discussion posts.

T F N/A 7. The class syllabus does not set clear expectations for civil behavior.

T F N/A 8. The faculty member does not effectively manage online incivility.

Range: 0-5; 0 = do not agree at all 5 = agree to a great extent

___ 9. I feel comfortable with the respect afforded to me by other students.

___ 10. I feel comfortable with the attention/ respect afforded to me by course faculty.

___ 11. This online class provides a comfortable and respectful learning environment.