

Responding to Microaggressions in the Classroom: Taking ACTION

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- [Tasha Souza, PhD](#)



The term “microaggression” was coined in 1970 to name relatively slight, subtle, and often unintentional offenses that cause harm (Pierce, 1970). Since then, a substantial body of research on microaggressions has demonstrated their prevalence and harmful effects (Boysen, 2012; Solorzan, et. al., 2010; Suárez-Orozco, et. al., 2015; Sue, 2010).

Whether an observer, the target, or the unintentional perpetrator of microaggressions, faculty often don’t know how to respond to them in the moment. We may feel frozen (if the observer) or defensive (if the target or perpetrator). How we respond can shift the communication climate from supportive to defensive, which can have an adverse effect on student learning and comfort (Dallimore, et al, 2005; Souza, et al, 2010). Despite the feelings of paralysis or reactivity that tend to emerge in response to microaggressions in the classroom, certain practices can be implemented to increase the likelihood of maintaining a supportive climate. The following communication framework is offered as one of many possible response strategies to help faculty feel better equipped to effectively respond when a microaggression occurs. I developed this framework (first introduced in Chueng, Ganote, & Souza, 2016) as an interactive response one could take to a microaggression by a student in the classroom. The acronym and steps below provide a guide on how to take **ACTION** rather than feeling frozen when faced with a microaggression.

Ask clarifying questions to assist with understanding intentions.

“I want to make sure that I understand what you were saying. Were you saying that...?”

Come from curiosity not judgment.

- Listen actively and openly to their response.
- If they disagree with your paraphrase and clarify a different meaning, you could end the conversation. If you suspect they are trying to “cover their tracks,” you may consider making a statement about the initial comment to encourage learning.

“I’m glad to hear I misunderstood you, because, as you know, such comments can be...”

- If they agree with your paraphrase, explore their intent behind making the comment.

“Can you tell me what you were you hoping to communicate with that comment?”

“Can you please help me understand what you meant by that?”

Tell what you observed as problematic in a factual manner.

“I noticed that . . .”

Impact exploration: ask for, and/or state, the potential impact of such a statement or action on others.

“What do you think people think when they hear that type of comment?”

“As you know, everything speaks. What message do you think such a comment sends?”

“What impact do you think that comment could have on ...”

Own your own thoughts and feelings around the impact.

“When I hear your comment I think/feel...”

“Many people might take that comment to mean...”

“In my experience, that comment can perpetuate negative stereotypes and assumptions about... I would like to think that is not your intent.”

Next steps: Request appropriate action be taken.

“Our class is a learning community, and such comments make it difficult for us to focus on learning because people feel offended. So I am going to ask you to refrain from stating your thoughts in that manner in the future. Can you do that please?”

“I encourage you to revisit your view on X as we discuss these issues more in class.”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d consider using a different term because it is inconsistent with our course agreement regarding X...”

When practiced, the ACTION framework can be a tool that is quickly retrieved out of your mental toolbox to organize your thoughts and unpack the microaggression in a way that addresses the situation and cools down tension. When students make comments that are microaggressive in the classroom, doing nothing is a damaging option (Souza, Vizenor, Sherlip, & Raser, 2016). Instead, we can engage thoughtfully and purposively in strategies that maintain a positive climate that is conducive to learning and models the skills needed in responding to microaggressions in any context (Souza, 2016).

For more on microaggressions, including how to cultivate a classroom environment that limits them, join Tasha Souza for **What are Microaggressions and What Can I Do About Them?** [Now available on-demand »](#)

Sources & Resources

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