

# Addressing Microaggressions – A Focus on the Little Things

Presented by Joel Portman and Javier Ogaz

11<sup>th</sup> White Privilege Conference – La Crosse, Wisconsin

Microaggressions in universities against students and between students, representing a diversity of groups, continue to be a challenge. Students report that they are often subjected to insults and invalidations by faculty and other students based on race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender expression, gender identity, disability, and other diverse dimensions. It is clear from the literature that microaggressions are often perpetuated, not by spiteful and bigoted people, but instead are undertaken at the unconscious level by well meaning and caring individuals. The bottom line is that microaggressions result in hostile and unwelcoming classroom environments. Both students and faculty play a role and have a responsibility in creating safe and inclusive classroom environments.

*This document is based on the paper “Microaggressions in the Classroom” by Joel Portman, Tuyen Trisa Bui, Javier Ogaz, and Jesus Trevino produced for the University of Denver’s 8<sup>th</sup> Diversity Summit on Inclusive Excellence. It is available online at [http://ctl.du.edu/images/stories/teaching\\_resources/microaggression\\_in\\_the\\_classroom.pdf](http://ctl.du.edu/images/stories/teaching_resources/microaggression_in_the_classroom.pdf).*

## Definitions of Microaggressions

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)

Microinsults are 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 are actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of people who represent different groups (Sue, et. al. 2007).

Microaggressions cut across all social identities including race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability status, socio-economic class, and other important social dimensions.

## Examples of Microaggressions

Continuing to mispronounce the names of students after they have corrected you time and time again.

*“Is Jose Cuinantila here? I am here, but my name is Jesús Quintanilla.”*

Scheduling tests and project due dates on religious or cultural holidays.

*“It has just been pointed out to me that I scheduled the mid-term during Rosh HaShanah, but we are okay because I don’t see any Jewish students in the class.”*

Singling students out in class because of their backgrounds.

*“You’re Asian! Can you tell us what the Japanese think about our trade policies?”*

Expressing racially charged political opinions in class assuming that the targets of those opinions do not exist in class.

*“I think illegal aliens are criminals because they are breaking the law. They need to be sent back to Mexico.”*

Ignoring student-to-student microaggressions, even when the interaction is not course-related.

*“Don’t be retarded! That party this weekend was so gay.”*

Arranging the classroom by height.

*“Will all of the short people move up to the first two rows?”*

Asking people with hidden disabilities to identify themselves in class.

*“This is the last time that I am going to ask. Anybody with a disability who needs extra help, raise your hand!”*

Assigning projects that ignore differences in socioeconomic class status.

*“For this class, you are required to visit four art galleries located in the downtown area. The entrance fees vary but I am sure you can afford it.”*

Assigning class projects that are heterosexist, sexist, racist, or promote other oppressions.

*“For the class project, I want you to think about a romantic relationship that you have had with a member of the opposite sex. Think and write about your observations.”*

### **Example of Ways to Address Microaggressions**

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 often used in class and in groups 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. Whichever technique you use, establish ground rules and set the context for the activity.

When you are studying and discussing different group identities or issues related to specific groups (immigration, same sex marriage, affirmative action), do not lock eyes with someone whom you think represents one of those groups. Your action assumes the identities and opinions of the individual, potentially “outs” that person, and puts the individual on the spot. In addition, everyone else will also notice what you are doing.

Set high expectations for all students. For example: “You are all very bright and talented. I know that you will do well in my class. I have high expectations for everyone of you.” In contrast, do not say: “Those of you from West High School will probably need a lot of help in my class.”

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). For example, just because a student is Latino does not mean that they have an academic background in the study of Latinos. The same can be said about individuals with disabilities, members of the GLBTIQ community, etc.

Address issues in a timely manner – after class, the next day, etc. Talk to a student or professor privately. Do not be afraid to approach a professor or their department chair (if necessary). Do not beat around the bush. If something is bothering you, give the context, state what it was, and explain why it is a problem.

Know about and utilize the resources your institution/organization has available to you. Do not be afraid to learn and address what you and others are doing in a proactive, positive manner.

### **Contact Information**

Joel Portman    [jportman@du.edu](mailto:jportman@du.edu)    314-607-7988  
Javier Ogaz    [jogaz@du.edu](mailto:jogaz@du.edu)    303-517-9154

### **References**

Sue, D. W.; Bucceri, J.; Lin, A. I; Nadal, K. L.; and Torino, G. C. (2007). Racial microaggressions and the Asian American Experience. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*. Vol. 13. No. 1. pp. 7281.

Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69, 6073.

For a resource on student experiences being singled out in the classroom, visit <http://ctl.du.edu/index.php/teaching-resources/du-teaching-resources/236-singled-out>.