

# Responding to Microaggressions in the Classroom: Taking ACTION

 [facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/responding-to-microaggressions-in-the-classroom](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/responding-to-microaggressions-in-the-classroom)

By Tasha Souza, PhD

April 30, 2018



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 microaggressions 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.

**A**sk clarifying questions to assist with understanding intentions.

*"I want to make sure that I understand what you were saying. Were you saying that...?"*

**C**ome with a perspective of 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?"*

**T**ell what you observed as problematic in a factual manner.

*"I noticed that . . ."*

**I**mpact 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 ..."*

**O**wn 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."*

**N**ext 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).

---

Join Tasha Souza on June 7 for the live online seminar **What are Microaggressions and What Can I Do About Them? [Register now »](#)**

---

## Sources & Resources

Boysen, G. A. (2012). Teacher and student perceptions of microaggressions in college classrooms. *College Teaching*, 60(3), 122-129.

Cheung, F., Ganote, C. M., & Souza, T.J. (2016). Microaggressions and microresistance: Supporting and empowering students. In *Faculty Focus Special Report: Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom*. Magna Publication. <https://www.facultyfocus.com/free-reports/diversity-and-inclusion-in-the-college-classroom/>

Obear, K. (retrieved August 12, 2012). *How to Facilitate Triggering Situations*. Online manuscript. Alliance For Change: Boston, MA. [www.AllianceForChange.com](http://www.AllianceForChange.com)

Pierce, C. (1970). *Offensive mechanisms in Black Seventies*. Boston: Porter Sargent.

Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60-73.

Souza, T.J. (2016). Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom: Concrete Strategies for Cooling Down Tension. In *Faculty Focus Special Report: Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom*. Magna Publication.

Souza, T.J., Ganote, C. M., & Cheung, F. (Nov., 2016). *Confronting Microaggressions with Microresistance and Ally Development*. Conference pre-conference presentation/handout for POD Network, Louisville, KY.

Souza, T., Vizenor, N., Sherlip, D., & Raser, L. (2016). Transforming conflict in the classroom: Best practices for facilitating difficult dialogues and creating an inclusive communication climate. In P. M. Kellett & T. G. Matyok (Eds.), *Transforming conflict through communication: Personal to working relationships*. (pp. 373-395). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Souza, T.J., Dallimore, E., Pilling, B. & Aoki, E (2010). Communication climate, comfort, and cold-calling: An analysis of discussion-based courses at multiple universities. In L.B. Nilson & J.E. Miller (Eds.), *To Improve the Academy: Resources for Faculty, Instructional, and*

*Organizational Development*, 28, (pp. 227-249). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Suárez-Orozco, C., Casanova, S., Martin, M., Katisaficas, D., Cuellar, V., Dias, S., & Smith, N. (2015). Toxic rain in the classroom: Classroom interpersonal microaggressions. *Educational Researcher*, 44(3),151-160.

Sue, D.W. (2010). *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.