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Microaggressions in Online Courses

Refereed Paper with Presentation (20 minutes)

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Description

A relatively small number of students in online courses post content that is overtly and deeply offensive to other students and/or the instructor. These “macroaggressions” are typically 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, these slights appear within class discussions, in submitted assignments, and in the work of online groups. Online microaggressions can take many forms, both verbal and non-verbal. 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, who serve 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. Violations of civility that are less overt, termed “microaggressions,” can be no less hurtful. Sue et al. (2007), in their 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.” The authors offered categories and examples of racial microaggressions, that while beyond the scope of this paper, are recommended reading for instructors. While Sue et al. (2007) wrote about racially based microaggressions, it is important to note that microaggressions can also relate to many types of demographic and personal characteristics.

Microaggressions in the Online Classroom

In the online classroom, microaggressions can appear within class discussions, in the work of online groups, and even in completed assignments.

From the instructor's vantage point, there are several reasons while some microaggressions may be problematic to recognize.

First, a microaggression might fall outside of their awareness of another culture's sensitivities or experiences.

Second, even in the online group work environment, microaggressions may not be obvious. Harwood et al (2015) describe a range of such behaviors 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.

Third, microaggressions can be embedded in voluminous textual entries – and therefore easily missed by well-meaning instructors who "speed read" through posted content.

Fourth, instructors might not be certain whether the microaggressions were intentional or non-intentional, though arguably, a lack of intent cannot 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 proactively SET EXPECTATIONS within the syllabus even before the work of the class begins. A multi-disciplinary collection of chapters edited by Branche, Mullinex and Cohn (2007) describe strategies for constructing syllabi, courses and curricula; leading classes, and constructing and assessing assignments, content that can inform online teaching. More recently, universities are developing strategies to recognize and manage microaggressions. Within a comprehensive report on microaggressions authored by Harwood et al, (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 dialogue. Their recommendations apply to online classes as well.

Faculty in online courses can MODEL BEHAVIOR that promotes civility and respect. Strategies include responding to the posts of class members that other students ignore, ostensibly

because of religion, ethnicity, gender, appearance, etc. Faculty can select readings and videos that are inclusive, so that all class members see themselves represented in the class. Faculty can also construct web-based courses that are accessible to persons with disabilities. It is expected that faculty members would use “bias free” language and inform students how to do so. Finally, non-verbal communication can model culturally competent behavior, even in an online course. Graphics posted on the website can be inclusive of all segments of the population. The use of time to communicate, (i.e., chronemics), can be highly expressive. Students notice when instructors communicate rapidly and profusely with some students, and not others.

Some faculty AVOID TOPICS that could “open the door” to the posting of microaggressions, realizing that certain topics are more likely to “activate” offenders of civility. The instructor might want to avoid providing a forum for incivility, and the attention the offender seeks.

An ill-advised strategy is to IGNORE microaggressions, and wait instead for COMMUNITY CENSURE. Passive instructor behavior can provide the impression that the instructor endorses the microaggression. This unfairly places the burden on student peers to mediate the behavior, and can place the university at risk for claims of failing to provide a non-discriminatory class environment.

Even when students provide the most diplomatic of feedback, micro-aggressors often persist in posting excessively lengthy and even referenced responses. On occasion, a dyad of micro-aggressors will form, exclusively responding to each other’s posts. Early tip-offs to this habitual 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 employ an invented variation of an offensive word.

Still other instructors quickly REMOVE a highly offensive microaggression from the website. If the post is obliquely and ambiguously offensive, an instructive strategy is to privately CONFRONT the student via e-mail as to how the post might have offended others, and ask the student to promptly revise or remove the post. When a post is so 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 why they think that is the case. When these circumstances occur, it can be effective to post an announcement restating the value that the instructor places on civility, as well as to directly censure the post.

Interactivity (for 45 min sessions)

Participants who are online will be asked to share “best practice” strategies to recognize and manage micro-aggressions in their online classes.

Audience: Intermediate

Tags: instructional practices, diversity, online courses