

I Wanted to Say the Right Thing

There is no “right” thing to say, however the “wrong” thing is to say nothing. It may seem awkward to disrupt at first, but say something anyway! The more you speak up, the more you’ll come up with approaches that feel natural and authentic. Every situation is, of course, unique and context is everything! Perhaps these categories of strategies will help you interrupt language (regardless of intent) that delivers a harmful impact.

1. *The stall technique*: If you are unable to think of what to say, or are too angry or triggered to respond, call for a “time-out.” Say something like “I am really uncomfortable with what just happened. I need to think about it and we will come back to it later.” Then, call for a class meeting or individual conversation after you’ve had time to think more clearly about how to respond.
2. *Make it personal*: Tell how it made you feel when you heard the comment. Use the relationship you have with the student(s) to build empathy and understanding. Say something like “I felt...when you said...” or “I am offended when you say...because....”
3. *Call it what it is*: That is *racist/xenophobic/transphobic*. If you haven’t already introduced these terms in class, take the time to explain what they mean and describe their impact.
4. *Use education*: Use accurate statistics, language, and history to respond with corrective information the students lack. For example, explain the etymology of the offensive word(s) used. Say something like “Actually the word *f*#%@!* means ‘bundle of sticks’ and comes from the Middle Ages whereby gay men were rounded up, tied together, and set on fire” (definition from Ausburn, 2005, p. 104). In the classroom, take adequate time to unpack this; perhaps offer a series of lessons on the persecution of gays in Nazi Germany before and during World War II.
5. *Reference norms or policy*: Most schools have basic building-wide rules such as “be respectful, be kind,” and these can be stated to remind students they are breaking these rules by using epithets, unchecked microaggressions, etc. Increased numbers of schools now have specific anti-bullying policies in place and when referring to that, you can say, “When you say..., it makes our community unsafe and those words are not acceptable in our community/class/school because we respect all people...”
6. *Ask a question*: Before intervening, you may require more information to determine a student’s intention and the context. Ask questions like, “What did you mean by that?” or “What sort of impact do you think...?” You can follow up with the “use education” strategy and a whole-group lesson to break down stereotypes, address microaggressions, and clarify language.

Resources: [Exploring Microaggressions](#) & [Let’s Talk: Facilitating Conversations with Students](#)