Microaggressions and Microaffirmations Series
PART 2: Recognizing and Responding to Microaggressions

Over time, microaggressions can inhibit the academic performance of students as they experience increased feelings of discomfort, self-doubt, isolation, and emotional exhaustion (Solorzano et al., 2000); undue stress and feelings of exclusion (Yosso et al., 2009); hopelessness and even post-traumatic stress disorder (Nadal et al., 2011). Additionally, microaggressions can often be explained in ways that absolve the perpetrator of responsibility, implicitly delegitimizing the experience of the targeted person (Sue et al., 2007). This type of gaslighting, in which the person experiencing the microaggression is made to feel that they are imagining things or being "overly sensitive," can be just as detrimental as the microaggression itself (Sue, 2010).

Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send
Before you can respond to a microaggression, it's necessary to recognize that one has occured. As noted above, in 2015 the UC Office of the President published "Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send," a list of example microaggressions. The following examples are excerpted from that list:

Microaggressions	Examples	Messages
Ascription of intelligence. Evaluates someone's intelligence or aptitudes based on their race and gender.	(To a woman of color): "I would never have guessed you were a scientist!" Or "How did you get so good at math?"	People of color and/or women are not as intelligent and adept at math and science as whites and men.
Assumption of criminality/danger. Presumes a person of color to be dangerous, deviant or criminal because of their race.	A white person crosses the street to avoid a person of color, or a professor asks a young person of color in an academic building if they are lost, insinuating they may be trying to break in.	People of color don't belong here, they are dangerous.
"Othering" cultural values and communication styles. Indicates that dominant values and communication styles are "normal" or ideal.	Structuring grading practices in such a way that only verbal participation is rewarded, failing to recognize cultural differences in communication styles, and varying levels of comfort with English verbal communication.	Assimilate to the dominant culture.
Second class citizen. Awards differential treatment.	Calling on men students more frequently than women students; mistaking a student of color for a service worker.	Men's ideas are more important; people of color are destined to be servants.
Gender/sexuality exclusive language. Excludes women and LGBTQIA community.	Forms that only offer male/female choice for gender; use of the pronoun "he" to refer to all people.	There are only two acceptable genders; men are normative and women are derivative.

Responding to Microaggressions
Microaggressions can and do occur in the classroom. However, their occurrence can be an opportunity to stimulate potentially generative dialogues, though success in facilitating such conversations depends strongly on instructors' abilities to recognize and respond to microaggressions in the first place (Sue et al., 2009). Below are some practical strategies to dealing with microaggressions perpetrated by students:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Address the comment.	Ignoring these comments can be tempting, especially if you feel uncomfortable, but that will send the message that such comments are okay.
Decide if immediately pursuing the topic is in the best interest of the class.	If necessary, count to ten and take a deep breath. If you feel unprepared to engage the topic, tell the class that you will talk about it at the next class meeting. Then prepare in the meantime, and revisit the topic at the next opportunity.
If you decide to pursue it, legitimize the discussion.	Avoid changing the subject or dismissing topics of race, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, disability, etc. as they arise (unless you are clear that you will return to the topic in the near future). This dismissal is itself a type of microaggression against some students.
Use a direct approach to facilitating the discussion.	Don't be a passive observer, or let the class take over the discussion. Similarly, try not to expect students to be "representatives" speaking for their identity groups, or to make up for your lack of comfort or knowledge. The A.C.T.I.O.N. Framework (Souza, Ganote, & Cheung, 2016) is one method for effectively responding to microaggressions in your classroom.
Validate the feelings of your students.	Avoid questioning, dismissing, or playing down feelings that your students have about issues of difference and power. They are trusting you when they share their feelings.
Be willing to accept a different reality than your own.	It's likely that if you have a different background and circumstances than your students, and the stories, feelings, and views they share may not resonate with your own.
Consider sharing the ways in which you have been conditioned by the circumstances of your life and society.	Revealing yourself as "flawed" will encourage students to take risks by sharing their experiences and thoughts, and communicates courage in approaching conversations about difference and relationality.

Additional Resources
The following are a few additional resources that can help you understand and approach microaggressions:
- "How to Be an Ally to Someone Experiencing Microaggressions"
- "Microaffirmations in Higher Ed Advising"
- The Microaggressions Project
- Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send
  - From "Fostering Inclusive Excellence: Strategies and Tools for Department Chairs and Deans." 2015.

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