Leveraging Microaggressions in the Classroom as Teachable Moments: Engaging in Difficult Conversations as a Starting Point for Change

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Abstract

In this article, the author examines current tensions and controversies on college and university campuses regarding microaggressions. She provides an overview of the construct and impact of microaggressions and the positions on both sides of the issue. She asserts that even with the creation of safe spaces and raising awareness about the damage microaggressions can inflict, there is no way to eliminate or ban microaggressions and that doing so would not address the underlying beliefs and biases that result in microaggressions. Instead, she argues that we need to have difficult and uncomfortable conversations that tackle microaggressions and the underlying beliefs head on. Doing so creates opportunities for learning and change in the classroom. The author provides multiple classroom vignettes, both from her own experience and those of other educators, about what this process looks like. She concludes by offering guidelines and recommendations for fostering these difficult and uncomfortable conversations in your own classroom.

Keywords: Microaggressions, safe spaces, bias, difficult conversations

Microaggressions is one of those terms that has only come to the broader social consciousness in the last decade or so. Discussions of microaggressions are currently ubiquitous on social media platforms and cable news. However, scholarly discussions about microaggressions date back to early work in critical race theory. Chester Pierce coined the term in the 1970s. Pierce and his colleagues asserted that microaggressions are the primary way that racist behavior is perpetuated in the United States (see Pierce, 1974; Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1978). Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, and Wills (1978) defined microaggressions as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of Blacks by offenders” (p. 66 as cited by Osanloo, Boske, & Newcomb, 2016, p. 3). Pierce (1974) noted that microaggressions are often unintentional or unconscious and therefore incessant and cumulative.

More recently, the work Derald Wing Sue and his multiple colleagues has brought attention to microaggressions. Sue, Cucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2009) developed a taxonomy of microaggressions based on their qualitative focus group study of 10 self-identified Asian Americans. Sue (2010a) summarized that taxonomy of racial microaggressions with accompanying examples:

- Microassaults: Conscious and intentional discriminatory actions: using racial epithets, displaying White supremacist symbols - swastikas, or preventing one’s son or daughter from dating outside of their race.

- Microinsults: Verbal, non-verbal, and environmental communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity that demean a person's racial heritage or identity. An example is an employee who asks a co-worker of color how he/she got his/her job, implying he/she may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system.
- Microinvalidations: Communications that subtly exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. For instance, White people often ask Latinos where they were born, conveying the message that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land. (para. 10)

Sue and colleagues' microaggression taxonomy has been applied across race, gender, and sexual orientation by themselves (see Sue, 2010b) and others. For example, in the context of microaggressions and sexual orientation, Swann, Minshew, Newcomb, and Mustanski (2016) identified experiences of LGBTQ youth analogous to Sue's (2010) racial microaggression taxonomy: anti-gay attitudes ("microinsults"), heterosexism ("microinvalidations"), and societal disapproval ("microassaults") (p. 1289). Swann et al. also identified a factor they labeled "denial of homosexuality" (p. 1289). Nadal, Issa, Griffin, Hamit, and Lyons (2010) proposed six categories of religious microaggressions: "(1) endorsing of religious stereotypes, (2) exoticization, (3) pathology of different religious groups, (4) assumption of one's own religious identity as normal, (5) assumption of religious homogeneity, and (6) denial of religious prejudice" (p. 297). Nadal et al. suggest that these categories are "based primarily on religion and are likely independent of race, ethnicity, or other variables" (p. 297).

While it is important to examine microaggressions as they are experienced by particular minority groups, it is important to acknowledge and draw attention to the fact that minority status is not monolithic—is intersectional. The term *intersectionality* reflects the reality that an individual's diversity may fall across or between multiple minority statuses (see Crenshaw, 1991; Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). For example, an African American gay male will experience racial microaggressions, sexual orientation microaggressions, and microaggressions targeted at both his race and sexuality.

Impacts of continuous microaggressions across time have consequences for mental and physical health, creation of hostile and invalidating campus environments, perpetuate stereotype threat, and lower problem-solving abilities and work productivity (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009, p. 183). The tangible effects of microaggressions over time for minority groups is documented and significant, and it's clear that there is a need for combating microaggressions. Blog posts (e.g., Stockman-Brown, 2019), discussions on social media (e.g., www.facebook.com/microaggressions/), business publications (e.g., Barratt, 2018), magazine articles (e.g., Martin, 2019), news stories (NBC News, 2018), and higher education forums (e.g., Fleurizard, 2018) are examples of avenues where individuals from various backgrounds are trying to educate the public about microaggressions and their impacts. This new social dialogue about microaggressions has both raised awareness and sparked pushback and outrage.

University and college campuses are one hot spot of controversy surrounding microaggressions as well as other types of language and speech in what Campbell and Manning (2018) refer to as "campus culture wars" (para. 10). The types of language and speech at the center of this controversy range from microaggressions, to specific course topics (e.g., Jackson, 2016), to safe spaces (e.g., Zimmerman, 2019), to trigger warnings (e.g., Kamenetz, 2016), to the

types of speakers invited to campus (e.g., Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Gerstmann, 2019). On one side are those who see the need to change and limit the ways certain types of language is used on campuses that may be harmful and offensive to particular groups. On the other side are those who feel that changing and limiting language is censoring speech and thought.

A Snapshot of the Campus Culture Wars in My Classroom

A first-hand example¹ can illustrate one way the “campus culture wars” can unfold in a classroom. In a course I taught, we were talking about the importance of having open discussions about complex and sometimes uncomfortable issues related to diversity. I started off the class talking about creating inclusive classroom spaces where *all* students feel seen and valued. I showed my student a segment of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2009) TED Talk where she describes what she calls the “danger of the single story.” We talked about how non-inclusive classrooms can sometimes result not only from students having “single stories” define them but also from students feeling completely invisible.

After discussing these two types of experiences, together we did a brainstorm-and-share activity where students shared times when they felt their identity in the classroom was seen through a single story or where their identity seemed invisible, or both. I told students to only share what they were comfortable with. A White male student in the class shared his experience of a “single story.” He shared that he had been raped but because he did not fit within the single story of sexual assault (i.e., a violent assault of a woman, unable to fight back, by a male). Those he told about his rape viewed his experience with suspicion and questioned why he “let it happen.” An African American female in the class shared that because of her race, she often experiences microaggressions such as people exclaiming with surprise that “you speak English so well,” implying that she “sounds White.” I was impressed and grateful that my students felt so comfortable sharing these personal, emotional experiences with the class.

Then, a White female student, who had been growing visibly frustrated in her seat, stood up and said that that issues of diversity like race are getting too much attention, that the country has come really far on racism, and that talk about race and microaggressions is just making things worse and blowing issues out of perspective. She continued, saying that things have turned around to the point that White students like herself are the ones being persecuted. She said that what are “safe spaces” for some students are actually hostile environments for students like herself who feel they have to guard everything they say for fear of being called a racist. By the time she was done sharing her feelings, she was on the brink of tears, her voice quivering.

Although this student’s comments made others in the class upset, I was also glad that she felt comfortable sharing her views and experiences. The length of the class period resulted in me having to pull the conversation to a close sooner than I would have preferred, given the intensity that had ensued. But I ended the class by pointing to the fact that these are extremely complex and important discussions around issues that cannot be resolved by pushing feelings and controversies under the rug. I also noted to students that entire courses are dedicated to unpacking these issues and that I was glad that they were willing to dig deeply and have this difficult conversation within this short time period.

As the rest of the class filed out, the White female student who stood up to vent her frustrations stayed after class to talk to me. She said she wanted to clarify that she is not a racist

but feels like the discrimination and silencing of groups of which she is a part, is neither acknowledged nor valued. She also said that it's not fair for society to blame her, as a White person, for past racism and perceived that issues of racial discrimination today, which, she said, are largely behind us. I sat quietly and listened as she shared personal experiences where she felt she has faced discrimination and lack of understanding from others. These included being judged for her political and religious views and being a victim of emotional abuse. She shared that a professor had told her a persuasive paper topic was unacceptable because it forwarded a view that the professor saw as problematic. She said it is unfair to be labeled as having White privilege when she has had to overcome many obstacles in her own life.

At that point she stopped and looked to me for a response. First, I thanked her for being willing to share her thoughts and experiences and said that I was glad she felt comfortable doing so. She responded that she did indeed feel comfortable and that if she hadn't she would have stood up and left the class. Then I tried to unpack her frustrations one by one and offer some alternate views and contexts. I explained that there is sometimes a tendency to pit types of diversity and accompanying discrimination and adversity against one another, which can result in the exact type of resentment, frustration, and anger she expressed. I said it's important to realize that we can acknowledge that racial stereotypes and racial discrimination is a problem while also recognizing that there are stereotypes about Whites, Christians, and Republicans. We can simultaneously identify that there are deleterious effects of experiencing homophobia *and* of experiencing emotional abuse.

Next, I addressed her anger about feeling that she should feel responsible, as a White person, for racism in our society and for White privilege. I said that often, we as White people can take this criticism personally, feeling like we are being individually demonized as opposed to stepping back and seeing ourselves as part of a larger dominant racial group in which we are inherently complicit; having White privilege isn't intentional. I said that an approach to tempering this frustration is to try not to react defensively at the individual level. Instead think about how, as part of a racial group that is dominant in society we can disrupt inequities through our individual actions.

Finally, I explained that White privilege is not monolithic and that intersectionality plays a role. I gave the example of how White privilege differs between White men and White women, between White men from lower socioeconomic statuses versus those from a higher socioeconomic statuses, between White women whose bodies fit within what society considers desirable body norms versus those whose bodies do not. Privilege in one facet of one's identity doesn't mean we don't face obstacles in another and that those obstacles aren't valid. However, I noted, we need to acknowledge that our Whiteness gives us privileges that other racial groups do not have. This student listened attentively through my explanations. I asked if my thoughts were helpful. She said they were and that, while she still felt frustrated, my ideas gave her a different way to think about things. I said that unpacking such issues takes a lot of time and that I was happy to talk about them anytime she wanted.

This snapshot of my class discussion and my conversation with a student after class demonstrates the raw emotions and controversy that microaggressions and safe spaces on university campuses can elicit (and the conversation in my class could have escalated in much more incendiary ways). This snapshot of my class also illustrates that talking through the issues

underlying microaggressions and students' feelings on both sides of the issue is valuable, even if that conversation is difficult and uncomfortable. The conversation also revealed that students who push back against attention to microaggressions and safe spaces on campus deserve the opportunity to explain their anger and discomfort. Shutting down the language and thoughts of the White female student in my class would have eliminated any opportunity for her to hear other sides of the issue and to reflect more carefully on her own views in light of new information.

In the next section, I share additional classroom scenarios (including another of my own) where difficult conversations occurred in response to microaggressions. While the stories of other teachers are from the secondary level, the scenarios could easily have occurred at the post-secondary level, and the strategies and routines these teachers used to navigate the difficult conversations are valuable across all contexts.

The Value of Difficult Conversations

In the scenarios that follow, you will get glimpses into the classrooms of four teachers. Heidi navigated a difficult discussion resulting from a racial microinvalidation. Samuel conducted a research study to see whether he could combat xenophobia and Islamophobia. Etta helped her students unpack a homophobic microassault. Finally, I share a conversation that emerged after a microinvalidation toward the LGBTQIA+ community. I follow each story by unpacking the particular type of microaggression and draw attention to focal strategies each teacher used to guide the difficult dialogues.

“I Wanted to Know What It Was Like”

Heidi Tolentino (2007) teaches high school English, and in her book chapter “Race: Some teachable — and uncomfortable — moments,” she describes a classroom experience where a White student’s well-intentioned comment was offensive and hurtful to a Black student in the class. In her multicultural literature class, she had chosen to have her 11th grade students read Sue Monk Kidd’s (2008) *The Secret Life of Bees*, situated around race and racism in the 1960s American South. Tolentino says she chose this book to “explore how race plays out in characters’ lives, which I hope will in turn trigger discussions about how race plays out in *our* lives” (p. 270, emphasis in original).

The controversial moment in Tolentino’s class occurred when she built on the experience of a Black character, Rosaline, in *The Secret Life of Bees* who was arrested on her way to vote. Tolentino brought in copies of the Louisiana voting rights test that was administered to Blacks who wanted to vote. She talked about the kinds of tricks used to keep Blacks from voting: “Imagine the fear that must have come with walking through that door, seeing the men with rifles standing a few feet behind you, and being handed a test, given 10 minutes to finish, and realizing that there was no way for you to pass” (p. 271). She gave the students the test to look at and think about. A White female student named Jessie was bent over her desk and was feverishly trying to finish the test in 10 minutes. When a Black female student named Carlin observed and questioned her, Jessie said “I want to know what it was like” (p. 271). While Jessie’s thoughts and actions, in her mind, were intended to empathize with what the Blacks had experienced at the time, her comment provoked Carlin’s ire: “You can never know what it’s like. You will never understand” (p. 271).

Describing the conflict that quickly transpired, Tolentino explained: “I knew I had to make a choice quickly and either cut-off discussion or open the door all the way” (p. 271). She chose to “let [the door] swing wide open” (p. 271). She began by acknowledging that talking about race is a difficult topic, one that people often avoid but that she wants to give her students space to explore. Turning to Carlin she said, “You need to know that when you say something like this in class, you have to be ready to explain yourself and have an open discussion...” (p. 271). What ensued was an emotional conversation between Carlin and Jessie. Carlin felt that it was offensive that White people could never understand the Black experience, and that they wouldn’t want to know. Jessie was distraught and was confused as to why she shouldn’t try to understand and why she should remain ignorant. Carlin countered that if White people *did* know, it wouldn’t change anything. Tolentino told them they were going to stop the conversation there for now but would return to it “over and over again”, and that she “appreciated their honesty” and “wanted them to feel that they could always stop our conversations and discussions to be honest about what they were thinking and feeling” (p. 271).

Unpacking the conversation: The conflict that spurred this difficult conversation in Tolentino’s class was based on Jessie’s statement, which was perceived as a racial *microinvalidation* (i.e., “communications that subtly exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color,” Sue, 2010, para. 1). While Jessie’s *intention* was to express empathy and understand the experience of racial discrimination, for Carlin its *effect* was to minimize the magnitude of the history of racism and the Black experience. A strategy that Tolentino enacted in this situation was to establish ground rules for the conversation: being able to express oneself; having to listen to the other person’s views; and being responsible for explaining their own responses. She also made clear that conflicts like this one are complex and cannot be resolved in one class period.

“Terrorists Come From the Middle East”

Samuel Troy Shepherd (2018) undertook a sequence of lessons in his seventh grade class, in rural Appalachia, in West Virginia to combat xenophobia that he noticed among his students. Students commonly uttered statements representative of the kinds of microaggressions Muslim Americans encounter on a daily basis, whether from the media, politicians, people on the street, or through direct statements such as “terrorists come from the Middle East” (p. 99). Shepherd started out by fostering an understanding of the sociopolitical and historical context in which his students (and their families) lived and which shaped their worldviews. Having grown up in West Virginia Appalachia himself, he understood the coexisting “modest, friendly, hard-working, and morally sound” community he knew and the “mistrust of outsiders” and persistence of xenophobia within the region (p. 98). The reasons, he explains, range from “the region’s history of outside economic domination to its inhabitants’ indignation with being called ‘hillbillies’—a group that is still socially acceptable to discriminate against” (p. 99). This context and the resulting attitudes—historical and political, national and local—permeate rural Appalachian communities and their institutions.

Among his seventh graders, Shepherd (2018) observed outcomes of such contexts, including classroom discourses and expectations that are informed by radical nationalism and xenophobia, education foci that do little to address global concerns, and Islamophobia that although not directly endorsed, is implicitly accepted in the curriculum (p. 99). Shepherd decided

to test whether he could disrupt his students' xenophobia through the presentation of new ideas and information, through his own teaching, and by providing opportunities for interactions with Muslim Americans (p. 99).

Shepherd (2018) began by doing a survey of his students' attitudes toward Muslims from which he concluded that they held "radical dispositions toward Muslim people and cultures" (p. 99). Shepherd wanted to teach his students to "demonstrate tolerance, understanding, and even appreciation of Muslim peoples/cultures via experiences that contradicted the images of Muslims commonly seen in the media" (p. 99). Shepherd's series of lessons included teaching his students more about the Middle East and Islamic culture and having first-hand interactions with Muslim individuals, which helped students disrupt their xenophobic beliefs.

At the conclusion of the lessons' sequence, Shepherd (2018) administered an exit survey to see whether his students' "dispositions and xenophobia" had changed (p. 101). He saw encouraging progress. Zero students agreed with the statement "Muslims cause all terrorism" and only two of the sixteen students agreed that "Muslims should not be allowed to live in the United States" (p. 101). Shepherd acknowledges that this work only represents "a base of practical global knowledge and cultural competence" but that this foundation is needed for students to "think more critically about their world" (p. 102).

Unpacking the conversation: The conflicts that Shepherd addressed in his classroom differ from that in Tolentino's classroom and the upcoming snapshots from Etta's and my own classroom. Shepherd identified entrenched, overt xenophobia and Islamophobia, as well as a range of microaggressions, particularly the endorsing of religious stereotypes (Nadal, Issa, Griffin, Hamit, & Lyons, 2010). Shepherd, like the other teachers highlighted in this paper, understands that changing beliefs and prejudices takes time. He also identified the problem not as the individual bigotry of students but as a problem resulting from the students being part of regional, social context that perpetuated such beliefs. In particular, Shepherd understood that a lack of knowledge about Muslims contributed to students' xenophobia and Islamophobia. His strategies included providing students opportunities to interact with Muslim Americans and teaching them more about Islam. Collecting data from the students allowed him to track changes in his students' beliefs and identify that part of disrupting bias is developing critical mindsets among students.

"Ya'll Make the Other Lit Circle Group's Work Look Gay"

In her recently published book on social justice practices in English classrooms, Ashley Boyd (2017) presented cases of three teachers, each of whom worked for social justice in their classrooms and developed social justice sensibilities in their students. The story I share here is about one teacher, Etta, who was particularly invested in creating safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQIA+ students and disrupting homophobic discourses in her classroom.

Etta navigated one such situation when students were getting ready to make presentations after working in literature circles. One of Etta's students, Kesha, commented on another group's presentation with the intention of communicating that their group's presentation was better than the other groups. Kesha said: "Ya'll make the other lit circle group's work look gay" (Boyd, 2017, p. 47).

Etta could have responded to this comment in a number of ways. She could have ignored the comment. She could have admonished Kesha, saying “Kesha, that’s not appropriate!” or “We don’t use language like that in this classroom!” and leaving it there, addressing the offensive comment but quickly putting the situation to rest. Instead, Etta halted the conversation and used it as an opportunity to unpack the common use of such language in our society broadly, as opposed to focusing on Kesha’s individual use of “gay” as an insult and centering Kesha as the problem. Etta said:

No, wait. Let’s talk about word choice in this situation. This is a word that is used in our language as a habit. It’s not Kesha’s fault. It’s habit. I don’t think Kesha means that the lit circles are interested in same-sex partners. What did she mean? (p. 47).

Etta concluded the discussion by talking about how language like this is ubiquitous in our society, hurtful, and can have damaging effects on LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Unpacking the conversation: Kesha’s use of the word “gay” constituted what Swann, Minshew, Newcomb, and Mustanski (2016) would categorize as a *microassault*. Although Kesha’s use of the word “gay” was not intended to directly disparage the gay community, her phrasing originated from the use of gay as a pejorative term stemming from societal disapproval of members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Swann, Minshew, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2016, p. 1289). Strategies that Etta used included moving the critique of the microassault away from Kesha as an individual and situating Kesha’s microassault as a part of a larger problematic social norm. Etta also provided her students with additional background knowledge to help them see the history of the word “gay” as a slur and the harm this can cause to LGBTQ individuals. Etta also had the students work as a group to think about what Kesha’s intentions were and how to use different language to communicate appropriately.

“But They Don’t Face Violence Like That Here in the US”

An example of a time when a microaggression occurred in my class was during a literature circle discussion about Sarah Farizan’s (2014) *If You Could Be Mine*, a realistic fictional account of two young women—Sahar and Nasrin—in love in Iran. The book opens readers’ eyes to the danger—including death—that Iranians engaging in same-sex relationships face (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015a, 2015b; Drossopoulos & King-Watkins, 2018). In our literature circles, each of my students took on a different responsibility, namely: identify particularly salient quotes from the book for us to discuss; prepare a summary of the book; find connections and relevance among characters, events, settings, and themes in the book to history and/or current society. The microaggression occurred during discussion of finding connections and relevance between the characters, events, settings, and themes in *If You Could Be Mine* and our nation’s current social context surrounding LGBTQIA+ issues and experiences. One of the students, a White, heterosexual female, commented that it was tragic to see the fear that Sahar, Nasrin, and others like them in Iran had to live with, including the threats of violence and death. She questioned, however, whether this book was useful in examining the context and experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the United States, stating that “Violence isn’t something that is a threat to people like Sahar and Nasrin who live here.”

I was initially stunned by this student’s comment. How could she not know of the discrimination, bullying, and violence (including death) experienced daily by members of the

LGBTQIA+ experience in our country? Similar to Etta's response and ensuing conversation after Kesha's comment, I knew that showing my shock and calling out this student could lead her to feel alienated and ashamed and would do little to leverage this microinvalidation as a learning opportunity.

So, I said, "Okay, let's step back a little from this. Although our government doesn't have a policy like they do in Iran, LGBTQIA+ persons in our country do face violence every day, far beyond bullying." I explained that often we don't hear about a lot about the extreme violence in the news. To make the point, I had my students do something a colleague and I had done in a conference session that was successful in driving home this same point (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015b). I asked "Have any of you ever heard of the "Bullet to the Head" legislation, formally entitled the "Sodomy Suppression Act," proposed by a lawyer in California?" All my students shook their heads. I asked them to take a moment and do a search for this on their phones. One by one around the table my students' faces showed expressions of shock, dismay, and disgust as they read the details of this proposed legislation. I pointed them to Part (b) of the "Sodomy Suppression Act" document, which states, "any person who willingly touches another person of the same gender for purposes of gratification be put to death by bullets to the head or by any other convenient method" and to Part (g) that states that "the text shall be prominently posted in every public school classroom" (Sieczkowski, 2017). One said, "I can't believe this is real." "I know," I said. Continuing, I asked "Can you imagine what it would do to a child who knew they were gay or lesbian to see a politician propose a legislative bill that would allow citizens to shoot them on site?"

We then talked about the spectrum of discrimination, bullying, and violence faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in the USA. We talked about how schools that have generalized anti-bullying policies that don't address specific underlying motivations for bullying do little to eliminate homophobic attitudes and actions among students. We talked about the disproportionate violence experienced among some in the LGBTQIA+ community, such as Black, trans individuals.

Unpacking the conversation: My student's comment is best categorized by Sue's (2010) definition of a *microinvalidation* but in the context of LGBTQIA+ identity: it served to "exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of" (Sue, 2010, para. 1) LGBTQIA+ individuals in the US. My student's microinvalidation stemmed not from harmful intent but from a lack of knowledge. Strategies I used were to directly expose my students to information that expanded their understanding of the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the US. Similar to my actions in the first story I shared and similar to what Shepherd and Etta did with their students, I also moved the focus of our discussion of this microinvalidation from the individual student's comment to the social context that can result in such comments (e.g., assumptions about prevalence of LGBTQIA+ discrimination and bullying; lack of attention in the media and policy to anti-LGBTQIA+ violence and death). While the specific conversation that emerged from this student's microinvalidation was not planned, my curricular choices to include literature that would expose my students to issues of diversity and build background knowledge to disrupt bias was intentional. I expected our discussion of *If You Could Be Mine* to result in difficult conversations that I believe are essential for my students and me to have.

Continuing Difficult Conversations

The stories above provide insights into the varying types of conversations that can occur in classrooms based on microaggressions. Commonalities across the stories provide insights and strategies for engaging in challenging dialogues in the classroom. Each story is evidence that having these difficult conversations is essential. Shutting down dialogue after a student's microaggression or admonishing the student and moving on would eliminate opportunities to help students learn to listen to each other, reflect on their own beliefs and experiences, and think critically about the larger social structures that shape our biases and misunderstandings. Looking across the classroom stories from Tolentino, Shepherd, Etta, and myself, some recommendations and strategies for navigating difficult conversations stemming from microaggressions can be gleaned.

Starting Assumptions:

- We should value and embrace opportunities for difficult conversations.
- We should understand that complex, controversial issues cannot be resolved in one sitting.
- We should acknowledge the legitimacy of all feelings and experiences.

Ground Rules for Difficult Conversations:

- All experiences and beliefs deserve to be heard.
- We must listen respectfully to others.
- We must be responsible for explaining our language, beliefs, and reactions to others.

Understandings about Microaggressions:

- Microaggressions are often unintentional but that does not excuse responsibility for their meaning and impact or the need to unpack them.
- Lack of background knowledge can be a major cause of microaggressions and unconscious bias and prejudice.

Teacher Responsibilities and Strategies:

- Teachers should develop background knowledge about issues of diversity and discrimination that prepare them for difficult conversations.
- Teachers should know their community and the particular types of controversial issues that may come up in class discussion.
- Teachers should have strategies for increasing the efficacy of difficult conversations, including specific tools to defuse moments of escalated emotion.
- Moving beyond the individual and personal to look at issues as systemic shifts students away from feeling personally villainized.

- We should help students to not only identify why some language is harmful but how to make different language choices.
- Make intentional curricular choices that afford opportunities for difficult conversations.

Example Strategies and Tools:

- Vanderbilt University's Center for Teaching (2019) recommends teachers be prepared with intentional strategies to help students navigate and learn from difficult conversations. One strategy for what they term "hot moments" that can "erupt" during difficult discussions is to have students "take a break and write out what they're feeling or thinking about the conversation. This can allow emotions to cool enough for the discussion to be respectful and constructive" (<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/>; VU's Center for Teaching website offers additional strategies and tools for helping students process difficult conversations).
- A strategy teachers can use to help students build reflective, critical mindsets as they engage in difficult conversations is the use of exit tickets. Students can complete exit tickets following a difficult dialogue where they can answer questions such as:
 - Did you feel that you were able to express your thoughts and experiences in our discussion?
 - Did your classmates listen respectfully to you?
 - Did you feel you were able to understand the thoughts and experiences of those who felt differently than you?
 - Did you listen respectfully to your classmates?
 - Did you change your mind about any ideas we discussed?
 - What are you still concerned or confused about?
- Teachers should also always be willing to talk to students more out of class to follow-up after difficult conversations.

By engaging with difficult topics instead of shutting down conversations, teachers can demonstrate to students that discussing their thoughts and feelings is relevant and that just because something is complex it should not be avoided. Students need to know that it is okay to engage controversial, sensitive, and difficult issues and that conversations about these topics will be uncomfortable. Conversations about microaggressions, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other topics of diversity, discrimination, and injustice will always be difficult but can be even more so if you, as a teacher, have not thought about how you would talk about the issue with students or navigate conflict in schools. Because of this unpredictability, teachers should work on being as prepared as possible for facilitating difficult dialogues and helping students engage in them in productive ways. I have found that reading about particular issues from a variety of sources (books, academic journal articles, news articles, posts on social media), talking with

others, and attending diversity workshops or presentations are ways to develop background knowledge about particular issues and develop skills for having difficult conversations. Naturally, the more difficult conversations in which we engage, the more prepared we are to have those conversations (although they are never easy).

Endnote:

¹ I have taught at several universities over the last six years, each with their own demographic and regional contexts. Here and elsewhere in the paper, I reflect on conversations that occurred in my classrooms in the past years but do not identify the particular institution or course names.

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