

TOOL: MICROAFFIRMATIONS

Office of Equity and Inclusive Communities and Teaching & Learning Commons

Overview

Microaffirmations are a simple but important way of promoting anti-racism and inclusion while consciously mitigating microaggressions within educational and classroom contexts (Boyce-Rosen & Mecadon-Mann, 2022). While everyone needs microaffirmations to thrive, they are particularly impactful and significant for [boosting the self-image and self-esteem of] individuals who have been traditionally excluded, underrepresented and silenced or marginalized, including racialized people (Logos Consulting Group, 2023).

Reflective Pause

Reflect on your current experiences as it relates to this topic.

Consider what you are looking forward to learning more of, or hope to be able to do more of, as you work towards developing anti-racist practices.

Goal

1. Faculty will appreciate the nature, value, and types of microaffirmations, and how they contribute to advancing anti-racism and inclusion in racially and culturally diverse higher education workplace and classroom settings.

Description

Rowe (2008), who coined the term, describes microaffirmations as “**apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed**” (p.46). Rowe (2008) contrasts them with microinequities viewed as “apparently small events which are often ephemeral

and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be ‘different’” (p. 45).

Context & Background

Rowe (2008) further characterizes microaffirmations as “**tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening**” manifesting “**in the practice of generosity, in consistently giving credit to others in providing comfort and support when others are in distress, when there has been a failure...**” or demonstrated in “the myriad details of fair, specific, timely, consistent and clear feedback that help a person build on strength and correct weakness” (p. 46).

By creating or fostering alternative positive and inclusive experiences, **microaffirmations help counter the negative or deleterious effects of microaggressions** on students from marginalized or racialized backgrounds (Boyce-Rosen & Mecadon-Mann, 2022).

There is empirical support for the concept and effectiveness of microaffirmations in the field of education and psychology; and evidence-informed suggestions have been proffered on how educators and advocates can employ them to support culturally diverse students in higher education settings (Koch, Knutson, Loche III, Lee, & Federici, 2022).

Types of Microaffirmations

Within a Critical Race Theory/LaCrit framework, Rolón-Dow & Davison (2021, pp. 251-256) identify (or typologize) four types of microaffirmations which educators and practitioners should consider in their anti-racism pedagogy and practice (as cited below):

1. **Microrecognitions** are actions, verbal remarks or environmental cues (e.g., artwork, signage and symbols) that **lead the recipient to feel that their presence, racial identities, experiences as a member of race-based social identity group(s)... are made known, made visible, appreciated or included.**
 - They often illustrate moments when whiteness as an institutional norm is disrupted. By giving visibility and appreciation to racially minoritized social identities and cultural practices, microrecognitions create a more expansive racial milieu for students
2. **Microvalidations** are actions, verbal remarks or environmental cues that **lead the recipient to feel that their thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviours associated with their race-based social identity(ies) or those of a group they belong to are accepted, corroborated, legitimized or given value.**
 - Microvalidations acknowledge that a person’s identity and lived experiences provide worthy contributions to understanding of phenomena or social reality.In

line with this concept, Delgado Bernal (2002) acknowledges that racialized students have been historically devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings; she suggests that critical epistemological frameworks (which include anti-racist curriculum and pedagogical approaches to learning and knowledge creation) should validate the histories, experiences, cultures, and languages of students of colour as holders and creators of knowledge.

3. **Microtransformations** describe actions, verbal remarks or environmental cues that **lead the recipient to feel that they, as a member of a particular social identity group(s), or the group they belong to are further integrated ...; or that their capacity for success or some facet of social or academic life is enabled, enhanced or increased.**
 - In these microtransformations, recipients may describe everyday ways that a process, policy, or initiative is beneficial to them as a member of a particular social identity group
4. **Microprotections** occur when actions, verbal remarks or environmental cues **lead the recipient to feel shielded or protected from harmful or derogatory behaviours, practices and policies tied to their identity.**
 - Within a similar context, microaffirmations have also been conceptualized as caring remedies that heal (Sabzalian, 2015)

In practice and for the most part, several types of the microaffirmations highlighted above may be applied simultaneously. For example, by intentionally (and respectfully) providing opportunities for members of racialized groups to share their perspectives and lived experiences in relation to a topic, you are both recognizing them (microrecognition) and legitimizing their experiences and knowledge (microvalidation).

The absence of microaffirmations in an educator's practice creates a void that allows microaggressions and other microinequities to dominate the experiences of students and colleagues. The result is detrimental to their well-being and success.

Conversely, when instructors or staff integrate microaffirmations in their academic and classroom practice, they combat unconscious bias and demonstrates that they value and respect everyone; such practices help to validate the knowledge and experience which others bring (Sharma, 2023). Indeed, microaffirmations contribute to higher levels of confidence, trust, and foster a sense of belonging while providing a strong foundation for academic excellence and career progression among people of equity-denied groups – who are usually the most impacted.

Considerations for Implementation

Tips for Applying Microaffirmations

What are some practical ways of practicing or applying microaffirmations (including microrecognitions, microvalidation, microprotections and microtransformations)? The following are some tips which educators may consider in academic, advising and classroom contexts.

They can also be embedded in curriculum, pedagogy and related policies to help enhance or transform marginalized learners' experiences. The following tips have been adapted from Sharma (2023) and Logos Consulting Group Blog (2023):

- **Compassion and empathy:** Demonstrate compassion and empathy in your relations with learners and colleagues through your verbal and non-verbal actions, including tone of voice, words, and reactions
 - Ensure that you are particularly mindful and empathetic towards the lived experiences and contexts of students from equity-denied groups
- **Intentional affirmation:** Affirming the achievements of others and looking for excellence in the work of others will help us avoid unconscious bias
- **Validation through small messages:** Use small positive messages (through reassuring eye contact, smiles, appropriate gestures and any other verbal or non-verbal expressions) that explicitly recognize and validate an individual and their identity, even in cases where you are not familiar with them
 - this should regularly apply to both Canadians and non-Canadians within your sphere of influence
- **Role modelling:** People are sensitive to the morale and happiness of those around them, and especially sensitive to the behaviours of their leaders. If leaders model affirming behaviours other students and members of the instructional team will likely follow suit
- **Recognition:** Keep an eye out for and recognize important events and moments (big or small) in people's lives as much as is possible, regardless of their background or popularity. Be generous with compliments where they are merited
- **Encouraging authentic participation:** Take note when students (including those from equity-denied groups) are not participating and find safe and encouraging ways to help them participate during class, group and individual activities. Don't assume they have nothing important to contribute
 - While avoiding tokenization, create conditions that normalize and make it easier particularly for people of colour to engage, speak up and contribute as much as possible

- **Appreciate people's expertise and skills:** The skills and expertise of people from racialized and underrepresented backgrounds are often questioned or challenged. Make it a point to acknowledge their expertise and skills and solicit their opinions and ideas
- **Undivided attention:** Listen attentively. Give undivided attention to someone speaking and ensure that others in the class/space do so too, including when a racialized person is speaking
- **Expressing curiosity:** Be genuinely curious about other people (students, instructors, staff) and invite them to share their opinions whenever there is an opportunity to do so
- **Intercultural learning and pronunciation:** Ask a person to teach you how to pronounce their name or an important ethnic term if you are not sure about the pronunciation

Reflective Action Point

Reflect on your learning as you approach the end of this tool.

- What changes to your practice do you hope to implement?
- How can this tool support your anti-racist practice?

Instructor Resources

Article: [Micro-affirmations in Academic Advising: Small Acts, Big Impact](#), - This article suggests ways to communicate and apply microaffirmations in college academic advising contexts, and specifically to student, staff and faculty dynamics

Article: [How to use microaffirmations to combat unconscious bias at work](#), - This resourceful article provides important background knowledge and some practical tips for deploying microaffirmations in ways that combat unconscious bias and promote inclusion in work environments. The suggestions are directly applicable to academic and classroom contexts

Tool: [KPU Resources on Campus to support students and staff](#) - This includes information about a host of the resources and services offered by specific offices and centres at Kwantlen Polytechnic University that can assist students, instructors and staff members who need help either advancing inclusive and culturally appropriate learning practices or addressing issues. The contact details are provided through which you can reach out to key personnel who can provide you with professional and culturally appropriate support based on college policies

Website: [Accentuate the Positive](#), - This insightful resource unpacks how small actions have the power to make people feel welcomed and valued in learning and classroom settings. It also draws on a study on positive intergroup relations which confirms that positive, welcoming and inclusive attitudes

by predominantly white teachers can enhance learning experiences and academic outcomes of mostly minority students

Article: [The Biology of Positive Habits](#), – In this short read from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the author describes the simple steps through which the brain can be reprogramed/retrained to develop and practice positive habits that are relevant in educational contexts

Short Videos on Microaffirmations

These 5 short videos feature explanations, narratives and testimonial about the essence and impact of microaffirmations within educational and institutional spheres:

<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/16/12/accentuate-positive>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjI9ExT3fso>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElNw9VQr484>

<https://www.facebook.com/TeachingChannel/videos/3773914642656746/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WE-wuYLOYGU>

Website: [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#) – this website provides further information and resources about Microaffirmations, as well as connections to other areas such as implicit bias and intersectionality.

References

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