Addressing Acts of Oppression within Online Classrooms: Best Practices and Collaborative Solutions

Social Work Distance Education Conference

Amelia Ortega, Matthea Marquart, and Malwina Andruczyk

April 16, 2015
Workshop Components

- Presentation of the core theories and approaches used by this teaching team
- Overview of a turning point incident experienced in an online classroom environment
- Collaborative discussion regarding overt and covert marginalization in an online classroom

Definitions of language commonly used to instruct on systemic oppression
Overview of Transformative Learning themes and strategies for collaborative educational practice
Hands on application of principles to a case study from an online classroom
Community agreements

This session deals with a topic that engages our personal social identities.

What community agreements shall we make to create a space for respectful dialogue?
Your experience

Raise your hand if:
● You have taught a class in which one or more students directed micro-aggressions or overt acts of -isms at another student

Keep your hand up if:
● This class was an online class

Keep your hand up if:
● You’d like to briefly tell everyone a little about what happened
Your motivation for attending

Raise your hand if:

- You’re worried that in a future online class, you will face a situation in which one or more students direct micro-aggressions or overt acts of -isms at another student

- You’d like practical ideas for handling this type of situation (ideas for yourself or to share with others)

- You’re attending out of pure curiosity
Operating assumptions for this session

● Oppression is systemic and institutionalized

● Micro-aggressions are damaging and often overlooked and left un-addressed (Cognitive toll as explored by D. Sue Wing)

● Online learning environments require context specific strategies for emotional engagement
Core Elements of Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1978)

• Individual Experience
• Self-Reflection
• Dialogue
Definitions of language commonly used to instruct on systemic oppression

**Racial Identity Development**

Racial identity and racial identity development theory are defined by Janet Helms (1990) as: a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group. . . racial identity development theory concerns the psychological implications of racial-group membership, that is belief systems that evolve in reaction to perceived differential racial-group membership.

Stages: Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment

**Microaggressions**

Racial microaggressions are 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. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities. Microaggressions seem to appear in three forms: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Almost all interracial encounters are prone to microaggressions.

Meetings in which participants gather based on a particular social identity to discuss related personal experiences

Group members share similar social status, common goals, or are perceived and responded to similarly by outgroup members

The commonality of the in-group context and shared challenges foster an atmosphere where participants speak more freely or receive validation, without fear or defensiveness related to outgroup members contesting their perspectives.
Why do microaggressions matter?

● Standards of professional comportment for social workers
● Impact on the learning environment
● Impact of chronic stress on marginalized identities
● Responding as an opportunity to transgress typical acceptance/unawareness of microaggressions
Sample live class session

Presentation note

At this point in the presentation, we played a video. The 5 slides from the video follow.
Context of the Course

- Beta test of an online section of HBSE
- 11 students from Columbia’s residential MSSW students
- Course was developed and supported by the instructor, TA, and a team from the School of Continuing Education (SCE)
- Included asynchronous components and synchronous components
Technology and Active Tools

- Inside the live session:
  - Webcams & mics
  - Polls, status icons, randomizer tool
  - Public & private chat
  - Breakout rooms for small group discussions
  - Slides and media

- During the week:
  - Canvas LMS, with discussion forums, e-reserves, videos, assignment uploads, gradebook comments
  - Course blog
  - BigBlueButton conference space for meetings
How Community was Developed

- Weekly participant spotlights
- Logging in early and chatting with students
- Playing music before class
- Webcam for instruction and student dialogue
- Typed ongoing chatting, including informal chatting
- Support outside of live sessions
Online Environments - Special Considerations for Transformative Learning

- Private side chats
- Lack of ability to read body language
- Simultaneous screen activity
- Typed chat comments are archived & sessions are recorded
  - Permanence of written and verbal class content presents a contradiction of being both a measure for accountability and also a barrier to engagement
Standing Think-Pair-Share

1) **Think**: Stand back-to-back with a partner (or turn in your seats) and consider:

   What are other examples of special considerations in online environments?

1) **Pair**: Discuss with your partner
1) **Share**: Share with the group
Presentation note

Two students with online experience, Anum Iqbal and Francene Campbell, volunteered to participate in the presentation.

Prof Ortega offered them this opportunity to participate months after she was their instructor and months after grades had been submitted.
Student’s perspective: Francene Campbell

“Though I have been the target of racial microaggressions in a classroom lecture format, I believe this form of oppression is more likely to occur via online course format for several reasons.

- It is obviously linked to the “hide behind the screen” tactic; the person doing the oppressing finds it easier to type inappropriate things since they are hidden from view.
- For the oppressor, there is a heightened sense of boldness in typing something they would not particularly say to the oppressed.
- They can counter an opinion without seeing the hurt or anger they are causing to another person (sans webcam).
- They can also disregard the comments, but pretend to care by typing what “sounds” good.”
Student’s perspective: Anum Iqbal, part 1

Presentation note

Video transcript:
“I found online courses to be very challenging. On one hand, the online course provided a platform where students felt comfortable expressing their opinions and really just saying what they felt about many issues and about many of the subjects that we were learning. But on the other hand, it also allowed students to speak almost without a filter. Microaggressions aren’t uncommon for any school. They happen both when you’re taking a course on campus and also on the online platform, but I just felt that students feel more comfortable making comments that are offensive to other students when they’re online.”
Our roles / perspectives

Amelia Ortega
Instructor

Malwina Andruczyk
Teaching Assistant

Matthea Marquart
Instructional Support

Students

Presentation note

While the case was discussed in greater detail during the conference session, a brief synopsis is provided here in these slides.
The Case of “The Microaggression”

During class, some students used language in the typed chat conversation that was experienced as racially micro-aggressive by other students in the class, which led to an argumentative discussion. The TA was monitoring the chat conversation and escalated the situation to the instructor’s attention. Both the TA and faculty acknowledged this chat room content, responded briefly by directly acknowledging what had just been stated in the chat discussion, and requested that students pause the use of the chat function in order to focus on the class content.
Directly after class an announcement was sent to students requesting that they ...

Complete two additional readings:

**Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice**
by Derald Sue Wing, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal & Marta Esquilin

**European American (White) Racial Identity Development: Mental Health, and Prejudice**
by Joseph G. Ponterotto, Shawn O. Utsey & Paul B. Pederse
The Professor and teaching team also set up a new Discussion Board: *Reflections on Discussing Culture and Identity in Online Classroom Spaces* and asked the following questions….

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1)</td>
<td>How did it feel to read the chat room discussion? What was the experience like for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2)</td>
<td>Reflecting on last week’s class, were you active in this chat discussion? Were you able to say what you wanted to? Did you leave class with additional thoughts that you would like to contribute here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3)</td>
<td>What have other conversations around identity, race, culture, oppression and colonization been like for you at CUSSW? How was this discussion similar or different?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4)</td>
<td>And lastly….. what can you contribute that might change the experience of this conversation for yourself?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Common Themes or Characteristic of Transformative Learning Spaces (Taylor & Cranton, 2012)

- Learning happens in \textit{relationships}
- There is \textit{shared ownership} and control of learning spaces
- Room for the \textit{whole person} – feelings as well as thoughts, body and soul, as well as mind
- \textit{Sufficient time} for collaboration, action, reflection and integration
- Pursue a process of inquiry driven by the questions, needs, and purposes of the learners

Transformative Learning & Our Response

“a practice of education that is predicated on the idea that students are seriously challenged to assess their value system and worldview and are subsequently changed by the experience” (Quinnan, 1997)
Timeline of Events

Live Session Event
- Student Comment
- Faculty verbal response
- Chat room discussion

Additional Assignment & Re-development of Lecture of following week
- Discussion board assignment
- Additional Reading
- Lecture for next week

Live Session the Next Week
- Affinity Groups
- Lecture on Dialogue vs. Discussion
- Paired on Camera Dialogues

Contacted Advising Office
Held full teaching team meeting

Met one-to-one with Student
Utilized student handbook to frame “attributes of a social work student”

Applying this to your context

- Asynchronous / synchronous
- Small class / large class
- Solo instructor / instructional team

*With a partner, consider how you might approach the following scenarios?*
Scenarios

A student is learning English as a second or third language. Every time this student types into chat, other students make fun of their spelling, or correct their spelling.

A guest speaker has been introduced in writing and out loud as a woman. Students keep referring to the guest speaker as “he.”

Debrief

What are some practical suggestions for how you might address these scenarios, in your context?

Presentation note

The debrief included the following ideas:

- Role modeling
- Privately contact student who experienced microagression re: publicly addressing
- Refer to community agreements
- Ground rules
- Bringing it up in a globalized way outside of in a discussion - if the student does not wish
- How to gauge a microagression - oops/ouch
- Setting groundwork as preventative
- Instructors & students both should respond
- Addressing fears around responding (i.e. institutional oppression)
- Co-Construction of group agreement
- Encouraging responding to content
- Transparency!
- Approaching from a social justice perspective

Practical Tips

● When a microaggression occurs in your classroom and you didn’t notice it/aren’t sure if you agree try not to feel defensive, and rather focus on supporting your students in their emotional reactions
● Collaborate whenever possible, and try to see it as something that will take you further rather than taking longer
● If you teach alone, locate another voice to support your framework (TedTalk, consult a colleague, blog)
● Keep all students involved--including student(s) who are responsible for the microaggression
● Use technology to build community (e.g. webcam, chat curator)
Q&A

Please take a minute to write down your top takeaway, any additional ideas you’d like to share, and any feedback on this session.

We will compile and distribute the ideas you share. If you would like your name credited for your idea, please write legibly.
**Presentation note: Ideas shared, part 1**

Make the first discussion forum an introduction. In the second discussion forum, co-construct how to create a safe & productive inquiry environment.

- Andrea Tamburro

My partner made a great point in that she incorporates preferred pronouns at beginning of class as part of intros! I always tend to bring things back to professionalism which is both inherent in our Code of Ethics & EPAS competencies. [EPAS refers to the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards set by the Council on Social Work Education.]

- April Murphy

The ouch & oops rule. Let the class know that everyone can say or type “ouch” when someone has said something that hurt their feelings, or “oops” when they themselves say something that needs to be corrected.

- Debbie Rice

I have students share their preferred gender pronouns along with their name, passion, etc., when we do introductions in our first session. I also really emphasize parallel process -- I have students ask themselves “what could I be doing that contributes to oppression in this interaction?” and “what strengths are in the person I'm engaging in this interaction?”

- Lindsay Littrell
Presentation note: Ideas shared, part 2

Include both affinity groups and cross-social identity groups in the classroom structure. Consider how they can collaborate, intersect, etc.
- Mark Giesler

I love the idea about "pre-teaching" etiquette and sensitivity to language, etc., setting agreements, and then being able to refer back to that.
- Mo Cuevas

At the beginning of a course, I share that all of us commit microaggressions, including the professor -- and we learn and grow when others hold us accountable in the class because usually these microaggressions are unconscious.
- Peg Munke

When a student commits a microaggression, consider an immediate reach out by phone or email, get support, use the ground rules that were set up front, and consider creating an alternative assignment to what was originally planned for the week.
- Pete Meagher

I’ve found having students do some self-assessments throughout the semester useful in seeing how a student may change through a semester. I also love to use "Gifs" to help convey humour!
- Richard Cooper
Thank you!

If you’d like to contact us

We are available as a group for additional talks, workshops, or written pieces, or contact us individually about:

Amelia - amelia.ortega [at] gmail.com; ao2167 [at] columbia.edu; Skype amelia.ortega6
- Radical Social Work
- Collaborative teaching about “the isms”
- Trauma informed approaches to classroom instruction
- Queer theory in clinical practice

Malwina - malwina.andruczyk [at] gmail.com
- Teaching Assistant issues
- White anti-racist work
- LGBTQ issues

Matthea - msm2002 [at] columbia.edu; mattheamarquart [at] gmail.com; Twitter @MattheaMarquart
- Online teaching and training - design, instruction, faculty development, and logistics
- Social enterprise administration for social workers; nonprofit leadership and management
Student Contributor Bios:

ANUM IQBAL is a Master of Science (M.S.) in Social Work candidate at Columbia University School of Social Work. She is currently doing her field education at Westchester Community College and will be placed at Four Winds for 2015-16. She holds a Bachelors of Arts degree, summa cum laude, from Hunter College--City University of New York.

FRANCENE A. CAMPBELL is a first-year graduate student at Columbia’s School of Social Work in the Advanced Clinical Practice method, with a concentration in Health, Mental Health, and Disabilities. Her past experience includes working at Catholic Charities of Rockville Centre in Long Island with the aging population with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She has also worked at Nassau Suffolk Services for Autism with children and adolescents on the autistic spectrum. Francene currently interns at the I Have A Dream Foundation – DeHostos Program, serving children living in low-income communities. She anticipates a rewarding internship experience at Access Community Health Center this fall. Francene plans to pursue her LCSW to continue engaging with children and adults, especially in areas of mental disorders.


Acknowledgements

The presenters would like to thank the following people for their support and contributions to the course and/or the presentation:

- Anum Iqbal
- Francene Campbell
- Maria Alzuru
- Steven Schinke
- Tamarah Moss
- Darise Jean-Baptiste, who contributed one of the scenarios
- Glen Steinmacher
- Melanie Hibbert
- Diane Moroff
- Adrienne Garber
- Michael Fleming
- Erik Nelson
- Sandesh Tuladhar
- John Pesantez
- Natalie Strafaci
- Brooke Kienle
- Columbia University’s School of Social Work
- Columbia University’s School of Continuing Education Online team
- Bob Vernon and the SWDE Conference organizers
- The amazing session participants at the SWDE conference!