

Navigating Classroom Conflict: Cultural Insensitivity

At Arizona State University, we pride ourselves on being an institution diverse in population and inclusive to all. Our aim is to provide a forum for the intellectual, personal, social and ethical development of our students.

Because we are an institution that serves students from many backgrounds, beliefs and value systems, it's important to know how to appropriately and safely de-escalate conflicts in the classroom and advocate for the emotional wellbeing and safety of all students.

This extends to the training and experiences of our teaching assistants. There are numerous resources within ASU to help you create an expectation of inclusivity and civil engagement in the classroom. But what do you do if your students or peers do not practice this inclusivity?

What is culturally insensitive behavior?

Culturally insensitive or inappropriate conduct includes a spectrum of behaviors, from unintentionally offensive assumptions or comments (implicit bias and microaggressions) to intentionally prejudiced conduct (racist or other 'ist' statements, discrimination, and hate speech). None of these are appropriate for our university community.

Glossary of terms

Implicit bias: an assumption we *unknowingly hold* by which we may judge others, most often based on their culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability or other identity.

Prejudice: a preconceived opinion we *knowingly hold* against a person or group uninformed by reason or actual experience. Can be the result of unexamined implicit bias.

Microaggression: a brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignity communicating hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults. Often the result of implicit bias or prejudice. Some scholars further sub-categorize microaggressions as microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations.

Racism/Sexism/Ableism: any of the so-called isms are expressions of prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different identity (culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, etc.) on the belief that one's own identity is superior.

Discrimination: the unjust or prejudicial treatment of a person or group based on the grounds of the other's identity.

Bigotry: obstinate or intolerant devotion to one's own opinions and prejudices, often manifesting in behavior, action or speech denigrating another person or group on the grounds of their identity.

Hate speech: public speech based on ism-derived bigotry expressing hatred or encouraging violence toward a person or group based on the person or group's identity. Examples of hate speech include slurs or anti-group propaganda.

The slippery slope

A challenge in dealing with culturally inappropriate behavior is the intent behind it. Blatantly racially prejudiced, homophobic, sexist, or discriminatory actions or statements are clearly inappropriate (and are violations of the ASU Student Code of Conduct) because they are malicious in intent. However, behaviors, actions, or statements made in ignorance can still be culturally insensitive even if not intended maliciously.

Consider the following: *"My engineering professor is from another country -- I'm never going to understand a word she says!"*

While perhaps not intended as an insult to the instructor, the statement is based on an assumption (implicit bias) that calls the instructor's capability (in this case, to speak the student's language) into question.

A comment may be intended as a compliment, but still be culturally insensitive.

Consider the following: *"Oh, you speak English so well!"*
"Well, you don't seem gay..." *"You have a handicap? You seem so normal!"*

In these examples, the speaker's statement expresses approval of the recipients' apparent conformity to the speaker's own culture or identity while implicitly judging the recipients' (microaggression). In the first three examples here, the speaker's statements imply negative judgment of the language skills of international students, the behavior of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the capabilities of differently-abled people.

In all of these cases, the speaker's intent may be benign, but the effect can be denigrating to members of other communities or cultures.

What do I do if I experience or see culturally insensitive or inappropriate activity or speech take place in my classroom?

You have options. There is no one best way to deal with a microaggression, prejudiced comment or discriminatory action. Oftentimes, a microaggression or innocuously-intended statement of cultural implicit bias can be gently corrected at the time. In dealing with more severe disruptions of a purposefully inflammatory nature, though, you may need to step back and address it at a later time or with additional support.

Factors to consider include:

- Is physical or emotional safety (yours or other students') an issue in the situation?
- Are you comfortable dealing with conflict head-on?
- Can you address the incident without escalating the situation?

If you are comfortable addressing in the moment and can do so without escalating the situation, create a 'teachable moment':

- Ask 'why do you think this?'...
- Gently confront the misconception or assumption behind the statement or action.

A list of potential phrases to use is available [here](#). Remember, your first responsibility is to maintain a safe environment for all students in the classroom.

If you are uncomfortable addressing it at the moment, it's still important to deal with the behavior. Pull the student(s) aside and ask them to make an appointment to speak in private outside of class hours. Depending on the nature and severity of the action, it might be useful to consult with your faculty supervisor and/or with the Dean of Students Office before meeting with the student.

- When you meet, advise the student(s) that you would like to address the incident, outlining your perception without accusation and creating an opportunity for the student(s) to self-reflect on their earlier words or actions.
- Make it clear that nonproductive, inappropriate behavior could constitute a violation of student conduct.
- Consider using the [Open the Front Door Method](#) for respectful, inclusive conflict navigation.

Follow up:

Depending on the nature of the incident and its resolution, it's possible no further action may be needed. Oftentimes students just need to have an implicit bias or microaggression pointed out or be shown how a behavior is inappropriate. If the incident is of a more purposeful nature, though, further action likely needs to take place.

After you've had a chance to talk to the student(s) about the issue, check back in with your faculty supervisor or, if necessary, with the Dean of Students Office.

- **Get support.** Being on the receiving end of a culturally problematic action can be traumatizing. You may need to process your emotions and take time to reflect. Talk through with friends, counselors or the [Employee Assistance Office](#).

The best solution is preparation:

Empower yourself proactively by knowing your resources.

- **Take an inclusivity or conflict resolution training program.** The Sun Devil Civility program offers peer-led workshops around respectful and inclusive communication and community engagement. Attend a workshop or schedule a training for your class at the beginning of the semester: <https://eoss.asu.edu/student-and-cultural-engagement/culture/sun-devil-civility>.
- **Set expectations early.** At the beginning of the semester, consider inviting Sun Devil Civility (Above) or the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (<https://cfo.asu.edu/OEI-training>) to present on conflict management, classroom civility, or microaggression and inclusive culture.
- **Know your conflict resolution style.** The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (<https://kilmanniagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki/>) breaks down strategies of conflict management. By understanding your own innate conflict resolution style, you can be better prepared to address potential microaggressions you may encounter.
- **Learn to de-escalate conflict and communicate clearly and rationally.** The OTFD Method is a three-step conflict resolution communication strategy that you should be aware of.
- **Know your resources.** Be familiar with the Dean of Students (DOS) Offices on each campus and respective resources available to consult and help students navigate issues or conflicts, including the Student Rights and Responsibilities (<https://eoss.asu.edu/dos/srr>) and Student Advocacy (<https://eoss.asu.edu/dos/srr/StudentAdvocacyandAssistance>) offices.
- **Learn more.** Read Derald Wing Sue, et. al., Racial Micro-aggressions in Everyday Life, American Psychologist, 62.4 (2007): 271 - 286 or download this document from the University of Washington: [Addressing microaggressions in the classroom](#).