



Symposium on Educational Excellence 2025

Navigating difficult conversations: empowering educators in the learning environment

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Keywords

Microaggressions, difficult conversations, trauma-informed

Abstract

In academic health professions education, creating inclusive and equitable learning environments is essential for fostering learner success and preparing future providers and professionals to serve diverse populations and communities. However, conversations around race, gender, disparities, biases, and other topics may be activating for learners and educators, often evoking discomfort and resulting in harm through microaggressions and other forms of discrimination. These difficult conversations can be particularly challenging for educators, who may initially lack the tools or confidence to effectively manage them or address discriminatory comments and behaviors in the learning environment. Despite this, health professions educators need to learn to discuss and address challenging topics because how we manage those discussions greatly impacts how useful the conversations are to our instructional goals, the dynamics of the learning environment, and learners' experiences (Brookfield & Perskill, 2005). This interactive workshop is designed to equip health professions educators with practical strategies for navigating difficult conversations, whether planned or spontaneous, and fostering a culture of inclusivity and belonging in learning environments.

The workshop will define microaggressions and help participants develop a deeper awareness of inequity, racism, and positionality within educational spaces. We will examine real-world microaggression scenarios and discuss effective strategies for responding to and interrupting such instances of discrimination. Throughout the session, participants will practice reflective techniques to build their confidence and skills in facilitating difficult discussions with learners. The facilitators will also address the emotional toll of navigating challenging conversations in the learning environment and recommend methods for maintaining well-being and resilience.

Active engagement strategies include pair or small group work, and whole-group discussion. Utilizing an adapted version of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle Framework (1988), participants will reflect on past experiences with managing difficult conversations, identify emotional responses, and explore alternative strategies for handling similar situations in the future. Through guided practice, educators will increase their self-awareness, refine their communication techniques, and enhance their ability to respond with empathy and effectiveness.

By the end of this workshop, participants will leave with a stronger understanding of microaggressions, a toolkit for responding to bias and discrimination in learning environments, actionable strategies for fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment, and the ability to approach difficult conversations from a trauma-informed perspective. Furthermore, they will gain a deeper awareness of the importance of reflection and self-care in their roles as educators. This awareness will ensure continued engagement in these essential conversations without compromising mental and emotional health. This workshop is ideal for health professions educators at all levels seeking to develop their skills in navigating difficult conversations and promoting an inclusive, anti-racist educational environment.

Learning Objectives

1. Define microaggressions and develop awareness surrounding inequity, racism, and positionality in educational spaces.
2. Examine a real-world microaggression scenario and collectively discuss strategies for responding to this type of discrimination.
3. Practice reflection as a tool for building skills and confidence in facilitating these difficult discussions.
4. Identify methods for instructor self-care when experiencing compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress.
5. Explore strategies for approaching difficult conversations from a trauma-informed perspective, emphasizing empathy, psychological safety, and resilience.

Active Engagement Strategies

Pair/Small Group Activity:

- Activity 1 (10 minutes): Review, analyze, and discuss a prepared scenario. Reflect on what might have happened and alternative ways to respond.
 - Example Scenario:
"For a teacher to really just kind of ... nonchalantly not really care about our opinions, it was like kind of a slap in our face because we were just trying to educate her and tell her why we thought, personally, it was wrong for her to try to tell us whether we can use the word or not use the word in our classroom" (OHSU Course Evaluation).

- Activity 2 (15 minutes): Build-your-own/discuss your own scenario
 - 10 minutes to create/discuss the scenario together
 - 5 minutes to reflect on it
 - Reflection:
 - What do you think was the trauma behind this action?
 - Is there a sign of a microaggression?
 - What should the educator do?
 - Considerations for drafting your scenario (real or possible):
 - Where have you seen it? How did it go?
 - What and how it happened?
 - What you did or didn't do?
 - What you need to learn more?

References

1. Brookfield, S., & Preskill, S. (2005). Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
2. Gibbs, G. (1988). Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods. Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford.