Developing Cultural Competence for Social Justice: Addressing Microaggressions and Unintentional Bias

Sept. 6, 2016
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Cultural Competence for Social Justice

Cultural competence for social justice is the ability to live and work effectively in culturally diverse environments and enact a commitment to social justice. Social justice refers to creating a society (or community, organization, or campus) with an equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. In socially just environments, all people are safe (physically and psychologically), can meet their needs, and can fulfill their potential. This notion of social justice entails equity (fairness) and a sense of real inclusion.

Cultural competence for social Justice requires a range of awareness, knowledge, and skills. The five key components of this model are: 1) Self-awareness, 2) Understanding and valuing others, 3) Knowledge of societal inequities, 4) Skills to interact effectively with a diversity of people in different contexts, and 5) Skills to foster equity and inclusion. Each of these components, and some of the competencies within them, will be discussed in more depth.

1. Self-awareness.

Self-awareness is the consciousness of our social identities, cultures, biases, and perspectives. It entails the ability to understand who we are and what we bring to relationships and situations. There are numerous competencies to this component, including:

- Awareness of our social identities and their cultural influences and how they intersect.
- Awareness of our prejudices, stereotypes, and biases.
- Awareness of our internalized superiority and internalized inferiority—how we have internalized (often unconsciously) notions of the superiority of our dominant/privileged social identity groups (internalized dominance) and the inferiority of our subordinated/marginalized social identity groups (internalized oppression).

2. Understanding and valuing others.

Not only is self-knowledge and awareness needed to enact cultural competence for social justice, so is knowledge and appreciation of the social identities, cultures, and worldviews of other people. Many of these competencies mirror the ones in self-awareness which include:

- Knowledge of the social identities of other people, their cultural influences, and how they intersect.
- Ability to value and appreciate ways of being, doing, and thinking other than our own.
- Ability to recognize how other people express internalized superiority and internalized inferiority.


We cannot understand ourselves or other people, or create greater equity without considering the larger socio-political and historical context of which we are part. We need to have a grasp of different forms of privilege and oppression and how these they affect people's experiences and access to social power. It is also critical to appreciate the interlocking nature of different types of inequality. Some key competencies include:
• Knowledge of the history, ideology, and current manifestations of systemic inequalities and how they reinforce each other.
• Understanding of how different forms of oppression operate on interpersonal, cultural, institutional, and structural levels.
• Understanding of the impact of systemic inequalities on individuals' opportunities and lived realities.

4. Skills to interact effectively with a diversity of people in different contexts.

In addition to understanding self, others, and society, we need the ability to adapt to and work collaboratively with diverse people in a range of situations. People's social identities affect their interpersonal, communication and work styles, as well as their views of conflict, notions of leadership and sense of time (among many other things). Some competencies of this component of the model include the ability to:
• Embrace, integrate, and adapt to different cultural styles.
• Deal with conflict due to cultural differences and the dynamics of inequality.
• Engage in dialogue about social identities, diversity, and oppression issues.

5. Skills to foster equity and inclusion.

Cultural competence for social justice requires more than just understanding the impact of social inequality. It entails being able to identify and address inequities and choose appropriate interventions to create environments, policies, and practices to ensure diversity and fairness. Competencies for creating change are needed at various levels such as skills for:
• Continual self-development, including for self-education, self-reflection, and personal change.
• Addressing interpersonal and group issues for example, responding to biased comments, addressing inequitable group dynamics, and creating culturally inclusive work and learning groups.
• Transforming institutions such as being able to create, critically analyze, implement or advocate for organizational norms, policies and practices that are equitable and inclusive.
• Creating societal change by being able to work collaboratively with others to foster social justice.

Developing cultural competency is an ongoing process; it is not an endpoint. We will have different degrees of competency in different components with different social identity groups. The Cultural Competence for Social Justice model can help us navigate the path towards greater understanding, effectiveness, equity, and inclusion.

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Creating an Inclusive and Respectful Classroom Environment

Establishing a learning community where people can be authentic, take intellectual and emotional risks, and support each other's learning.

1) Have class guidelines and enforce them (e.g. talking from one's own experience, no interrupting, no personal attacks, listening respectfully, sharing airtime, confidentiality)

2) Do group-building activities. Allow people to get to know each other.

3) Teach and have students practice good listening, dialogue, and group skills.

4) Discuss personal and cultural differences in communication styles.

5) Model respectful and equitable communication.

6) Model appropriate self-disclosure and personal sharing.

7) Provide opportunities for frequent feedback about classroom climate.

8) Convey that learning stereotypes and misinformation is unavoidable.

9) Use examples from your own life of the mistakes you've made and how you've learned and unlearned biases.

10) Consider reviewing theories of racial/social identity development.

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## Microaggressions

Commonplace, usually unintentional, negative slights and expressions of bias toward socially devalued groups.

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Microaggression Examples</th>
<th>Underlying Message</th>
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<tr>
<td>Second class citizen: seeing certain groups as less worthy, less important, less deserving and inferior. People get excluded, ignored, or discriminated against.</td>
<td>Not knowing the name of lower status workers. Ignoring the contributions of marginalized people in groups. Overlooking the person of color on line.</td>
<td>Who you are and what you have to say is not important.</td>
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<td>Inferiority or pathology of marginalized culture/identity: assuming that certain groups are abnormal, deviant or pathological. Assumes dominant cultural norms are correct and superior.</td>
<td>Saying to an African-American person, “You speak really well. You sound white.” Asking, “Why do they have to be so loud/so quiet/dress like that?” Not putting a person with a disability in a front line position. “That food smells really funny.”</td>
<td>Who you are is not acceptable or not as good as people from the dominant culture.</td>
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<td>Assuming the normality and superiority of the dominant culture</td>
<td>Asking everyone to contribute money or attend an event without considering financial differences. Assuming that people are in heterosexual relationships. “Saying to a woman, “So what does your husband do?”</td>
<td>You should conform to dominant cultural norms regardless of who you are or the dominant cultural norms are what’s “normal.”</td>
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<td>Assuming inherentabilities or qualities</td>
<td>Saying to an Asian person, “Do you work in the math or computer fields?”. “I don’t think a woman can handle this position—we need someone strong and decisive.” Assuming a tall black man plays basketball.</td>
<td>Your individuality doesn’t matter, I know what you are like.</td>
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<td>Assuming homogeneity: assuming that all people from a certain group are alike. Not seeing individual and group differences.</td>
<td>Asking a Black person, “So what do Black people think about Obama?” Asking a Latina (who is Colombian) to explain Cinco de Mayo (a Mexican holiday). Assuming a Sikh is a Muslim.</td>
<td>You are all alike.</td>
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<td>Ascription of intelligence: making assumptions about a group’s intellectual ability, competencies and capabilities.</td>
<td>Saying to a service worker, “Wow, that sounded smart. How did you know that?” Saying to a Black person, “You’re so articulate.” Speaking more slowly and simply to a person with a physical disability (who does not have a cognitive disability) Not encouraging females to pursue high level math and science. Assuming Asians are good at math.</td>
<td>You’re not as intelligent or you must be good at this activity.</td>
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<td>Alien in one’s own land: being perceived as a perpetual foreigner or being an alien in one’s own country.</td>
<td>Saying to a Latino- or Asian-American, “So where are you really from?” or “You speak really good English.” Saying to an African-American or Muslim, “If you don’t like it here, you can just go back to Africa/the Middle East.”</td>
<td>You’re not really an American. You don’t really belong here.</td>
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<td>Assuming criminality: presuming that certain groups are dangerous or criminals.</td>
<td>Crossing the street or holding one’s purse tighter around Black/ Latino men. Not wanting one’s child to be taught by gays or lesbians. Only asking people of color for ID when using checks or credit cards.</td>
<td>You can’t be trusted. You might be dangerous.</td>
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<td>Using offensive/biased language: referring to individuals or groups in ways that are insensitive or derogatory.</td>
<td>Calling women “girls” or “hon”. Not using the correct gender pronoun. Using the term “illegal alien”. “That’s so gay.” “That’s so ghetto.”</td>
<td>Who you are is not important or worthy of respect.</td>
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<td>Myth of meritocracy: assuming that all groups have equal opportunity and that there is a level playing field. Therefore, success or failure is due to individual effort and attributes. “Blaming the victim”</td>
<td>“I had no problem finding an internship/job, you must not be trying hard enough.” “I just want to hire the most qualified person.”</td>
<td>Your marginalized status or experiences with inequality don’t matter.</td>
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<td>Ignoring/Denying Differences: unwillingness to acknowledge or admit seeing someone’s social identity and thus the significance of it.</td>
<td>“I don’t see color, I just see people.” “You’re so pretty I forget that you’re a lesbian.”</td>
<td>Your identities don’t matter.</td>
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<td>Denying personal bias: unwillingness to admit individual prejudice or discriminatory behavior.</td>
<td>“I can’t be racist, some of my best friends are Black”. “My sister has a disability so I have no prejudice against people with disabilities.” “I’m not homophobic, that was just a joke.”</td>
<td>You’re wrong. I don’t have any bias.</td>
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For more examples of microaggressions see: www.microaggressions.com
Addressing Microaggressions in the Classroom

1. **Directly correct the stereotype/assumption/language.**
   Example: A white student turns to a black student and asks if black people believe the Black Lives Matter movement is being effective.
   Possible response: No one can represent everyone from their racial or other social identity groups. Everyone speaks from their own experience. Let’s hear different people’s perspectives.
   Example: A student uses the term “illegal alien” when discussing immigration issues.
   Possible response: I realize you didn’t intend it this way, but using the term “illegal alien” is considered by many to be an offensive term since people aren’t “illegal”. Preferred language is “undocumented”.

2. **Address the comment on a broader level as a common assumption, not focus on the individual.** Example: A student makes a comment about a gender non-conforming person just being “confused” about their gender.
   Possible response: Many people mistakenly believe that people who are not gender-conforming are just confused. However, people who are gender non-conforming don’t identify with the traditional gender categories and are expressing their gender in a way that is consistent with their own sense of identity.

3. **Remind students of class guidelines and respectful behavior.**
   Example: A student says, “That’s so ghetto” or “That’s so gay”.
   Possible response: We agreed that we would be respectful and not use put-downs. That language is not consistent with our guidelines and is unacceptable. (If appropriate, suggest other terminology or ways to express their thoughts.)

4. **Note reactions and ask for a response.**
   Example: A student makes a statement that students visibly react to.
   Possible response: “I noticed that several students had a reaction when John said that. Could you help us understand your reactions? Before asking people to share their thoughts and feelings, it may be helpful to remind people of the class guidelines.

5. **Ask for further clarification of the statement.**
   Example: When a student makes a biased comment, ask them to clarify their thinking and assumptions.
   Possible response: You’re suggesting that low income students are not as academically capable. Could you tell us more about how you came to that assumption? Follow up with correcting inaccurate assumptions and information.

Consider following up with the person who said the microaggression and/or the person who was the recipient of the microaggression after class.

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RESPONDING TO MICROAGGRESSIONS AND BIAS

(=Can be used alone or in combination=)

▲ RESTATE OR PARAPHRASE.

“=I think I heard you saying__________ (paraphrase their comments). Is that correct?=”

▲ ASK FOR CLARIFICATION OR MORE INFORMATION.

“Could you say more about what you mean by that?”

“How have you come to think that?”

▲ ACKNOWLEDGE THE FEELINGS BEHIND THE STATEMENT. Express empathy and compassion.

“It sounds like you’re really frustrated/nervous/angry……….”

“I can understand that you’re upset when you feel disrespected.”

▲ SEPARATE INTENT FROM IMPACT.

“I know you didn’t realize this, but when you __________ (comment/behavior), it was
hurtful/offensive because___________. Instead you could___________ (different language or
behavior.)”

▲ SHARE YOUR OWN PROCESS.

“I noticed that you __________ (comment/behavior). I used to do/say that too, but then I
learned___________.”

▲ EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS.

“When you __________ (comment/behavior), I felt __________ (feeling) and I would like you
to_____________.”

▲ CHALLENGE THE STEREOTYPE. Give information, share your own experience and/or offer
alternative perspectives.

“Actually, in my experience____________.”

“I think that’s a stereotype. I’ve learned that______________.”

“Another way to look at it is ______________.”

▲ APPEAL TO VALUES AND PRINCIPLES.

“I know you really care about________. Acting in this way really undermines those intentions.”
► PROMOTE EMPATHY. Ask how they would feel if someone said something like that about their group, or their friend/partner/child.

“I know you don’t like the stereotypes about ______ (their group), how do you think he feels when he hears those things about his group?”

“How would you feel if someone said that about/did that to your sister or girlfriend?”

► TELL THEM THEY’RE TOO SMART OR TOO GOOD TO SAY THINGS LIKE THAT.

“Come on. You’re too smart to say something so ignorant/offensive.”

► PRETEND YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND. As people try to explain their comments, they often realize how silly they sound.

“I don’t get it…….”

“Why is that funny?”

► USE HUMOR. Exaggerate comment, use gentle sarcasm.

“She plays like a girl?” You mean she plays like Serena Williams?” Or Mia Hamm?

► POINT OUT WHAT THEY HAVE IN COMMON WITH THE OTHER PERSON.

“I’m tired of hearing your Muslim jokes. Do you know he’s also studying ______ and likes to ________? You may want to talk with him about that. You actually have a lot in common.”

► W.I.I.F.T. (What’s in it for them). Explain why diversity or that individual/group can be helpful/valueable.

“I know you’re not comfortable with ______ but they can help us reach out to/better serve other groups on campus/in the community.”

“In the real world, we are going to have to work with all sorts of people, so might as well learn how to do it here.”

► REMIND THEM OF THE RULES OR POLICIES.

“That behavior is against our code of conduct and could really get you in trouble.”


Straight A's for Facilitating Discussions about Diversity and Social Justice

AFFIRM—Affirm and appreciate people’s comments and questions.
- Thank you for asking that question. I’m sure others were wondering about that too.
- Great point. That’s important to consider.
- I appreciate your taking the risk to share that with us.
- I appreciate your willingness to stay open and consider other perspectives.
- I know this isn’t easy to think or talk about. Thanks for doing the hard work.

ACKNOWLEDGE—Acknowledge what people are saying. Make sure you understand what they’re expressing.
Paraphrase their words and feelings. Acknowledge areas of agreement or commonalities with others.
- I’m hearing you say that…… Is that correct?
- It sounds like you feel…..
- So from your perspective…..
- It seems like you’re both concerned about …..even though you’re approaching it differently.
- Those are both good examples of the effects of racism because…..

ASK—Ask questions to better understand individuals’ behaviors and perspectives and to help them reflect on their views.
- Can you tell me more about how you came to think that?
- What experiences led you to that belief?
- How would you make sense of ….?  
- What would it mean for you if this was true?
- How were you feeling when ….?

ADD—Add more information, historical/social/political context, or alternative explanations. Challenge misinformation,
broaden people’s perspectives, address differences in power and privilege, and put issues in a larger context.
- This research study found that……
- What institutional policies might have contributed to these inequalities?
- Let’s consider how the history of ….. has impacted what we see today.
- How might people’s social identities affect their experiences in this situation?
- What are some other explanations for this?

ASSESS and ADDRESS—Assess individual and group dynamics and your own internal and external responses and decide
how to address it. Notice people’s reactions, body language, degree of participation, tone in the room. Reflect on
your own behavior and feelings.

To the group:
- People are very quiet. I’m wondering what’s going on.
- People seem restless. Do you need a break?
- I’m wondering what other people are thinking/feeling about this.
- I’m noticing that people are interrupting each other. We agreed that we’d let people finish their thoughts before
  someone else spoke.

To self:
- I’m starting to get more tense and more aggressive. What’s triggering me?
- This person is reminding me of the stereotype. I need to refocus on their full humanity.

Dealing with Conflict and Strong Emotions

- Enforce the guidelines (e.g. respectful listening, no personal putdowns, no interrupting).
- Slow down the interaction: make sure one person is finished before someone else speaks.
- Use a "talking stick". Only the person with the stick talks.
- Paraphrase: Instructor or next speaker summarizes what person said before continuing. Make sure everyone feels heard and understood.
- Look for feelings beneath words.
- Look for areas of agreement.
- Discuss differences in styles of communication and conflict. Clarify how people are feeling. Don't assume.
- If between two people, invite others to share their perspectives or go around the room and get all perspectives on the table.
- Move focus off of individuals to larger issues raised: What are the meta questions/topics?
- Remind people is okay to agree to disagree and that these are sensitive, powerful issues.
- Take a time-out (a break, journaling, free writing, reactions in pairs, time for quiet reflection.)
- Ask students to step back and think about what they can learn from the moment. How does this situation mirror other dynamics?
- Allow individuals to sit with their feelings (e.g. crying). Do not overprotect.
- Get up on the balcony, off the dance floor (Lee Warren). Step back and look at big picture.
- Manage yourself. Stop, breathe, think. Know your triggers.

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