

Responding to Challenging Comments in Class with the ACTION Framework

Despite the feelings of paralysis that take over when a student makes a comment in class that seems inappropriate or offensive, certain practices can help maintain a positive learning environment. Consider using a communication framework such as ACTION to inquire about intent, reduce tension, explore impact, and offer a positive direction. The steps below provide a guide on how to take ACTION.

Ask clarifying questions to assist with understanding intentions.

"I want to make sure that I understand what you were saying. Were you saying that...?"

Carefully listen to their response.

- If they disagree with your paraphrase and clarify a different meaning, you could end the conversation. If you suspect they are trying to "cover their tracks," you may consider making a statement about the initial comment.

"I'm glad to hear I misunderstood you, because, as you know, such comments can be..."

- If they agree with your paraphrase, explore their intent behind making the comment.

"Can you tell me what you were hoping to communicate with that comment?"

"Can you please help me understand what you meant by that?"

Tell others what you observed as problematic in a factual manner.

"I noticed that . . ."

Impact exploration: ask for, or state, the potential impact of such a statement or action on others.

"What do you think people think when they hear that type of comment?"

"As you know, everything speaks. What message do you think such a comment sends?"

Own your own thoughts and feelings around the impact.

"When I hear your comment I think/feel..."

"That comment can perpetuate negative stereotypes and assumptions about..."

"Such negative comments can cause division and defensiveness. I would like to think that is not your intent."

Next steps: Request appropriate action be taken.

"Our class is a learning community, and such comments make it difficult for us to focus on learning because people feel offended. So I am going to ask you to refrain from stating your thoughts in that manner in the future. Can you do that please?"

"I encourage you to revisit your view on X as we discuss these issues more in class."

When practiced, the ACTION framework can be a tool that is quickly retrieved out of your mental toolbox to organize your thoughts and describe the situation in a way that cools down the tension.

When students make comments that are offensive or inappropriate in the classroom, doing nothing is a damaging option (Souza, Vizenor, Sherlip, & Raser, 2016). Instead, we can engage thoughtfully and purposefully in strategies that maintain a positive climate that is conducive to learning and models the skills needed during difficult conversations (Souza, 2016).

Read More about the ACTION Framework:

Cheung, F., Ganote, C. M., Souza, T.J. (2016). "Microaggressions and Microresistance: Supporting and Empowering Students." In Faculty Focus Special Report: Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom. Madison, WI: Magna Publication.

Souza, T.J. (2016). Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom: Concrete Strategies for Cooling Down Tension. In Faculty Focus Special Report: Diversity and Inclusion in the College Classroom. Magna Publication.

Abridged from a teaching tip submitted by:

Tasha Souza, Boise State University