

# MAKE IT AWKWARD - EQUIPPING STUDENTS TO ADDRESS MICROAGGRESSIONS

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## OVERVIEW OF WORKSHOP

Teamwork is central to engineering and appropriately constitutes a core element of engineering curricula in order to develop students' skills (Malmqvist et al., 2022). However, teamwork can create situations where students, especially minoritized students, can experience discrimination based on their identity (Wolfe et al., 2016). Previously identified examples include how black engineering students experienced their student teams (Cross & Paretti, 2015) and how gender influences expectations and task assignment in student engineering teams (Aeby et al., 2019). Often, the emotional labour of countering this discrimination falls on the shoulders of those very minoritized students, thus taking their time and energy away from their own academic work (Griffith et al., 2019). It is the responsibility of technical universities to foster learning environments that are inclusive and respectful of all people. The activities in this workshop offer one concrete way to positively influence students' behaviour, as reported in our recent empirical study (Isaac et al., 2023).

## KEYWORDS

Social Justice, Peer learning, Project-based learning, Standards: 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10

## DURATION

60 minutes.

## ACTIVITIES

This workshop offers participants an opportunity to experience a brief, scalable activity designed to enable engineering students (and ourselves!) to address quotidian instances of discrimination/microaggressions directed at minoritized students in teams (Cech & Rothwell, 2018; Dee & Gershenson, 2017). The workshop structure has three main parts:

- The introduction creates a space for participants to articulate their **personal motivations to speak up** against prejudice, **share the barriers** they have encountered to speaking up, and **learn about the significant impact of speaking up**.
- The facilitators next provide **a repertoire of 8 responses to discriminatory comments to "Make it Awkward" for the person making the comments**. The participants examine the nuances of using these responses in different contexts, sharing their personal preferences and learning to employ responses they're unlikely to use from fellow participants.
- The core of the workshop are the **three levels of scaffolded practice of replying using these 8 responses to bigoted statements** (curated examples) heard in

academic settings. In particular, the use of triadic roleplays, shown to be highly effective in counselling and psychotherapy education (Smith, 2016), will provide participants with feedback on their choice of words and the non-verbal wrapping of their intervention. **One of the distinguishing features of the workshop is that it also provides a response template for when the participants get called out themselves.**

## TARGET AUDIENCE

This session requires no background knowledge and is relevant for everyone who teaches or works with students.

## OUTCOMES

This collaborative, interactive workshop can help expand your repertoire of responses & refine your technique. Specifically, we will practice

- choosing words that clearly communicate that biased comments are not acceptable,
- responding to being called out ourselves in ways that build trust and community,
- fostering learning environments that are inclusive and respectful of all people.

Participants will receive the materials and facilitation guide, enabling them to replicate the workshop in their own contexts. The facilitators will conclude with some student feedback from the roughly 40 previous instances that we have facilitated this workshop for engineering students.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

**Siara Isaac** PhD is the project manager and a researcher in the 3T PLAY project at the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL). Her work focuses on how students develop transversal skills in science and engineering contexts, including her 2022 book with Roland Tormey entitled *Facilitating Experiential Learning in Higher Education - Teaching and Supervising in Labs, Fieldwork, Studios, and Projects* (Routledge).

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