

The Creating Brave Spaces workshop: a report on simulation-based faculty development to disarm microaggressions

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ABSTRACT

Background Microaggressions occur regularly in the clinical and teaching environments and is harmful to individuals, teams and institutions. The aim of this brief report is to share experiences in developing and conducting a simulation-based faculty development initiative, the Creating Brave Spaces (CBS) workshop, to disarm microaggressions.

Methods In 2021–2023, a total of six workshops were arranged for faculty in different settings, including faculty development events, faculty retreats, national and international conferences. From each workshop, the team gained insight and experience that they incorporated into additional deliveries. Experiences and lessons learnt from facilitators have been subject to systematic reflection by the authors.

Results A total of 85 faculty participated in the workshops. We experienced that context was important and that participants varied greatly in their understanding of the concept of microaggression. We also found that participants play an active role in the co-creating of the learning experience. Highly engaged participants have shared their own techniques to disarm microaggressions with each other, adding value to the workshop. We experienced that facilitators found it helpful to debrief as a team after each event and incorporate experiences into future deliveries.

Conclusion The CBS workshop is a feasible approach to build awareness about microaggressions and to learn strategies to disarm microaggressions.

members become better educators.^{5–7} The literature on simulations to address anti-oppression competencies in postgraduate medical education or faculty development is limited.^{8–10}

As originally defined by Sue *et al*,¹¹ ‘racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour’. In addition to people of colour, many marginalised groups experience these subtle and casual put-downs and indignities. Ackerman-Barger and Jacobs¹² outlined that in any given incidence of microaggression, there are usually three perspectives: the source, the recipient and the bystander(s). Anyone in the clinical teaching environment, including faculty, staff, learners, patients and family members, could find themselves as the source, or recipient, or bystander, to a microaggression. In social science, bystanders have been recognised to have a significant impact in the phenomenon of bullying; bystanders who act are called ‘upstanders’.¹³ The Creating Brave Spaces (CBS) workshop was designed to equip faculty members to disarm microaggressions as an upstander.

The aim of this brief report is to share experiences in developing and conducting a simulation-based faculty development initiative, the CBS workshop, to disarm microaggressions.

METHODS

In 2021, a team of volunteers came together from the McMaster University’s EDI-IR Advisory Committee, the Program for Faculty Development, the Office of Faculty Affairs and Center for Simulation-Based Education to develop the CBS workshop. The team included clinical faculty, education researchers, administrative leads and learners. Together, the team created two simulation cases (see [table 1](#)). The team incorporated best practices for simulation-based education, including separate pre-briefs and debriefs for participants and facilitators.¹⁴ Participants maintained their own identity throughout; and only trained actors were the source of the microaggression. Each workshop began with clearly stated learning objectives: (1) identify a microaggression, and (2) gain one technique to disarm microaggressions compassionately.

A team of three or four co-facilitators conducted each workshop. The workshop started by defining the harmful impacts of microaggressions. We

BACKGROUND

Designing faculty development focused on equity, diversity, inclusivity, indigenous reconciliation (EDI-IR), anti-racism and anti-oppression is a daunting task.^{1–3} In the Canadian context, health profession educators are called on to provide skill-based training in anti-racism as one of the 94 Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, to alleviate the disproportionate burden of poor health outcome of indigenous populations.⁴

While a didactic approach remains the default at most academic and healthcare institutions, a passive education intervention does not help faculty to navigate the high level of tension and emotional labour required to engage with anti-oppressive practices. A disconnect exists between the workshop/presentation environment and the ‘real world’ environment. Simulation-based education, using actors, can therefore be effective in helping faculty



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Table 1 Case writing notes and synopsis

Case	Writing and review process	Case synopsis
Gender Neutral Pronouns	The author is a university staff member and a woman of trans experience. She wrote the case based on conversations she overhears in her workplace. The case was then reviewed by the Creating Brace Spaces team and edited into a workshop format.	In a curricular meeting, a senior burnt-out faculty member rants about the workload related to changing all pronouns in the teaching cases catalogue to gender-neutral 'they/them'. A workshop facilitator acts as chair and participants begin as if reviewing the meeting agenda.
Orange Shirt Day Fatigue	The idea comes from a faculty member and an indigenous woman. She suggested the case idea based on her personal experience. The case was written by a Creating Brace Spaces team member to fit into a workshop format and returned back to the faculty member for review and approval prior to implementation.	In a curricular meeting, a senior burnt-out clinical leader rants about having to attend an Orange Shirt Day ceremony in place of other planned commitments which he perceives to be more important.

provided some examples of microaggressions experienced in the clinical teaching environment and introduced the ARISE acronym (A=Awareness, R=Respond with Empathy, I=Inquiry, S=Statements with I, E=Education and Engage).¹² In the literature, there are various strategies and acronyms, some of which focus on making the source accountable. We chose to focus on 'empathy' to create a more welcoming environment for participants, as we were unsure if the workshop would be met with acceptance by our faculty.

As part of the pre-brief, we paired the case synopsis (see table 1) with some context. For example, the case on gender-neutral pronouns was paired with data depicting the high level of discomfort that people still have with the concept of communicating in a gender-neutral manner. A committee meeting context allowed participants to maintain their professional identity. The actor's goal was to provoke a response, therefore, if participants reacted with prolonged silence, the actor's verbal microaggressions would intensify. The actor responded defensively if criticised harshly but would retreat if participants deployed any technique to compassionately disarm the actor.

Facilitators often deployed rapid cycle deliberate practice.¹⁵ This technique offers flexibility based on the participants' reaction. The facilitator may pause the scenario, share observations, prepare for a re-run and replay the case, until the participants

feel comfortable in interrupting and disarming microaggressions. In the post-workshop debrief, facilitators invited participants to share reactions and analyses of the experience.¹⁴ Facilitators also debriefed themselves to identify areas that could be improved.

Experiences and lessons learnt from facilitators have been subject to systematic reflection by the authors.

RESULTS

In 2021–2023, a total of 85 faculty members from both inside and external to McMaster University were involved in workshops that were arranged in different settings, including faculty development events, faculty retreats, national and international conferences. The workshops were based on two cases centred in gender diversity and indigenous reconciliation delivered in both in-person and virtual formats. From each workshop, the team gained insight and experience that they incorporate into additional deliveries. Figures 1 presents a summary of 'Lessons Learnt'.

Context is important

We experienced that context was important and that participants varied greatly in their understanding of the concept of microaggression. At some events, participants were senior academic



Figure 1 Lessons learned.

leaders who identified the microaggression immediately and acted swiftly and confidently in addressing the actor effectively. During an event with a heterogeneous group, we found that some participants did not understand microaggression, while others were excited to try this workshop in their own institutions.

Facilitate co-creation

We found that highly engaged participants shared their own techniques to disarm microaggressions with each other, adding value to the workshop. Exposure to a case was often followed by uncomfortable silence, and in-person workshops created more obvious discomfort. When facilitators paused the case, participants reported feeling ‘frozen’ and expressed simultaneous dismay at the actor’s actions as well as their own inaction. Being asked to justify their inaction led participants to several insights. Some admitted to struggling with the steps of ARISE but also realised that the acronym was not the objective. Some struggled with formulating an empathetic approach but also pushed back on our recommendation to be empathetic—they felt accountability was more important. Some expressed discomfort with breaking social norms (eg, waiting their turn to speak), particularly when facing one actor who is an older, white male, which reminded them of many senior faculty. When asked to try and think of an approach, participants reluctantly shared strategies they were considering, which were immediately validated by the facilitators. Encouraged by this feedback, participants acted swiftly and collaborated successfully to disarm the microaggression when the case was reset. In the final debrief, participants often reflected on past experiences of inaction towards a microaggression and committed to applying their new skills in the future. In this process, the participants co-created the learning experience with each other by sharing their own experience and demonstrating at least one technique for disarming a microaggression. Participants played an active role in the co-creation of the learning experience.

Allow for facilitators’ own debrief

We experienced that facilitators found it helpful to debrief as a team after each event and incorporate experiences into future deliveries. Facilitators engaged in ‘hot debrief’, which refers to debriefing immediately after the simulation. The topics ranged from logistical issues (time management, physical space management) to identifying notable experiences from each of the workshops. To ensure the sustainability of the CBS project, we invited guest facilitators at various events to build capacity for the project and incorporate new perspectives and experience into the work.

DISCUSSION

The CBS workshop is an early exploration into deploying simulation-based educational faculty development to disarm microaggressions. We join a growing group of faculty developers working in this space using innovative educational designs. Although we immensely enjoyed our experience and believe that it is generalisable, there are also some limitations and threats to its feasibility, sustainability and effectiveness that we wish to share.

We were cognisant that conversations about microaggression and anti-oppression could bring out vulnerabilities. As the establishment of psychological safety is paramount in simulation-based education, we counselled participants that they could experience discomfort and should only engage voluntarily.

Faculty development generally runs on a shoe-string budget and relies heavily on team members’ passion and generosity. The financial cost of training actors makes simulation-based education the most costly instructional design for faculty development. Participation in the CBS workshop has been entirely voluntary. Teams and event organisers must first perceive a need for this workshop before inviting this activity to their events or meetings. The complexity of the work may affect the sustainability of the project without ongoing institutional support.

The team was aware of ‘Preaching to the Converted’ phenomenon and looked for ways to bring this activity to those who have unperceived learning needs, where the impact of this activity could be even more substantial. Some strategies included shortening the activity to fit into regular meetings, promoting the activity widely through testimonials of past participants and lobbying senior academic leaders for support.

We conclude that the CBS workshop is a feasible approach to build awareness about microaggressions and to learn strategies to disarm microaggressions. Simulation-based faculty development focusing on microaggressions and oppression needs further development and research-based evaluation.

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Contributors XCT is the guarantor for the overall content of the study. She led the Creating Brave Spaces curricular team in the design and implementation, funding acquisition, as well as the writing and editing of the manuscript. SC contributed to project administration, funding acquisition, data curation and analysis, and review and editing of the manuscript. HJ contributed to the design and implementation of the Creating Brave Spaces curriculum, project administration, funding acquisition, data curation, analysis, and review and editing of the manuscript. MS contributed to funding acquisition, data curation and analysis, and review and editing of the manuscript. AG-S contributed to the design and implementation of the Creating Brave Spaces curriculum, as well as the review and editing of the manuscript. SM contributed to funding acquisition, data curation and analysis, and review and editing of the manuscript. Arden Azim, Pamela Elmhirst, Patricia Farrugia, Anjali Kundi, Tejal Patel, Saroo Sharda, Madeleine Verhovsek and Mohammad Zubairi contributed to the design and implementation of the Creating Brave Spaces curriculum. Teresa Chan and Renate Kalke consulted on the methodology of the study.

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Competing interests XCT received salary support from the McMaster Education Research Innovation and Theory (MERIT) Program to lead the Creating Brave Spaces (CBS) team. XCT is the principal investigator of the MERIT Scholar Research Pilot Grant for a future program evaluation project of the CBS curriculum. SC is a research assistant for Research Innovation and Theory (MERIT) program at McMaster University. SC is a collaborator of the MERIT Scholar Research Pilot Grant for a future program evaluation project of the CBS curriculum. HJ is the standardised patient trainer/coordinator for McMaster University’s Waterloo Regional Campus. HJ is a collaborator of the MERIT Scholar Research Pilot Grant for a future program evaluation project of the CBS curriculum. MS is an Associate Professor at McMaster University and received stipends from McMaster University for various roles in medical education. MS is a collaborator of the MERIT Scholar Research Pilot Grant for a future program evaluation project of the CBS curriculum. AG-S is the program manager for McMaster University’s Midwifery Graduate Program. SM is an Associate Professor at McMaster University and received salary support from the Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Medicine. SM is currently funded by the Medical Council of Canada to conduct an investigation of online examination test security and fairness. SM is the senior author on the MERIT Scholar Research Pilot Grant for a future program evaluation project of the CBS curriculum.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Ethics approval This study involves human participants but The Hamilton Integrated Research Ethics Board determined that this project falls within quality improvement/program evaluation and does not require ethics review by the HiREB; a waiver is granted (TCPS2 [2018] Article 2.5). The workshops described in this report are faculty development activities. The participants voluntarily registered for the workshops. For this part of the study, the program team describes our experience facilitating this activity. We have incorporated notes recording the feedback from participants in session. In the subsequent part of the study and future reports, participants give explicit consent for participation in the program evaluation study.

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