Using Students as Participants: Gaining IRB Approval for SoTL Research

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Using Students as Participants: Preparing SoTL Work for the IRB

Just as a developmental psychologist will employ longitudinal or cross-sectional methods, a teacher scholar will utilize their classroom as a laboratory, setting up studies to draw conclusions about student learning. When this is done, we need to take certain ethical considerations into account. We should be particularly concerned with the changing roles whereby students become participants and teachers become researchers (Burman & Kleinsasser, 2004; Dale, 1996; Swenson & McCarthy, 2012). Other issues include avoiding coercion, appropriate data collection times and places, obtaining consent, and protecting anonymity. This is why it’s important and necessity of gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval when conducting Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research.

The Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; Division 2 of the American Psychological Association) provides us with many great resources related to SoTL including e-books, journal articles, grants, and workshops (STP, 2014). Within these resources, and inspired by Halpern and colleagues (1998) original definition within psychology, SoTL is described as scholarly work, rigorous in nature, that is done to enhance teaching and promote student learning. SoTL ideally results in peer-reviewed products that are available to the public (Halpern et al., 1998; STP, 2014). The definition includes research on teaching pedagogy where learning is the outcome variable of interest, and researchers disseminate and make public their results. The goal of teaching (i.e., student learning) is then related to the goal of scholarly teaching (i.e., to demonstrate how teachers have fostered such learning). To do this, we must collect evidence on teaching effectiveness, reflect, evaluate and communicates their results (Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin & Prosser, 2000).

As more professors engage in SoTL work, clear ethical and methodological parameters ought to be established. In 2008, Wilson called for more guidance to help SoTL researchers
make fair choices with our student’s best interest in mind. She asserts that if we started treating SoTL like *real* research, it would become more respected. Since then, SoTL has gained in popularity, prestige, and respect. More recently, the editor of *Teaching of Psychology* emphasized utilizing solid research design for SoTL research in psychology (Christopher & Troisi, 2013). However, some ethical issues about SoTL research with students can be unclear.

When does SoTL work surmount normal teaching inquiry and become research that needs to be approved, monitored, or in some cases restricted? A certain level of commonly accepted experimentation on teaching effectiveness is allowed. However, the point at which educational process becomes true research is often not clear (Burman & Kleinsasser, 2004; Swenson & McCarthy, 2012). Furthermore, should SoTL work be held to the same standards that we have traditionally accepted in our primary research fields (Wilson, 2008)?

**Why is IRB Approval Necessary for SoTL Research?**

In the past, professors have been hesitant to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for SoTL projects (Wilson, 2008). The line between examining normal classroom experiences and research was not clear or well defined. Today, we see a rise in the popularity of SoTL research as well as a high level of sophistication within the work itself. For these reasons, we suggest that the uncertainty that used to exist is now clearer. To protect our students, you should obtain IRB approval or at the least contact your intuition’s IRB chairperson for clarification (Swenson & McCarthy, 2012). Gaining IRB approval increases the respect, methodical vigor, and acceptability of SoTL work as true scholarship.

Public sharing of ideas about teaching and learning is an essential piece of SoTL research (Shulman, 1993). Work can be disseminated among colleagues in colloquiums, teaching
portfolios, conference presentations, chapters, books, and peer reviewed journal articles. To communicate research findings in these ways, IRB approval must be gained for the study. These various forms of dissemination provide a good rule of thumb to determine if you should seek out IRB approval. If you do not intend to publish your research results IRB approval does not need to be granted. Regardless of whether IRB approval is obtained, you should adhere to the ethical principles as prescribed by the APA (APA, 2010; Swenson & McCarthy, 2012).

Regardless of whether the research is disseminated, because students are human subjects they are entitled to certain protections. “Human subject means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) identifiable, private information” (DHHS, 2009, p.4). It is for this reason that we, and other SoTL scholars, strongly suggest that IRB approval be obtained for all classroom research, regardless of publication intentions (Burman & Kleinsasser, 2004; Swenson & McCarthy, 2012).

Title 45 of The Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46, regulates the protection of human subjects (DHHS, 2009). There are three ethical principles to follow: (1) Respect for persons including autonomy and informed consent. With regard to autonomy, people have the right to decide for themselves to participate, or not, in research. With regard to informed consent, people who may be considered vulnerable should be provided special protections. This includes student populations. (2) Beneficence (i.e. risk-benefit analysis); the risks of any study must be minimized, and benefits must always outweigh the risks. (3) Justice: those who bear the burdens of research must receive its benefits (also encompassing fair subject selection). Following these regulations is of central importance for all researchers. The following section discusses major
issues and considerations for your consideration that are specific to using students as participants in SoTL research.

IRB Considerations

Recruitment and consent. If your research participants will be students in your courses, then there are special ethical considerations that arise. You will have two roles, first as the instructor of the course, and second as a researcher on a scholarly project. Balancing the demands of both roles can be tricky. Additionally, your students have both the role of a student and the role of a research participant. Having multiple relationships with students is not in and of itself unethical, according to APA’s Ethics Code (APA, 2010). As long as the relationship has no risk or harm, then conducting SoTL research with your students is acceptable (Swenson & McCarthy, 2012). However, depending upon how you manage the different roles and relationships, it could lead to ethical problems.

One problem that can occur happens in the recruitment process. Given that you are their instructor, students may consent to participate because they like you or because they feel as if their grade depends on their participation (Martin, 2013). Part 45 and 46 of the Code of Federal Regulations states that participants should “consent only under circumstances that provide the prospective subject or the representative sufficient opportunity to consider whether or not to participate and that minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence” (DHHS, 2009, p.7). In addition, APA’s ethics code indicates that psychologists need to protect participants from adverse consequences if they choose to decline or withdraw from a research study (2010).

One way to assure that coercion or undue influence does not happen would be to leave the classroom and have a third party (e.g., a colleague or collaborator) come in to recruit
participants and obtain consent. The third party should make it clear that students’ grades in the
course will not be affected by their decision to participate or not. Another added safeguard would
be to make it clear that you, as their instructor, will not know who consented or did not consent
to participate in the study. All of this should be emphasized by the third party when obtaining
consent and also be clearly and prominently displayed in the informed consent form.

To prevent yourself from knowing who participated, have your colleague put the signed
consent forms in a sealed envelope (Burman & Kleinsasse, 2004). Additionally, you might
consider not finding out how many students consented to participate until after grades are turned
in. If you know that 100% (or 75% or 10%) of your Introductory Psychology students consented
to participate, will that change your behavior in the classroom? You might start engaging in a
guessing game of who did or did not consent, and that speculation is better left until after the
semester ends. Specifically, knowing that 100% or 0% of the students consented might change
your attitude toward that class of students while you are still teaching the course. That changed
attitude could ultimately interfere with obtaining accurate data in your study.

**Student work vs. research.** Another problem that can occur when your students are your
participants is distinguishing what assignments or activities students complete for the class and
what students complete for the research project. In some cases, there may be little difference. For
example, using exam scores as an indication of learning could be a part of your research design,
but all students will take the exams for course credit, regardless of whether they are participating
in the research study. If, however, you want participants in the study to answer other questions or
do other tasks, such as answering a demographic questionnaire or filling out a scale, then those
activities are ones that only participants need to complete.
If you are offering course credit or extra credit for the course for participation, there are two things to consider. First, you must offer students another option for earning those points. The APA ethics codes indicates that equitable alternative activities need to be available for students as real and viable options when a research study counts towards their course grade or is offered for extra credit (2010). The second consideration in offering course or extra credit for participation is whether you as an instructor can still not know who did or did not participate in your research study during the semester. Having a teaching assistant or colleague handle the alternative assignments might help with that process.

Timing. Ethical issues can arise with the timing of data collection and recruitment. While some (see Burman & Kleinsasser, 2004) advocate obtaining informed consent at the beginning of the course or even having it in your syllabus, we believe the timing of the informed consent can vary, depending on the design. For example, a research design that includes a radical change to how you normally teach your class would lend itself to obtaining consent early in the semester, and you may even consider having some information about the study in your syllabus. A research design that does not change how you normally teach class may not need to have informed consent at the very beginning of the course.

What if you want to use student’s work from a previous class? Burman and Kleinsasser warn us to proceed carefully if we choose to use data from a previous course without student consent (2004)! You can use this type of data for your own improvement as a teacher or as a pilot study, but using it for SoTL research may not be the best idea. For example, to maintain accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, known as FERPA (US Department of Education, 2001), consent must be obtained for all student work used in a research study. The specific artifacts that will be used and a well-defined understanding of how
they will be used should be clear to the student (Burman & Kleinsasser, 2004). In other words, their artifacts, such as papers or projects are not yours to disseminate without consent.

**Protecting confidentiality.** As human subjects, students have the right to anonymity and/or confidentiality. They ought to be treated just as any participant in a psychology research experiment would. Because they are also students in your class, protecting anonymity can be tricky. A distinction should first be made between the terms anonymous and confidential, as they are often confused. For something to be anonymous, no identifying information is collected. Additionally, it should be impossible to identify who the participant is. In a SoTL classroom research study, students should not use their name on data collection materials. However, it should be noted that through demographic information or other responses, in a limited sample size (a class), it might still be possible for the professor to know who the participant is.

Standard four, “Privacy and Confidentiality,” of The Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct helps clarify this issue. It states that “psychologists have a primary obligation and take reasonable precautions to protect confidential information obtained through or stored in any medium, recognizing that the extent and limits of confidentiality may be regulated by law or established by institutional rules or professional or scientific relationship” (APA, 2010). SoTL work is thus more concerned with confidentiality (protecting information) than it is with attaining anonymous data.

To protect confidentiality, SoTL researchers should de-identify all data. Numerical codes can be assigned to participants, which is also helpful if you are going to track them over time (pre and post test measures). For example, researchers can have participants create their own unique numerical code by stringing together day of birth, last two digits of their phone number,
and their favorite number. It is unlikely that two participants will create the same number and the professor has little chance of discovering who each individual truly is.

Once data is collected you should lock it in a cabinet in your office and you should wait until the course has closed (i.e., final grades have been submitted) before examining it. Only people approved on the IRB should be able to handle the data, and, if electronic copies are created, they ought to be treated with the same level of security. Audio, photo and video data should also be treated confidentially. If collecting such data, a separate consent form should be used with permission for release. Because the data provides identifying information, we recommend not including it in the dissemination of the study. Instead, researchers can code audio, video, or photographed data and summarize the information.

Concluding Thoughts and Advice

While obtaining IRB approval for a project may seem overwhelming, it is an essential part of the process of SoTL research. First of all, consult with your local IRB. IRBs are not there to impede your research, they are there to make sure you are conducting ethical research, and part of their job is to help you understand and navigate the IRB process. Also, local IRBs can be idiosyncratic, interpreting ethical rules and principles differently, creating slightly different experiences and rules. Finding out how your IRB functions before you submit a proposal can save you valuable time. You will also want to add time in the planning process to include consulting with and gaining IRB approval. While this can be one of the most vexing parts of working with the IRB, understanding and accounting for the extra time needed can help mitigate any frustration you might feel.

Next, learn about the IRB process and the ethical guidelines (APA, 2010; DHHS, 2009). SoTL research is not conducted at all institutions, so your local IRB may not be familiar with
some of the ethical issues occurring in SoTL research. You may, unfortunately, be in the position of educating your local IRB about appropriate ethical considerations specific to SoTL research. In accordance with this, the IRB should not be criticizing your writing, the value of your research, or the methodology. The IRB is solely responsible for the risk that your study poses to participants (Martin, 2013). SoTL work might provide your institution the occasion to reflect on their IRB procedures and operations, providing a great learning experience while bringing your institution up to speed with federal regulations.

This article proposes strong support for obtaining IRB approval for SoTL research. We have outlined a few of the ethical issues that exist with the IRB. However, the issues that you need to consider, and that are discussed here, are certainly not exhaustive. We recommend reading and following the International Code of Ethics for SoTL that was presented by Gurung, Marin, Jarvis and Creasey (2007). Additional explanation and information can be found on FERPA regulations in Burman and Kleinsasser (2004), including nine principles to guide use of student work in classroom inquiry. This resource will hopefully aid your preparation of SoTL work for the IRB. We wish you the best of luck in your teaching and learning scholarly endeavors.

References
American Psychological Association (2010). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct (Amended June 1, 2010). Retrieved from:  


