

Ethical Issues in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
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The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) generally involves some type of research, broadly defined, and the public sharing (presentations, publications) of that work. In addition, one is most often working with human subjects in this work. For these reasons, in many institutions and for some professional associations, SoTL work is subject to approval by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Whether subject to IRB approval or not, I believe those involved in SoTL work are ethically obligated to consider the ethical issues involved in their work, and to make every effort to protect our human “subjects,” usually our students! When considering research that involves humans, three ethical standards or criteria are frequently discussed and should be considered. Each of these is briefly explained and illustrated in terms of SoTL, below. It is the case that somewhat different terminology or standards related to research ethics may be used, depending on the discipline. You may wish to check the ethical guidelines for your professional association. (See, also, Hutchings, P. 2002. *Ethics of Inquiry: Issues in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Carnegie Foundation for additional information and examples.)

Informed Consent

There are two parts to this standard: “consent” and “informed.” Essentially, the people participating in our research have the right to give or refuse to give consent to participate. In order to give meaningful consent, they must be adequately informed about the nature of, risks of, purpose of, privacy of, consequences of, etc. the study. Thus, in doing research, including SoTL research, we must obtain informed consent from the participants. There are a variety of ways to do this that range from passive to active consent (e.g., read an oral statement, have a written statement, obtain signatures) and some IRBs will require that informed consent be obtained in a certain way and/or that particular content be contained in any informed consent statement.

In some SoTL research, informed consent may seem unnecessary as your study or data may be collected as part of course requirements, for example. Yet, in many institutions, as you are planning to present or publish the research (not just use it for course improvement or program evaluation), you would need informed consent. Here is one example of an informed consent statement:

“The purpose of this self-administered, questionnaire study is to obtain some information about the out-of-class learning experiences of our Sociology majors. We hope to use this information to improve the co-curriculum and to enhance student learning in Sociology. In addition, we will share the aggregate results in presentations and/or publications. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may quit any time without penalty. Your data will be kept confidential and will be destroyed via secure recycling when the study is completed. If you have any questions about this research, please contact Kathleen McKinney (kmckinne@ilstu.edu). You may also contact staff in the University Research Office at 309-438-2528. We greatly appreciate your assistance with this important study.”

Right to Privacy

Participants in our research have the right to expect that their data or responses or behavior in the study be private. Data can be anonymous, where no one can connect the specific person to their data (e.g., self-administered questionnaires with no names or code numbers or identifying questions), or confidential, where at least one person can connect a specific person to their responses or actions (e.g., an interview study), but the researchers promise to keep the data private. Aggregating the data also helps maintain privacy as does destroying raw data when it is no longer needed. A statement about protection of privacy is usually included in the statement obtaining informed consent.

In SoTL research, privacy is most often an issue in terms of the confidentiality of the content or quality of student work. SoTL researchers must consider issues of privacy, offer reasonable protection of privacy, and make the level of privacy clear to participants.

Protection from Harm

In research with human participants, we are obligated to protect them from physical, emotional, and social harm. More specifically, any potential harm must be clearly outweighed by the benefits to the participants or to society as a whole. This is clearly a subjective decision to make, thus, harm is also one of the areas an IRB will consider. We must also protect participants' privacy and refrain from sanctioning anyone who declines to participate or who ends his/her participation before the study is completed (thus, this ethical standard of harm also relates back to the standards of privacy and consent).

In SoTL research, physical harm is unlikely but it would be possible to damage the self-esteem of a student (emotional harm). This might occur, for example, in a study where the student reflects on his/her performance or interacts with other students and learns about their level of work, and is embarrassed by his/her own performance. It is also possible to contribute to the situation where a student learns less or earns a lower grade than he/she might in another situation (social harm). For example, this could occur in a quasi-experiment where one section of a course receives a learning opportunity or pedagogical innovation that the researcher believes (and the study later confirms) enhances student learning, but the other section of the course is not offered this opportunity/innovation. Thus SoTL researchers must consider these risks and weigh the benefits of doing such SoTL work.