

Doing Ethical Research: SoTL and the IRB

Normal Practice & Research Additions

With any research project, you should think of the ethical issues surrounding your work. When dealing with research on teaching and learning, IRBs distinguish between activities that are part of “normal educational practices” and other research activities.

- What are you asking of students that they might be doing as part of the course, whether or not you were conducting your project? These are “normal educational practices.”
- What are you asking of students that is above and beyond the normal course work? These are research activities that will be subject to closer scrutiny by the IRB.

Example

If you plan to do a close reading of your students’ answers to a particular essay question on the first exam to look for patterns in their thinking, then what you are asking of your students—having them answer the essay question—is part of “normal educational practices” associated with the course. They would be doing that work whether or not you were conducting your study. If you also ask them a follow-up question after the exam, asking them to reflect on what course components (lecture, discussion section, textbook, etc.) helped them answer that essay question, then you are *also* asking them to do something above and beyond “normal educational practices” associated with the course.

When you apply for IRB approval, be clear about which of your project activities are normal educational practices and which are research activities.

Informed Consent

If you are asking your students to participate in activities beyond your normal practices, you are asking them to participate in research. In such cases, students should be informed of the advantages and disadvantages of participating in such extra or unusual activities, as well as any associated risks. Students then should be given the opportunity to opt out of participation—without penalty.

The IRB will want to know how you plan to tell your students about their participation in your study: are you giving them enough information to give you their “informed consent” to include them in your study? While signed consent forms aren’t always required, the principle of informed consent is more than an issue of policy; it’s a larger ethical one, so many researchers choose to obtain their students’ consent whether required or not.

Risk to Students

Regardless of the pursuit of IRB approval, the fact that humans, and especially students, are involved means there are several ethical issues to consider. Ultimately, the basis behind all human subject research (medical, psychological, SoTL, etc.) is the spirit of the Hippocratic oath: do no harm. It may seem counterintuitive to think that improving your teaching through research may put students at risk, but there are two main risks: risk to their grades and learning, and risk to their privacy.

Risk to Student’s Grades & Learning

Be clear that your students’ participation in your study will not jeopardize their grades or their learning. Since normal educational practices are part of the regular learning experience, they create no more risk to learning or grades than students would expect to encounter in any course, but participation in activities beyond

normal practices can create minimal risk to their learning or grades (e.g., participation in the part of a study with what turns out to be a less effective learning strategy).

Risk to Student's Privacy

As sociologist and SoTL scholar Kathleen McKinney explains, “Participants in our research have the right to expect that their data or responses or behavior in the study be kept private” (2007, p. 63). To maintain students’ privacy, you can de-identify the data, so it can’t be connected with a particular student. This includes direct information like names, as well as indirect identifiers like hometowns, majors, etc. Another option is to collect anonymous data when possible. When neither of these strategies is possible, their identities should be kept confidential.

Example¹

You survey your students about their reading strategies and study habits. Suppose that you only have two female students in your class. If you include your students’ sex in your data set, a third party with access to your class rolls might be able to determine which survey responses belong to each of your two female students.¹

De-identifying your data doesn’t mean that you won’t know individual student identities as you conduct your project. Instead, it means that if a third party (perhaps a colleague at another school interested in your project) wanted to see your data, you would need to be able to provide a de-identified set of data that would enable that third party to verify your analysis of the data, so make sure that any results you share publicly don’t inadvertently reveal individual student identities.

Example²

You survey your students about their textbook reading strategies and want to compare their answers to their performance on a midterm exam. Your data set might include the fact that a student named John Smith uses a certain reading strategy and made a C on the midterm. While you are interested in knowing that his reading strategy is correlated with that specific grade, you won’t include his name in your de-identified set of data. Instead, you can assign random numbers to all your students, so your de-identified set of data includes the fact that Student 12 used that reading strategy and scored a C. This way, a third party could verify the correlations you find without identifying particular students. Additionally, if you set aside or don’t see the students’ number assignments, you won’t risk bringing other knowledge about the students (how John Smith did on subsequent exams) to your analysis.

¹ Course registration information is considered protected educational information by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a federal law protecting student privacy in educational settings. Thus, only your institution’s faculty and staff with a “legitimate educational interest” have access to course registration information, so only they might be able to identify your students in this case. However, although they might have a “legitimate educational interest” to know which students are taking your course, they don’t have a “legitimate educational interest” to know your students’ individual responses to your survey. Additionally, the identity of your two female students may be common knowledge to their friends, family, and other peers, rendering their responses—if identified as by women—identifiable.

² Be sure not to inadvertently identify your students when you assign them numbers. For instance, don’t use their social security numbers or the numbers according to their alphabetical order on your class roster.

In some cases, it may not be possible to de-identify your data, as when videotaping students. When de-identifying your data is not possible, be clear how participation in your project poses minimal risk.

Click the “IRB” tab on the [SoTL Research Guide](#) prepared by Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching and Heard Library for the following additional information:

- A few key explanations of the relationship between SoTL and the IRB,
- Vanderbilt’s IRB policies and forms,
- An annotated (Vanderbilt University) IRB form with advice and examples