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IRBs and Research on Teaching and Learning

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## IRBs and Research on Teaching and Learning

You have decided to conduct research on teaching and learning (often called the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; SoTL). Because the word *research* appears in both labels, you will likely need to seek IRB approval. Even though we know we have academic freedom in the classroom, and we can try any reasonable method to enhance our teaching and improve student learning, research takes us to a new level. Even if your SoTL will not take place in the classroom, student data are included in your study; therefore, ethical considerations are a must. Conveniently, the IRB is in place to help us. In fact, utilizing the IRB further elevates SoTL research to the level of “real” research to be respected and valued. As an added bonus, obtaining IRB approval allows you to publish your work or even present your research at a conference.

### Common Questions:

#### 1. When do I have to get IRB approval for SoTL?

IRB approval is required any time you conduct *research* using *human participants*. Research is defined as “a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge” (Protection of Human Subjects, 2009, 46.102.d). A human participant (referred to a “subject” in the federal regulations) is “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” (Protection of Human Subjects, 2009, 46.102.f).

Using this definition, the vast majority of SoTL will require IRB approval. In those gray areas where it is not clear whether or not the project is considered research, the investigator should err on the side of obtaining approval or at least consulting with his or her IRB prior to collecting data.

#### 2. Why do I have to get IRB approval for SoTL?

Although much SoTL work is rightfully considered low-risk compared to other sorts of research (e.g., when blood samples are taken), SoTL is not without risk to participants (e.g., participants may be deceived, student may feel coerced to participate, and researchers sometimes use sensitive data such as student journals). Potential risks should be evaluated by a neutral body, the IRB, with expertise in the protection of human participants. Getting IRB approval is part of ethically conducting well designed SoTL (Gurung & Wilson, 2013; Swenson & McCarthy, 2012).

#### 3. What are some of the particular risks I should consider when conducting SoTL?

SoTL scholars really need to be concerned about two primary issues: First, and likely the most worrisome, is coercion. Because SoTL scholars are often studying their own students, they may intentionally or unintentionally coerce students to participate. For instance, offering a direct benefit like course credit without an equivalent alternative option for them is

coercive. Or perhaps students feel compelled to participate simply to gain the instructor's approval.

Another potential risk is the use of sensitive data. Some SoTL scholars may want to use student journals in their research or may want to ask questions about behaviors such as cheating. Using such data elevates the risk of participating in the study.

**4. How can I avoid making students feel coerced to participate when researching my own students?**

You can do a few things. First, when you offer course credit, even if it is extra credit, for participation, be sure to offer an equivalent (i.e., approximately the same amount of time) alternative to participation. Second, try to develop a system by which you do not know who chose to participate and who did not. For example, you could ask a colleague to collect the data for you and hold on to it until after you submit grades.

**5. Do I need to get IRB approval to use student information I was going to collect anyway (exam grades, essay responses, etc.)?**

Yes, you do. It will likely be considered "exempt" by your IRB as it meets exemption Number 4 of the federal guidelines (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009, 46.101)<sup>1</sup>. However, even research that qualifies as exempt requires initial review by the IRB to make sure it truly is exempt. The one caveat here is to make sure the data really contain information you were going to collect anyway. If you add such measures as a short survey or a brief reflection exercise for the purpose of research, it no longer meets the requirements of exemption Number 4.

**6. If I want to test a new assignment/study aid with one section/class and compare it to another, do I need to get student consent at the start of the semester, or can I get it at the end of the semester when I do a post-assessment and comparison?**

The standards for informed consent with SoTL are the same as with any research. You need to establish four conditions in order to waive or delay informed consent: (1) The research involves minimal risk, (2) the waiver of consent will not adversely affect the participants, (3) the research could not practically be carried out without waiving consent, and (4) participants will be provided appropriate information about the study as soon as possible.

**7. My school does not have an IRB. What do I do?**

An IRB at another institution can review your proposed research. Look into other colleges or universities near you, a nearby hospital, or other institutions that engage in research. You might also consider collaborating with someone at a nearby university that houses an IRB.

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<sup>1</sup> Exemption Number 4: "Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects."

**8. Isn't student data archival after the class is over, which requires little IRB control?**

Some student data could be considered archival under Exemption 4, but that does not mean less IRB control. You should remember two important points. First, as was indicated above about Exemption 4, you cannot collect more information than you would have otherwise. In other words, the data you collect must truly be data you would have collected as part of the class. Two, when you know you are going to be completing a SoTL project, you must get IRB approval in advance. Waiting until after the data are collected and arguing that the data were archival is unethical.

**9. My IRB has no experience with SoTL and I fear my proposal will be penalized. What can I do?**

The easiest thing to do is provide the IRB chair with some exemplars of SoTL. Most articles in *Teaching of Psychology* serve this role well. You may also want to share pieces discussing the robustness of SoTL work (e.g., Wilson-Doenges & Gurung, 2013).

We wish you good, ethical research in SoTL! Through SoTL, we have the opportunity to enhance teaching and learning, and gaining IRB approval of your study is worth the effort.

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