

## The Value and Ethics of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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**T**he Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) is at the forefront of a research-in-teaching movement called SoTL, or the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. This exciting wave of activity embraces all research applied to how we teach and how students learn. Psychology is the perfect discipline to focus on research in teaching given our firm grounding in the scientific method. For the past several years, I have enjoyed conducting empirical research – even experiments – on teaching, both in my classrooms and in lab settings. I have had conversations with my department chair and my dean to clarify their positions on research in teaching to make sure it is valued in academe, and they have assured me that SoTL is firmly accepted as valid research at Georgia Southern University. I have even been fortunate to publish research on teaching in several teaching journals, including our own *Teaching of Psychology*. So it seems that all is well.

But as my teaching research has evolved over these past several years, I find myself with more questions than answers about the process of SoTL. My concerns revolve around one central question: *Is research in teaching truly analogous to scientific research in any other area?*

This leads me to two related questions:

First, is SoTL valued? Would most administrators truly see a list of publications in teaching journals as equal in value to a list of publications in more traditional research-oriented journals? For example, would a new psychology faculty member be given tenure or promotion based on teaching publications alone?

Second, is SoTL (always) ethical? Where does academic freedom end and the rights of students as participants in research begin?

### Is SoTL Valued?

This first question is likely being addressed on campuses everywhere, with teaching institutions faring better than research institutions (yes, I recognize the irony in that sentence). And if a formal study has not yet been conducted, it seems a good question to address. Is research in teaching valued only as *additional* evidence of scholarship but not primary scholarship?

I find myself wanting to rise above such questions and argue that research on teaching and learning should be seen as equal in value to research in areas such as physiological, developmental, or cognitive psychology. But if I'm honest with myself, I have to admit that I would frown on a job candidate with a PhD in physiological psychology giving a job talk on teaching research. I suppose if the SoTL talk was also tied to physiological responses to learning, I could at least convince myself that the candidate indeed had an area of research emphasis besides teaching. Before you judge

me too harshly, consider that teaching should be an area of emphasis for all teachers, regardless of whether we conduct scientific research in the area. Even writing this, I completely understand that I have slipped into a gray area, and I cannot offer a strong, logical argument for why SoTL should not be a sufficient research area for a psychologist. I also worry that if someone as sympathetic to the SoTL cause as I am still has reservations about its true worth, what must administrators really be thinking?

### Is SoTL (Always) Ethical?

Regardless of where research in teaching and learning falls on the value spectrum, we need to examine how we will continue this movement ethically. In my first empirical teaching study, I wanted to collect teaching evaluations in professors' classes across the campus. I had no intention of manipulating any variables; this was a simple survey study. Even so, I had no doubt in my mind that this would require Institutional Review Board (IRB) review of a full proposal. After all, I was asking to go into classes and have students report on their professors as well as write down their grades. I was granted IRB approval for a proposal that included informed consent from both the instructors and their students.

In my own classes that term, I asked students to complete the surveys after providing informed consent. I also asked students to complete the traditional end-of-semester instructor evaluations without informed consent. Portions of the two forms were identical; one required IRB approval, and one did not. So be it.

During the next few years, I attended workshops at conferences and at our own Center for Excellence in Teaching, where I learned to use strategies like the one-minute paper. On numerous occasions I learned a new technique and tried it on my students as soon as I had the opportunity. Sometimes I assessed the outcome with questions about how they liked it or whether they thought it helped them learn; I often quizzed them to see if they seemed to understand the material.

Every once in a while I even came up with something new, tried it out on my students, assessed it using the wealth of knowledge psychologists have about statistics, and lo and behold, found something interesting. Did I get IRB approval? Of course not! In fact, I would have argued vehemently against anyone trying to exert any control over my classroom. In addition, I wanted to share the discovery with my colleagues, so I submitted the demonstration to a conference and created either a poster or a talk so others could benefit from what I had learned. True SoTL.

However, we might need to reexamine our shortcuts if we elevate SoTL to the level of research equal to what we have traditionally accepted in our "primary" research areas. Does that mean seeking IRB approval for every demonstration we use in class? I hope not! If we do, then we might as well seek IRB approval to have a bad day or to see if being nice to students (if we generally are neutral) is okay to do. But we do have to evaluate where to draw the line, and that's the problem. Each of us will draw it in a different place, and many of us may claim that academic freedom protects our right in many instances to perform SoTL within the classroom. Even if we choose to conduct teaching research in our classrooms, what can we do with the data? Research can't be shared with the public without IRB approval. One option may include obtaining approval to share the data, which generally requires completing exempt-status paperwork and promising not to identify students.

Let me share with you one more example of conducting research in the classroom. During the past few years, Bill Buskist and others have pointed out the need to empirically assess our beliefs about teaching rather than teach by commonly accepted

practices. On one occasion, they discussed how to increase the effectiveness of the first day of class. I was intrigued, so I used their work about student likes and dislikes to create a study with two groups: One group would get a perfect first day as outlined by Henslee, Burgess, and Buskist (2006; and Perlman & McCann, 1999), and the other group would get a not-so-great day as defined by students (e.g., full use of class time and homework). I decided to randomly assign an incoming group of Introduction to Psychology students to these two conditions, and called my IRB for advice. I was told that what I did in my classes was my business. I then talked about my study to the chair of our department, and he asked me to contact the IRB again. I did, and they assured me that they were not interested in interfering with academic freedom.

I conducted the study and found that the perfect first day (according to students) resulted in higher motivation across the term than the not-so-great first day. In addition, there was some indication that grades were higher for the perfect first-day group by the end of the term. This took me by surprise; I had expected the groups to differ in their attitude toward me and maybe the course on the first day, then I fully expected classroom rapport to remove any differences quickly. I adjusted grades so students would not suffer for their participation, sent the information to the IRB, and asked for permission to share the results so my colleagues could start thinking about the potential impact of the first day of class. The IRB granted permission, and I first presented the research at a conference in the form of a talk.

When I finished the presentation, the first question was, “Did you get IRB approval for this study?” And of course, being the subtle person that I am, I replied, “No.” What I really wanted to say was, “I tried, but no one wanted to touch teaching.” Or, “No, and did you get IRB approval every time you tried something new with your students?”

What makes this study different? Is it the outcome? Surely the outcome of a study does not define the ethics of its method. Is it the random assignment to conditions? I assume a between-groups experiment isn’t subject to more stringent ethical requirements than a pre-post design. Which classroom exercises or inquiries characterize *research*, with all of the compliance requirements inherent in that title? Conversely, which classroom experiences illustrate academic freedom to teach the best way we know how?

I don’t know if I will seek IRB approval for every change I make in my classroom, even if I will be assessing the outcome (which is almost always the case). But certainly at this point more guidance is needed to help SoTL researchers make fair choices that respect our students, who are the *participants* in our studies. Maybe if we start treating SoTL like real research, it will become more respected.

## References

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