

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and the IRB

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This document provides a brief introduction to some of the ethical considerations involved in conducting Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research at Elon University with Elon students. This document also describes the steps necessary to apply for approval to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is required for anyone conducting research with human participants at Elon University.

For the purposes of the IRB, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) can be defined as ***research on teaching and learning that may result in public presentations or publications, or classroom-based research in which data collection extends beyond normal student work products and teacher observations.*** In addition to student work, SoTL researchers often use surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, and video- or audio-recording of student work sessions.

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

The purpose of the IRB is to ensure that all research involving human participants meets the standards issued by the Federal Government for the ethical treatment of human subjects in research (Office for Human Research Protections - OHRP¹) and for the handling of student education records (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act – FERPA²) at all institutions that receive federal funding (this includes Elon). These requirements include:

- 1) ***Participation in research must be voluntary.*** Students may choose to participate in a study or they may decline without penalty. They may initially consent to participate and then withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
- 2) ***Participants must give informed consent.*** Students should know, ahead of time, what their participation entails and what their options are. Students must consent to have their work or other data (including audio- and video-recordings) included in a study. Note that permission to participate must be provided by parents in the case of any student who is under 18 years of age.
- 3) ***Risks to participants must be anticipated and minimized.*** This includes psychological and social risk (such as embarrassment) as well as physical risks. The benefits of participation must outweigh the potential for harm.
- 4) ***Every effort must be made to maintain the privacy of participants.*** Student work and other data must be treated confidentially and any public reporting must assure participant anonymity, unless the participant granted permission to use identifiable data – this can be particularly important with video and audio-recordings.

¹ http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/irb/irb_guidebook.htm

² <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>

Receiving IRB approval to conduct your SoTL research

Information about the IRB and application materials is available at <http://www.elon.edu/irb>. We recommend that you review the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) document linked to that site (especially the *Special Topics* section) and complete the CITI on-line research ethics training made available to all Elon faculty, staff, and students.

A list of the primary components of the IRB application and consent form are at the end of this document. CATL can also provide you with examples of successful applications and consent forms. The IRB application and consent form templates are Microsoft Word documents with spaces left for you to fill in specific information about your project. The templates ensure that applicants provide all information necessary for an IRB review; some modifications can be made to tailor the application to your project, but be cautious about making major changes without consulting an IRB expert.

As you prepare for your SoTL research, allow ample time for both completion of the application and turn-around from the IRB prior to beginning your study. SoTL work typically falls under the “exempt” or “expedited” review category, but the process of getting approval often takes at least two weeks. SoTL projects with minimal risk to the participants and de-identified data (see below) are likely to be determined to be exempt from oversight of the IRB; however, this determination is made by the chair of the IRB based on the information provided in the IRB application. Even projects that are likely to be determined to be exempt need to be submitted to the IRB.

In your IRB application, you should be explicit about your research methods, the way in which you will ensure that participation is voluntary, your procedure for obtaining informed consent, the efforts you will make to minimize risks, and how confidentiality and privacy will be maintained. *Additionally, if you are conducting research in a class you are teaching (rather in a colleague’s class), you will need to explain why you must use your own students (rather than a colleague’s) as research subjects.* The chair of the IRB may contact you with questions, or indicate that changes need to be made to the proposal prior to approval.

If part way through an approved SoTL research project you decide you would like to collect a new kind of data or make other modifications to your research protocol, you will need to file an addendum with the IRB prior to collecting any new data.

Faculty members are invited to meet with CATL staff prior to submitting their IRB application to work through questions of research design and data collection and to explore any practical and ethical issues involved in conducting their SoTL research.

Recommendations for ethical collection of SoTL data

Faculty members in many science and social science disciplines have received training in research ethics as a part of their own education; however, this training typically concerns the use of human subjects for research purposes only, not the addition of a researcher-participant dimension to an already existing teacher-student relationship. Some disciplines have addressed these concerns; for example, Composition Studies has a tradition of pedagogical research and the Conference on College Composition and Communication has issued guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research

in Composition Studies³. The growing SoTL community has also begun to address the dual nature of SoTL research and some guidelines have been offered (see Burman and Kleinsasser, 2004).

CATL encourages faculty to carefully consider the following questions in preparation for conducting ethical SoTL research:

- How will I receive truly voluntary informed consent from my students? Many faculty worry about whether participation in SoTL research can ever be truly voluntary given the inherent power imbalance between faculty members and students. Can students really be fully informed about the nature of their participation in the research project at the beginning of class? Informed consent is a process, not a one-time event. You may want to include a statement about your research in your course syllabus similar to the following⁴:

I am working on a research project that seeks to investigate how students learn qualitative research skills. I plan to use this research to help me better teach qualitative research methods and to enhance how future students learn the subject. In this class, we will do three in-class exercises (about 30-45 minutes each) to help you develop as a qualitative researcher. (These are exercises that I would normally do while teaching, regardless of my research.) I plan to analyze your work in these exercises for my research project. In any presentation of the results, I will not include your name or any identifying details. If I plan to quote extensively (i.e., more than one sentence or an image of your work), I will follow up with an email to check that this is acceptable to you. If you are under age 18, I would ask you to let me know so that I can disregard your work from the analysis. However, you will still do the same work as the rest of the class. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns about this research.

Some faculty members are not comfortable with the standard informed consent procedure in which students are given a consent form to sign at the beginning of the semester. Although students are told that they do not have to participate in the study, they may not feel comfortable declining a request from the person who is responsible for determining their grade. You may want to consider ways to reduce this implicit pressure. You may want to get someone else to distribute the consent forms. You may want to keep the consent forms in a sealed envelope until after the semester is over so that you don't know who assented and who declined to participate until after the grading is completed.

- How does grading relate to my SoTL research? Often researchers use the same criteria to evaluate student work for research purposes that they use for grading purposes. This is certainly the most efficient approach. You could expand your usual grading rubric to include research-specific items and assign those items relatively few points compared to the items most closely tied to your learning outcomes. Sometimes learning outcomes and research objectives are not the same; in this case consider whether you should make copies of student work to be evaluated for research purposes after all coursework is completed and graded, so as to minimize the risk that you are scrutinizing student work unfairly (through a researcher's lens rather than a teacher's).
- How might I collect informal or ungraded student work? In-class and out-of-class activities often create useful data for research on student learning. However, the use of informal materials and student-student or student-teacher communication requires careful

³ <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/ethicalconduct>

⁴ From the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan crlt@umich.edu

consideration. If you are using informal or ungraded work, are you confident that those materials accurately capture student understanding? If you will be using journals, blog entries, or other forms of informal writing, do students need to be reminded that this writing is part of your research? If you are using informal student work in your research, you might consider collecting and saving only specific activities (such as responses to certain writing prompts that link to your research), rather than collecting *all* informal student work.

- *How might I collect audio or video-recordings of students working, focus groups, or interviews?* The use of audio, video or other recording requires special consideration, because of the difficulty of ensuring the anonymity of your participants. It is important to allow students to indicate whether or not they agree to the use of their image or recording. Only tapes in which all potentially identifiable students have consented to the use of their recorded voice or image may be used for research. Consider having someone else collect any potentially sensitive data from students. For example, in a study of students' critical thinking about course content⁵ an undergraduate research assistant interviewed students at multiple points during the semester. The interviews were transcribed and not viewed by the professor until after the course was completed. In the interviews students frequently expressed frustration, confusion, and disagreement with the professor – crucial information that she could not have collected as effectively herself.
- *Should responses to surveys or questionnaires be anonymous?* Not all survey data needs to be associated with a specific student's identity, and you might receive different responses (see audio/video above) if you collect anonymous data. Also, consider if there are ways to make completing a survey a learning or reflective experience for students. Our students spend a lot of time completing various surveys outside of class, so be wary of "survey fatigue" unless yours is clearly linked to learning, reflection, or course goals.
- *How will you analyze your data and report your conclusions?* You should strive to avoid associating data with the identity of any particular student. There are many ways in which data can be "de-identified." For example, you can assign each participant an i.d. code which you then use to label all data or student work that you will treat as data, avoiding or removing students' names. Ask a colleague to do this if you want to provide an extra layer of anonymity. Privacy and confidentiality are especially problematic when class size is small or work is highly personal. Be mindful that even though students may turn in work for evaluative purposes, it is still their work and students' rights must be considered. Ask students' permission to quote from their work or to use an audio or visual image of them or their work in any kind of public report or presentation. Consider that in some cases, as when student work is creative or exemplary, students may wish that any use of their work retain their identity.
- *Might your SoTL research be improved by collaborating with students?* Some faculty members believe that many of these ethical issues are mitigated when their students are also involved in the SoTL research as researchers. For example, Manor, Bloch-Schulman, Flannery, & Felten (2009) use a "multivoiced" technique in order to share perspectives of students and faculty members in an Elon SoTL project. Consider whether an examination of student learning might fit in with the objectives of the course you are teaching. Of course, you

⁵ King, C., & Mattern, R. (January, 2002). *The Influence of Pre-service Teachers' Epistemological Beliefs on Educational Psychology*. Paper presented to the Powerful Learning & the Perry Scheme Conference, Fullerton, CA.

will need to pay extra attention to privacy and coercion issues if peers are evaluating student work.

Additional SoTL Resources

The above suggestions are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive; they are meant to give new SoTL researchers a sense of the scope of ethical issues they will likely encounter as they plan their research projects. The work of Hutchings (2002; 2003) and Gurung and Schwartz (2009) provide more information about SoTL research in general. Zeni (2001) discusses classroom research as self-study in education which challenges both the theory-practice dichotomy and the insider-outsider dichotomy typical of university research. Discipline-specific models for conducting pedagogical research can often be found in journals published by disciplinary societies (see <http://www.podnetwork.org/resources/periodicals.htm> for suggestions). Faculty members are also invited to consult with the staff of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning for guidance.

The IRB Application requires:

- 1) A brief description of the proposed research, including:
 - a) Start and stop dates
 - b) Any funding for the project
 - c) Goals and/or hypotheses of this study
- 2) A description of your methodology, including
 - a) Who will be your participants
 - i) How will you identify and recruit your participants
 - ii) What is your informed consent process (with a copy of your consent form appended)
 - b) Where will the research be conducted?
 - c) What will your participants be asked to do?
 - d) What data will be collected?
 - i) Audio/video/still picture recording
 - ii) Surveys or questionnaires (attach copies)
 - e) Will the data be anonymous or confidential?
 - f) How/where will the data be stored and kept secure? Who will have access?
 - g) How will the data be used (during and after the research)? Will it be disseminated through publication, presentation or other means?
 - h) How and when will the data be disposed of?
- 3) A description of any physical, psychological, or social risks. How will the risks be minimized?
- 4) A description of any benefits: What do you hope to learn? Who might find these results useful? Will the participants benefit directly? Explain how the benefits justify the associated risks.
- 5) A description of how or if participants will be informed of the results of the study

The consent form requires:

- 1) A statement that the study involves research
- 2) An explanation of the purposes of the research

- 3) An explanation as to whom to contact concerning questions about the research, research participants' rights, and/or a research related injury or adverse effect. This should include the Principal Investigator's name and contact information as well as the IRB Chair's name and number.
- 4) The duration of the participant's participation
- 5) A description of procedures to be followed
- 6) A description of foreseeable risks or discomforts to the participant
- 7) A description of any benefits to the participants or any others that may be expected from the research (or a statement that there are no direct benefits)
- 8) A statement describing the extent, if any, that confidentiality will be maintained
- 9) A statement that participation is voluntary
- 10) A statement that refusal to participate involves no penalty or loss of benefits
- 11) A statement that the subject may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits

References/Resources on SoTL and IRB issues

- Burman, M.E., & Kleinsasser, A. (2004). Ethical guidelines for use of student work: Moving from teaching's invisibility to inquiry's visibility in the scholarship of teaching and learning. *The Journal of General Education*, 53, 59-79.
- Gurung, R. A. R., & Schwartz, B. M. (2009). *Optimizing teaching and learning: Practicing pedagogical research*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hutchings, P. (2002). *Ethics of Inquiry: Issues in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Hutchings, P. (2003). Competing goods: Ethical issues in the scholarship of teaching and learning. *Change*, 35(5): 26-33.
- Manor, C., Bloch-Schulman, S., Flannery, K., & Felten, P. (2009). Foundations of Student-Faculty Partnerships in SoTL: Theoretical and Developmental Considerations. In, Carmen Werder & Megan Otis (Eds.) *Engaging student voices in the study of teaching and learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishers.
- Zeni, J. (2001). *Ethical issues in practitioner research*. New York: Teachers College Press.