Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board Guidelines on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Mandate

The Research Ethics Board Working Group on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) was tasked with creating recommendations to help guide researchers in the application of research ethics principles to scholarly investigation of the effectiveness of pedagogical innovation and practice related to course-based interventions.

What is the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching?

The Scholarship of Learning and Teaching is defined as the "the process of exploring, researching, developing, refining, reflecting upon, and communicating better ways and means of producing, promoting, and enhancing scholarly learning and teaching in ways that are ethically reasoned and inclusive" (Healey et al., 2013: 24). At its core, SoTL is a reflective practice that aims to enhance and enrich teaching and learning. It is a mechanism that enables the profession to reflect on high-level questions about student learning (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999).

This approach to understanding pedagogy is still relatively new, but has become a valuable tool that can enhance teaching and learning outcomes of students, instructors and institutions. SoTL helps instructors become more conscious about their teaching practice (Ottenhoff, 2011), increase their awareness of how students learn (Lyons, 2003), and shed light on how different teaching medias and learning mechanism can impact the learning process (Dorman, 2004; Horspool & Lange, 2012). It can further improve instructors' understanding of where students are having difficulties and enable a pathway to address these challenges (Chanock, 2005; Draeger 2013). These interventions have centred on the reflective activities of the instructor, but have also been shown to have important benefits for learners (Brew & Ginns, 2008). As such, SoTL challenges the status quo in favour of a more reflective and potentially transformational approach to teaching and learning (Lyons, 2003; Cranton, 2011; Atkinson, 2001).

How is SoTL distinct from program evaluation or quality improvement?

The distinction between SoTL and program evaluation/quality improvement remains a frequent source of confusion. Each of these activities is regularly performed in classrooms and course spaces but they are all subject to different levels of ethical scrutiny. For the purposes of SoTL, its distinction from program evaluation or quality improvement hinges on the design, purpose, generalizability and intended beneficiaries of the project in question (McNett & Lawry, 2009). Research projects are typically designed and based on theory, a testable hypothesis, and the results are often meant to be generalizable or transferable so they can contribute to the knowledge base of their respective discipline (Levin-Rozalis, 2003). Conversely, the scope of program evaluation or quality improvement tends to focus on organisational goals as opposed to investigative goals (Cook & Lowe, 2012). These activities may be based on a research question but, unlike research, these activities are not typically meant to test or develop more generalizable findings. Instead, program evaluation and quality improvement are defined by their project goals – to assess and/or improve a particular practice (Levin-Rozalis, 2003). The outcomes are generally most relevant for the organisation or unit being evaluated, with specific benefits targeting current or future participants. Like research, the results of program evaluation and quality improvement exercises can be published as such.

For a more comprehensive analysis of these categorical distinctions please consult Dalhousie's Guidelines for differentiating among Research, Program Evaluation and Quality Improvement.

Dalhousie's commitment to Scholarship on Learning and Teaching

Dalhousie University is committed to the advancement of the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching as a means of achieving excellence in teaching and learning. Dalhousie's Strategic Direction 2014-2018 articulates a commitment to "foster and support innovation in program development and excellence in teaching and pedagogy" (Strategic Initiative 1.5). In order to achieve this goal, Dalhousie encourages faculty to engage in SoTL as a means of providing rigorous and robust data on best practices for improving student learning outcomes.

Research Ethics and the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching

Research ethics is the arms-length systematic analysis of ethical issues to ensure that study participants are protected and that research is conducted in a way that "serves the needs of such participants and of society as a whole" (Weijer et al. 1997). Research ethics is concerned with the application of ethical guiding principles (respect for persons, concern for welfare and justice) in the context of specific research projects. In the case of SoTL, REB processes and protocols exist to help ensure ethical principles are reflected in the conduct of research involving students, participants, and others involved in course-based research.

Empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that there exists a great deal of confusion for researchers around whether and how a SoTL application should be submitted to the REB (Balkwill & Stockley 2013), leading to concerns that the REB process represents a 'bureaucratic hurdle' that serves only to impede the research project (Chang & Gray, 2013). For the REB, SoTL represents a new and ethically complicated arena of scholarship, whose increasing popularity translates into increased numbers of reviews. This Working Group was convened to identify the key ethical challenges of SoTL research, with the overarching aim of articulating the issues, recommending best practices and communicating these clearly to researchers to support the conduct of ethically sound SoTL research (as well as stronger REB applications and speedier, less burdensome reviews).

Ethical Issues and Recommendations

Ethical issues pertain to four key domains in the conduct of SoTL research: (a) undue influence and coercion; (b) dual-role research; (c) confidentiality in the use of participant data; and, (d) the use of class time for research purposes. Each is introduced below, along with recommended strategies for best practice.

A. Undue Influence and Coercion

Context: The Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS II) underlines the potential risks of undue influence as "the impact of an unequal power relationship on the voluntariness of consent. This may occur when prospective participants are recruited by individuals in a position of authority over them" (p. 210). Coercion is defined as a more extreme form of undue influence that further undermines the ability for participants to offer full and free consent to participate in research.

The issue of unequal power relationships is particularly relevant within SoTL as student participants engage in instructor-led research constitute a captive population that is dependent on their instructor for their grades and their broader educational goals. As a result, students may feel pressured to participate to avoid real or perceived repercussions or to please their instructors (Ferguson, Myrick, & Yonge, 2006; Loftin, Campanella & Gilbert 2011). Existing scholarship suggests that the best strategy for

mediating this concern is for the instructor to remove him/herself completely from interactions with participants and employ an intermediary, unaffiliated with the course or the students, to recruit and obtain consent from students (Ridley, 2009).

Dalhousie recommendations:

I. Instructors and Teaching Assistants should aim to remove themselves completely from the process of research in the classroom and delegate all functions related to recruitment, seeking informed consent and data collection a neutral third-party (such as a Research Assistant) who has no formal role with the course. Ideally, the researcher will identify an RA who has no relationships with any students in the class. If this overlap cannot be avoided, the specifics of the relationship between the RA and students need to be explained in the REB application (with associated risks identified and mitigation plan proposed).

II. Students who are recruited to participate in research during class time might feel compelled to participate based on the decisions made by his or her peers. To mitigate this risk, researchers should consider including a consent form separate from the research instrument, in order to allow students the option to complete the research instrument while still withholding their consent to participate in the study.

III. To mitigate the potential undue influence of in-person recruitment, researchers are encouraged to utilize online a recruitment tool for participation, such as Dalhousie's Learning Management System. In this case, researchers should grant access to the third-party (such as a Research Assistant) who can utilize the communications functions to create outside links to manage the recruitment and other aspects of the research process. In the REB application itself, the researcher will need to discuss the identity of this intermediary and disclose any relationship this intermediary might have with student participants. (NB: In Brightspace, the best role for this third party would be 'builder', as this would allow the individual to manage the research process but retain confidentiality around grades by not allowing access to those data). The researcher must commit to not consulting the analytics that record student decisions on whether or not to participate.

IV. Students should not be significantly advantaged or disadvantaged by participating in course-based research projects. As such, incentives given by course instructors to encourage participation in the research project are discouraged. Exceptions include a third-party system for recruiting at the level of faculty, department, or school, for example, research managed through a subject pool.

B. Dual-Role Research

Context: Section 7 of the TCPS II introduces dual-role research as a situation where researchers "hold trust relationships, either directly or indirectly, with participants, research sponsors, institutions, their professional bodies and society. These trust relationships can be put at risk by conflicts of interest that may compromise independence, objectivity or ethical duties of loyalty" (p.95). The TCPS II emphasizes that researchers are responsible for ensuring that this trust is not abused, by recognizing and mitigating

the conflict of interest that arises from their dual roles, and ensuring it does not affect the decision-making procedures of participants.

This dual-role issue is particularly pronounced within SoTL, where the role of the instructor is to act in the best interests of their students, while the role of the researcher is to move the research project forward (Ferguson, Myrick & Yonge, 2004). The path to achieving both of these objectives can often be contradictory, which may cause the instructor/researcher to prioritise one role over the other. The consensus within the scholarly literature is to use a third-party to lead all phases of the research project, so as to create a clear separation of roles and ensure that the educational needs of students remain paramount (Leentjen & Levenson, 2013; Cleary, Walter & Jackson, 2014).

Dalhousie recommendations

I. Researchers are responsible for distinguishing their role as instructors from their role as researchers. This distinction needs to be clear to students/participants. Recommended measures include 1) ensuring that a third-party undertakes recruitment and consent, 2) holding off on accessing any research-related data until after final course grades have been submitted.

II. The research project should be described in the syllabus and introduced in the first week of the semester. The description of the research project to be included in the syllabus should also be included in the REB application.

C. Confidentiality in the Use of Participant Data

Context: Chapter 5 of the TCPS II outlines the responsibility of researchers to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of their participants and their data. According to Article 5.1 "Researchers shall safeguard information entrusted to them and not misuse or wrongfully disclose it. Institutions shall support their researchers in maintaining promises of confidentiality." The TCPS II requires that researchers safeguard this information throughout "the full life cycle of information: its collection, use, dissemination, retention and/or disposal " (TCPS II article 5.3).

Concerns around privacy and confidentiality are heightened when collecting and using student data (Dommeyer, Baum & Hanna, 2002). According to Ferguson, Myrick, and Yonge (2004) the "potential violation to confidentiality of data can place students at risk for compromise of the teaching-learning situation and contributes to their reluctance to participate in the studies." (p.7).

Dalhousie recommendations:

I. Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their collection and analysis of research data remains secondary to their responsibility for safeguarding student data. Mitigation measures include: 1) not viewing or accessing any identifiable research data until after the final course grades have been submitted; and, 2) having a neutral third-party de-identify data before it is viewed by the researcher to preserve participant confidentiality between the student/participant and the instructor/researcher.

II. Researchers who wish to make use of identifiable student data (i.e. comparing project or course grades with research variables) need to 1) ensure free and informed consent, and 2) ensure that no course or research data is viewed until after final course grades are submitted.

III. Secondary use of data (i.e. researchers who wish to use student data after the course is complete but who did not obtain consent from participants) is permitted if it satisfies the requirements described in the TCPS II (Chapter 5, Section D). In this case the researcher will need to obtain REB approval for secondary use of data.

D. Use of Class Time for Research Purposes

Context: Chapter 4 of the TCPS II deals with fairness and equity in research participation: "The principle of Justice holds that particular individuals, groups or communities should neither bear an unfair share of the direct burdens of participating in research, nor should they be unfairly excluded from the potential benefits of research participation" (p.49). Students are at risk of experiencing a greater research burden as compared to other groups because they are an accessible population (Clark & McCann, 2005). A unique challenge with SoTL research is the intrusion of research into class time, which is not explicitly designed for this purpose.

Dalhousie recommendations:

I. Whenever possible, online research is preferred to in-class research, as the former allows students to make decisions about whether to participate in the research in private, without fear of these decisions being visible to others. l, Researchers who propose to conduct research during class time must 1) provide strong justification for why class time is the most appropriate venue for undertaking the research, and 2) ensure a suitable alternative is provided for students who choose not to participate in the research process.

II. Researchers will need to justify using class time for research purposes in their REB application. Where possible, researchers are encouraged to tie in the research project with the learning objectives of the course, to ensure that time devoted the research project enhances the learning experience for students.

III. Researchers should be aware of the burden that might be placed on students across multiple classes and make every effort to minimize the amount of class time devoted to the research process.

IV. Researchers are encouraged to supply a letter of support from the academic head of the program of study demonstrating the value of the research activity (for the risk/benefit assessment), as well as the academic program's awareness of the potential research burden on students.

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