RESEARCH ETHICS:
CONDUCTING SCHOLARLY ENQUIRY ON YOUR TEACHING
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Classrooms as Sites of Scholarly Inquiry

“Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) brings with it the need for careful thought and decision-making about questions that arise when teachers treat their classroom as sites of scholarly investigation – questions about informed consent, the use of student work, and the impact on audiences and policy-making.” (Hutchings, 2002)

SoTL research primarily addresses the impact of one’s teaching practice upon student learning. Research that involves students as participants requires careful planning to ensure that several ethical issues are clearly within the University of Toronto’s institutional requirements and processes. This tip sheet draws on common instructor questions and provides the key principles, considerations and steps you may take to ensure a smooth SoTL research ethics submission.

Guidance on Ethical Issues

As a start, U of T provides research ethics consultations to provide guidance on ethical issues. This step is strongly encouraged in the early stages of your research planning. Oftentimes, decisions on whether research ethics protocols are required for any given research study in higher education are not a simple ‘yes/no’ decision and many ‘grey’ areas exist; meeting with research ethics staff will ensure you are proceeding in an ethical manner, and furthermore you will receive sound guidance through this process.

Reflective Practice or Research?

Reflective practice

When deciding whether you will need to submit a research ethics protocol it is important to ascertain whether the inquiry/research you plan to undertake is a reflective practice or research. For example, you may evaluate or assess the effectiveness of your teaching practice and ethical approval would not be required if this activity is part of your standard teaching practice. As you think through the purpose, intent and goals of your inquiry/research please consult U of T’s brief Teacher-Researcher Role-Based Conflict to guide the initial stages in your decision-making process.

Making the Most of Your Research Ethics Submission

While instructors may feel the ethics submission process is time-consuming, it can also serve as a valuable opportunity to begin mapping and planning your research. You can consult the literature in your area of research interest, firm up your motivation and your research question, and begin to articulate what exactly you will ask participants in order to answer your research question(s).
Research defined

U of T’s research ethics processes are governed by the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2). The TCPS2 outlines the key sections that may assist you to determine whether your study is research, defined as:

An undertaking intended to extend knowledge through a disciplined inquiry and/or systematic investigation. The term “disciplined inquiry” refers to an inquiry that is conducted with the expectation that the method, results, and conclusions will be able to withstand the scrutiny of the relevant research community (Article 2.1).

A determination that research is the intended purpose of the undertaking is key for differentiating activities that require ethics review and those that do not (see Article 2.5). If your inquiry/research falls within the TCPS2 definition you will be required to submit a research ethics protocol, using the U of T online submission process. The following section addresses some unique considerations in your role as an instructor and researcher.

Dual Roles: Instructor and Researcher

Conducting research on your teaching must adhere to the TCPS2 Core Principles of respect for persons, concern for welfare and justice. In the context of teaching, it is important to note that there exists an “inherent power difference between instructor-researchers and students, which increases the vulnerability of students as potential research participants” (McGinn, 2018, p. 6). The following guidelines may assist you to reduce the potential for coercion, or perceived coercion, when inviting students to participate in your research:

- Carefully consider how you might engage other research team members/mediators to ensure third party recruitment. Ensure that these parties do not hold any authority over the students, for example, they are not responsible for teaching the course, marking or assigning grades. Possible neutral third parties include Work Study students, Research Assistants, and/or colleagues not involved in the course.
- You should not take an active role in research involving your course and students until after the course is over and final grades have been submitted (Elgie, 2014).
- If you are generating data for research purposes (e.g., focus groups and interviews), ensure that a neutral party conducts these activities.
- Consider using a small sample of students to reduce a sense of obligation or coercion (McGinn, 2018).

Types of Student Participation

There are a variety of ways in which student data may be used in research, what McGinn refers to as “naturally occurring or generated specifically for the research” (2018, p. 9). Permission may be requested from students for data stemming from a number of sources including, for example: generated as part of normal course activities (e.g., regular assessment activities), use of other academic data (e.g., marks in other courses, course-taking patterns), records of participation, diagnostic tests, placement tests, additional assessment activities, focus groups, or interviews.
Risk Matrix

As you undertake your research on teaching, it is helpful and reassuring to know that invariably such research falls within a minimal risk category. Minimal risk, as defined on the U of T Humans in Research website, and illustrated in the Risk Matrix table below is:

The probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation in the research can reasonably be expected by participants to be no greater than those encountered by the subject in those aspects of his or her everyday life that relate to the research, or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.

Risk is assessed by determining both group vulnerability and research risk, using the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Vulnerability</th>
<th>Research Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Delegated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consent to Participate

As noted previously, the Instructor-Researcher roles require careful attention as students are first and foremost learners, and data collected for research purposes must adhere to ethical standards. Specifically, students must receive the request to participate, read or listen to the request, want to participate, and have the time to participate. Furthermore, students must be able to access the survey and if needed, be provided some flexibility with scheduling their participation. Research mediators may play a role in responding to student questions regarding the study and their involvement in it.

Ultimately, researchers want to encourage participation, but students must be free to choose based on full information. Of note, consent and participation must be hidden from the instructor.

The consent form letter to students is a key document and there are helpful points on the U of T research ethics website to guide you in this important step: Guide for Informed Consent.

Student Recruitment: A Few Additional Tips

Consider the students’ perspective when planning your research design and recruitment. This section addresses some unique considerations when recruiting students that are cognizant, for example of their schedules/time demands, workload, and overall interest in participating in a project.

How Will Students Learn About the Study?

Students may learn about the study through a visit by a research mediator (not the instructor as noted in the previous section) to the site of the inquiry/research (usually the classroom/lecture space). The instructor conducting the study may also arrange to send a personalized, targeted or mass email to the students in the course. Finally, Quercus offers an avenue to post details and recruitment information, aligned with the informed consent procedures addressed earlier in this section.

Some important considerations in disseminating information about your study include reaching intended participants, attracting attention through carefully selected strategies to cut through the “noise”. Consider selecting complementary modes to raise awareness, to provide additional information, and to send reminders on a regular schedule.
Overall, the research recommends that direct contact, such as classroom presentations or information kiosks, is especially effective (Cyr, Childs & Elgie, 2013).

What Do Students Need to Know?

Instructors should be clear and upfront from the start of their recruitment process on the study rationale, level of commitment, incentives and rights (i.e., informed consent). You might consider creating a brochure or website that contains a more detailed description of your project and contact information.

Why Would Students Want to Participate?

Research on student recruitment demonstrates that students are likely to participate when they hear that student feedback/insights are valued and important for improving the student learning climate. It is highly recommended that the research is a learning/educational experience (Cyr et al, 2013). Instructors who have had high student response rates note that they have created a social norm of participating in research by sharing their previous research findings with students. Student participants like to know how results will be acted upon and it is recommended that instructors offer to provide an accessible summary of the findings.

References


Suggested Reading


Note: Check Principal Investigator Eligibility on the U of T Research Ethics Board submission process.

Note: Consult with CTSI staff to ensure that you address any potential ethical concerns when using online learning tools.