Ethical SoTL Research

SoTL involves research on student learning, so “human subjects” are inherently part of the work. GWU, like any other university in the US, has an ethics review committee called Institutional Review Board (IRB). This step will be unfamiliar to you if you have never done research on human beings (i.e. students). As you engage in SoTL research, you need to be sensitive to the ethical issues of your work with students. One key ethical consideration in SoTL research is the power difference between instructors and students (assigning grades, writing letters of recommendation, etc.). Protecting students’ privacy and confidentiality, maintaining voluntary participation in research, and minimizing risks to human subjects (such as risks from inadvertent breaches of confidentiality, or risks to grades) is a fundamental ethical practice that needs to be guided by the IRB.

All research with human subjects must be reviewed by an IRB before it begins. IRB review is designed to help you as the researcher uphold three basic ethical principles for working with human subjects:

**Beneficence** - Research should do good. This means that risks from research must be balanced with expected benefits. The risk/benefit ratio of a study is an important ethical consideration; the riskier a study is, the higher the expected benefits must be in order to justify the research.

**Respect for Persons** - People are autonomous beings who have the right to decide for themselves whether or not to participate in research. Respect for Persons is upheld through the informed consent process, which is a pivotal and basic aspect of doing research with human subjects. The informed consent process is the process by which you inform potential participants about your research and ask them to agree to participate. Those potential participants who do not consent to participate may not be included in your research. When planning your SoTL research, you should consider what activities are required elements of coursework vs. what activities are done solely for research purposes, and plan your consent process accordingly.

**Justice** - The principle of justice is rooted in the fact that historically unethical studies deliberately targeted populations that were considered vulnerable, meaning they were at risk of undue influence to participate in the research, and those vulnerabilities were exploited by researchers to control research populations and force participation in research. The principle of justice is upheld by additional protections when a study targets a vulnerable population. This is an important consideration in SoTL research; if you plan to do research on your own students, be prepared to explain why it necessary for you to perform research on your own students and describe methods you will use to recognize the manage the vulnerability of your study population.

When dealing with research on teaching and learning, the IRBs distinguishes between activities that are part of “normal educational practices” and other research activities. If what you are asking of students is something that they might be doing as part of the course, whether or not you were conducting your project, then it falls under “normal educational practices.” Research that primarily involves “normal educational practices” is subject to a lower level of scrutiny than research that entails procedures that go above and beyond normal course work.

**Informed Consent**

If you are asking your students to participate in activities beyond your normal practices, you are asking them to participate in research. In this case, students should be informed of the advantages and disadvantages of participating in such extra activities, as well as any associated risks. Students then should be given the opportunity to opt out of participation without penalty. The IRB needs to know how you plan to tell your students about their participation in your study: are you giving them enough...
information to give you their “informed consent” to include them in your study? Signed consent forms are a common way to document your students’ willingness to participate in your study, but there can be flexibility regarding signatures if the risks of the research are low.

**Risk to Students**

It may seem counterintuitive to think that improving your teaching through research may put students at risk, but there are two main risks: risk to their grades and learning, and risk to their privacy.

**Risk to Student’s Grades & Learning**

1. Be clear that your students’ participation in your study will not jeopardize their grades or their learning (e.g., participation in the part of a study with what turns out to be a less effective learning strategy).
2. If you will be implementing a novel, or experimental curriculum, you will need to explain why you expect the novel curriculum to be more beneficial than standard curricula.

**Risk to Student’s Privacy**

Students’ data, responses, or behavior in the study must be kept private. To maintain students’ privacy, you can de-identify the data, so it can’t be connected with a particular student. This includes direct information like names, as well as indirect identifiers like hometowns, majors, etc. Another option is to collect anonymous data when possible. When neither of these strategies is possible, their identities should be kept confidential through use of a code number or pseudonym. You will still know individual student identities as you conduct your project, but a third party won’t. Don’t use social security numbers or numbers according to alphabetical order on your class roster. In some cases, it may not be possible to de-identify your data, as when videotaping students. When de-identifying your data is not possible, be clear how participation in your project poses minimal risk. Also, be aware of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which restrict access to educational records without permission.