

Ethical Considerations for Dual-Role Research: Conducting Research with Students in your own Classroom

“The teacher’s responsibility to hold students’ educational interests paramount provides an important perspective when considering ethical issues for research in teaching and learning” (MacLean & Poole, 2010).

Introduction

These guidelines are intended to provide guidance to researchers at Mount Royal University on the ethical issues surrounding the conduct of research using their own students as research participants. In these cases researchers have a dual role, that of instructor and that of researcher. The potential for ethical challenges arises primarily from the possible conflicts of interest generated by an individual playing multiple roles. At issue is the possibility that a situation may arise where these two roles come into conflict. Can instructors at MRU conduct this sort of research given the asymmetrical power relationship that exists between an instructor and their own students? The answer is a qualified yes. With proper planning and consideration, an instructor may be able to use the students within their own class as study participants, provided the researcher addresses relevant ethical issues including avoiding both the reality and appearance of undue influence.

All research involving human participants conducted by any member of the university community must meet the guidelines set out in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2) (full text available at <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/>).

Research on one's own students can be a legitimate knowledge-creation exercise when it is carried out ethically, but doing so requires special attention to the issues of undue influence, conflict of interest, informed consent and privacy. Conducting research on one's own students poses several significant ethical challenges which have important implications for the ethical review process.

Background

Research protocols submitted by dual-role researchers pose some challenges due to the ethical principles that may be compromised in this position. These principles include voluntary and informed consent, confidentiality, and considerations generated by potential conflicts of interest. The HREB at MRU is moderate in its approach to dual-role research in the classroom when compared to review boards at other institutions in Canada (according to the results of an informal survey conducted by the board in winter 2011). Each research project submitted to the board is reviewed case by case according to the principles outlined below and in the TCPS2. It is up to the researcher to demonstrate within their application how the particular ethical issues associated with dual-role research have been addressed.

Article 7.4 “Article 3.2(e) reminds researchers of relevant ethical duties that govern real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest as they relate to the consent of participants. To preserve and not abuse the trust on which many professional relationships rest, researchers should be fully cognizant of conflicts of interest that may arise from their dual or multiple roles, their rights and responsibilities, and how they



can manage the conflict. When acting in dual or multiple roles, the researcher shall disclose the nature of the conflict to the participant in the consent process.”

Ethical issues related to research in one’s own classroom

(All references are to the TCPS2)

I. Ethical principle: Consent shall be given voluntarily

Dual-role researchers should be aware of the potential effect of undue influence on the voluntariness of consent.

Article 3.1 “The approach to recruitment is an important element in assuring voluntariness. In particular, how, when and where participants are approached, and who recruits them are important elements in assuring (or undermining) voluntariness. In considering the voluntariness of consent, REBs and researchers should be cognizant of situations where undue influence, coercion or the offer of incentives may undermine the voluntariness of a participant’s consent to participate in research...REBs and researchers should also pay particular attention to elements of trust and dependency in relationships (e.g., between ... professor and student). These relationships can impose undue influence on the individual in the position of dependence to participate in research projects...There may be a greater risk of undue influence in situations of ongoing or significant dependency.”

II. Ethical principle: Consent shall be informed

Of particular note for dual-role researchers is the fact that informed consent includes the requirement to disclose real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest.

Article 3.2 “Researchers shall provide to prospective participants... full disclosure of all information necessary for making an informed decision to participate in a research project... The information generally required for informed consent includes information concerning ...the presence of any real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest on the part of the researchers, their institutions or the research sponsors” (Article 3.2e). [See the HREB application form and Article 3.2 for a full list of the informational elements generally required for informed consent.]

III. Key concept: Conflict of interest

Researchers are expected to identify, minimize or otherwise manage their individual conflicts in a manner that is satisfactory to the HREB. For example, something may come up in the course of a dual-role research study that a researcher would handle differently than an instructor, creating a conflict of interest. Plans should be made ahead of time to deal with these types of situations.

Article 7.4 “Researchers shall disclose in research proposals they submit to the REB any real, potential or perceived individual conflicts of interest... that may have an impact on their research...Dual roles of researchers and their associated obligations (e.g., acting as both a researcher and a ... teacher..) may create conflicts, undue influences, power imbalances or coercion that could affect relationships with others and affect decision-making procedures (e.g., consent of participants)...researchers should be fully cognizant of conflicts of interest that may arise from their dual or multiple roles, their rights and responsibilities, and how they can manage the conflict. When



acting in dual or multiple roles, the researcher shall disclose the nature of the conflict to the participant in the consent process.”

IV. Ethical principle: Ethical duty of confidentiality

Dual-role research may present unique difficulties for efforts to maintain full anonymity and confidentiality, given the dual and ongoing relationships that may exist between researcher and participant.

Article 5.1 “Researchers shall safeguard information entrusted to them and not misuse or wrongfully disclose it...When researchers obtain information with a promise of confidentiality, they assume an ethical duty that is central to respect for participants and the integrity of the research project. Breaches of confidentiality may harm the participant, the trust relationship between the researcher and the participant, other individuals or groups, and/or the reputation of the research community.”

Step- by-Step Guide for Dual-Role Research in the Classroom

Researchers planning dual-role research in their own classroom can follow the three steps below to help ensure they have adequately addressed the ethical issues generated by dual-role research in the classroom. Additional guidance on these issues is available from the TCPS2 and the recommended reading listed at the end of this document.

Step 1. Is this project research or professional development?

The first step when thinking about a research project is to distinguish between activities that constitute “research” and those that fall under the practice of “professional development”.

Personal Professional Development:

Systematic critical examination of teaching practice for personal professional development, though it may raise ethical issues, is not considered “research on human participants.” As professionals, instructors have a responsibility to examine their pedagogical practices and curriculum implementation, in short, to be “reflective practitioners.” Where a particular activity is aimed *solely* at examining that instructor’s pedagogical practices to improve professional practice (and not for publication or for presentation at a public meeting/conference or for a directed research project or thesis) it is not “research on human participants” and would not have to be reviewed by the HREB. If, however, that same data that were collected, analyzed and reported for research purposes or public dissemination then the project would require ethics review. Refer to the TCPS2 for additional details on what is or is not research (article 2.5). Please note that one cannot apply for retroactive approval from HREB. If there is a chance that instructor may want to publicly present the information gathered for professional development they should obtain ethics clearance in advance.

Research:

If research with human participants is being conducted for research or public dissemination purposes then it is subject to ethical review by the HREB. The HREB at MRU is governed by the TCPS2. The board is required to take the ethical issues listed below into consideration when reviewing instructors’ research with their own students.



Step 2. Decide how you will avoid the reality and perception of undue influence, address conflicts of interests, ensure informed consent and protect the privacy of participants.

Ethics review involves balancing risks and expected benefits. From the point of view of those responsible for ethics review, the dilemma is between facilitating ethical research and protecting participants from harms that may stem from the ethical issues raised above. It is therefore critical that these issues be address directly in the ethical review processes. It is the job of the researcher to think through, explain and justify the ethical approach taken. It is the job of the HREB to judge the adequacy of the proposed procedures according to the TCPS2.

Step 3. Create a plausible plan to address the ethical issues of dual-role research in the classroom

The third step in planning for research on one's own students is to include the following elements within your ethics application and in the consent process:

- full disclosure of all the information necessary for individuals to make an informed decision about participation in the research (article 3.2);
- a disclosure of conflicts of interest (articles 3.2e) and efforts that will be taken to manage them (article 7.4);
- descriptions of measures for meeting confidentiality obligations (article 5.2) and safeguarding information (article 5.3).

Undue influence can often be managed with the researcher putting themselves at arm's length from the research either by time or person. The following are possible alternatives for instructor-researchers. This is not an exhaustive list. If researchers are able to provide other alternatives that avoid undue influence, they are welcome to submit them to the HREB for review (some types of data, for instance anonymous online questionnaires, might by their very nature leave a instructor blind to which of their students actually participated in his/her study and thus potentially be non-coercive and thus acceptable).

- I. The instructor-researcher may choose not to study his/her own students and rather to study students in another school or another classroom.
- II. After explaining the study the instructor-researcher may choose to have another person (who does not have a power relationship with the students) provide letters of information, collect consent forms, and keep them until the final grades for the class have been submitted. Only then would the instructor-researcher learn the identity of students who consented to participate and only then would the researcher be free to use (for research purposes) assignments, test marks, and so forth for which consent has been obtained. It follows that an instructor-researcher would not be able to interview students, at least until after they were no longer their instructor, as they would not know who agreed to participate until after the school year or semester was over. In some cases students are likely to encounter the same instructor



multiple times in their program, this would have more long term implications for how long the dual roles relationship lasts.

- III. The option of using another instructor for collection and storage of consent forms might be taken a step further by having a third party, perhaps another instructor or student, come in as a research assistant and conduct the interviews and/or lead discussions for research purposes (e.g. focus groups) and report back to the instructor/researcher. This third party, however, should not have a power relationship with the students. The instructor-researcher, moreover, would need to remain “blind” to the identity of participating and non-participating students.
- IV. The instructor-researcher may want to personally interview the students. They may do so after final grades for the class have been submitted and the dual-role nature of the relationship between the researcher - instructor and the students has ended.
- V. Typically no more than 5 minutes of class time should be devoted to recruitment or aspects of the study which are not a normal part of the course work.

These guidelines are specific to dual role research. Depending on the nature of the study other ethical issues may apply, for example, with research protocols involving deception or aboriginal or vulnerable populations. In these cases refer to the applicable sections of the TCPS2.

Applicants to the HREB who follow these suggestions, or design other means to satisfy the TCPS2, stand a good chance of having their proposals pass the ethical review process. Proposals which do not clearly and directly address the issues of conflict of interest and the possibility of undue influence on the applicant’s own students, however, are likely to encounter difficulties.

Recommended Reading

MacLean, M., & Poole, G. (2010). An introduction to ethical considerations for novices to research in teaching and learning in Canada. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 1(2). Retrieved from http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=cjsotl_rcacea

Panel on Research Ethics. (2010). *Tri-Council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans*. Retrieved from <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/>

Acknowledgements

This document was adapted with permission from a document originally developed by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Western Ontario, “*Ethics considerations for teachers’ research with students in their own classroom*”. Several other documents, “*Action research*” from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia and “*Guidelines for ethics in dual-role research for teachers and other practitioners*” from the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria were also used with permission.

