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Scholarly teaching practice: Ethics issues and responses in research into teaching in tertiary education

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***Abstract:** Research into one's own teaching practice, a significant aspect of the scholarship of teaching and learning in tertiary education, raises ethical issues. This paper sets out some ethical issues for teaching staff and their implications for academic management and academic development. It uses a case study of a funded Action Research in Teaching and Learning scheme in the Science, Engineering and Technology Portfolio at RMIT University. It examines the role that academic developers can play in building staff and organisational capability to work ethically with research into teaching practice.*

***Keywords:** Scholarship of teaching and learning, classroom research, human ethics in research, academic development*

Introduction

Two fundamental aims of tertiary institutions are to help students to learn and to create new knowledge. While changes in tertiary education in Australia and elsewhere are well documented: increasing student diversity; advancing technologies; global competition; and shifting relationships between institutions, government and private providers. The impacts of these changes on student learning and knowledge creation are not clear. Research into teaching and learning sits at the intersection of the two aims of tertiary institutions and the need for such research is heightened by the scope and pace of change in the sector. However, this kind of scholarly activity is not straightforward. This paper considers ethical issues

that arise through teachers' research into their own teaching and their students' learning. It identifies issues and their implications for the management and governance of such research. It examines the role that academic developers can play in supporting teaching staff and the university as a whole, to address these issues.

The scholarship of teaching and learning offers academic and teaching staff a well-developed framework for thinking about research into teaching practice in both higher education and TAFE (Technical and Further Education). While the scholarship of teaching and learning continues to grow in terms of understanding and practice (Hutchings, 2002), at its heart is the idea of teaching as an intellectually rigorous and scholarly undertaking, which sits alongside scholarship in other areas (for example Boyer's 1990 framework). In this context, Cross (1990, p.4) urges academic staff to consider that "the intellectual challenge of teaching lies in the opportunity for individual teachers to observe the impact of their teaching on their students' learning."

Any investigation into the impact of teaching on students' learning requires the use of appropriate and rigorous methodology (Glassick, Huber & Maeroff, 1997) and an ethical approach. This paper considers the ethical issues associated with research into one's teaching practice from the perspective of three groups: teaching staff; ethics committees, and academic or educational developers.

An action research scheme as the context for improving ethical practice

The Action Research in Teaching and Learning (ARTL) scheme coordinated by the Academic Development Group in the Science, Engineering and Technology Portfolio at RMIT University is one example of how one might encounter and need to examine ethical issues in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The ARTL scheme—preceded in 2002-2003 by Strategic Initiative Projects scheme (Chang et. al., 2003, 2004, Jansz-Senn et. al., 2003)—provides financial support and related professional development for academics and teaching staff to undertake research into teaching and learning in the setting of their own programs (degrees) and courses (subjects) with a scholarly outcome such as a conference presentation or paper.

The experience of coordinating the scheme in 2002 and 2003 surfaced a fundamental ethical question among staff in the Academic Development Group. Was the conduct of teachers' research into their teaching transparent enough to their students to allow, or even to constitute, informed consent by these students? This led the Academic Development Group to formalise its approach to human ethics questions in the operation of the ARTL scheme in 2004.

Developing a formal approach involved a process of review and consultation. First we reviewed legal frameworks and institutional policies and practices relating to ethics in the scholarship of teaching in Australia (NH&MRC 1999, RMIT 2004, University of Canberra 2004, University of Tasmania 2004), and other English-speaking countries such as Hutchings (2002). We then conferred closely with the Science, Engineering and Technology Portfolio's Human Research Ethics sub-committee, which initiated an ongoing project between the ARTL coordinator (Chang), the committee Chair (Polus) and other academic developers (Gray and Radloff). We also consulted with other colleagues who have leadership roles in research and in educational development within the university; we found that we had opened up an organisational dialogue on this issue for the first time, for many of those with whom we talked.

Our review revealed arguments for an alternative to the current approach to human ethics approval in Australia, which presently borrows standards from the bio-medical model. Critiques argue that the bio-medical model is poorly equipped to accommodate disciplines as varied as sociology, criminology, qualitative health research and the humanities (Israel, 2005).

We also discovered the proposition that ethical guidelines for insider research by professionals in the classroom require a different set of questions from “traditional” research conducted by outsiders. Zeni (2001, p.1) argues that “When researchers investigate their own practice, many of the traditional guidelines collapse”. Perhaps attempting to avoid an ethics application that could become a tick-the-box exercise in compliance, Zeni has instead developed “questions for review and reflection” (2001, p.4) for those using action research or similar approaches, which includes the following headings:

1. Overview of the study
2. Location [exploring the socio-political aspects of the academic and teaching staff members with their students, such as gender, race and class]
3. Methods
4. Subjects, subjectivity, and relationships
5. Consequences

It became clear during our review of existing practices and consultation activities that clarifying our definition of “research” would be important in guiding improvements to ethical practice in this area. In the US, some institutions classify all research in teaching and learning as quality management or quality assurance, thus not requiring ethics approval. This approach appears to be fuelled by concerns about creating “a precedent for getting consent” (Hutchings 2002, p.11). Our conversations also canvassed notions of the “classroom as a laboratory”. Ultimately, the very basic test that we decided to apply was: Will the results be published? If so, the work constitutes research.

In ARTL projects, team members are drawn from science, engineering and technology disciplines. Therefore, ARTL projects often represent a staff member’s first experience of social sciences research, or sometimes any form of research involving humans. In this context, we introduced human ethics considerations for ARTL projects in two ways:

- Through a workshop. The Science, Engineering and Technology Human Research Ethics committee Chair provided a workshop to educate project teams about the purpose, meaning and process of a human ethics application. ARTL teams were then paired with Human Research Ethics sub-committee members for follow-up support to prepare their application.
- Through a mentoring system. Each ARTL team was allocated a mentor with experience in educational research or educational development, with whom they could explore ethical and other research considerations before preparing their application, and during the course of their research project.

All ten ARTL project teams in 2004 conducted their research with formal human ethics approval, and the same outcomes are anticipated in the 2005 ARTL scheme.

Ethics issues for teaching staff

The major issues for teaching staff that were raised by past years’ ARTL projects, our review of existing ethics practices and the 2004 ARTL human ethics applications themselves, echo issues in the literature (Zeni 2001, Hutchins, 2002) namely: efficacy and protecting student learning (balancing the desire to improve teaching practice with the risk of adversely affecting student learning), informed consent and voluntary participation; vulnerability and unequal power relationships; intellectual property; and collegiality. Table 1 sets out the major ethical issues and related questions and our responses, actions or recommendations to teaching staff.

Issues	Questions we faced	Our responses
Efficacy and protecting student learning	When is it appropriate to use a control group in an educational setting? How can we assure equivalent learning opportunities are offered to both groups? In the case of externally accredited curricula, is there any implication for students' eventual recognition as accredited practitioners?	Recommend against the use of control groups, via the ethics education workshops
Informed consent and voluntary participation	How will informed consent be established, including in distance learning situations with no face-to-face contact?	Confirm that a formal process for this is in place, via discussions in the ethical review process.
	If any students are under 18 years, how will parental consent be gained for those students to participate?	Confirm that a formal process for this is in place, via discussions in the ethical review process.
	To what are students consenting? i.e. balancing the assessment requirement that students submit assignments against the student's right to have their 'data' used as part of the research process.	All students must be given explicit information that their assessable work may be used as research data only if they give informed consent to this.
	What mechanisms are in place to allow students' involvement to be voluntary? If a student chooses not to be involved in the project, will their participation in ordinary classes, activities and assessment be affected? If a student chooses to withdraw their involvement partway through the project, what happens to their participation in class and their status within their peer group?	Assurance through providing details of scholarly activity to students and gaining their informed consent Assurance from investigator/s that student learning and assessment will not be affected if the student chooses not to participate.
Vulnerability and unequal power relationships	Is there the possibility that students may feel pressured to participate, given the unequal power relationship between teaching staff and students? Could students feel pressured due to staff behaviour, even if plain language statements emphasise voluntary participation?	Discuss and formulate preventive strategies in education process and with mentors, for example, peer observation of teaching.
	Will staff conducting the project be assessing students' work during the project? Will those same staff assess students' work in the future? How will they guard against the influence of the project on their marking?	Discuss and formulate preventive strategies in education process and with mentors, for example external moderation of assessment.
	How can the research methods be designed to so as to diminish other effects of unequal power relationships?	Discuss and formulate preventive strategies in education process and with mentors, for example, in the case of focus groups can they be conducted by a colleague?

Issues	Questions we faced	Our responses
Intellectual property	Is it appropriate to make examples of students' work public in conference papers / journal articles? Should such students be named and acknowledged? What if student work is provided to illustrate inadequate learning outcomes or poor quality work? Should their permission be sought?	While usually confidentiality would be maintained—at this time, this is the driving force—there is scope to acknowledge and value students' intellectual property. If student work is to be used as examples of poor quality work, this needs to be part of informed consent.
	Will students be able to read / hear / see a draft of the final report of the investigation before it is made public? Can they withdraw consent at that time?	Consent can be withdrawn at any time unless aggregate (anonymous) data are used. Methodologies such as action research offer approaches where a draft could be shared with students before being made public (Dick 1999).
	Even if student identities are concealed, will the fact that the academic or teaching staff member is the author in some cases mean some readers could guess students' identities—for example in small classes or close-knit communities?	Yes. Public reporting needs to be sensitive to these issues, which can be addressed through the education process and action research mentors.
	When or how would students' contributions constitute joint authorship?	This option could be included in seeking informed consent, for students to choose.
Collegiality	How broadly does collegial collaboration need to be negotiated and agreed? Do all academic and teaching staff in the teaching team for the course (unit of study) or program (degree) need to be considered as potential participants? Does the discipline, program or course leader need to be included?	Project applications require sign-off by program leader and Head of School. Project teams are advised to keep their teaching and disciplinary colleagues abreast of their work, and keep the options open for other teaching staff to join in.
	In a collaborative research project, where data may be collected with and about academic and teaching colleagues, how will that data be treated if a colleague chooses to withdraw before the project is completed?	Examine this question explicitly, through development of an ethical framework developed by stakeholders of the group to guide their decision-making.

Table 1 Ethical issues for teaching staff of research into practice

Issues for academic management and governance

A tertiary institution has certain clear responsibilities for the conduct of research into teaching that occurs within it. Ethics issues for the institution include duty of care to staff and students, and efficacious processes. Those that we identified through collaboration between academic developers and the Human

Research Ethics committee in this case are set out in Table 2.

Issues	Questions we faced	Our responses
Duty of care to staff	Are teaching staff provided with a proper approach to processes and learning and development that protects their interests and reputation?	Our decision to implement formal human ethics approval for the ARTL scheme.
Duty of care to students	Is there an external contact person who students can go to if they would like to withdraw from a study, or who is available to deal with student concerns or complaints?	Addressed through requirements in plain language statement and confirmed in ethical review process, including identification of the ARTL coordinator and of student complaints officers, as part of briefing students.
Efficacious processes	How do we ensure that members of the Science, Engineering and Technology Human Research Ethics Committee - scientists, engineers and technologists, predominantly quantitative researchers - possess an adequate critical understanding of qualitative research approaches being proposed?	We found points of interest and expertise in qualitative research, e.g. in committee members from health sciences and information sciences backgrounds, that could be used to locate the committee's attention to ARTL applications.
	How do we encourage staff to address ethical issues appropriately, while not creating a barrier to research into teaching and learning—for example through an arduous, lengthy application process?	The committee agreed to expedite the approval process, so that applications were considered via email outside the regular meeting schedule, resulting in an approval process that, on average, was completed within 2-3 weeks. The committee is trialling with ARTL teams a simplified Human Research Ethics application form designed specifically to cover research into practice in teaching in Science, Engineering and Technology.
	How do we demonstrate the adequacy of our ethics approval decisions, and improve our decision-making?	An independent evaluation of the ARTL scheme in mid-2005 will include a review of ethical aspects of the conduct of ARTL projects.

Table 2 Issues related to academic management of teacher research into practice

Issues for the practice of academic developers

It is a challenge for academic developers as a profession to promote and support research into practice, competing as this activity does for scarce time and low priority in the workplans of many staff. But it would not seem ethical for academic developers to sponsor research into teaching, such as the ARTL scheme, without supporting teachers to develop an awareness of ethical issues as part and parcel of reflection on the action of doing research into their teaching. For us to provide this support we first had to undertake our own learning and development in this area.

Furthermore, in sponsoring such research, we had to improve and manage our own knowledge of research designs, and the implications of action research methods especially, to enable us to give sound advice on ethical questions such as whether the design would at least do no harm to student learning, and whether informed consent would need to be reviewed and re-sought as the project progressed.

It would not seem ethical for academic developers to confine concern for ethical practices solely to sponsored research schemes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that our approach to human ethics in this kind of research is now reaching beyond the ARTL project teams and across the organisation. Other university staff are approaching the ARTL co-ordinator for advice on human ethics issues in research into teaching and learning. Further collaborative work between academic developers and research managers in the university is required to integrate our learning about these issues within the formal research training provided to all staff and research students in the university.

The academic development work in this case required opening up the question and leading the enquiry; identifying and disseminating the issues for teaching staff and for academic management and governance; brokering an efficient and effective way forward; and holding up a mirror to the experience for others and for ourselves. This kind of a role is consistent with views of the role of educational developers, such as those set out in Blackmore et al. (2004, p.18-19), namely interpretation, change agency, development of academic practice, counselling, institutional evaluation and critique.

Future directions

The ethical issues for teachers, academic developers and academic managers that have emerged for us from the operation of the ARTL scheme do not purport to be an exhaustive list of all possible issues. One of the challenges we face in working with research into teaching practice is how to stay alert to potential questions and issues with ethical dimensions as a project progresses. It is important not only to observe the necessary formalities with such issues, but also to deliberate, that is, to give time to tease out issues and consider various possible ways forward (See Cherry (1999, pp. 14-15) for an example of a specific purposeful technique we have used.)

It is clear from our experience with ethical issues and responses from the ARTL scheme that academic developers' success in developing an awareness of ethical issues in teaching staff, and in supporting them to address these issues effectively, depends on employing an appropriate scholarly framework and working within an academic management and governance system that recognises and respects this.

Regarding the ethics of such research, we must work collaboratively to:

- recognise the organisational learning and development that occurs as teaching staff, academic managers and developers work through this process;
- manage the knowledge that we are building about the ethical issues in these circumstances and work to benchmark and quality assure our practices; and
- communicate about our ethical practices with students, and industry/ professional stakeholders as part of our stance towards improving learning.

Rather than being inconveniences or difficulties in this kind of research, questions with ethical dimensions—and how we attend to them—should be regarded as generating new knowledge that deserves inclusion in research reports, and that constitutes an important contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

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