Ethical Considerations for Research in University of Calgary Courses
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The University of Calgary encourages scholarship on teaching and learning because of its potential to enhance student experience by advancing teaching methods and evaluation practices. This document describes the special ethical considerations applicable to research carried out in undergraduate and graduate courses, where the students registered in a course are recruited to be research participants. This research may include one or more activities, such as assessing the effectiveness of assignments with respect to student learning and achievement, assessing changes in knowledge, beliefs, or skills due to the course experience, and comparing different teaching methods or learning activities. Students' perceptions of the course and the course materials may also be evaluated. In some cases the research data will include students' course assignments and other creations.

Due to the unique circumstances and issues inherent in this type of research, researchers need to keep several principles and priorities in mind when planning their study and completing their ethics application. The Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (the TCPS) provides researchers and the CFREB with direction for how research in courses can be carried out in an ethically sound manner. The TCPS can be found online at: www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/.

1. Managing the Dual Role of Instructor/Researcher

   The TCPS (Article 3.2) is clear that:

   “Researchers should separate, to the greatest extent possible, their role as researcher from their other roles as therapists, caregivers, teachers, advisors, consultants, supervisors, employers, or the like.”

   This principle is applicable when an instructor proposes that the students in his or her course be research participants. Effectively managing the dual instructor/researcher role requires that it be clear to students that your first priority is the course and that your secondary role as a researcher will not infringe upon their course experience (e.g., that students’ grades will not be positively or negatively affected by their choice to participate; that students will not be excluded from valuable course-related activities by declining to participate). Managing the dual role also requires that there be full disclosure of the research prior to it commencing. This is most easily accomplished by incorporating an announcement and description of the research in the course outline.

2. Recruitment

   The TCPS (Article 3.1) requires that researchers be sensitive to the recruitment context:

   “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.”

To properly manage their dual role and to ensure voluntariness of consent, course instructors should not recruit students from their classes—all recruitment activities should be carried out by a third party who is not associated with the course (e.g., a research assistant, a graduate student, a departmental colleague, etc.). This includes email invitations and in-class announcements. Contact the CFREB if this requirement creates serious difficulties in your situation (cfreb@ucalgary.ca).

Recruitment should not be set up such that it is assumed that students will agree to participate, in which case those who choose to decline will have to identify themselves to make this request. Instead, the third party recruiter can send or provide invitations to the class, and the students who chose to participate can respond. The CFREB strongly encourages recruitment to be carried out using email and/or an online web-based signup procedure (instead of the distribution of consent forms in class), because this practice eliminates peer pressure and allows students who are not interested in participating to easily decline with anonymity.

3. Eliminating Undue Influence

Article 3.1 of the TCPS describes the issue of undue influence:

“Undue influence and manipulation may arise when prospective participants are recruited by individuals in a position of authority. The influence of power relationships (e.g., employers and employees, teachers and students, commanding officers and members of the military or correctional officers and prisoners) on the voluntariness of consent should be judged from the perspective of prospective participants, since the individuals being recruited may feel constrained to follow the wishes of those who have some form of control over them.”

This concern is significantly reduced by assigning all recruitment activities to a third party, as described above, but there are several additional steps that can be taken to largely eliminate perceptions of undue influence:

a) Whenever possible, data collection should be carried out by a third party and kept in the safekeeping of the third party until the end of the course. An alternative is to collect the data electronically, and without identifying information (names, student ID numbers, etc.), via web-based survey tools such as Survey Monkey, Qualtrics, and Fluid Surveys. These procedures help to separate your role as course instructor from your role as researcher, and reassure students that their participation decision will be confidential. Contact the CFREB if this requirement creates serious difficulties in your situation (cfreb@ucalgary.ca).

b) Procedures should be created to preserve the anonymity of students who participate in the research and those who do not, such that the instructor is not aware of who has participated until after the course is over. Ideally, the instructor would never be able to identify students who participated, because the data would be stripped of all personal identifiers by a third party or because the data never included such information. This helps to address students’ concerns that their grades may be adversely affected by declining to participate (and vice versa). Remember that students have 15 days after the final exam period to request that their term work be reappraised (according to Section I.2 of the University Calendar). The specific procedures used should be communicated to students in the consent form and the invitation/recruitment materials (see the example text below).

c) Students must be informed that their participation in the research will have no bearing on their course grades (e.g., “Your participation in this research will in no way affect your grades in this course”). It is the researcher’s responsibility to design the study so that this condition is always met. Students cannot be penalized, in any manner, for choosing not to participate in the research.
d) Students must have the option to withdraw from the research at any time, without the instructor’s knowledge, and in a simple manner (e.g., by sending an email to the third party recruiter; by completing a web-based form). The TCPS (Article 3.3) is clear that consent shall be an ongoing process (“Consent encompasses a process that begins with the initial contact and carries through to the end of participants’ involvement in the project”). For research with multiple components that take place throughout a semester, in some cases it may be necessary to obtain a final consent from students after the course is over, to ensure fully informed consent has been obtained once all the components of the research have been revealed. This is especially important when students may have second thoughts about the comments or opinions they have shared, or when students are asked to allow their course work to be used as data. The final consent in these situations serves as an opportunity for students to consider their participation decision in light of their ultimate appraisal and understanding of the research and their personal contributions to the study.

e) The consent form should indicate what will happen to the data from participants who chose to withdraw from the study before completing it. The TCPS is clear that the expectation is that data from participants who withdraw will be destroyed. If this is not possible (due to the nature of the data collection), an explanation should be provided in the consent form. You can also ask participants for permission to keep their data if they do withdraw from the study.

All of these principles can be incorporated into a short paragraph that can be communicated to students in invitation/recruitment materials and in the course outline (this text can be modified as necessary):

“Dr. Smith, your course instructor, will be conducting a research study this semester that you have the option to participate in. A detailed description of the research will be provided by Ms. Graham, who is assisting Dr. Smith with this study. Ms. Graham will be responsible for recruitment and all data collection and Dr. Smith will not know whether you have decided to participate in the study or not until after final grades have been approved by the Registrar and the final grade appeal period is over. If you are interested in participating, Ms. Graham will provide you with a consent form to read and consider and she can answer any questions you may have. Whether you decide to participate in this study or not will in no way affect your grades in this course. If you do volunteer to participate, you can later withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason by sending an email to Ms. Graham; if you withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed.”

4. Incentives

The TCPS (Article 3.1) discusses incentives and the associated ethical issues:

“Incentives are anything offered to participants, monetary or otherwise, for participation in research. Because incentives are used to encourage participation in a research project, they are an important consideration in assessing voluntariness. Where incentives are offered to participants, they should not be so large or attractive as to encourage reckless disregard of risks. The offer of incentives in some contexts may be perceived by prospective participants as a way for them to gain favour or improve their situation. This may amount to undue inducement and thus negate the voluntariness of participants’ consent.”

Given these guidelines, the CFREB reviews incentives very carefully to ensure that 1) the incentives are not so large that they would amount to undue inducement (e.g., bonus course credit that is a significant percentage of the final course grade), 2) the incentives are not so large that students who decline to participate would be penalized (e.g., participation provides a valuable educational opportunity related to the course content; participation provides an academic benefit in the course), and 3) students who decline to participate have an opportunity to earn the same inducement via a different activity. The basic principle the CFREB will carefully attend to is that students must not be significantly advantaged or disadvantaged by participating in the instructor’s study.
5. Minimize Intrusion of Research Activities

The final consideration to keep in mind is that the research should not intrude upon the learning environment or the course curriculum. In-class activities that are not normally part of the course curriculum will be carefully reviewed by the CFREB for their impact, especially from the perspective of students who choose not to participate in the research. The use of regular instruction time for research activities must be justified in the ethics application. In-class video or audio recording will require a compelling rationale, due to their potential to interfere with students’ uninhibited participation in class discussions and their intrusion on students’ privacy. If students’ course assignments are used as data, the assignments must be clearly related to the course content and have pedagogical value. The CFREB must be sure that the course will be the first priority and that the research will be a secondary consideration. The course cannot be designed primarily for the purposes of the research, because students are not paying for or expecting such an experience, nor is it consistent with the instructor’s primary role as an educator.

For further information on any of the points above, please contact the Chair of the CFREB or a Research Ethics Analyst at cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

Chair, Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB)