

## Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Ethics Guidelines for Researchers

All research involving living human participants, where research is defined "as an undertaking intended to extend knowledge through a disciplined inquiry and/or systematic investigation," must be reviewed and cleared by a Research Ethics Board (REB) prior to commencing the research (TCPS 2 (2014), Article 2.1). Human participants are "those individuals whose data, or responses to interventions, stimuli or questions by the researcher, are relevant to answering the research question." This definition encompasses Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), a rigorous approach to understanding and informing others about teaching and learning practices. SoTL typically involves collecting data directly from students or teachers, or indirectly, via recollection, journal entries, etc. It can also involve self-study, where the researcher is the participant. SoTL **requires** ethics clearance.

Hoessler, Britnell, and Stockley (2010) define SoTL as "an integrated aspect of academic scholarship that goes beyond great and informed teaching" (p. 81). "Although there is a tendency...to view SoTL exclusively as discipline-specific pedagogical inquiry into how students learn, ...it is equally important that SoTL engage with broader agendas and consider questions relating to the larger learning experience of students" (Kreber, 2007, p. 1). Excellent teachers draw on the scholarship of others to inform their practice; SoTL researchers contribute to that scholarship through their own investigations.

The Research on Teaching and Learning Guidebook from McMaster University similarly describes SoTL as using "the work of the classroom as a site of inquiry. It also elaborates that, "questions about students' learning are posed and explored in order to improve one's own practice and to advance the knowledge base of teaching and learning."

### Reasons to conduct SoTL

- Identification of a problem, issue, or area of concern in the classroom (e.g., why did students...?)
- Change in teaching circumstances (e.g., assigned to a new classroom or program)
- Ideas generated from attending a conference or workshop
- Teaching realization (i.e., ah-ha moment)
- Successes or failures that need to be understood more clearly
- A learning process that requires more attention
- Creation of a new teaching methodology

### How is SoTL different from Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement (QA/QI) Activities?

SoTL is a research activity, designed to be disseminated to a scholarly audience. Quality assurance and quality improvement (QA/QI) studies, in contrast, are not defined as research activities when they are, "used exclusively for assessment, management or improvement purposes", and are not allowed to be disseminated outside of organization for which the QA/QI activity was conducted (TCPS 2, 2014)." For more information on QA/QI please refer to Article 2.5 of the TCPS 2 (2014).

### How is SoTL different from Other Efforts to Improve Teaching Over Time?

- SoTL involves defining a research design and conceptual framework and applying specific research methods
- SoTL involves stating specific research questions and aligning methodology, methods, and analysis to answer those questions
- SoTL generally involves more self-reflection in writing and identifies clear goals
- SoTL findings are disseminated (peer-reviewed and publicized research findings)

The Practice of SoTL may involve the following process as outlined in [The Research on Teaching and Learning Guidebook](#):

- Topics of Interest
- Framing Questions
- Gathering and Analyzing Evidence
- Trying Out and Refining New Ideas in the Classroom
- Going Public

### **Ethical Considerations for SoTL**

GREB classifies SoTL in two ways; (1) research with direct student involvement and (2) SoTL research as self-study. Research with direct student involvement may include conducting survey or questionnaire research with students, trying out new techniques or teaching methods in the classroom setting or using examples of student work to help answer a research question. Research as self-study may include self-reflections based on teaching practices over time. For example, researchers might want to use self-reflection to understand the best teaching and learning methods for students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Researchers in this situation might not necessarily have current or direct involvement with such students, but their self-study has the potential to lead to former students being identifiable.

SoTL may also involve the use of secondary data, which the TCPS 2 (2014) defines as, “the use in research of information originally collected for a purpose other than the current research purpose.” Ethics clearance is required for secondary use of data for SoTL research. For more information on secondary data refer to Section D Chapter 5 of the TCPS 2 (2014).

#### **1. SoTL Research with Direct Student Involvement**

##### **Power Differential**

The power-over relationships between instructors/researchers and students can impact the students’ decision to participate in the research. This differential can be managed by keeping the instructors/researchers at arm’s length from the students by person or time through:

- Ensuring participants are given free choice to participate in the research without penalty
- Conducting research on students from another class
- Ensuring that student contributions are anonymous
- A third party distributing, collecting, and retaining the Letters of Information/Consent Forms (instructors/researchers remain unaware of who has consented to participate until after the power differential is no longer present)

##### **Captive Populations**

This term can be applied when participants are dependent on an ‘authority figure’ (e.g., instructor/researcher) who can infringe on their freedom to make decisions. To mitigate this risk, instructors/researchers must ensure student participants are provided with information about the voluntary nature of participation during the recruitment, informed consent, and data collection processes. Student participants must be made aware of their right to withdraw from participation in the research, including their data, with instructors/researchers outlining the process for withdrawing and timelines involved. When students are not fully capable of deciding for themselves (e.g., young children), their parents/guardians must be assured of the above rights.

##### **Participant Burden**

The main purpose of formal education is for students to gain knowledge, not to be participants in research. If students are repeatedly asked to participate in research studies, their educational pursuits may be compromised. It may be of value for instructors/researchers to consider what other types of

research are being conducted with students to diminish the impact of participant burden. Also, instructors/researchers should try and design studies that help enrich the students' educational experiences instead of distracting from those experiences.

### **Confidentiality**

Students may have concerns about whether or not their instructors/researchers know if they took part in the research. Students may feel their decision not to participate in the research could impact their academic trajectory. Considerations should be made at the early stages of research design to minimize these risks. Instructors/researchers must have a plan for who will be collecting informed consent, how Consent Forms will be stored, and to whom and when access will be granted to the Consent Forms. The identities of those students who consented to participate should be concealed until at least after the class or semester ends and grades have been finalized. Any exception to this need for confidentiality requires substantial justification (i.e., appropriately considering benefits and risks).

For all SoTL research projects where there is **direct student involvement**, ethics clearance must be sought using the **standard GREB application process** which is available in [TRAQ](#).

### **2. SoTL Research as Self-Study**

Self-studies of personal teaching practice may not have direct student involvement. However, students are often the subject of reflections in SoTL research, even though their consent is not necessarily being sought. For the purposes of these guidelines, only true self-study research should be submitted using the GREB Self-Study Application Form (i.e. original research data). If data were initially collected for a purpose other than the current research purpose, they would constitute secondary data. Refer to GREB's [Secondary Use of Data Guidelines for Data Sets Initially Collected with an Associated Research Ethics Clearance and for Publicly Available Anonymous Data](#) for additional information on the secondary use of data application process.

The onus is on instructors/researchers to justify any departures in the standard informed consent process as outlined in TCPS2 (2014) Chapter 5: Privacy and Confidentiality. Instructors/researchers must therefore satisfy GREB that the identity of other participants (other than those instructors/researchers in the self-study) can be adequately concealed throughout the research process, especially in dissemination. The necessity for concealing identities is increased when there are risks to participants if their identities are revealed. If there are participants whose identities cannot be concealed, those individuals must provide free and informed consent.

The identities of students may be present in one of three ways: (a) the memories of the instructors/researchers, (b) artifacts collected about the students by instructors/researchers (e.g., anecdotal reflections on student progress), and (c) artifacts collected by instructors/researchers from the students (e.g., copies or originals of student projects or other work). Although the main ethical concern is protection of student identities during dissemination, student identities may also be revealed in the course of conversations with co-researchers (other instructors/researchers directly involved in the self-study) and research collaborators (researchers assisting in the self-study process).

For all SoTL research projects where there is **NO direct student involvement**, ethics clearance must be sought, using the **Self-Study Application Form**, which is available in [TRAQ](#).

### **SoTL Research Dissemination**

It is important that SoTL research results are disseminated in ways that protect the participants' identities, as applicable. It may not be ideal to use images, direct identifiable quotes, examples of work, or any other potentially identifiable information. If instructors/researchers plan on using personally identifiable information or potentially identifiable information, they should have conveyed exactly what they plan to

disseminate, and the potential risk for identification directly to participants in the Letter of Information/Consent Form.

## References

1. Fenton, N., & Szala-Meneok, K. (2011). [The Research on Teaching and Learning Guidebook](#). From McMaster University.
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6. [The Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans \(TCPS 2, 2014\)](#)
7. <http://rdc.ab.ca/about/research-innovation/research-ethics-board/scholarship-teaching-learning-sotl>
8. <https://www.stlthe.ca/sotl/what-is-sotl/>