

Human ethics issues for Tertiary Learning Advisors: A workshop kit for emerging researchers

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Abstract

In today's changing environment it is important that Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) research aspects of their practice. However, when TLAs embark on teaching and learning research with their own students as participants, they can encounter a range of thorny ethical issues that need to be considered and addressed when designing their research and completing their Human Ethics applications.

At the 2013 Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ) conference, we facilitated a workshop for emerging TLA researchers and others with an interest in fostering ethical research in their institution. The purpose of the workshop was to highlight the key ethical issues facing TLAs engaged in research into teaching and learning, and to explore how research projects could be designed to better accommodate ethical principles.

This workshop kit, a revised version of the conference workshop, is intended to provide a resource for colleagues to use and adapt in their own institutions.

Ethics in teaching and learning research

While scholarship has long been the cornerstone of the academic institutions in which Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) work, the scholarship of teaching and learning is more recent (Boyer, 1991; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Trigwell & Shale, 2004). As research into teaching and learning has become more firmly embedded

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in our institutions, there has been a growing expectation that Learning and Teaching practitioners, including TLAs, will research their own practice (Chanock, 2007; Goel, 2012; Stigmar, 2010).

Such research needs to be clearly distinguished from what could be characterised as “good teaching” or even “scholarly teaching” (Fenton & Szala-Meneok, 2010, p. 6). Good teaching is reflective; in other words, it routinely involves evaluating one’s own teaching and using the available teaching and learning literature (what Snook, 2003, p. 164 describes as “professionally accepted” methods) to improve practice. That reflective process benefits both teacher and students. Reflective teaching becomes research when issues or problems become the focus of scholarly investigation, often through trialling unproven approaches, and with the intention of gaining generalisable information (Fenton & Szala-Meneok, 2010; Snook, 2003). The benefit now extends beyond the teacher-researcher and students to the wider community, by contributing to the knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning, and improving not only the teacher’s own practice but that of other teachers.

The ethical approval of research into teaching and learning is dealt with by tertiary institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand in a variety of ways. Some institutions (for instance, University of Canterbury; Victoria, University of Wellington) distinguish “low risk” and “high risk” research and require a different approval process for each; others (for instance, Lincoln University) require practitioner-researchers to submit all research projects to a full human ethics review. This variation is paralleled amongst practitioners. In an informal survey of TLA colleagues in 2010, for instance, one of us found a wide range of interpretations and practices regarding the need for seeking ethical approval for research projects: some colleagues believed it was acceptable to publish papers on their practice without human ethics approval when the observations were very general and no courses or students identifiable, or where the publication could be characterised as “philosophical reflections” on practice with no explicit student data included².

Regardless of such variation in policy and practice, the principles of honesty, fairness, integrity and respect should underlie any research projects involving human participants. Applying these principles to research into teaching and learning poses particular ethical challenges for the practitioner-researcher. For instance:

- Ensuring **voluntary consent** – Particular care needs to be taken to ensure consent is voluntary because of the inherent power differential between teacher and student. Students are potentially a “captive population” and may feel under pressure to participate in the research.
- Ensuring **informed consent** – Students have a right to know if the teacher is trialling new teaching techniques for the purposes of research as well as to improve practice and benefit student learning. Students also have the right

² Responses to email query sent to selected ATLAANZ and AALL members by Caitriona Cameron in 2010.

to know if their work during the course is going to be used for some purpose other than assessing their progress in that course (e.g., to be correlated with data generated elsewhere).

- Minimising **burden and risk** – Teacher-researchers need to ensure that any research does not unreasonably reduce the instructional time and that any trial of new teaching approaches does not risk disadvantaging the current cohort of students. The institution also needs to ensure that students are not being “over-researched”.
- Ensuring **benefit** – The benefit of the research needs to extend beyond the teacher-researcher and the current cohort to future cohorts and the wider teaching and learning community; this benefit needs to be explicit, and to warrant the burden being placed on the current cohort.
- Assuring **privacy and confidentiality** – Knowing the identity of participants is a particular problem for teacher-researchers for as long as the teacher-student power differential exists (which, of course, may extend beyond the current semester).

These are not the only ethical considerations in teaching and learning research, but arguably they are the ones that those of us who have served on Human Ethics Committees (HECs) have found are the most problematic in practitioner-researcher projects. It was with this context in mind that we offered a workshop at the 2013 ATLAANZ conference, focused on identifying and dealing with some of the specific ethical challenges inherent in researching one’s own practice.

The workshop

The workshop was designed for emerging TLA researchers, and others with an interest in fostering ethical research in their institution. Its purpose was to highlight the key ethical issues facing TLAs engaged in research into teaching and learning, and to explore how research projects could be designed to better accommodate ethical principles.

The workshop adopted an inductive approach, including discussion and activities. Participants worked in small groups, each group focusing on one of four scenarios. They identified ethical issues needing to be addressed in each scenario before ethical approval could be granted, and discussed ways in which the research could be modified to accommodate essential ethical principles. The workshop concluded with a summary and discussion of the issue and solutions, and suggestions for both conducting research and gaining ethical approval.

This workshop kit, which largely follows the format and procedure we adopted at the conference, is designed to provide a resource for colleagues to use and adapt in their own institutions. We welcome feedback from colleagues on the ways you have used the kit and how it could be improved.

Workshop outline

1. **Purpose:** To highlight (a) the particular ethical issues facing TLAs engaged in research into teaching and learning, (b) how a research project can be designed to accommodate ethical principles, and (c) key points to consider in completing a human ethics application.
2. **Approach:** An exploratory, inductive session based on facilitated group discussion.
3. **Facilitator knowledge and skills:** Experience in research into teaching and learning; good understanding of the ethical issues in this research; preferably some experience or knowledge of the role of Human Ethics Committees. (NB. It is preferable to include two or more facilitators, each with different areas of expertise and experience.)
4. **Intended participants:** (a) TLAs considering embarking on research, or those who have found the Human Ethics approval process arduous in the past, and (b) anyone interested in promoting teaching and learning research in their institution.
5. **Time required:** 50-60 minutes.
6. **Group size:** Up to 20-25.
7. **Resources and materials:** Coloured cards or tokens (to sort participants into mixed groups), copies of each of the 4 scenarios (Appendix A). For the variation suggested below, one copy for each group of “Ethical Issues Worksheet” (Appendix B), enlarged to A3 size to allow groups to include notes.
8. **Plan/instructions:**
 - 8.1. Provide each workshop attendee with a coloured card or token as they arrive: one colour for those who are experienced researchers, another for those who have limited research experience, and a third colour for those with no research experience.
 - 8.2. Invite attendees to sit in groups of 4-6 with a mix of research experience. (4 groups is optimum, so that each group discusses one of the four scenarios.)
 - 8.3. Allow time for brief icebreaker and introductions. (5 minutes)
 - 8.4. Outline the objectives of the workshop and the importance of TLAs researching their practice. Briefly overview the role of Human Ethics Committees in tertiary institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the variation in institutional requirements, and the implications of the distinction between “improving practice” and “research”. (NB. Tolich, 2001, provides useful background on the Cartwright Commission and its influence on the operation of Human Ethics Committees in New Zealand.) If there is more

than one facilitator, it is useful for each to briefly outline their research interests and experience with HECs, and briefly share ethical situations they have encountered in conducting research with their students. (5 minutes)

- 8.5. Allocate one scenario to each group and provide sufficient copies of that scenario for each group member. Ask each group to identify the ethical problems raised in their scenario and to suggest how the proposed research might be modified to overcome those ethical problems. If there is more than one facilitator, assign a facilitator to each group. (Up to 20 minutes)
 - 8.6. Facilitate feedback from groups on ethical issues identified. (20 minutes)
 - Collate the issues (PowerPoint or whiteboard). Add any issues groups have not identified.
 - Facilitate discussion to categorise the issues into the five key ethical principles of voluntary consent, informed consent, minimisation of burden, benefit, and privacy. (Appendix C – “Notes for Facilitators” – provides detailed notes on the ethical issues apparent in each scenario.)
 - Encourage discussion on how these issues might be ameliorated through changing the research design. (Appendix C – “Notes for Facilitators” – provides detailed notes on changes to the research method that would overcome the ethical problems in each scenario.)
 - Allow time for questions and clarification.
 - 8.7. Conclude with a summary of key ethical issues to be considered in teaching and learning research and suggestions for both conducting research and gaining ethical approval. (Remind attendees that there are other, more general, ethical principles that they will need to deal with – for example, security of data storage, opportunities to withdraw from the research.)
 - 8.8. Hand out copies of the remaining three scenarios to each attendee (see Appendix A).
9. **Variations:**
- The workshop can be facilitated deductively, instead of inductively: Outline the five key principles (i.e., voluntary consent, informed consent, minimisation of burden, benefit, privacy) during the introductory phase of the workshop. Provide groups with the blank version of “Ethical Issues Worksheet” (Appendix B in A3 format) along with copies of the scenario they have been allocated. Ask each group to identify which of those principles is compromised in their scenario and suggest how the research proposed could be improved to accommodate the principle.
 - This workshop could be adapted for smaller groups in a number of ways. Rather than having groups of 4-6, participants could work in pairs, with an

experienced researcher partnered with a new researcher. Four shorter sessions (of approx. 30 minutes) over a semester could be offered to a small group, with the group working on one scenario in each session. A flipped classroom format could be adopted, with all four scenarios being sent to participants prior to the workshop and the workshop time used for the small group to discuss all scenarios. Finally, as suggested in 4 above, participation could be widened beyond Learning Advisors to anyone in the institution with an interest in teaching and learning research (e.g., faculty staff and management).

- Facilitators may also wish to provide a summary resource for participants. We suggest tailoring a resource sheet to the particular group using Appendix C (“Notes for Facilitators”) and the References and Further Reading list in this article.

References and further reading

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Appendix A

Scenarios

Scenario 1: Collaborative workshop embedded into a course

Hamish is a new Tertiary Learning Advisor (TLA) who is going to teach a session on essay writing, which has been embedded into the introductory biology course for many years.

Jane, a senior lecturer in the College of Sciences, is a strong supporter of the Learning Centre and always takes an active part in the essay writing session, although she considers teaching academic writing very much the Learning Advisors' area of expertise. She has become interested in the scholarship of teaching and learning and would like to use this year's essay writing session as the focus of some research. This suits Hamish (the TLA) because he has been encouraged by his manager to become involved in research. He thinks collaboration with a faculty member on a project will increase the status of his own teaching and research.

This year, in order to better assess the impact of the essay writing workshop, Jane plans to introduce an extra essay earlier on in the course, worth 20% of the total, which means reducing the marks for the other written assignments (lab reports) compared with previous years. Students will write the first essay without any specific instruction and can then attend the writing workshop for support on the second essay, which they will do at the normal stage in the course. Hamish and Jane will record who attended the writing workshop and compare their grades with students who did not attend. Next year, the assessments will revert to normal, with just one essay and more marks for the lab reports.

Jane will explain the research during a lecture time early in the semester, and distribute an Information Sheet. Jane will also show the students the Consent form that will be at the bottom of the assignment cover sheet. When the students submit their essay, they will also complete this consent section by ticking either: "I agree to participate in the research" or "I do not agree to participate in the research". Only the grades and attendance of those who agreed to participate will be analysed. This analysis will need to be done in the week after the exam, as Jane wants to present the research at a conference during the semester break. Hamish believes that the project will have immediate practical as well as research benefits as it will encourage the students to take advantage of the Centre's programmes.

Scenario 2: Online writing

Tanya is a Tertiary Learning Advisor in an institution which has a policy of encouraging all staff involved in teaching and learning, including Learning Advisors, to conduct research into the effectiveness of their practices. The issue Tanya wishes to investigate is how students for whom English is an additional language (EAL) incorporate and reference source materials in their writing. She hopes to use her results to advocate for policy changes which she believes will benefit them.

She has chosen a highly-rated foundation course in academic writing, in which many EAL students are enrolled, and from which she can collect data without making any changes to existing coursework and assessment. One major assessment, accounting for 50% of total course marks, comprises a set of graded paraphrasing tasks, which students post on the course blog, using their real names. Grading is partly based on the quality of students' tasks themselves and partly on the level of insight in the comments which they make on other students' paraphrasing. This process is very straightforward, as the blog allows for comments on each posting, and a certain degree of confidentiality is built in, since only students enrolled on this course have access to the blog website. What results is a high level of participation, which is highly valued by the department and was commended in the Teaching Excellence Award recently gained by the Course Co-ordinator.

Tanya intends to analyse the completed tasks and comments in order to develop a rich understanding of students' paraphrasing practices and attitudes. She plans to publish her findings in an educational journal, as well as using them as the basis for a policy paper to submit to the senior leadership team at her institution. Since she will only be using material which is already produced as part of the existing educational practices in the course, Tanya has been advised that she needn't complete a full ethical application. However, to be on the safe side, she has asked the IT department to embed an "opt-out" button on the blog, with a brief note explaining its function—that is, if students press it, neither their paraphrasing tasks nor any comments made on them by other students will be used in Tanya's research. She is confident most students will agree to participate, as there is no risk or cost to them and she'll make it clear how her research will help make "the powers that be" more sympathetic towards the challenges that EAL students encounter in paraphrasing, summarising and referencing.

Scenario 3: Orientation

Sarah presents a one-hour interactive workshop on "How to be a Successful Student in a New Zealand Tertiary Institute" as part of a compulsory induction programme for international students. This programme includes contributions from a range of staff from various academic and service units. In her position as deputy manager of the Learning Centre, Sarah has heard "through the grapevine" that a number of students have complained about some unspecified aspects of the orientation programme and she wants to find out why.

She plans to ask students to participate in one-hour focus groups at 3 p.m., when her workshop (and the orientation as a whole) is scheduled to finish. She has set aside a good five minutes or so to explain about the research. After this, consent forms will be handed out to the students – and Sarah's colleagues will be waiting at the exit to direct those students who wish to participate into nearby rooms, so that the focus groups can take place there and then, minimising any potential inconvenience to the students. Sarah's colleagues will facilitate the focus groups based on questions prepared by Sarah. No record will be taken of which students are in which particular focus group

– the only record of participation will be the consent forms completed by individual students and collected before each focus group starts.

The discussions will be recorded and Sarah will transcribe and analyse what was said. The anonymity of student comments should be preserved because the students are new to the institution, the make-up of each focus group is unknown to Sarah and she did not sit in on any of them herself. Sarah plans to use her analysis of the focus group data to prepare a report for managers responsible for orientation. As she plans to make clear to the students on the day, she believes her research will lead to significant improvements to the way the institution welcomes and prepares its students in future. It will also be a great opportunity for the students to discuss their experiences and to make new friends. When her analysis is complete, Sarah also hopes to present it at the First-Year Experience Conference and to write up an article for publication.

Scenario 4: One-to-one consultations

Mark co-ordinates a small team which has traditionally supported students mainly through one-to-one consultations. Senior management wants to see a shift to more “cost-effective” lectures, seminars and online resources. However, student feedback on one-to-one consultations is consistently positive – and demand is such that there’s nearly always a waiting list. Mark decides the team needs some hard evidence of the impact of one-to-one consultations on student learning outcomes in order to maintain this popular service, which is their “bread and butter”.

His research plan involves students being given an option to have their consultation (with Mark or one of his team) recorded. Any notes or revisions made during the consultation will also be copied. Everything students need to know about the research will be clearly explained in a leaflet which students will be handed by the Administrator when they book (for phone bookings, it will be read out; for online bookings, it will be available as a download). The students will also be sent a link to a five-minute follow-up online survey one month after the session. Finally, student grades will be collected for any assignments on which they received learning advice. These will be analysed by Mark and used as the basis of a report to the management of the institution and a presentation at ATLAANZ. Mark will also write a short piece for the Centre’s end-of-year newsletter, which the Centre uses to advertise its services to students.

As the Learning Advisors do not have any power over grading and so forth, Mark feels his research fits comfortably into the “low-risk” category, for which no formal ethical approval is required. Mostly, he will be collecting data that would be produced anyway. He already has access to all the student grades through the institutional network, so that is not something he needs to ask anyone’s permission for. The only inconvenience to students is the online survey, so to make up for this in a small way, students can click “enter me” at the end of the survey to go into a draw for three \$100 book tokens.

Appendix B
Ethical issues worksheet (to be printed on A3 paper)

Ethical issues to be addressed	Scenario 1: <i>Collaborative workshop</i>	Scenario 2: <i>Online writing</i>	Scenario 3: <i>Orientation</i>	Scenario 4: <i>One-to-one consultations</i>
Voluntary consent				
Informed consent				
Minimisation of burden and risk				
Explicit and appropriate benefit				
Privacy and confidentiality				
Other issues that may be identified				
Solutions				

Appendix C

Ethical issues notes for facilitators

Scenario 1: Notes for facilitators

Ethical issues to be addressed	Scenario 1: <i>Collaborative workshop</i>
Voluntary consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because consent is attached to the essay, students may think that taking part in the research is a requirement or that they may be marked differently if they do not take part in the research. • Students are a “captive audience” and may feel obliged to take part because Jane is their lecturer and will know who has/has not agreed to take part. • Students are being asked to “opt out”, rather than “opt in”, which means they are taking part by default. In other words students are not actually giving consent; rather the researcher is relying on students to know to opt out if they do not want to take part.
Informed consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not clear if students are to be told the assessment has changed for research purposes.
Minimisation of burden and risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because of the research, students are being given extra work. • Students are potentially disadvantaged compared to those in other semesters – Jane’s decision regarding assessments suggests she thinks this year’s tasks are not the best alternative for the students. • Writing an essay worth 20% with no input is pedagogically questionable.
Explicit and appropriate benefit	
Privacy and confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant identity will be known to researchers in any non-anonymous research, but in this case it is problematic because participants are in a dependent relationship and therefore there may be perceived coercion.

Other issues that may be identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is accepted that research benefits the researcher, but this would not normally be included in an application as an explicit benefit. • The researcher may need to seek permission from the management to conduct research involving student participants.
Possible Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students need specific assurance that participation will have no impact on grades or assessment. • The researcher could arrange not to see data until after exam results are released, and/or arrange for someone else to separate the data of those who are/are not participating so the data set is anonymous, or arrange for someone else to analyse the data. • The researcher could ask a third party to explain the research and store data. • Consent forms should be returned only by those who agree to participate, and returned to a neutral place.

Scenario 2: Notes for facilitators

Ethical issues to be addressed	Scenario2: <i>Online writing</i>
Voluntary consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are being asked to opt out, rather than opt in, which means they are taking part by default. In other words, students are not actually giving consent; rather, the researcher is relying on students to know to opt out if they do not want to take part. • Students are in a dependent relationship with the researcher and may feel obliged to participate.
Informed consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not clear when informed consent process is taking place and what information and assurances will be given to students. • Tanya's assertions that her research will help make "the powers that be" more sympathetic towards the challenges that EAL students encounter in paraphrasing may not be justified.
Minimisation of burden and risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students (especially EAL) may feel threatened and sense that they will lose face. This applies to the teaching/learning activity, regardless of whether the research occurs; however, as a teaching exercise, there is a pedagogical rationale.

Explicit and appropriate benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is unclear what the benefits of this research will be (i.e., policy changes around what?).
Privacy and confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students use their real names on the blog. How will their anonymity be assured in any publication?
Other issues that may be identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research that involves day-to-day teaching and learning practices still requires ethical approval. • Ethics approval is required if data collected for one purpose (course assessment) is proposed to be used for research purposes. • The researcher may need to seek permission from the management to conduct research involving student participants.
Possible Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' agreement, or otherwise, should not be known to the researcher until after final grades are released • Students need to be clearly informed that the research proposes to use data gathered for one purpose (course work) for a secondary purpose (research). • Consent forms should be returned only by those who agree to participate, and returned to a neutral place. • A third party could replace students' names on the blog entries with pseudonyms. • Benefits stated need to be achievable and stated objectively.

Scenario 3: Notes for facilitators

Ethical issues to be addressed	Scenario 3: <i>Orientation</i>
Voluntary consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By having staff at exit ways and directing students who want to take part into the room, EAL students may think they need to take part.
Informed consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only 5 minutes has been allowed to explain the research and for students to ask questions. There is no time between informed consent and the focus groups taking place, so no time for students to reflect and withdraw. • It is not clear if the informed consent process included explanation to the students what the results will be used for.

Minimisation of burden and risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups taking place immediately after orientation would not minimise inconvenience to the students as they may be overwhelmed after their orientation day. • Potentially the other staff are in a vulnerable position – have they been involved in the planning of the research? Is the research also an evaluation of their performance?
Explicit and appropriate benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The stated benefit is to improve orientation based on results; however, Sarah’s main goal is to find out why students complained and not what the issues with orientation are. • The orientation programme should already have provided students with the opportunity to make new friends – the focus groups will not significantly add to this benefit.
Privacy and confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fact that students are new to the institution does not in itself ensure anonymity. (However, if Sarah does not know who attended each group, then anonymity may not be compromised.)
Other issues that may be identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not clear which staff will conduct the focus groups – the same staff who teach the programme (and therefore whose performance may be in question)? • The researcher may need to seek permission from the management to conduct research involving student participants.
Possible Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The researcher needs to ensure the explanation is clear; for example, allow more than 5 minutes and provide a written explanation. • Students need to be given more time to consider participation. The focus groups could be scheduled for a different time.

Scenario 4: Notes for facilitators

Ethical issues to be addressed	Scenario 4: <i>One-to-one consultations</i>
Voluntary consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are in a dependent relationship with the TLAs so may feel obliged to take part.

Informed consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not clear how much time students will have between being given the option to take part in the research (informed consent form) and their one-to-one appointments to consider if they want to take part. • It is not sufficient to provide information orally only (for phone bookings).
Minimisation of burden and risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students should not be expected to download an information form. • Students may be deterred from accessing individual appointments, especially if they are reluctant to agree to participate in the research.
Explicit and appropriate benefit	
Privacy and confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will the sessions be recorded? Will these recordings be shared with anyone? How will students' anonymity be assured?
Other issues that may be identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the results of this research will be used to advertise the services of the unit, it appears it has already been decided that the result of the research will be positive. This casts some doubt on the nature of the research. • Permission to access grades in order to facilitate students' learning does not automatically provide permission to use grades for other purposes (i.e., research). • Using data that would be collected as part of "usual business" does not negate the need for ethical approval. Data collected for one purpose (records of TLA work with students) is proposed to be used for a secondary purpose (research). • The researcher may need to seek permission from the management to conduct research involving student participants.
Possible Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important that students are assured their access to the service will not be affected by their decision to participate (or not). • It may be better to approach students who have already used the 1:1 service, explain the objectives and invite their participation.