

Guidelines on conducting research in class (Students as participants)

Participating in research can have educational value in, for example, exposing students to the methods used in a discipline or engaging them in the analysis of their own data. However, students in classrooms represent a captive audience when used as research participants. Issues of coercion, confidentiality of data, anonymity of research subjects, and pedagogical value of participating in research raise particular concerns for this population of research participants. Thus, in-class research raises a number of ethical issues:

1. **Coercion**, or pressure to participate, is a major concern when using students as participants during class time as students are a captive audience.
2. Experimentation in a classroom setting also raises the issue of **confidentiality of data**, as students sit close to one another and are therefore capable of reading their colleagues' responses.
3. In-class research raises concerns about the **anonymity of participants** as everyone knows who participates if they are filling out a questionnaire, and who is not if some have left the room or are doing something else than filling out a questionnaire.
4. For research to take up any teaching time, such research must be of **educational value**.

Researchers conducting in-class research should take every measure possible to guarantee the free and informed consent of participating students, and to minimize the risks associated with issues of confidentiality of data and anonymity of research participants.

In-class experimentation taking no or minimal class time

In-class distribution of questionnaires or observation of students will generally be considered ethical provided that:

- a. the professor whose students are to be participants, approves;
- b. each student is permitted to opt in or out anonymously;
- c. the distribution of questionnaires and explanation by the researcher do not significantly reduce time allocated to syllabus materials;
- d. the methodology preserves the confidentiality of individual student responses;
- e. students are invited to a de-briefing following completion of the experimentation; and
- f. the research otherwise complies with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement*.

In-class experimentation using significant class time

Some in-class experimentation may be of sufficient pedagogical value to students in the course in which it is being conducted to justify the use of class time to complete the questionnaires or conduct other forms of experimentation that would otherwise be devoted to lectures or other syllabus material. The use of significant in-class time for this type of experimentation will generally be considered ethical, provided that:

- a. the methodology and purpose of the experimentation are approved by the professor whose students are to be participants;
- b. the experimentation is approved by the head of the unit (e.g. departmental chair) as being of significant educational value to the student participants;
- c. each student is permitted to opt in or out anonymously;
- d. the methodology preserves the confidentiality of individual student responses;
- e. students are invited to a de-briefing following the completion of the experimentation;
- f. an outline of the experimentation is included in the course syllabus; and
- g. the research otherwise complies with the Tri-Council Policy Statement.

Example of alternatives to in-class research:

- a. Distribute questionnaires in class and have students return the questionnaire, completed or not, in a sealed envelope at the next class, or have students drop them off at a specified location.
- b. Present the research project to students in class and invite them to fill out questionnaires outside class hours at a specified location and time.

These options would ensure the free consent of participants, and guarantee anonymity of research participants and confidentiality of data. In such cases, the educational value of the research conducted is not a concern.

Other Considerations

If any materials (e.g. papers, tests, etc.) produced by the students are to be collected and analyzed, consent from the students is needed. Fully informed consent on how the materials will be used, with guarantees of confidentiality are essential. The consent form should explicitly state that no penalties will result by not agreeing to “participate”. If possible, instructors should wait until grades have been submitted so that a real or appearance of potential for evaluative effect on student/participants no longer exists.

If the instructor intends to involve some students as participants, and not others, a third party should be involved in recruitment and selection to provide some distance between teacher/researcher and student/participant. The teacher/researcher should not know who has agreed to participate while the teacher-student relationship still exists. It is normally advisable that identifiable data be analyzed only after grades have been submitted so that a real, or appearance of potential, evaluative effect on student/participants no longer exists.