

Educational Technology Practitioner–Research Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Many ethical issues arise when educators undertake any kind of research into their own practice with their own students, and a number of ethical guidelines have been developed for such research. But working with educational technologies may enable kinds of transactions and interactions—and trigger related questions for teachers about good practice and propriety—that either do not arise at all or are not thrown into relief so clearly in other modes of teaching and learning. The broad categories of ethical issues that apply to practitioner research into teaching may not fully address all of the ethical dimensions of research into teaching and learning with technology.

This article provides a framework for reflecting on practitioner-researcher ethics in educational technology, including review of the research intention, the researcher's own position, approaches to data and subjects, ramifications, dissemination, and stakeholder interests. Excerpts from the literature are used to flag the possibilities and responsibilities attendant on such research. The focus of this article is on research undertaken in tertiary or higher education settings; however the general principles are relevant to schooling and other education settings.

BACKGROUND

Arising from the experience of the author and others, while operating a scheme supporting academics to undertake research into their own teaching, there are five broad categories of ethical issues that teaching staff need to consider before embarking on practitioner research (Chang, Gray, Polus, & Radloff, 2005): efficacy and protecting student learning, informed consent and voluntary participation, vulnerability and unequal power relationships, intellectual property, and collegiality. Table 1 shows a list of the 20 educational technology research projects undertaken within this

scheme (nearly 60% of all the projects undertaken), exemplifying both the strength of interest in doing such research and the diversity of research problems. In the author's experience, teaching staff using these five broad categories found it difficult to explore the ethical dimensions in their technology projects fully or deeply. Furthermore, emerging educational technologies that are rapidly expanding the scope of practitioner research—to include and to integrate mobile, wireless, handheld and broadband technologies; smart devices; reconfigured physical learning spaces; social networking facilities; as well as ever more sophisticated media authoring, resource sharing, and gaming—are likely to continue to raise complex ethical questions.

But there is no distinct body of established ethical practice for research into new and emerging educational technologies available to inform the design of practitioner research. Although general ethical aspects of human subjects research on the Internet as it was at the millennium have been thoroughly mapped (see Frankel & Siang, 1999), Thompson (2005, p. 9), quoting Roberts (2000), suggests that this is not adequate: "The online environment is characterized by 'unique and potentially harmful environmental factors', an awareness of which may not be reflected in existing codes of ethical practice for research on human subjects." A code of ethics for professional educational technologists (AECT, 2005) acknowledges the need for guidelines and procedures in the research and practice of that group; however such staff do not conduct research into their own teaching. The Association for Educational Communications and Technology code notes the need to build up a body of "interpretive briefs or ramifications of intent" (AECT, 2005, p. 1) for their own (and by extension their teaching staff clients') benefit in understanding what might constitute soundness, reasonableness, appropriateness, or integrity in specific instances of research and practice.

Most case reports of educational technology practitioner research make no mention at all of ethical considerations. In practice, reading between the lines

Table 1. Examples of practitioner research in educational technology

Pilot Projects	Integrated teaching and learning tool using computer-aided learning Learning activities using a new online learning production tool Renewable learning objects Student e-portfolios Virtual field trip Virtual tool for integration with hands-on teaching and learning Web portal
Implementation Projects	Asynchronous e-communication in a journal club Engagement in an elective subject studied fully online Graphical user interface to teach relevant skills in first year New online presentation and discussion environment Student e-portfolios Web-based videoconferencing to facilitate communities of learning practice Wireless interactive teaching, especially cultural issues
Evaluation Projects	E-communication Digital video material for teaching laboratory courses Student learning experience of using a new online learning environment Student learning experience of using e-portfolios for assessment Video analysis as a method to understand e-learning Web-based virtual tours as compared to actual tours

suggests that a spectrum, or possibly a polarization, of views has emerged among educators about the special significance of ethical considerations in such settings. At one end of the spectrum, there is seen to be nothing to worry about, and on the other end, the ethical dimension is regarded as an almost paralyzing issue. Illustrating one end of the spectrum is a case report suggesting that ethics are a pragmatic logistical factor in such research, but no more than this: "Practical issues such as the timing of the evaluation, instructions to students, ethics and student consent were all discussed" (Kennedy, 2003, p. 197). In contrast, a framework for scholarly teaching in an information and communications technology (ICT) degree implies a need to undertake such research with a sweepingly critical humanitarian perspective recognizing "the capacity of ICTs to bring forward voices that have been silenced, and...to marginalize and endanger others; to bridge or to widen the gap between those who have and those who do not; and to commercialize or to free human interaction" (Clifford, Friesen, & Lock, n.d., p. 80).

Further, discussions of the ethical factors to be borne in mind when teaching in online learning environments (e.g., Zimitat & Crebert, 2002; Gosper, 2004) do not capture the issues faced by teachers contemplating research into their own practice. This may be because such issues are thought to be morally relative to the individual teacher's personal code of conduct, as in the

argument put forth in Brewer, Eastmond and Geertsens (2003, p. 67) that the force of any institutional ethical code cannot be relied upon because educators' personal values and social roles "overlap with our professional roles and affiliations."

Given this choice among ethical stances characterized by invisibility, pragmatism, humanitarianism, or moral relativism, what is a practitioner-researcher to do? To be faithful to the spirit of the scholarship of teaching, any academic planning to develop, implement, or evaluate an educational technology initiative with his/her own students will want to address ethical considerations deliberately and explicitly within her/his reflective practice, before, during, and after undertaking the project. Roberts (2000, p. 7) suggests that the best resource to improve practice in this area is "bottom-up" learning, that is, from other Internet researchers and well-documented case studies, as well as the researcher's own practice based on the meticulous questioning of, and reflections on all facets of the online research process."

A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTING ON ETHICAL PRACTICE

As a framework for reflective practice and sharing of practice, Table 2 uses questions from Zeni (2001, p. 4)

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