

# ***Engagement, Evidence, and Ethics: Tensions in Pedagogical Research.***

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## **Abstract.**

Building effective partnerships with students and learning from their experiences to improve teaching and learning benefits from the conduct and dissemination of pedagogical research. However, tensions in the ethical and practical dimensions of carrying out such scholarship can be a barrier for educators. This contribution reflects our experience of planning and carrying out pedagogical research on a new student wellbeing module in an Irish university, wherein we discuss four key considerations from our experience: research ethics approval with respect to ensuring voluntariness and informed consent, access and timing with respect to the short window of time in a semester and competing academic influences, burden and information overload with respect to efforts to communicate the research, and promotion and incentives with respect to tensions in rewarding students for their contribution to scholarship but protecting their autonomy. We discuss the implications of these challenges for pedagogical research.

**Keywords:** Engaged research; Pedagogical research; Research ethics; Scholarship.

## **1. Introduction.**

Building capacity for student engagement and partnership in higher education benefits from the dissemination of lessons learned and other evidence that identifies effective practices, opportunities and areas for growth for the scholarship community (NStEP, 2021). However, the ethical and practical tensions that exist within the scholarship of teaching and learning can restrict widespread knowledge exchange to support this aim. This reflection details the experiences of the authors in conducting an evaluation of a new initiative to embed wellbeing

into the curriculum for university students.

A new module focusing on wellbeing and personal development in our digital world was designed, based on an extensive stakeholder engagement process, including students. A critical goal of this work was to leverage the student voice in the co-design of digital supports that could meaningfully support their wellbeing and personal development. The module was piloted with an interdisciplinary student group in Spring 2021. It was modelled on self-determination theory, facilitating opportunities for partnership in decision-making around content, assignment topics and submission dates. Parallel research activities sought to investigate students' motivation for pursuing such a module, to evaluate the pedagogical approach and outcomes, and simultaneously inform the development of future student support strategies, for example, the potential for digital approaches. Students were offered the opportunity to take part in the research at multiple levels: (1) by participating in entry and exit interviews to explore their reasons for choosing the module, their expectations and their experiences of it; (2) by providing feedback on the in-term small group seminars through a modified critical incident questionnaire to identify key learning moments; and (3) by consenting for their assignments to be included in the research (i.e. written assignments that identified their personal wellbeing goals, associated action plans and reflections). A cascade of operational challenges arose in executing this research plan.

### **1.1 Research ethics approval.**

It is acknowledged that researching one's own students has the potential for ethical concerns. In such cases, the importance of informed consent and placing students' educational needs above those of the project are considered critical (Regan, Baldwin, & Peters, 2012). Ensuring the voluntariness of participation is of utmost importance where there is a vulnerable population (students) and an unequal relationship to the researchers, who may be the instructors. Students understood that participation in this research had no influence on their academic standing. In order to operationalise this, an additional research coordinator was required to manage the recruitment, data collection and data management separately to the module delivery. Data which were not anonymous (e.g. personal assignments) were not released by the research coordinator for our analysis until after the grades had been committed to academic history, as the writing may have been familiar to us, as the instructors, having graded them. In order to maintain that the instructors did not know and were not influenced by who had taken part in the research or not, recruitment efforts could not take place during class time.

## **1.2 Access and timing.**

As module registration is only open relatively close to the beginning of term, the time available to access registered students and schedule entry interviews before the module got underway proved unmanageable logistically but also behaviourally; engaging students in an extra task that was not mandatory, that was being requested by people with whom they had established no rapport was very difficult. Engagement with the in-term feedback questionnaires on the seminars dropped off gradually as the semester progressed, and this, coupled with poor uptake of the entry interviews suggested that recruitment of students into exit interviews during the busy end of term and examination period were likely to fail.

## **1.3 Burden and information overload.**

Informed consent enabling students to choose which parts of the research they wanted to take part in required the completion of multiple participant information sheets and consent forms at different times in the module, according to our ethical approval. For example, students could not consent at the start of the module to the use of their assignments in the research as their assignments had not yet been completed. They did not know what they were consenting to sharing, and thus could not provide informed consent until this was understood later in the term. Correspondence about the research and consent processes was often lost in a sea of emails and electronic information overload as courses were delivered remotely (during the Covid-19 pandemic).

## **1.4 Promotion and incentives.**

The ability of the researchers to promote engagement with the research was hampered by the electronic information overload, the online only contact time and the ethical implications of promoting research as part of academic learning and structures. Providing incentives for students to engage in research is also a tension in protecting voluntary consent, and requires strong justification to obtain ethical approval. In a world-cafe type event we held at the end of the term, students were asked to discuss their reasons for participation/non-participation in the research and the consensus was that it was not that they actively refused to participate, but rather that they simply did not take the necessary steps to participate.

These experiences evoke multiple considerations in the conduct and dissemination of pedagogical research in higher education, some of which (e.g. voluntariness, de-identification)

are addressed in local and international guidelines (BERA, 2018). However, many situations require the researcher-instructor to balance the benefits, risks and 'irresolvable tensions' (BERA 2018). Where does quality assurance and scholarship/research stop and start? The literature indicates widespread dissatisfaction with ethics committees in general due to their bureaucracy, in addition to low levels of ethical review of pedagogical research (Regan et al., 2012). Hack (2015) asks if the ethical review processes of pedagogic research are fit for purpose. We ask what is the impact on the quality of knowledge generated from data that has been collected without proper ethical review, and, conversely, what is the implication of burdensome, bureaucratic processes on student engagement and knowledge dissemination in pedagogical research? In our experience, the challenges outlined previously resulted in a shrinking of our subsequent pedagogical research efforts, the very efforts which were designed to evaluate and inform our teaching and research in supporting student wellbeing.

Evans, Kandiko Howson, Forsythe, & Edwards (2021) recommend purposeful upskilling of academics and professional staff in pedagogical research literacy, while communities of practice may also act as a platform for sharing experiences and processes. We submit that one aspect of pedagogical research literacy is understanding that if we seek the student voice, then the student voice should be involved as true partners from the beginning, in designing the research/evaluation programme and the consenting procedures. However, the transiency of students progressing through modules means that this is not as straightforward a solution as it seems. A reframing of institutional ethical procedures designed specifically for pedagogical research may serve to support the conduct of valuable scholarship through facilitating appropriate and sustainable procedures for recruitment, consent, effort and reward.

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