

9 Research ethics

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Key concepts: informed consent, confidentiality, data collection, data storage, data presentation.

1. Introduction

Qualitative research, especially studies in educational contexts, often brings up questions of ethics because the study design involves human subjects, some of whom are under age (e.g. data collected in primary education classrooms). It is not always easy for young researchers to anticipate where ethical issues might emerge while designing their research project.

So what are some questions that a researcher might consider? A first premise for a researcher is to ‘do no harm’. It is important for the researcher to try to think about any adverse effects the study could possibly have on any of the participants. Of course, even though the researcher may try to anticipate any potential ethical issues, unexpected adverse effects may occur, in which case, the study should be halted or modified.

Researchers should also take into consideration how they are going to ensure privacy and confidentiality of the participants. It is reasonable for anyone taking part in a study to expect a certain level of anonymity, although some participants may not feel this is too much of a concern for them (especially among the younger

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generation of ‘public-face’ social media users). Whether or not identities will be revealed and how images and other identifying factors might be used must be carefully negotiated with the subjects of the study. This is, of course, directly linked to informed consent. Subjects in a study have a right to know enough about the study in order to decide whether they want to participate in the study. In the case of minors, parental permission (often through the schools) should be obtained.

Researchers should also try to be as ethical as possible when interpreting the study results. Researchers should do their best to not over-interpret or misinterpret the data and represent the possible conclusions as closely as possible. To do so, researchers can use triangulation techniques or corroborate their conclusions with the participants themselves through interviews and other techniques proposed in qualitative methodologies (see chapters in Section 1 of this volume for such procedures).

To help the young researcher, we include here the research ethic statement⁴ drawn up by the GREIP research group as a guideline for setting up and carrying out qualitative research. We also provide an example of a signed consent form that can be adapted to the individual needs of each study.

2. GREIP research ethics protocol

(1) Before embarking on any research project, the researcher and/or research team will carefully consider whether the study can cause potential harm to anyone involved. If the researcher identifies any possible ill effects, the team will seek the best approach to minimize these effects.

(2) The researcher and/or research team will always provide sufficient information to reviewers, ethical board members and participants to fully comprehend the scope of any research project under the aegis of the research team. Participants will be fully informed of the purpose and approach of the

4. These protocols are based on the guidelines by the Comissió d'Ètica en Experimentació a la UAB [Universitat Autònoma Council on Research Ethics] and the European Ethics Documentation Centre.

research. Also, how the data will be collected and processed will be explained fully. The head researcher of the project will make their contact details available to all informants for any complaints or ethical issues that may arise during the period of research and these will be dealt with through the local ethics board. This procedure includes doctoral studies supervised by any research team member.

(3) The researcher and/or research team will always obtain informed consent from all parties involved in the research prior to implementing the research project. This will include full disclosure of any anticipated risks to the subjects, whether the respondents will be compensated in any way, the methodology to be used and data treatment. A compliance document between parties (researcher and/or research team and the informant) will be signed by the individuals who are responsible for each institution (e.g. head researcher, head of school). In the case of research carried out with children under the age of 18 and which is in collaboration with schools, the education center will provide parental consent for research to be carried out in the center. In the case of a research project carried out with informants outside of an institution, on a one-to-one basis, signed consent will be obtained by each informant prior to beginning the research. In the case of research carried out with children under the age of 18 and which is not in collaboration with schools, the head researcher will seek signed parental consent. These procedures include doctoral studies supervised by any research team member.

(4) Requests for consent will always include the possibility of opting out of the research. In cases where opting out carries ethical issues of an individual being unable to partake in educational activities, the individual will take part in the research activity but data will not be collected whenever possible. The filming of the whole group will avoid close-ups of these people. In cases where it is impossible to avoid up-close data recording of said persons, the data will be eliminated.

(5) The researcher and/or research team will ensure confidentiality of all research subjects, including data stemming from systematic reviews of

documents, which might be considered sensitive due to race, ethnicity, religion, politics, health, or sexual orientation.

(6) In the case of compilation of personal data from the informants, data will only be gathered to further the study and will not be used for any other purpose. No extra personal data will be gathered that is not immediately pertinent to the study. The personal data will be carefully organized and managed to ensure that no unauthorized use is made of them. This procedure includes doctoral studies supervised by any research team member.

(7) Participant schools or informants may request viewing of all data related to the research before data management begins. If data are considered objectionable by the participating school or individual informant they will be destroyed upon presentation of a justifiable argument for doing so.

(8) Access to raw data collected by the researcher or under the aegis of the research team will only be allowed to members of the immediate research team (in the case of locally, nationally and internationally funded research projects), to doctoral students and their supervisors (in the case of doctoral studies) and to collaborating researchers who are fully accredited (e.g. completion of an international ethics research exam; demonstrable research trajectory), following explicit permission by the research members involved in the data collection and full disclosure to the informants.

(9) The method of processing the data will be fully disclosed to the informants before beginning data compilation. These methods include anonymizing the names of individuals and institutions, blurring of faces in videos and images, and deleting information that can lead to recognition of participants such as locations, names of cities, etc.

(10) Processed data (anonymized, codified, etc.) may be used for academic or educational purposes such as publications, conferences, teaching materials and policy documents only if this has been included in the written consent form signed by the informants. Anyone who has not been directly involved in the

data compilation may only have access to processed data for such purposes (publications, teaching materials, etc.) after requesting explicit permission from those responsible for the data collection.

(11) In the case of international research collaboration in which the researcher or a member of the research team is the lead investigator, the Ethics Statements of all the countries involved in collecting and handling the data will be studied. Explicit protocols concerning collection and treatment of data as well as use of data for publications and other academic output will be elaborated to cover as many of the ethical requirements of the countries as possible. However, compliance to the ethical considerations concerning the collection and handling of data in each country will be the direct responsibility of the collaborating researcher in that country.

For researchers who are working with online or telecollaborative data (see chapters by [Dooly, this volume](#), and [Antoniadou & Dooly, this volume](#)) there are other factors that need to be taken into consideration as there are now third parties involved in the interaction where the data are collected. Especially in the case of telecollaboration, researchers may find that they are dealing with data gathered from groups distributed across the globe, which inevitably means straddling numerous frontiers (national, cultural, geopolitical). And while practitioners and researchers often consider these borders as virtual, they can be all too real when it comes to legal issues. Here some examples of conceivable legal entanglements:

- What is considered lawful and permissible when dealing with data collected in the cyberworld in one country may not be allowed in the other countries where some of the study participants are located.
- The researcher doing ‘virtual ethnography’ (see chapter by [Antoniadou & Dooly, this volume](#)) may not be able to get explicit consent to gather data from all the individuals taking part in the virtual community. In the case where the community is not ‘public’ the legal rights to the data are unclear.

- Some legal cases have emerged concerning data that was gathered by one researcher in a country that does not have ‘research ethic board exams’. This researcher was not allowed to use the data for publication in countries where these exams are required. In virtual environment research, ‘new’ issues such as this one will inevitably emerge and the researcher may need to seek legal advice.
- The researchers involved in collecting the data must think very carefully about who can have access to the data and how is this controlled? For instance, if the data are collected by two researchers in different countries, can these researchers provide access to the data to fellow colleagues who did not take part in the online interaction? Does this require written consent between all researchers?
- The researcher should find out if they need to have written consent from their collaborating partners in order to publish findings, even if the data set used in the publication only reflects local participants. This should be discussed prior to the data collection with all the telecollaborative partners (see previous point above).

These are just a few possible ‘trouble’ areas that should be taken into consideration when the data compilation process moves beyond the more traditional borders of local classrooms.

3. Example of written project information for participants

INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

[add the title of project – keep it simple]

[add the date of this document]

[adapt as necessary]

You (or a minor who you are parent or legal guardian of) are being invited to participate, on a voluntary basis, in a study about [complete]. This information sheet tells you about the study you (or the minor who you are legal guardian of) will be a part of provided you are willing to participate: what type of data will be collected, how the recordings will be carried out, how the data will be used and stored after the recordings are completed and how you can withdraw your consent if you decide to do so.

Please read the information and discuss it with the researcher before you sign informed consent to participate.

Who is the researcher?

[add in non-technical language – explain who you are, where you work and/or study, etc.]

What is the research about?

[add in non-technical language, especially if minors or other vulnerable populations are meant to read it]

What type of data will be collected?

[adapt as necessary]

The researcher will collect different data types to help answer the questions, including: written notes based on observations, audio or video recordings of interactions, audio or video recordings of interviews, photographs, written documents and records of online documents and interactions.

The procedure for audio and video recordings is very simple. The researcher will set up a number of microphones and one or more video cameras in the setting where you (or a minor who you are parent or legal guardian of) are carrying out

normal activities which is to be recorded, and then you will simply be asked to go about your business as usual. The researcher will always check you are comfortable with recordings being made and you may ask for certain recordings to be deleted if you do not feel comfortable with them.

You (or the minor who you are parent or legal guardian of) might also be asked to participate in interviews, but the topics to be dealt with would be shared beforehand and can be negotiated.

You might also be asked to give the researcher access to online data (e.g. social networking site) or other face-to-face data (e.g. from home or with friends).

None of this is compulsory and each type of data that might be collected will be negotiated along the way with you in person or via phone or email.

How will be data be stored?

[adapt as necessary]

The data you (or the minor who you are parent or legal guardian of) participate in will be incorporated in a secure database. When you sign the consent form, you can decide how you are happy for the data to be used.

Whatever you choose, all material gathered during the study will be treated as confidential. Furthermore, data will be anonymized so people are not identifiable, unless you request otherwise. This means that in any use of the material names will be removed, images will be altered and, wherever relevant, information will be adjusted so that people cannot be identified.

Remember you are free to withdraw from the recordings at any time without having to give an explanation, by informing the researcher or her supervisor (see contact information below).

How will the data be presented?

[adapt as necessary]

It is common practice for researchers to present anonymized audio and visual data collected at research group meetings, conferences and in their university teaching, as well as to include images in academic publications. When you sign consent, you can decide exactly how you would like to give permission for the data to be used in academic contexts. Please note that research data will never be shown outside of these academic contexts. Throughout the study, the researcher will also consult you before presenting the data to make sure you are comfortable with how it is being used.

How can I withdraw from the study?

[adapt as necessary]

You can withdraw your consent to participate in the study at any time during data collection. You can also withdraw your consent to the use of your image in academic events and publications from the moment you communicate this wish onwards. To withdraw your consent, or to ask any questions in relation to the study at any time, please use the contact information at the end of this information sheet.

Will I find out the results?

[adapt as necessary]

If you would like to receive a summary of the project results at the end of the study, please include your email address on the consent form.

[include your contact details and those of your supervisor at the end of the document]

4. Example of a written informed consent form

INFORMED CONSENT PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Title of the project:

Researcher:

Supervisor:

Department:

I, Mr. / Ms.:

with ID/Passport number:

- Have read the attached written information about the study and have received a copy of it.
- Have received verbal information about the study.
- Have understood what has been explained to me, and the possible risks and benefits of participating in the study.
- Have been able to comment on the study and ask the researcher questions about it.
- Consent to taking part in the study and understand that my participation is entirely voluntary.
- Understand that audio and/or video data will be collected involving me, and I consent to (mark the options):

- The researcher, his/her supervisor and other members of the research project using the audio and/or video data in academic contexts (research group meetings, conferences, etc.).
- Other members of the research group using the audio and/or video data in academic contexts (research group meetings, conferences, etc.).
- The researcher, his/her supervisor and other members of the research project using images taken from the video data in academic publications (specialized journals, books, etc.).
- Other members of the research group using images taken from the video data in academic publications (specialized journals, books, etc.).
- The researcher, his/her supervisor and other members of the research project using fragments of audio, video and/or images in their university teaching.
- Other members of the research group using fragments of audio, video and/or images in their university teaching.
- Understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time during data collection.
- Understand that I can withdraw my consent to the use of my image in academic events and publications from the moment I communicate this wish onwards.
- Understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form.

By signing this informed consent form, I authorise the use of my personal data as described in this document, in accordance with the Law 15/1999, of 13 December, on the protection of personal data.

Participant's signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

If you would like to receive a copy of the results, please provide your email address:

Works cited

Antoniadou, V., & Dooly, M. (2017). Educational ethnography in blended learning environments. In E. Moore & M. Dooly (Eds), *Qualitative approaches to research on plurilingual education* (pp. 237-263). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.emmd2016.630>

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Websites with resources mentioned

Consent forms for downloading (GREIP model)

Consent form in English: http://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/greip/sites/grupsderecerca.uab.cat/greip/files/ConsentForm_Eng_WP_0.doc

Consent form in Catalan: http://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/greip/sites/grupsderecerca.uab.cat/greip/files/Consent_Cat_WP.doc

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Enfocaments qualitativus per a la recerca en educació plurilingüe (Catalan)
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