

Guidelines for Conducting Observations in Schools for Research Purposes

This document is designed to serve two purposes: 1) to help researchers think about some of the ethical issues that might arise while doing studies that involve Classroom Observation (CO), and 2) to help applicants in preparing Research Ethics Board applications that provide all the required information in making ethical judgements regarding the CO component of a research study. These guidelines are the result of a consultative process initiated by Dr. Gary Glavin, Assistant VP, Research, and included Dr. Charlotte Enns, Associate Dean, Faculty of Education, Dr. Zana Lutfiyya, former Chair, Education and Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB) and Pinar Eskicioglu, Human Ethics Officer, Fort Garry Campus.

Description of Classroom Observation

Educational researchers often use the observation of school and/or classroom settings as a source of data for research or for other possible research purposes. These procedures can include a continuum of observational practice from strictly naturalistic observation to more involved participant observation. Naturalistic observation typically involves shorter, more discreet, sessions in particular classrooms, where the researcher has limited interaction with teachers and students and observes the everyday, ongoing practices in the setting. Participant observation is where the researcher tends to be embedded in the school setting for an extended period of time, may even assist the teacher, and interact with students and teachers to gain a better understanding of their learning and teaching procedures and practices.

Clarifying Roles: Educator vs. Researcher

Schools feel like “public” places, but researchers still need permission to access these settings and carry out their research. Researchers will need consent of the school and the division in order to conduct the study and recruit participants. Researchers must gain fully informed and freely given consent to collect data from all of the adults involved in the study and freely given assent from students under the age of 18 (as well as consent from their parents or legal guardians). The educators’ (including teachers, educational assistants, clinicians, administrators) and students’ thoughts and interactions that are observed become data and must be kept private/confidential, along with the identities of these study participants.

Educational researchers are often teachers themselves, so it is important to keep these dual roles in mind when conducting research in schools. Teachers are used to observing students to assess student learning and to guide their own pedagogical practices; however, when they are serving as researchers the specific purposes of their observations, and how these can and cannot be shared, must be clarified. Students are often “cute” and “funny”, but also minors, so it is important that researchers resist the temptation to share their stories (or their teachers’ stories)

publically during the process of data collection. Some of these stories may be shared through the publication of the research, but the established procedures must be followed and the identities of participants must be kept confidential. Researchers must not inadvertently share information from students or school personnel who were not part of the study and did not give consent. Researchers must interrogate themselves continuously as ethical issues arise within the ever-changing research setting. If the researcher is unsure of any questions or issues, they should contact the Human Ethics Officer for advice (and their advisor, if they are UM students).

In some studies, the researcher is the educator of the study participants (i.e., the researcher wants to conduct a study with her/his own students). There is more at stake than maintaining confidentiality. There is also the issue of being in a position of power (having authority over) study participants. There are strategies that the researcher can use to address these concerns. Refer to the “Practitioner-Research Guidelines” at the following link for more details:

http://umanitoba.ca/research/orec/media/Practitioner_Research_Guidelines.pdf

It is important to be aware that the researcher has more than one role, and to be sensitive to the differences in status between the researcher and the various participants, including age, gender, race/culture, and level of education. The role of researcher (observer) must be balanced with the role of a responsible adult, particularly regarding whether to intervene or not. Behaviour that is dangerous to an individual or others, must be reported, prevented or stopped even within naturalistic observation. Researchers should feel free to contact the Research Ethics Board Chair if they are unsure of what they should do, or how to proceed. Similarly, any disclosures of abuse must be reported according to appropriate protocols.

Finally, researchers must be aware of being a guest in the school. This includes following proper etiquette and visitor protocols (signing in, wearing name tags); observing school culture (dress code, schedule, opening and closing routines); establishing a contact person (to inform them of illness or cancellation); being flexible when unexpected changes occur; and building relationships through reciprocity (volunteering to help out when required, showing appreciation, and sharing information and expertise). These arrangements can be outlined in the Classroom Observation Protocol that should be included in the ethics application.

Gaining Consent and Assent

Ethical approval for conducting research in schools must be obtained at several levels, including; a) institutional research ethics boards (REB), b) school divisions/superintendents, c) schools/principals, and d) parents/guardians and students. The process for recruiting participants and gaining consent at all these various levels must be clearly outlined in the ethics application to the REB. If changes need to be made to any aspects of the study, the researcher must seek an amendment from the REB. Please see the following link for the complete REB Protocol Submission Form: http://umanitoba.ca/research/orec/ethics/reb_forms.html

Schools are not permitted to provide researchers with a mailing list of students, families and/or staff members. Researchers must ask school divisions/schools for permission to have the school or division distribute the recruitment materials. Again, these procedures must be clearly outlined in the ethics application.

Researchers must obtain consent from each individual participant, which includes consent from parents/legal guardians for students under the age of 18 years, as well as individual assent from each of these students. This usually involves adapting the language and reading level of conversations and forms to ensure that assent is fully informed and freely given. Typically, researchers will include minors only if they have both consent and assent.

A particular challenge in conducting classroom observations is that rarely do all parents of students within the class give consent for participation. These exceptions do not prevent the researcher from observing in the classroom, but measures must be taken to ensure that the non-participating students are not included in the data collection. Some suggestions for appropriate data collection procedures are outlined below.

Data Collection: Keeping Track of Participants

As in all data collection, students' real names must not be used, nor any obviously identifiable features, including the names of schools, divisions, or staff. A coding system has to be established at the start of the study and used throughout observation notes. The key to this code must be kept securely and only accessible to the researcher (and advisor when the researcher is a student). Although the researcher will have access to observing all interactions in the classroom, it is important that no interactions involving students (or adults) who have opted out of the study be recorded in any form – written field notes, audio or video recordings and transcriptions. Depending on the situation, maintaining this distinction can be managed in different ways. In some cases (where the classroom size is small, or if only one or two children opt out), the researcher may easily recognize the students and keep track of which interactions to exclude. In other situations, with large classes or multiple classes, an identifying system (known only to the researcher) must be established. For example, providing name tags for all students, but the names of students who have opted out are written with a different coloured marker. Another approach (used with younger children) is to give them all animal stickers, where a particular animal identifies the students who have opted out. The researcher can work with the teachers to determine what kind of identifiers might be of interest to the students. The use of these identifiers should always be explained to the students as a way of helping the researcher keep track or learn the students' names during his/her visit. The researcher will have to outline this plan in the ethics application. The researcher must also be careful not to identify student participants to adults if this is a feature of the study.

Data Collection: Audio and Video Recording

If audio- or video-recording is used during data collection, students who have opted

out must not be recorded in any form. It is usually possible for them to be positioned or seated somewhere away from where the recording is taking place to avoid accidental capture. At the same time, it is important to ensure that they have their normal educational experience. If a non-participant is inadvertently caught on the video or audio recording, the researcher must be able to delete it, blur the image or beep out the voice of that individual.

Data Collection: Print/Written Artifacts

Classroom observation research does not usually focus on individual students, so written artifacts should only be used to give depth and full information about what was being done in the lesson, not as records of individual learning. The written material being used in this kind of research is that which is produced in the normal work of the lesson and has to be made confidential or coded before being handed to the researcher. No materials (whether confidential or not) can be obtained from students whose parents/guardians have not given consent. This process must be included in all consent forms (school division, school, teacher, parent/guardian, and student). Some researchers may be collecting data from a single person or only a few people in the class. Those giving consent would have to know the parameters of the study and give consent. Typically, though, the researcher is collecting data from more than one study participant.

Classroom Observation Protocols

In addition to completing the usual sections of the ethics application (procedures, participants, consent, etc.), researchers conducting classroom observations must also outline and address the following points:

1. Observation Plans
 - a. What potential interactions will be involved (teacher-student; peers; parents)
 - b. How will the data be gathered?
 - c. What kind of data will you collect of the setting itself? (Descriptive, map of the layout of the space, photograph of the space).
 - d. Details of anticipated process (acknowledging the limitations of predicting this ahead of time)
 - e. Anticipated length of time of the observation(s)
2. Participants
 - a. Describe the people to be observed (grade level, class topic/discipline)
 - b. Reflect on ethical issues that may arise

- c. Recruitment process
3. Consent/Assent
- a. Process for gaining consent (both verbal and written)
 - b. Adaptations for assent from students who are minors
 - c. Managing parents/guardians and students who opt out (establishing identifiers; adjusting audio- or video-recording)

This document has outlined some of the important considerations for researchers conducting classroom observations. Contact the REB or the Human Ethics Officer if you have questions or require further guidance, at HumanEthics@umanitoba.ca