Students As Lab Rats: The Ethics Of Conducting Non-Pedagogical Research In The Context Of Classroom Simulations And Experiential Learning

James W. Gentry
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
jgentry@unl.edu

Lee Philip McGinnis
Washburn Uuniversity
lee.mcginnis@washburn.edu

John R. Dickinson
Windsor Uuniversity
bjd@uwindsor.ca

Alvin C. Burns
Louisiana State University
alburns@lsu.edu

ABSTRACT

While much ABSEL work has addressed the teaching of business ethics to students, there is scant dialogue on the ethics of using one's students as subjects in non-pedagogical classroom research. The authors contend that this practice is ethical when the research is focused on pedagogical topics and student interests are protected. However, when non-pedagogical research is undertaken with student subjects or using student data gatherers, issues of exploitation and uneven opportunity to learn arise. Consequently, the authors judge this practice to be unethical.

INTRODUCTION

The Dickinson, Gentry, & Burns (2004) paper raised some interesting issues concerning the viability of using pedagogical simulation games and experiential contexts to obtain data for academic (as opposed to pedagogical) research. One issue raised was the ethics of using extensive classroom time for academic research purposes. We take the perspective that academic research should NOT be obtained from classroom settings for ethical reasons.

However, we do have some caveats:

(1) We see no problem with the infrequent use of students to complete pretest questionnaires or to participate in the occasional pilot study. In fact, some advice for incorporating such efforts into the class material itself has been provided at ABSEL previously (Tansuhaj & Stell 1986).

(2) The domain of our prescriptions does not apply to the "capstone"-type courses in which the course's purpose is to integrate concepts from previously studied subdisciplines and to note the nature of their interactions. A simulation game would appear to be the ideal pedagogical approach to such a course, and this may provide an ideal laboratory for academic research, one conceivably unmatched by either the laboratory or the field.

Thus, we are limiting our domain to that of required and elective non-capstone courses in the business curriculum. Given that the authors are marketers, the examples which we will use will be from marketing classes. Moreover, our intent is to raise the issue so as to increase awareness and hopefully to stir debate.

COVERAGE OF ETHICS IN THE ABSEL LITERATURE

While the specific context in which we will discuss ethical issues is relatively unique, the topic of ethics is one of the more commonly covered ones at ABSEL. For example, Howard & Strang (2003) found ethics to be the 32nd most commonly used term in ABSEL Proceedings titles and the 24th most common in the texts of the papers. Most of the work has not dealt with the ethics of research, but rather with the teaching of ethics via experiential

exercises or the insertion of critical incidents in simulation games (Anderson, Beveridge, & Scott 1998; Andrews 2000; Brozik & Zapalska 2003; Cannon & Schwaiger 2003; Chiesl 1994; Fristzsche & Rosenberg 1989; Halpin & Biggs 2000; Hauser & Logan 1977; Lynch 1998; Maddox, Armstrong, & Wheatley 1991; Markulis & Strang 1995; McAfee & Anderson 1995; Morgan & Dennehey 1995; Mujtaba 1997a, b; Page & Platt 2000; Ricci & Markulis 1990; Schreier 1990; Schreier & Komives 1997; Schumann, Anderson, & Scott 1996; Schumann, Scott, & Anderson 1994; Scot, Schumann, & Anderson 1998; Shami et al. 2004; Smith 1974, 1975, 1979; Sondergaard & Lommergaard 2002; Stacey 1988; Tangedahl & Manuel 2004; Trent et al. 1997; Ullmann & Brink 1992; Wheatley, Bennett, & Armstrong 1997; Wilson & Maxhem 1997; Wines, Anderson, & Fronmueller 1998; Wright & Brady 1990). While the bulk of this work reflects the increasing importance of ethical issues in the business curriculum in the last two decades, it is refreshing to see that such issues were discussed at ABSEL during its infancy as well.

In addition to the discussions of how to teach ethics, ABSEL has seen coverage of unethical behavior on the part of students. Issues of student cheating and "free-riding" have been covered throughout ABSEL's history, but more recently there has been concern for student "ethics" in an environment of greatly enhanced technology (Forte, Mueller, & Nicholson 2003; Hornyak, Peach, & Fekula 2003).

There has been coverage of ethical issues related to research, but the bulk (Burns & Burns 1985; Gentry 1980; Loveland, Wall, & Wheatley 1979; Overby & Durden 1988; Sewall 1978) of that has focused on pedagogical research and the most dominant issue: "since most experiments require researcher introduced controls, might these controls have some differentiating effect on what students learn as a result of playing an experimentally controlled simulation game?" Gentry (1980) discussed the "Pygmalion" study by Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968), who found that children who were expected to succeed by their teachers (falsely so, as the experimenters had lied about the students' IQs, which were essentially equivalent across classes) did receive better scores by the end of the year. Warwick (1975) criticized this study (and the other 250 or so studies which had replicated it in a relatively short period of time) for the possible harm done to the students whose IQs were lied about. ABSEL participants have discussed the need to protect student interests in pedagogical research, and obviously we advocate the continuance of such discussion.

A non-ABSEL literature exists that involves students and ethical issues, one that sees students serving as respondents in the evaluation of ethical contexts. In particular, some of these issues assess college students' attitudes toward advertising's ethical consequences (Beard 2003), assess how their attitudes have changed over time (Zinkhan, Bisesi, & Saxton 1989), assess ethical sensitivity (Sparks & Hunt 1998), and measure how students of different cultures react differently toward ethical dilemmas

(Ahmed, Chung, & Eichenseher 2003). These studies, by their very nature, use students because their attitudes and opinions are the essence of the comparison or represent the larger student population. Once again, though, ethical standards should apply to this type of research. If the research is self-serving and exploitive in nature, then we advise against its use in a classroom setting. However, systematic integration of the topic of the research with the course content (as discussed in Tansuhaj & Stell 1986) may result in a satisfactory learning experience.

The point of this paper, though, is to discuss ethical issues related to basic research conducted in a pedagogical context. This topic has received far less coverage at ABSEL (see Dickinson et al. 2004; Gentry et al. 1984; Sewall 1978 for exceptions). We looked at a number of ethics statements (such as the AACSB's "Ethics Education in Business Schools" and the Academy of Management's "Code of Ethical Conduct") for guidance in terms of evaluating the use of the classroom for basic research, and found little of a specific nature. However, the first author's institution, the University of Nebraska, does offer something of substance in its own "Professional Ethics Statement:"

1. As researchers, we avoid any exploitation of others for personal advantage, ….

2. We respect the confidential nature of the relationship between professor and student; avoid any personal exploitation of students; protect their academic freedom; and acknowledge any significant assistance from them.

3. As faculty of a research university, we seek to involve both our graduate and undergraduate students in our professional investigations by nurturing their opportunity to contribute to meaningful research, and by giving them appropriate credit for their work.

Clearly, all three of these points are open to multiple interpretations. For example, "appropriate credit" may be construed by some as a rite-of-passage obligation for a college sophomore in his/her Intro to Psychology course's laboratory experiment. Or, "appropriate credit" might be satisfied by extra credit points to help one's grade. Certainly more extensive efforts might merit a thank you in the article's opening footnote or possibly even co-authorship.

For us, the key words in the University of Nebraska's Professional Ethics Statement are "avoid any exploitation of others for personal advantage." Using unpaid students to further one's research record often may be unethical. We argue strongly that this is an issue that ABSEL should be having a dialog about. The tools used by ABSELers to provide learning experiences can be used to generate basic knowledge about intricate business practices (again, see Dickinson et al. 2004). In fact, simulation was first attractive to academics as a research tool, long before it became a relatively common part of business pedagogy. Von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944) pioneered the use of games for basic research over a decade prior to the development in 1956 of what is commonly recognized as the first modern business simulation game, *Top*

Management Decision Simulation, by the American Management Association.

Despite simulation's legacy as both a teaching and research tool, we suggest that the teaching/research interface may have a dark side that merits attention. As noted earlier, ABSEL has a rich history of dealing with the teaching of ethics in clever and appealing ways, should be proud of that tradition and should not capitulate when issues hit closer to home. Chiesl (1994) raised a critically important issue in the title of his paper, "Don't Teach Ethics to Business Students!" As experienced experiential exercise devotees, ABSELers know that Newell was advocating that students should learn ethical behavior experientially. We raise the following issue: What do students learn when they have been exploited in the teacher/student interaction? Don't students have the right to expect that the primary focus of a class is student learning, as opposed to faculty research generation? We argue that if learning is not the primary focus, then educators need to reassess the purpose of their instruction. Experiential exercises work in large part because they are more involving, but what can be more involving than the experience of "being used" by an instructor to further his/her own research record?

The multiple interpretations issue discussed earlier muddies the water, so to speak, in terms of just where the line is that we should not cross. We will try to clarify where we think the line should be in the context of some pedagogies with which we have a great deal of experience.

THE LIVE CASE APPROACH. A common approach in Marketing Research (and sometimes Promotion) courses has been to require students to do a hands-on study, often for a local client. The client may or may not be asked to pay the department (and not the instructor) a fee to cover out-of-pocket costs and to cover "overhead." Usually this fee is in the low four figures, and has the meritorious effect of raising both client and student expectations in terms of the quality of the study. Depending upon the size of the class and the amount of data collection asked of each student, the sample sizes may be substantial (beyond the magnitude of reviewer criticism). Given the effort required [Burns (1978) referred to this as the "suffering bastard" approach], there is a great temptation to use the study to generate publications. Most such studies are doomed, becoming conference papers at best as the practical bent of the study, which is so motivating to students, does not lend itself well to the testing of theory. Reviewers are accustomed to seeing this form of study and are generally quite cynical. We (or at least all but one of us) have <u>no</u> problem with such efforts and hope that the instructors do some get publication credit for them, as long as the practical orientation is maintained.

We <u>do</u> have problems with the use of such projects to conduct the instructor's own research, "using" students as cheap data collectors. If there is no student ownership of the research process (selecting the project, helping to determine the nature of the research problem, designing and pretesting the questionnaire, and collecting, analyzing, and integrating

the data/results), then the students are being "used" and do not receive their money's worth in terms of a motivating learning opportunity. Students prefer simulations that are more realistic with greater real world consequences (Wheatley, 1995); doing research that is self-serving and with few real world applications may well deviate from providing this experience.

A variant of this is having students become "junior colleagues" in a participant/observation study where they collect data (for example, of the Thanksgiving ritual within their families). While these experiences can be quite thought-provoking, the instructor has an obligation to justify the "use" of students as data collectors in his/her research to the students, to reviewers, and maybe to university administrators. The argument has been made that this requirement of students being collectors of observation data is akin to using classes to complete questionnaires, but we see a large difference between the use of a few minutes of class time (or possibly out-of-class time) for extra credit and the graded course requirement that necessitates a serious commitment of students' out-of-class time. The latter, however, could be construed as a better learning experience for the students, but only if the assignment is an integral part of the course or part of the learning objectives as stated in the syllabus. For example, the study of Thanksgiving rituals could be a beneficial project for a class on qualitative techniques, consumer behavior, or marketing research because students would be using a specific technique to gather information; the key to the successful implementation of this from a learning perspective is the integration of the students' effort with the course content.

THE USE OF A SIMULATION GAME AS A MEANS OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH.

Dickinson et al. (2004) listed a number of successful research (i.e., published in a Tier One journal) endeavors that used a teaching context. Many of these involved executive education contexts, where a more theoretical perspective might be more appropriate (i.e., they might understand the underlying issues being manipulated). The following criticisms deal with situations in which a game is used as part of a course (and not the context for the whole course) with "real students."

- *The bad fit between research topic and existing games may create problems. Forcing the games to fit the research topic may have negative consequences, as the modifications may involve aspects crucial to the learning objectives. One can create one's own game, but to what extent is the course learning being modified to fit the research context?*
- The Pygmalion Effect was discussed earlier. Some experimental treatments may facilitate learning better than others. How does one justify some students getting less than the best opportunity to learn?
- Sample size limitations in most courses may result in the researcher performing strange permutations to

generate a decent sample size. If one has a small class size, one should use that to facilitate learning rather than being concerned with aggregation to a sufficient size of similar student situations, and possibly harming the learning environment.

■ Experimentation assumes randomization of treatments being assigned to subjects. In gaming situations, we are often talking about groups of students constituting one firm. Do we assign teams randomly? Good experimental method says clearly, "Yes." Concern for student lives may say no, given the work schedules that many students face and different student characteristics that may force the instructor to control group makeup.

Gentry et al. (1984) discuss a number of problems associated with attempts to do academic research within the context of classroom use of a simulation game. Their failure may be due to their (Gentry et al.'s) limitations as academic researchers, but the list of reasons does resonate and provides a basis for improving the research process. However, we would suggest that many attempts to overcome the issues may mean deviating from the effectiveness of the teaching aspects of the experiential approach.

CONCLUSION

We believe strongly in the use of experiential pedagogies. We also believe strongly in academic (non-pedagogical) research. We do not believe that one gets synergies by trying to combine them. Academic research should not be conducted in the guise of teaching, because we believe that it is difficult enough to teach effectively when one's entire focus is on teaching the class (and not on the academic research by-products). And we are concerned that bad ethical behavior can indeed be learned experientially when faculty exploit student efforts in order to advance their own best interests. We advocate that student learning should be the focus of our classroom efforts, and note the possible conflicts of interest occurring when one attempts to generate non-pedagogical publishable research simultaneously with teaching. We believe that ethical faculty should question why they are doing what they do. If the answer is not in the best interests of their students' learning, then we suggest that rethinking their efforts is called for.

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