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Ethical Research Practices: Collaborative Action Research, Part II
By Chris Calvin, Ph.D.

Walden University
Regis University

In part one of this series we looked at a number of issues relating to ethical research praxis. In this article we will further examine these practices but in relation to one of the most popular and often used field-based research methods currently in education (Calvin, 2003).

Collaborative Action Research (CAR) goes by many names but one essential characteristic of CAR is that it is meant to be used by professionals in the field. Guidance and assistance from an expert is advised for early practitioners of this methodology but not required. CAR is by no means the only available field-based research methodology (Creswell, McMillan, Mills, and Schumacher, 2002). There are quite a few available but action research is one of the first utilized by practitioners for problems and issues they encounter on a daily basis (Sagor, 2000). This approach does much to empower a practitioner in the field to generate and control her/his own data and hopefully influence organizational policy. Data based decision making is currently the primary driver of change in most successful educational institutions (Erlandson, Stark & Ward, 1996). This makes ethical research praxis a primary concern and ensuing review essential. In the interview below the appropriate use of Institutional Review Boards (IRB) in the CAR method and some of the concerns involved when doing this type of data collection in the K-16 environment were examined.

Relevant Communication

Several areas need further scrutiny with regard to this methodology. Problems can arise in several forms if early planning is to be fruitful. To better examine some of these issues we turned to Dr. Richard Sagor, one of the premier researchers and contemporary developers of this popular educational method in a recent interview conducted by the author of this article. The entire following context is left intact for purposes of accuracy. Following the text of the interview I will include additional editorial comments. (Emphases added by the author)

From: Richard Sagor Date: 2003/08/04 Mon PM 04:24:25 CDT

>After reviewing your text "Guiding School Improvement with CAR" and >the videos I realized that you are encouraging teachers to report to the >public and publish, but I don't see anything about using IRB during the >stages you present. Much of what they will be studying is involving

>students, families, etc. and it seems should go through a review process >to protect human subjects. What would you suggest?

>-Chris

>-Dr. Chris D. Calvin, Director

>The Center for Digital Equity

><http://atpr.fws1.com/thecenterfordigitalequity.html>

>Houston, TX

Hi Chris, Thanks for writing. You have raised a good question and it is one where I think there is ample room for disagreement. And, I should state at the outset that my bias when treading on ethical or policy grounds is to err on the conservative side. While I don't discuss the IRB issue specifically in the book, the discussion in chapter 12 covers much of my thinking on this topic. That having been said, here is my take on the issue:

Do I support the IRB process?

The IRB process is one that I heartily endorse. Its purpose is the protection of human subjects...something that scientists have not always been ethical about in the past and this is something that needs to be corrected and we educators should be the lead in making known our concerns for the well-being of the innocent. Nevertheless, my position is that IRB approval is not necessary for most educational action research, largely because we are not engaging in "experiments" which involve "human subjects."

Why a concern for the protection of human subjects?

People have a right to go about their lives without being manipulated for someone else's benefit--whether it could harm them or not. If, someone (a research scientist) decides that he/she would like to manipulate someone to learn from their experience (the essence of human experimentation) then ethical behavior as well as law requires that we get informed consent. But, even informed consent is not enough, some manipulations could be so potentially damaging that it would be wrong to let someone engage in it, even with subject consent, hence the Institutional Review Process--a process where the scientific community under the cloak of law, polices itself.

Is all research subject to IRB approval?

The IRB process was instituted to provide oversight for institutionally sponsored research. I am not sure how that is defined. Clearly, a research grant made to a University department is considered institutionally sponsored. Doctoral research is always considered institutionally sponsored. But, what about class assignments that require research? I don't know how that line is drawn. Certainly, if research done in fulfillment of a degree requirement is deemed to be University sponsored at WU, then considering some form of IRB review would be warranted. I've heard about it being as perfunctory as a proposal made on behalf of an entire class or program by the professor or department head to individual proposals submitted by each class member.

That being said all research doesn't require approval. It is my understanding that basic experimental research in the natural sciences, that does not make use of human subjects, can proceed without IRB approval. But a significant amount of other research, most notably research in the arts and social sciences (involving investigations into human behavior) does not require IRB approval.

One distinction that I have found helpful in determining if review is called for is whether or not research (on a human endeavor) is experimental. Meaning does the study involve some sort of manipulation by the researcher--a manipulation which would not have occurred other wise and would not have involved a set of individuals were it not for the conduct of the experiment. **In my opinion all experiments on humans should ALWAYS receive approval.**

But what of other types of research into human endeavors? Such as research into works of art and artistic movements? Certainly the works were created by humans, but the work was not done at the request of the researcher, for the researcher, and would have been none even if the researcher never existed. Another example is that of historical research or journalism. Certainly the historian is reporting on the acts of humans. But, these were all acts that were engaged in independent of the researcher (historian/journalist) and would have occurred whether or not the events became an issue of scholarly inquiry. A reporter is a researcher, but hardly an experimenter!

Perhaps closest to home is the example of anthropology and other naturalistic cultural studies. The anthropologist clearly is reporting on the lives, actions, even the words of the humans. The humans the anthropologist has chosen to report on were not chosen at random, they were, in fact chosen because they were representative of a sample (a particular culture). Nevertheless, the very methodology of the ethnographer demands that efforts be made to ensure that no manipulation occurs. The entire validity of the report hinges on the fact that what was observed was what was and would have been occurring naturally--with or without the presence of the recorder.

Is action research experimental research?

With a few exceptions (which I will discuss later) it rarely meets the definition of experimental research, at least as I've defined it here. An experiment being defined as providing services to students or exposing them to certain conditions solely because the teacher was doing an action research project. As I stated in chapter 12 of the book---I have some serious ethical concerns about experimental designs (particularly treatment and control designs) in school settings. In my opinion every teacher has a moral obligation, every single day they are in the classroom, to utilize the best approach/techniques they know how. When a teacher uses an approach they wouldn't normally use (because they are doing research) they are violating their sacred obligation to the kids. Likewise, to deny kids an approach that their teacher believes is in their interest (solely to create a control group) is an equally heinous violation of our duties as teachers.

It is for this reason (that in nearly every case—the exception to be discussed below) I assume that the teacher conducting action research is exposing his/her kids to nothing different than the kids would have been experiencing if the teacher was not being systematic about collecting and analyzing data on the impact of their teaching.

Are there subjects in educational action research?

In my opinion, to the degree that there is a "subject" being placed under my microscope as a teacher researcher, it is me. The object that I am studying is "my teaching behavior." Yes, the work done by the students, even the opinions expressed by the students may be windows (data) into the efficacy of the behavior of the subject of my research. But, in no way is this different way than the recipient of medical treatment is the recipient of the doctor's practice and the client of the lawyer is a recipient of the lawyer's practice. If the doctor and lawyer are performing just as they would have (if they weren't in the habit of being reflective practitioners) then there is no experimental manipulation going on. If the doctor, lawyer, or teacher elects to reflect on their practice (making use of the results of their work—to draw conclusions) and even if they later report on what they learned, it still doesn't constitute an experimental manipulation. Instead the doctor, lawyer, teacher is reporting on their routine practice.

Are these the only legal and ethical issues we need to be concerned with?

Absolutely not! Whether it be the naturalistic research of a journalist, a historian, an anthropologist or a teacher the research can and often does have unintended consequences for the individuals and communities that were reported on. While their behavior would have been the same with or without a reporter being there to chronicle it, once the behavior is reported it can produce numerous anticipated and unintended consequences (basic chaos theory). The impact of reporting can be both positive and negative. For this reason both the law and our ethical strictures should control all of our decisions on confidentiality and anonymity.

Once again, this is an issue that concerns teachers whether or not they ever venture into the arena of action research. Student work, grades, their faces, their opinions, etc., etc. belong to them and to them alone. Allowing a student to be identified (even if it is identified for something positive) without prior un-coerced student and parental consent is wrong (and often illegal) and this will be the case even if an IRB ruled otherwise.

Note: Earlier I said there were limited circumstances when action research might be experimental yet, still ethical and (arguably) not subject to IRB approval. This usually occurs when a decision needs to be made by the school authorities---in circumstances when authorities will be asked to make an informed choice among alternative programs or strategies. It is not uncommon for this to occur, even in schools which have never heard of Action Research. Often in such circumstances a variety of alternative approaches are piloted, results are reviewed and, ultimately, a decision is made on how to proceed. When this happens the student who experiences one program (as opposed to

another) simply because it is being piloted in their room is certainly being subject to a manipulation (having an experience) that wouldn't have occurred if pilot wasn't occurring. But, just as when a doctor decides to try one particular medication (with you) as opposed to another, it doesn't require IRB approval (even at a University Medical Center). In my opinion, understanding this distinction requires examining the issue of "motivation." In the case of trying out different medications or alternative textbooks, the motivation for the manipulation is clear. As I see it, the motivation in both cases is the following:

- 1) It is being done because the treatment appears to be a worthwhile approach.
- 2) It is being tried to enable "your practitioner" to learn how to provide you with better service.
- 3) It is being done on a short term basis with monitoring.

So, in conclusion, my recommendations are to:

A) Go overboard on informed consent. Take a look at the sample letter (figure 12.4) on page 160. It doesn't hurt to let people know what you are doing. It reduces parental concerns, impresses them that you care about the students and are working at becoming more effective, and finally is an efficient way to gain approval for the use of student work/artifacts (should you want to) for publication or presentation.

B) Maintain anonymity (make liberal use of pseudonyms) even when it isn't necessary. This is a case where an ounce of prevention is certainly worth a pound of cure.

C) Avoid using control groups. If you want/need a comparison group find a naturally occurring one. Students come to school to receive the educational services we deem best, not to be denied them so they can be objects of study.

D) See student work as what it is, a reflection of our instruction.

Perhaps as we teachers begin accepting the truth that the grades and other assessments of student work we produce are, in fact data, but not data on the kids, but rather data on our teaching effectiveness, it will help us develop a healthier attitude towards kids, grades, and teaching.

And finally,

E) If in your opinion or in the opinion of your University, IRB approval seems to be a prudent strategy, by all means use it. For starters most IRBs use a process whereby work of this sort will get an expedited review. It won't take up much administrative time, it won't have a significant effect on the course requirements (submitting a 3 page proposal at the start of the term-is a minor thing), it will teach the students about the IRB process and by doing so alert them to an important and sad history of abuse of human

subjects both here and abroad, and finally it will help keep controversy at bay. In education we have enough going on....we should choose our battles and this is not one worth spilling blood over!!

Best wishes,

Dick

Richard Sagor, Director
Institute for the Study of Inquiry in Education
16420 SE McGillivray, Suite 103-239
Vancouver, WA 98683

Summary, Comments, and Conclusions

The above suggestions offered by Dr. Sagor are fairly consistent endorsements of standard research IRB protocol and proscribe a format for K-16 educators that errs on the side of the participant in any school related research project. As he established above, "I should state at the outset that my bias when treading on ethical or policy grounds is to err on the conservative side." According to Sagor (2003), for most CAR studies the expedited process will probably suffice but in cases where significant questions remain the full review should be made available.

Of course, as discussed in Part 1 of this series (Calvin, 2004), independent review for questionable application of a research protocol that has been reviewed by an institution with a vested (financial) interest in the studies outcomes have not been addressed through the National Research Act or subsequent action. The best advice for someone in a situation like the one previously mentioned in Part 1 is to appeal the findings of the institutional committee that has the financial interest involvement to a level that appears to be independent of the initial group. Each IRB is required by law, as are the principal investigators in any federally-funded study, to provide this contact information to research participants and anyone else associated with the project.

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