Classroom Activities as Research

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Background:

In a large university such as UF, the classroom is the site of many research activities, both when students are being trained as researchers in the procedures and methods in the behavioral and social sciences, and when investigators are interested in research questions where students are the appropriate population. Some of this work qualifies as research according to The Common Rule, and needs IRB review; other work is not.

Q: When do class projects need review by the IRB?

University of Florida class projects conducted by or with students as researchers do not need to be reviewed by the IRB if they are conducted only for instructional and training purposes, and there are no plans to use findings to “add to generalized knowledge,” such as presenting the results at a conference, publishing them, posting them to a publicly available website, etc.

On the other hand, if there is a possibility that the results may be presented/published outside of the class, the class project should be reviewed and approved by the IRB, and have proper consent/assent procedures.

Class projects may involve participants other than the students in that class. Nonetheless, if the purpose of the project is strictly instructional, it still does not qualify as "research" for regulatory purposes, and does not need review the IRB. Of course, professional and academic ethical guidelines should be followed for such activities, and the instructor is responsible for ethical oversight of their students' projects.

Q: Does the evaluation of educational programs or tools need review by the IRB?

Maybe. Evaluating the effectiveness of a standard part of the curriculum, or new method of educating or training, is a very common practice. As with classroom projects, if results from the assessment will be shared only with local stakeholders, then the activity is wholly program evaluation / quality assurance, not research, and does not need IRB review.

Conversely, if there are plans to publish or present the evaluation of this new educational procedure at a conference, or publish it such that it can be accessed by other educators, researchers, or the public at large, then it qualifies as research, and IRB review is needed. It is quite common for evaluation studies to have such a “research component.” If you are uncertain about where your work might fall, or if you think there is some chance that the findings may ultimately be of interest to others outside of local stakeholders, you should submit the work to the IRB for review.

These considerations apply both to evaluations of classes at UF, and of classes in K-12 schools and districts. Evaluations of educational methods for children in schools will require approval of those schools, regardless of whether UF IRB review is needed.
If your study qualifies as research, an important question is whether the program or method being evaluated was designed for the research, or is an ongoing or new program introduced by the school. Even if the program was designed by the researcher(s), if it is being adopted by the school as part of the regular educational curriculum, and students can participate in the program regardless of whether they take part in its research evaluation, then the program proper is not part of your evaluation research. The protocol and consent should make clear that the research involves evaluation of the program, and students can decline to take part in the evaluation but still participate in the program.

Q: Is “classroom observation” human-subjects research?

Usually no. Even if your study qualifies as research (see above), activities that involve observation of students in the class may or may not qualify as human-subjects research. In general, if those observations do not involve recording any identifiable information about individual students, and the researcher is not interacting directly with students, then that component of the work is not human-subjects research. In that case, consent or assent of the students is not needed.

Video or audio recordings of class behavior and interactions are considered identifiable information, and constitute human-subjects research.

Q: What if I want to analyze data or artifacts that have already been collected for non-research purposes?

Data such as class reports and papers, creative productions and artifacts, student evaluations (by them or by the instructor), journals and reflections, scores on grades, etc., can be examined for research. However, these materials need to be those that were gathered for purposes other than for a research study.

The researcher must explain that prior purpose in the protocol submission, indicate who is providing the materials, document their permission for access, and describe how it will be transferred to the researcher. If possible, all identifiers should have been removed before that transfer. (If any material is still identifiable, you may need to see consent from the students for its use in your research, or request a waiver of consent.)

If you were yourself the instructor of the class, we will pay particular attention to the rationale for use of the materials, and the question of identifiability of the information to be used. There are legitimate cases where you realize after the fact that there may be research questions that could be addressed with the information generated by class activities, but the mechanism for retrospective analysis of data is not intended to provide post hoc approval for human-subjects research.