Researching university education for tomorrow's world: ethical challenges
A work in progress
Jennie Golding j.golding@ucl.ac.uk
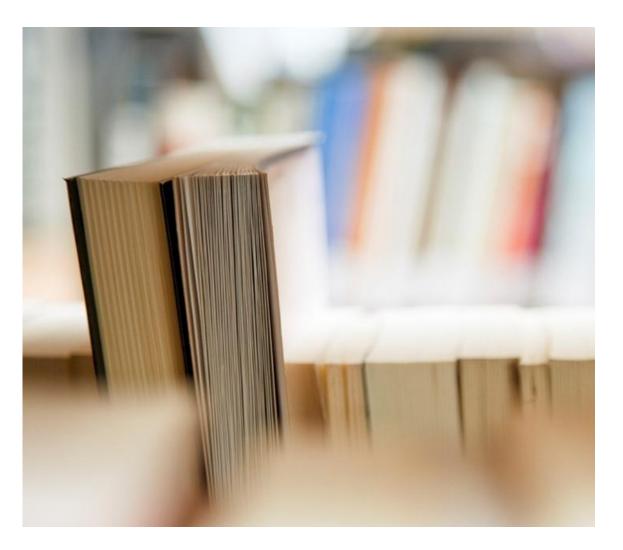*UCL Education Conference 2024*

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Rationale for our work-in-progress

- *Values dissonance:* Tension between the valuing of colleagues' teaching and of their research; also a disjuncture between the apparent valuing of research in one's academic discipline, and the development of teaching that is research-informed

- RHETL can enhance student experiences in universities, and can also support academics in becoming more expert in their teaching practice, so improving their job satisfaction.

- For many, RHETL not only lies outside their disciplinary expertise, but its comparatively low risk nature can lead to an under-appreciation of the potential ethical conundrums, including power relations, involved, and their implications.

- University REC procedures can be perceived as cumbersome and overly time-consuming or even obstructive

- *My motivation: to support colleagues in collaborating with students to do RHETL, and to negotiate associated ethical processes with confidence*

May-July 2023: RHETL ethics report (IOE REC)

- Nomenclature
- Level of guidance, and systems, re 'standard' ethical issues
- Issues re use of student work
- Dynamic nature of digital affordances for research

Nomenclature

The literature is replete with competing, often ill-defined, vocabulary around academics (or others) exploring their own, or their colleagues', teaching practice and its impact on learning:

- (Professional) E(I)nquiry (including 'evaluation of practice')
- Scholarship
- Pedagogic research
- Scholarship of teaching and learning
- Close-to-practice research
- **Research:** 'systematic enquiry made public' (Stenhouse 1981, p104). That should meet current standards of research ethics and rigour that are exposed to wide public scrutiny via coherent communication. We expect empirical research to be designed and based on identified theory, a testable hypothesis or question to which answers are demonstrable, and critically, with findings that aim to be generalizable or transferable so they can contribute to the knowledge base within their respective discipline (cf Levin-Rozalis, 2003).

We take RHETL (Research in Higher Education Teaching and Learning) to be academics researching their own, or their colleagues', teaching practice and/or the related learning, in ways that are robust and transferable or generalisable, contributing to the field, and going beyond the 'scholarship of teaching and learning'.

The related scholarship is a prerequisite to high quality RHETL; both pedagogic research and close-to-practice research in Higher Education are subsets of RHETL.

Level of guidance, and systems, re 'standard' ethical issues

- RHETL will involve data derived from human participants (including administrative records), and so requires ethical consent, before any research data may be collected, or any research use is made of data previously collected for another purpose. In general, RHETL research is relatively low-risk but

- the researcher is often an 'insider' to some extent: that needs explicit consideration

- the research design often draws on student contributions; **power imbalance central to both**

- *'Standard' ethical issues may be new to the RHETL researcher, who requires* consideration of beneficence, freely given opt-in and ongoing consent, anonymity and confidentiality in use of data, inclusion and equity in the voices heard, rigour and impact in design, incentives, storage of **primary and secondary** data, use of digital data, issues around students as 'collaborators'.

Analysis and critique of ethical processes can seem slow, but the preparation and external scrutiny support rigour and an ethics-first project-long approach

Issues re use of student work

Artefacts, of whatever nature, generated by students generally become their intellectual property (IP) whether or not they derive from their studies (but note some funded projects, or collaborative endeavours, may differ). **Student contributions should not be used, directly or indirectly, without freely-given and informed owner consent:**

- Written tasks or assignments, including presentations
- Survey/questionnaire responses
- Online contributions requested or required by the lecturer
- In-class oral contributions
- Unsolicited online contribution
- Emails, personal reflective notes or journals
- Professional materials developed by students
- Contributions which are research data only, rather than arising from teaching and learning activities

Consideration of approaching students post-assessment, or of requesting consent in advance, but reading responses only post-assessment, or of colleagues researching one another's practice.

Dynamic nature of digital student contributions to research

- Blurring of public/private contributions

- BPS, 2007 p 3: 'unless consent has been sought, observation of public behaviour needs to take place only where people would 'reasonably expect to be observed by strangers'

- Council of American Survey Research Organisations (CASRO) social media guidelines suggest where participants and researchers directly interact (including private spaces), informed consent must be obtained in accordance with applicable privacy and data protection laws

- Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Ethics Working Committee Guidelines 2012

- If in doubt as digital affordances for research develop further, refer issues upwards

Students as collaborators

- Inviting students to collaborate in RHETL begins to address some of the ethical issues identified and supports UCL initiatives such as the Connected Curriculum and Changemakers projects.

- Needs genuine opt-in collaboration rather than nominal: student roles might lie between provider of data, and genuine (novice) co-researcher.

- Such work can be research-educative for students, lending justification to the study, as well as having the potential to enhance teaching and learning for future cohorts.

- But power imbalances persist, and the challenges identified above remain where student contributions from beyond the collaborator group are sought: see Allin (2014).

Key recommendations

Recommendation 1: IOE should adopt the use of the acronym RHETL ('Research in Higher Education Teaching and Learning') for research that is focused on an academic's own, or colleague's, teaching, and/or the related learning.

Recommendation 2: IOE REC should adopt use of an additional ethics guidance sheet for RHETL, similar to that in Appendix 2.

Recommendation 3: The IOE REC should appoint a panel of RHETL specialist reviewers, responsible for reviewing RHETL ethics applications wherever possible (and RHETL research should be identified by a small addition to section 1 of the IOE ethics application form). That panel might include one or more interested student members.

Recommendation 4: RHETL panel members should commit to review within 15 working days, so that overall turnaround time to first decision is no more than 20 days.

Planned routes to a shared understanding and adoption

- For colleagues on teaching contracts who might have quite limited experience of any academic research: workshops and blogs via teaching leadership at dept and faculty levels; mentors; link with HEA Fellowship.

- Academic colleagues experienced in researching their own disciplines in ways non-cognate with RHETL: *different* workshops (RHETL is social science research!) and blogs, involving Arena (academic developers) and line managers; potentially, social science mentors; link with HEA Fellowship.

Thank you for engaging. If you would like a copy of the report and guidance, please email me at j.golding@ucl.ac.uk