

3

Advocating for learners in telecollaboration exchanges: The role of ethical training and IRB approval

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Abstract

As technology continually enhances telecollaboration and virtual cross-cultural exchanges, there remains a limited body of research on how ethical training impacts these initiatives, particularly concerning human subjects. Conducting intercultural exchanges without securing institutional approval may result in legal and ethical complications. Therefore, it is crucial to thoroughly consider ethical considerations. Based on the experiences of a specific research group, this paper highlights the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification requirements and explores the steps to gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval when conducting online collaborations, particularly in the United States. CITI certification requires online training for human subjects research, including protected groups such as minors, seniors, or incarcerated individuals. Simultaneously, gaining IRB approval through participating institutions requires comprehensive research plans and adherence to ethical guidelines. The combination of informed consent and confidentiality can create a safer environment for positive learning experiences. Ultimately, prioritizing safety and ethics can enable virtual exchanges to foster meaningful connections between cultures and a heightened sense of global citizenship.

Keywords: intercultural exchanges, ethical considerations, virtual exchange programs, Institutional Review Board (IRB), Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)

Introduction

In 2022, the authors of this paper conducted an online telecollaboration project to increase students' economic and financial literacy through cross-cultural interactions, involving 190 high school and university students from Japan and the United States. The project aimed to develop skills aligned with Florida State Economic and Financial Literacy Standards for Grades 9–12, encompassing planning, creativity, logical thinking, leadership, teamwork, presentation, and communication. Over ten weeks, participants engaged in multistage activities: pre- and post-event Google Form surveys, individual creation of Google Slide or PowerPoint Flip videos highlighting selected careers, and group-made videos on country-specific careers. The project culminated in a synchronous Google meeting and post-event survey, revealing significant and substantial improvements in students' self-assessments and perceptions (Carlson et al., 2022).

Developing cross-cultural understanding through global connections

The abovementioned results demonstrate that the ever-evolving technical landscape of online platforms can facilitate meaningful international exchanges and joint research without leaving home. A plethora of literature also supports the notion that learners from diverse cultural backgrounds can expand their world outlook by gaining valuable insights into different customs and ways of thinking while cultivating empathy, open-mindedness, and a deeper sense of global citizenship (e.g., Hackett et al., 2023; Verzella, 2018). Such interactions can also promote cultural awareness, boost intercultural understanding, and improve social and electronic literacy (e.g., Ketzer-Nöltge & Markovic, 2022; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal, 2018). Moreover, telecollaboration projects can enhance technical adeptness and communication skills as learners use various information and communication technology (ICT) tools. These skills carry over to preparing them for the increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world they will face in their future careers and personal lives (Alanko, 2017; Case et al., 2022; Withanachchi et al., 2022).

Although online cross-cultural collaboration has many benefits, language educators and researchers often lack the knowledge of the procedures required for such exchanges to be considered ethical by educational institutions and academic communities. Some may not be aware of specific safety procedures or realize the importance of reducing potential harm by obtaining informed consent, guaranteeing privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and secure data management. Therefore, it is imperative that facilitators learn about potential pitfalls, implement clear behavioral guidelines, and ensure proper oversight. A better understanding of the rules for human subjects research can also help create a more respectful and safeguarded environment (Ritchie, 2021). This allows participants to have a heightened, more meaningful, and transformative experience.

On this premise, this paper aims to share essential information for obtaining Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certifications and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for online interactions with subjects between Japan and the United States. The rights of the participants can be protected during intercultural exchanges by following safety protocols. In turn, they may become transformative experiences that foster meaningful connections, promote mutual learning, and equip students to become more culturally adept in an increasingly interconnected world.

Ethical oversight worldwide: A comparative perspective

While codes of conduct for ethical practice may vary in different countries, and researchers should be well informed of these regulations before launching an international virtual exchange, it is important to understand how “ethical” is defined from the standpoint of IRBs. This definition is provided through the lens of the 1979 Belmont Report, which provides the cornerstone of ethical research on human subjects. First, “Respect for persons” upholds autonomy, courtesy, and respect for all individuals and necessitates the informed consent process, which requires researchers to be truthful and transparent. This principle encompasses protection for “vulnerable” populations with diminished autonomy, which would include juveniles, seniors, or individuals in custody. Second, “Beneficence” encompasses the “Do no harm” ethos by minimizing risks to participants. Third, “Justice” ensures equal treatment and supports non-exploitative procedures for selecting research subjects (Belmont Report, 1979). From these three principles stems four essential requirements for respect for persons: 1) Participants must consent to participate in research voluntarily; 2) The voluntary consent obtained must be informed consent; 3) Protection of privacy and confidentiality must be embodied into the research; and 4) Participants must maintain the right to withdraw from research participation without penalty or repercussions (Belmont Report, 1979). These principles accentuate the ethical framework for IRBs to ensure the protection and welfare of research participants.

Although some parts of investigations may appear harmless, all human research must receive official approval from their affiliated institutions. Projects without ethical approval may not meet the necessary criteria or may be considered unprofessional. Therefore, working with partners in the target country or obtaining assistance can be invaluable. Researchers should also be aware that the ethical approval process takes time and, therefore, make sure they plan accordingly.

Institutional review boards: Safeguarding ethical conduct

Most developed countries have established systems to maintain ethical research standards concerning human subjects. These organizations ensure ethical compliance and protect autonomy, privacy, and cultural sensitivity. The 1947 Nuremberg

Code, for instance, was established to address unethical human experimentation and atrocities during World War II, setting a new precedent for research ethics (Nuremberg Code, 1947). Subsequent guidelines were established by IRBs, administrative bodies created to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects recruited to participate in research activities conducted with affiliated institutions. Such guidelines continue to evolve, requiring researchers to recertify their adherence to these standards every five years.

Following the Nuremberg Code, the World Medical Association proposed a similar code of conduct for participating members by publishing the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964. Although it does not provide organizational or regulatory frameworks for human subject protection, it remains a guideline for ethical research worldwide (World Medical Association, 2022). As research ethics grew in importance, other international entities emerged to address more considerations, including medicine and the social sciences. Some examples are the Research Ethics Committee (REC) in the UK, the Research Ethics Board (REB) in Canada, the Institutional Ethics Committees (IECs) in India, and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at research institutions and universities in Japan.

When conducting online exchanges with schools in the United States, facilitators abroad are also required to gain CITI certification and IRB approval from the American institution, which provides educators and researchers guidelines for obtaining informed consent from participants and legal guardians for minors. Following CITI and IRB-approved methods helps avoid potential harm or exploitation. Through consent, subjects can feel supported and more at ease while participating in the exchange, knowing their rights and interests are protected. Doing so can help build trust and better rapport between facilitators and participants.

Method of navigating the IRB approval process: A multi-staged approach

The first stage for online collaboration with schools in the United States is to obtain certification through CITI or similar institution-specific requirements for research on human subjects. Numerous American institutions and research organizations regard this certification as necessary for obtaining consent from an IRB board for collaboration involving any human participants. The certification process entails completing relevant online training modules covering research ethics, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality (CITI Program, 2023). With CITI certification, researchers are better equipped to conduct their studies by minimizing harm and protecting the rights and well-being of participants.

Depending on the type of project, researchers must choose the most applicable training course, such as biomedical, behavioral, or educational research. Those who plan to collaborate in interscholastic online exchanges outside the United States should select the Social-Behavioral-Educational (Non-Health Professions Division) Researchers course that requires them to complete 21 modules and tests with a minimum score of 80/100. There is no cost if going through

an affiliated institution, but independent learners can take the course for \$249 at the time of this paper's publication (CITI Program, 2023). Once the tests are passed, researchers receive a certification demonstrating their comprehension of the ethical principles and guidelines for conducting research involving human subjects.

The second stage is to go through the process of obtaining IRB approval for human subjects research and involves several key steps. The first is to compose a detailed research outline of the study's purpose, methodology, data collection procedures, potential risks, and the steps to protect participants' rights and well-being. The plan must include the researcher's identity and affiliation, how information from the study will be used, the expected benefits or outcomes of the research, and the fact that they can withdraw at any time (US Food and Drug Administration, 2019). Presenting proof of CITI or approved alternative certification is also included in this step.

The next step is to submit the research outline and all related documents, such as informed consent forms, data collection instruments, and supporting materials, for the IRB to review (US Food and Drug Administration, 2019). The review process may take days to weeks or months of feedback and revisions to complete, depending on the workload of those on the board. An essential aspect of this review is that all participants in a study must receive clear and understandable information about the study and voluntarily agree to participate without coercion. The IRB also checks that data collection and secure storage are private and confidential. Any identifying information must be removed or anonymized to maintain confidentiality; however, this requirement can be waived if the benefits outweigh the risks (Navalta et al., 2019). In addition, the levels of review are audience-specific, especially when it comes to protected subjects, such as children, prisoners, or the elderly.

Finally, the IRB assesses the benefits and potential risks of the study. They are responsible for determining whether the risks are minimized, and the benefits outweigh the potential harm to participants (US Government Accountability Office, 2023). These harms may include physical, psychological, social, economic, and breach of privacy or confidentiality risks. Once the IRB is satisfied with the study's ethical considerations, formal approval is given for the research to proceed. After the study has been launched, the IRB may conduct periodic reviews to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and to monitor participant safety. The researchers are responsible for keeping detailed records of the study throughout the process and providing progress reports to the IRB, as required.

Conclusion

In an era where technology has greatly enhanced telecollaboration and virtual cross-cultural exchanges, this paper has stressed ethical training and IRB approval's significant role in ensuring integrity. The authors hope that language educators and researchers in Japan will pay greater attention to the research process

when conducting their studies from the outset. Advocating for the comfort and well-being of the learners helps facilitators conduct meaningful exchanges that can enhance cultural competence and social adeptness. Moreover, fostering a sense of security can enhance student participation in virtual exchanges by instilling a sense of trust and safety. In turn, this can aid in equipping future leaders with the challenges and complexities of an increasingly connected world.

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