



The Teaching-Research Nexus

A guide for academics and policy-makers
in higher education

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Examples from Australian universities

Research-Based Learning: Applied Theatre Students in a Law Faculty's 'Innocence Project'

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Broad discipline area:

Education

- Applied Theatre

Year level:

- First and third year

TRN strategy:

- Designing learning activities around contemporary 'real world' research issues
- Building a small-scale research activity into assignments
- Linking research, community engagement and teaching

Teaching and learning context:

- Inquiry-based learning
- Real world learning
- Community-based project

Brief description of the initiative:

Undergraduate students in the Bachelor of Arts (Applied Theatre) program and other degree students enrolled in a drama major or drama electives engage in research-based learning when applying theatre to a social purpose. Students research the discipline the project covers, and participate in theatre or drama-related research.

Through involvement in the university Law Faculty's 'Innocence Project', students connect with applied theatre in a real world context. The 2006 first semester *Introduction to Applied Theatre* course, with enrolment numbers of 26, engaged in research on wrongful imprisonment as identified by the university's Innocence Project. Students developed, rehearsed and presented in dramatic form an educational theatre performance based on this research.

During second semester, another group of undergraduate students undertook further research investigating wrongful imprisonment as part of the *Playmaking* course, which they developed into a public benefit performance for the Innocence Project. Students created a number of scenes based on real cases of wrongful imprisonment, which they presented as a play to an invited audience at the university.

Students taking the final year *Industry Studies Project* course (who all intend to become secondary teachers) continued with the same theme, providing educational performances and workshops to Year 11 and 12 *Legal Studies* secondary-school students as part of their work- integrated learning project. Aims of this final project were to:

- generate awareness of the Innocence Project
- give high school students the opportunity to experience research-based learning.

This initiative enhances student engagement as it:

- enables them to connect with the idea of applied theatre;
- provides opportunities for them to become enthusiastic about the vocational possibilities of applied theatre;
- promotes an interdisciplinary approach to learning and teaching;
- promotes research-based learning to strengthen scholarship, stimulate and inspire students;
- promotes community engagement as a context for, and enhancement of learning.

Evidence of effectiveness and impact

Retention rates for first year students improved considerably after real world projects were introduced in first year. In 2007, the BA Applied Theatre students completing the first year experience questionnaire responded much more positively than any other education group, including 100% positive responses to questions relating to having a clear career path and to finding their studies worthwhile.

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