



Jolyn Ford

I'm professor Jo Ford. I teach both at undergrad and graduate level. The undergraduate level, I teach Torts, which is a compulsory first year law subject around civil liability for personal injury, especially. And at the master's level, I teach a course on the intersection of law and corporate responsibility and also in international commercial arbitration.

So my research is at the intersection of business and human rights, and it has two paths, the main fields that I'm working on. One is the role of human rights frameworks in the governance of responsible artificial intelligence. And the other area that I work on, again with business and human rights, is around human rights risks in global supply chain.

I think we tend to say that we are research-led or research-based without necessary of reflecting on what that means in our particular discipline, law. For me, what it means is, the closer that a subject matter aligns with your research area, the more I expect that you'll be motivated in your teaching.

And so, to the extent that you can make those alignments that will give the students maybe imperceptibly, but a different kind of quality of experience. Precisely because you're teaching into an area that you know very well, that motivates you, that interests you and inspires you. Because often, at least in our discipline, we have to teach subjects that just need to be taught because they're compulsory subjects. You don't just get to teach in your own research area all the time.

There's two aspects of research they're teaching. One is to try and find ways to bring your research into a subject that you happen to be teaching, even if it's not your research area. And the other is where you're able to design coursework or student experience that reflects your own research. I think apart from all the content that you might give to the students as a result, it's just more about the experience the students will have.

Because I imagine, and in my own experience, you feel a lot more alive and motivated and the students can tell. They're like, "Wow, this person's very passionate about this subject. That they know a lot about it. They research in it and they're sharing it with me." And so it feels, in my experience, the students feel this kind of privilege. They're like, "This person's letting me into their world that they know so well," which can create quite a good, intimate learning experience.

Law has its own particular research methodologies. It's quite light on method really, I would say compared to other disciplines. If you look at the average law PhD thesis, it doesn't feature a methods chapter necessarily. But it depends a lot of what we call legal research, is really doctrinal work. So comparing legislative frameworks from one jurisdiction with another, in terms of how they try to deal with a particular social problem.

But there is some sociolegal work, which does involve research methods that might be familiar to, for example, the sciences around designing surveys and the other social sciences. For example, around designing surveys of stakeholders who are subject to a piece of legislation.

How do they experience the legislation affecting them, or how do they experience the legal system and its effects?

Yeah. Incorporating research into teaching is easier, I would say in my experience, at the graduate level than in the undergraduate compulsories that I teach. Law is a regulated profession. The degree is regulated by the profession. We do have compulsory and electives. But in the compulsory subjects there's a certain amount of content that is mandatory in the sense that any course on that subject in Australia needs to cover some of these issues. There, there's less scope for designing the course itself, the assessment, the materials that you cover, the very selective process that's involved in course design. There's much less scope for incorporating one's own research into that.

Nevertheless, one, I've been able to do that more by way of illustrations and asides that help students to understand the core concepts that they have to study in this compulsory, but in a different context, which is very familiar to me from my research. And therefore, I'm able to explain it with a great deal more insight.

That's not really research-led teaching in the sense that your course is designed on the basis of some of the research you've been doing. But it's just, it's more a case of sprinkling across a subject matter that you have to deliver in a compulsory course, sprinkling or weaving through it some of your own experiences and insights from your research area in ways that give your teaching more authenticity and authority. And it's more motivating for you because it's an example that comes from your own research area.

Another aspect which whether you call it research-led teaching and learning or not, is an open question, but it's really experiential learning for students that I have been running, some of it for credit. So, that is getting students involved in evaluating company reports under the modern slavery legislation and the United Kingdom. For students who do that, that's a great experience because they get to encounter working with international NGOs. They get to work on company reporting across the sector, which allows them a deep dive into how a particular industry is responding to the risk of modern slavery.

And it gives them an opportunity to interact with each other as well because they peer review each other's reporting. That's an example of less conventional or experiential learning that's based on my research.

The downside of truly research-driven teaching might be, at least at the undergraduate level, that you have to check yourself, otherwise you pitch things at a level of complexity and sophistication that is too hard for students precisely because it's your research area and there's a lot of assumed knowledge. You just assume knowledge on the part of students. And you're so deep in your own research area. And so familiar with it, that you've forgotten what it's like for people who've never encountered that subject.

I think, in an area that you know well from your research, you have to step back all the time and say, "How would I explain this to someone who's not encountered this before?" That's contradictory because the benefits of research they're teaching, are all the nuance and the passion that you bring to a subject precisely because you research in it. But the downside is, it might be too much and too rich and too nuanced for students because you've forgotten that other people don't necessarily know your area that well.