Principle 3
Emphasise the importance, relevance, and integration of theory and knowledge with professional practice to develop solutions to real world issues.

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As a teacher, it is important for me to bring the world into the classroom, and take the class into the world. For the last fifteen years I have been passionately committed to designing challenging learning experiences for theatre students that enable them to adapt their creative skills to different socio-cultural contexts, such as prisons, refugee centres, aged care facilities, and special education schools.

At Griffith, I have developed a scaffolded three-year approach to enhancing students’ critical and practical understanding of applied theatre. In order to sustain meaningful student learning in the community, I have established long-term strategic partnerships with a range of community organisations. The development of relevant and sustainable community partnerships are key, as they provide students with a first-hand experience of how theatre can be applied in different social contexts. These encounters with real people, real problems, and finding real solutions through theatre result in a deeper understanding of the complexity of social issues and nurture students’ personal growth.

One of the ways I have sought to strengthen the teaching of applied theatre at Griffith is to develop a structured and scaffolded progression for students. The focus in the first year is in bringing real-world issues into the classroom. The students are introduced to the concept of applied theatre but do not directly work in a context. In the second year, students undertake a practical task designed to foster their independence in learning through devising a performance for a specific target group (secondary schools, aged care facilities, etc). In the third year, students undertake a more sophisticated task with detailed training on facilitating groups, drawing on all the skills they have learnt from the drama program (acting, improvisation, devising, creative writing, directing) to apply them to a particular setting or context (school, prison, etc).

For example, in their second year, students design a performance in response to the needs of a particular community group. In 2007, I was commissioned by the State Library of Queensland to develop a performance and workshop project for schools responding to an exhibition on Brisbane memories. As part of Applied Performance, students moved off-site to work at the State Library of Queensland with the curator. The ‘applied’ focus of the project was to enhance the conceptual interpretation of the exhibition in ways that would deepen the learning experience for grade 8-10’s. Each group presented the students with very different challenges and needs, which they met by having to adapt their plans and responses.

To build the capacity for students to develop and be involved in more sustained projects, either through work-integrated learning opportunities or through ‘graduate companies’ that offer paid internships on commissioned projects, I have set up an organisation which seeks to promote Applied Theatre practice. I established Griffith Applied Theatre Affiliates (GATA) in 2008, an exciting initiative that seeks to develop strategic and sustainable partnerships in the community sector which embed quality work-integrated learning experiences for drama students.