

AP-LS Teaching Techniques

Using John Grisham's *The Innocent Man* to Create a Significant Learning Experience for Undergraduate Students in a Psychology and the Law Course

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Imagine a man, suffering from alcoholism and schizophrenia, drifting through his small town, known mostly for getting thrown out of bars. When a graphic murder occurs, this man's name gets linked to the victim, and police focus on him as a suspect. Although there is no evidence against him, a combination of poor police work and a town's desire for closure lead to this innocent man being convicted of the crime and sentenced to death. Down to his last appeal, after spending 12 years on death row, a fair and honest judge is finally convinced to take a closer look at this man's case, and he is eventually freed. These are the true events that happened to Ron Williamson, sent to death row for a murder he didn't commit, and his story is told in John Grisham's only non-fiction book, *The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town*.

I chose to use this book as assigned reading in my Psychology and the Law course to introduce students to topics related to our legal system through the lens of a true case of a man wrongly convicted. The course is a lower-level psychology course, designed for students interested in learning more about forensic psychology and other topics related to psychology and the legal system. The students in the course were mostly sophomore, junior and senior psychology majors. Several law enforcement majors and corrections majors were also enrolled. In the course, we covered areas including forensic psychology and determining competence, interrogations and false confessions, lie detection and polygraphs, eyewitness memory, racism in the courtroom, jury decision-making, and the death penalty. The book *The Innocent Man* was a natural fit with the course; it raises issues of determining competency and how our legal system deals with people with mental health problems. The book also explores false confessions, flawed eyewitness testimony, jail snitches, police and prosecutors under pressure, courtroom trials and jury decisions, death penalty sentencing, and the appeals process. I wanted students to be able to learn more about the process of investigation, trials, and appeals, while also seeing the effect that mistakes can have on the human beings involved. Although students also read assigned textbook chapters, I hoped that *The Innocent Man* would reinforce these concepts while engaging the students with this real-life story.

Students read the book over the course of a semester, and completed several assignments relevant to this reading. First, I broke the book down into seven sections of two or three chapters each, and assigned a short worksheet of reading questions for each section. We read one section about every two weeks, a pace which did not seem problematic for the students to complete. For the worksheets, I wrote questions to help direct students' attention to important points of the book (such as asking them to summa-

rize the evidence presented in the main trials, or to identify key characters), as well as asking their opinion on some of the events (such as whether they felt the police had acted competently, or if the conditions on death row were ethical). Students had to complete worksheets for points and to prepare for in-class discussions, where we reviewed the main events of the section, and students expressed their opinions or asked questions about the events of that section. We had lively discussions about the reading, and I was impressed with the number of students who participated and asked questions throughout—they showed a high level of engagement with the story. I also tied the events in the book to the lecture topics throughout class. For example, when discussing factors that could lead to false confessions, I asked students which elements were present in some of the confessions detailed in *The Innocent Man*. This helped students to draw connections between the elements of the story and the specific course topics.

Students were also tested on material from the book, with several multiple choice questions on each of their class exams. These factual questions focused on identifying characters and main events, and primarily served as another encouragement to students to complete all the reading and to review the main points covered in each section of the book. Finally, after we had completed reading and discussing the book, I assigned a reflection paper, in which students commented on three topics: Their overall reaction to the book, whether the book changed how they thought about the legal system in the United States, and if they would recommend any reforms to our legal system based on reading the book. I used these reflection papers, along with anonymous evaluation comments, to assess whether *The Innocent Man* was a valuable reading assignment for this class and if the students appreciated reading the book.

Almost unanimously, students had a positive overall reaction to reading *The Innocent Man*. One student noted,

“Most often times [sic] when I am required to read a book for a class I usually loathe the idea, not because I am against reading but because more often than not books that are required for a course usually only serve the purpose of being educational and aren't concerned with captivating the reader with any kind of excitement or suspense. However, after several pages into *The Innocent Man* I realized how much I was intrigued by Ron Williamson's story, and as I continued I noticed more and more my desire to know how the story would end.”



Many of the responses echoed this comment of initially being hesitant to have another reading assignment in addition to our course text, but then finding themselves captivated by the real-life events described and enjoying reading the book. Another student simply stated, “It has plenty of things that I find interesting, aspects such as baseball, a questionable murder, and a faulty court case.” The value in using a book like *The Innocent Man* is that it can engage students who might be quick to dismiss more traditional texts, while still being a valuable learning experience. I was surprised and impressed by the passion of many of the responses to the book—reading this story was clearly a significant experience for many of the students.

Several students commented on the connection between the book and the topics covered in class. One student wrote that they “liked that the book explained what was happening in the legal process along the way and I was able to relate it to course material.” Another student paper supported my own reasons for assigning the book: “I feel this book did a good job at tying [together] a lot of the topics that we went over in class; false-confessions, police interrogations, mental competency, the procedures of a trial, eyewitness testimony, lie detection, pre-trial publicity, jury processes, and even death penalty and death row. We as readers got an inside view that would otherwise be harder to imagine.”

When asked if the book changed how they thought about the legal system in the United States, I found a variety of responses. Some students were astounded by the events of the book: “I truly thought this would never be a possibility; to have someone go to jail and ...end up on death row although they were innocent.” Another stated, “Before reading this book I had never really thought about innocent people in our legal system.” Many students were disappointed by the refusal of police and prosecutors in the book to admit any mistakes after a very flawed investigation: “Although I knew that not everyone is perfect and our criminal justice system has flaws, I still believed that people who work for it would have the right morals to admit their wrongfulness.”

For the law enforcement majors in the class, some connected the events of the book to their own future careers as police officers. “It helped me realize how good of a job I must do when I’m a law enforcement officer,” said one student, and another commented, “I also realize that there are so many things that all law enforcement majors should be taught.” Many of these students also noted the pressure that is put on police to find suspects, especially in high-publicity cases. It seems as if some of these students had not thought very specifically about the impacts of their actions as future law enforcement professionals, and the consequences that can come from mistakes. I hope that all of my students, whether preparing for careers in law enforcement, corrections, or psychology, were able to reflect on the pressures and requirements of their future careers as a result of reading *The Innocent Man*.

Students’ suggestions of potential reforms to our legal system were particularly insightful. A few students recommended that the death penalty be eliminated completely. One stated, “We still cannot rely on the system to potentially work things out because the system is a human-run function, and humans make mistakes.” Other students focused on ways to improve police investigations,

suggesting mandatory recording of police interrogations, better training about the possibility of false confessions, and not allowing police to present false evidence or lie to suspects in hopes of getting a confession. One student also recommended increased psychological training for police, saying that officers “should also be aware of the confirmation bias when questioning suspects. It is important that police officers look at the evidence objectively and from a scientific approach.”

One issue that was raised repeatedly, probably due to the number of future psychologists in the course, was the lack of any competency screenings for Ron Williamson throughout his first trial and sentencing. The book clearly describes Williamson’s mental health struggles throughout his life, and this resonated with students. Several responses went so far to suggest that competency screenings be mandatory and applied to everyone in court for a serious crime. Others were more realistic about applying reforms; as one student noted, “The justice system...is already so overcrowded or booked it would be difficult to reform the process. The frustrating part is that I can name many things that would have helped Ron but to apply them to all cases is not practical and in many ways not possible for the criminal justice system to handle.” I thought that this comment was insightful, as the student realized the value of many reforms, but also understood that the practicality of implementing them was also just as important. In future classes, I would like to expand on this element of the assignment, and get more information from students about how they would specifically reform our legal system in realistic ways, perhaps asking students to tie in research that relates to potential reforms. This would help to connect the book more deeply to relevant research, and show students how researchers can work with law enforcement agencies to improve our legal system processes.

Finally, when examining the results of the anonymous class evaluation, students had a positive response to the reading. Over 92% of the students agreed that when I teach this class again, I should definitely include *The Innocent Man* as an assigned reading, and 95% of the students said they had completed most or all of the readings. Also telling was that several students specifically commented on this book in an evaluation question asking them to note one thing that they particularly enjoyed and/or learned a lot from in this class—here, a few highlighted this book as the most enjoyable aspect of class, and indicated that they had learned a lot from reading and discussing it.

I was initially hesitant to assign reading from a “popular” author like John Grisham; I worried that students would dismiss the book as light reading, or that they might enjoy the reading but not think deeply about the issues raised throughout. However, through the combination of in-class discussions and the final reflection paper, students showed a deep and consistent level of engagement with the issues of the book, and put a lot of consideration into suggesting reforms to the legal system inspired by their reading. I was impressed with many of their responses and ideas, as well as the passion with which they reacted to the book. Not only was reading *The Innocent Man* a significant learning experience for my students, but reading and listening to their responses was a significant learning experience for me as an instructor. I encourage other instructors to incorporate alternative reading assign-

ments such as this one for students to learn about real cases and to reflect on their own thoughts about the legal system.

Please contact me (emily.stark@mnsu.edu) if you would like more information about my course or *Innocent Man* assignments.

Worksheet Questions

Part 1: Chapters 1-3

1. What were the events of the evening leading up to Debbie's murder? Is anyone appearing as a suspect already?
2. What do you think of the 'clues' left at the scene of Debbie's murder?
3. How does Chapter 2 present Ron Williamson? What kind of person is he?
4. What problems does Ron have in Chapter 3? What impression do you have of him as an adult?

Part 2: Chapters 4 and 5

1. Who is Dennis Fritz? How is he connected to Ron?
2. What do you think of the police investigation as presented in Chapter 4? Do you think they made any mistakes in their investigation?
3. Who is Denise Haraway? What information do the police have about her disappearance?
4. What do you think of the interrogations described in Chapter 5? Did the police jump to conclusions during this process? What evidence did they have against Tommy Ward? What do you think of this evidence?

Part 3: Chapters 6 and 7

1. What kinds of psychiatric problems and abnormal behaviors is Ron showing? How has he been diagnosed? How have the courts dealt with him?
2. What do you think of the new interpretation of the palm prints? Why do you think the OSBI agent changed his interpretation of the prints?
3. Chapter 7 describes the beginning of Ron's trial. What is the evidence that the prosecution has against Ron?
4. Who was Ron's defense lawyer? What do you think of his abilities?

Part 4: Chapters 8 and 9

1. What evidence is presented against Dennis Fritz in his trial as described in Chapter 7? What do you think of this evidence? What was the outcome of Dennis' trial?
2. What evidence is presented against Ron Williamson in his trial as described in Chapter 8? What do you think of this evidence?
3. What is the relevance of the *Brady v. Maryland* case to Ron's trial?
4. How do you think Ron's behavior at his trial influenced the jury?
5. After finding Ron guilty, the jury now needs to determine if he will get the death penalty. What additional evidence or other considerations comes up at this phase of the trial?

Part 5: Chapters 10 and 11

1. What is death row like for Ron? How does he react to being in prison? What types of physical and mental breakdowns are detailed in these chapters? Do you think Ron was treated ethically?
2. What is Greg Wilhoit's story?
3. How does Dennis react to being in prison?

Part 6: Chapters 12 and 13

1. What is the H unit like? Do you think this is an ethical place for inmates?
2. What are the different steps in Ron's appeal process?
3. Who is Judge Frank Seay? What role does he play in Ron's case?
4. How do the prosecutors of Ron's original case respond to Ron being granted a new trial?

Part 7: Chapters 14-17, authors note at end

1. What happens in Ron's new trial? What is the main piece of evidence that shows that Ron and Dennis are innocent? How do the prosecutors respond to this evidence?
2. How does Ron react to being free? How does the town respond?
3. What is the outcome of Ron's lawsuit against the people who wrongfully convicted him?
4. In the author's note, what does Grisham say are the causes of wrongful convictions?

AP-LS Teaching Techniques Column: Articles Welcome

The Teaching Techniques column, sponsored by the AP-LS Teaching, Training, and Careers Committee, offers useful ideas for those of us who teach (or who plan to teach) courses in Psychology and Law, Forensic Psychology, or more specialized areas of legal psychology. We hope that the Teaching Techniques column of the Newsletter will become the best place to find activities, simulations, and demonstrations that engage students in the learning process and help professors to teach important content in psychology and law.

Editors welcome your comments, ideas, suggestions, or submissions. We are especially interested in articles describing techniques that promote active learning in psychology and law. Please send submissions, questions, or ideas for articles to any of the four editors listed below.

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