

Season 2, Episode 3:

The Teachers Episode

(with Marija Apostolovski, Luís Filipe and Matthew Wilks)



Guide

Learning objectives

- To introduce students to the role and purpose of high school law courses in Ontario, and how they help learners develop a deeper understanding of law, justice, and civic engagement
- To explore the diverse pathways, experiences, and teaching philosophies of high school law educators, and how these shape classroom practice
- To examine effective strategies for teaching legal topics, including sensitive or challenging issues, in a way that is respectful, inclusive, and grounded in human rights principles
- To encourage reflection on experiential and hands-on approaches to learning law, such as mock trials, debates, case studies, and community-based activities
- To support students and educators in considering how legal education develops transferable skills, inspires future pathways, and fosters critical thinking about the role of law in everyday life

Materials

- Copies of the handout below
- Device to listen to the [“Law Syrup” podcast episode](#)

Teaching and learning strategies

- **Group discussion:** Students discuss the journeys and philosophies of the educators featured in the episode. Small groups identify themes and share reflections about why law is taught in high school and what makes legal education meaningful.
- **Reflective activities:** Students complete activities such as “Law in My Life,” “Compass Points,” or “Letter to a Future Law Student” to explore their motivations, experiences, and evolving perspectives on law and justice.
- **Navigating sensitive topics:** Using the “Navigating sensitive topics” section, educators guide students in discussing challenging legal issues with empathy and respect, emphasizing classroom safety, inclusion, and constructive communication.



The Teachers Episode

- **Experiential learning connections:**
Classes discuss hands-on legal learning opportunities (mock trials, moots, court visits, etc.) and consider how experiential activities help students build practical skills and understand legal processes.

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Handout

What are community legal clinics, and what is the

In Ontario, law courses are part of the [Canadian and World Studies curriculum](#). These courses introduce students to key legal concepts, build practical skills, and help students understand how the law shapes everyday life.

Grade 11 courses:

Understanding Canadian Law (CLU3M): Introduces students to Canada's legal system, including areas such as criminal, contract, and family law.

Understanding Canadian Law in Everyday Life (CLU3E): Focuses on how the law affects daily life and helps students examine legal issues in their communities.

Grade 12 courses:

Canadian and International Law (CLN4U): Builds on earlier courses by exploring global legal systems, human rights issues, and international law.

Legal Studies (CLN4C): Offers an applied approach for students interested in careers that use legal knowledge.

Across all courses, students take part in experiential learning, including mock trials, debates, case studies, and research activities. These experiences help students develop skills in critical thinking,

communication, and analysis. Legal education at the secondary level also encourages students to understand their rights and responsibilities and to see themselves as active and informed participants in society.

Journeys to Teaching Law

Marija Apostolovski

Marija attended J. Clarke Richardson Collegiate in Durham Region. She is now a high school teacher with the Durham District School Board and is currently seconded as a curriculum facilitator. Marija was inspired by the teachers who shaped her own high-school experience. She entered university considering both education and law, and during that time worked with the Working Women Community Centre through the On Your Mark tutoring program. Working closely with students confirmed how much she loved teaching, while her interest in law continued to grow. Becoming a teacher allowed her to combine both passions: supporting students every day while staying connected to the world of law.

Matthew Wilks

Matthew first discovered his interest in law at Pierre Elliott Trudeau High School through his Grade 11 and 12 law courses, where he was drawn to real-world case studies and hands-on learning.

He later completed a Law and Society degree at York University, followed by a Juris Doctor at Osgoode Hall Law School. Matthew articulated and summered at Blaney McMurtry LLP, gaining experience in corporate, employment, and litigation work.

Even though he enjoyed legal practice, he realized how much he missed working with youth, something he had loved while leading City of Markham summer camps. That pull toward teaching ultimately guided him back to education. He now teaches at Garth Webb Secondary School and finds the work deeply rewarding.

Luís Filipe

Luís attended Central Technical School and has been teaching for 17 years, currently at Bloor Collegiate Institute. Growing up in the Catholic District School Board exposed him to a wide range of cultures and perspectives, shaping his worldview and inspiring him to pursue education.

He admired the teachers who helped him understand politics, society, and the world around him. Teaching felt like a natural path, one that allowed him to be creative, serve his community, and build a meaningful and stable career.

Reflection questions for teachers

- What personal experiences or mentors most influenced your decision to teach, and how do they shape your classroom today?
- How might sharing your own pathway into teaching help students understand the value and relevance of their education?

Discussion questions

- Luís mentioned that his lived experiences in high school played a major role in his decision to teach. How are your own high school experiences shaping the choices you might make after graduation?
- Each teacher combined different interests (law, youth work, creativity, advocacy) into a career they find meaningful. How might you combine your own passions to build a future pathway?

Approaches to teaching law

Although Marija, Luís, and Matthew each bring their own style to the classroom, their approaches share several important themes. All three follow the Ontario curriculum while adapting it to meet the needs, interests, and lived experiences of their students. Their teaching highlights that legal education is not only about preparing students for law school—it is about helping young people understand the world around them.

Across their classrooms, these educators emphasize:

- **Connecting law to students' lives:** They design lessons that reflect community issues, current events, and the real-world legal questions students encounter.
- **Developing critical and ethical thinking:** They encourage students to reflect on fairness, justice, and their own roles in society.
- **Using experiential learning:** Activities such as case studies, mock trials, debates, and hands-on simulations help students apply legal concepts to realistic situations.
- **Building transferable skills:** Skills like analysis, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving are woven throughout their lessons.

Each teacher brings a distinct teaching style:

- Matthew emphasizes structure and clear progression, helping students build knowledge step by step.
- Marija focuses on inquiry-based learning and skill development, encouraging students to ask questions and explore legal issues deeply.
- Luís often situates legal topics within social and philosophical questions, inviting students to think broadly about justice and society.

Despite their different approaches, they share a common goal: to make legal education accessible, relevant, and empowering, helping students see themselves as active participants in their communities and in the justice system.

Navigating sensitive topics

Law classes often include discussions about discrimination, human rights, and other sensitive issues. Marija, Luís, and Matthew shared several approaches they use to ensure these conversations are respectful, inclusive, and meaningful for students.

Knowing your students

Understanding students' backgrounds and identities is essential when discussing difficult topics. Luís intentionally teaches in the community where he grew up, which helps him anticipate what students may be hearing or discussing at home. Marija also emphasized that discussions must be —a topic that works well for one class may not be appropriate for another.

Both noted the importance of getting to know students early in the course. For example, Luís uses an autobiography activity to learn about students' experiences and interests (see Exercise 1). These insights help teachers shape lesson plans and create a supportive environment for sensitive conversations.

Curiosity with boundaries

Luís and Matthew both stressed that not every legal issue is suitable for debate. Some topics require reflection rather than argument.

Instead of debating sensitive issues, teachers might use:

- written reflections
- small-group conversations
- anonymous whiteboard responses
- guided analysis of legal cases

These approaches allow exploration without putting students on the spot or framing personal identities as “sides” in a debate.

Respect and inclusivity

A respectful classroom culture is the foundation for navigating sensitive topics. Matthew noted that this begins with building a strong classroom community grounded in mutual respect and human rights principles.

When discussing *Charter* rights, for example, he ensures that the content is explored without requiring students to disclose personal experiences or identities. Luís similarly encourages students to analyze the legal reasoning behind different perspectives rather than judging individuals or groups.

Open communication with colleagues

Luís emphasized the value of staying connected with administrators and fellow staff. Regular communication helps teachers understand the “pulse of the school”, including emerging issues in the community. This awareness supports responsible lesson planning and ensures that discussions align with what students may be experiencing outside the classroom.

Advice for other teachers

The educators in this episode shared insights based on their experiences teaching high school law. The points below highlight themes that may guide your own teaching practice.

Matthew

Matthew reminded teachers that students take law for many reasons—not just because they want to become lawyers. Some are interested in the justice system, others are exploring legal-adjacent careers such as paralegal work or public service.

His advice:

- design your law course so it is accessible to all students
- focus on building practical, transferable skills
- include hands-on activities like moots or mock hearings, which build confidence, encourage collaboration, and foster advocacy skills

Marija

Marija emphasized that law classes should be responsive to students' lived experiences and the changing world around them. She cautions against simply "covering" the curriculum at the expense of meaningful learning.

Her advice:

- adapt lessons to suit your students and their contexts
- make space for inquiry-based learning
- prioritize experiential learning that helps students connect law to real life

Luís

Luís highlighted the importance of developing skills that students can use in many areas of their lives, not just within law class.

His advice:

- teach skills that transfer across subjects and careers
- help students practice critical thinking, analysis, and active engagement
- remember that the goal is not just to complete tasks, but to build adaptable learners who can navigate a changing world

Practical learning experiences

Practical or experiential learning helps students understand how legal concepts work in real life. Whether they are visiting a courthouse, participating in a mock trial, or preparing arguments in a classroom moot, these activities let students try on the role of a legal professional. They also build confidence and strengthen key skills that apply far beyond law class.

Hands-on learning is valuable because it:

- helps students see the relevance of what they learn in class
- builds transferable skills such as teamwork, problem solving, communication, confidence, and adaptability
- gives students exposure to potential careers and workplaces
- supports informed decisions about post-secondary programs or career pathways

Practical learning ideas

OJEN resources

- Mock trials: <https://ojen.ca/en/oocmt/>
- Classroom speakers:
<https://ojen.ca/en/classroom/classroom-visit/>
- Courthouse visits:
<https://ojen.ca/en/classroom/courthouse-visit/>

Other experiential options

- The University of Toronto's pre-law programs (such as the Youth Summer Program [YSP] and March Break Youth Program): <https://jackmanlaw.utoronto.ca/jd-program/pre-law-preparation>
- Law school and law firm visits

Discussion questions

- Why is it important to apply what you learn in class through hands-on activities?
- Which practical learning opportunities interest you most, and why? Teachers may wish to use tools like [Mentimeter](#) for a live class poll.

Why should students take high school law?

High school law courses offer far more than an introduction to legal rules. They help students understand how the world works and provide a foundation for becoming thoughtful, informed, and engaged citizens. The teachers in this episode emphasized that learning law encourages students to think critically about how society functions and to reflect on their rights and responsibilities.

Studying law also helps students develop transferable skills such as communication, reasoning, problem-solving, and ethical decision-making. Through activities like mock trials, moots, and case studies, students build confidence in expressing their ideas, analyzing complex issues, and working collaboratively. These skills are valuable not only for students considering legal careers but for anyone preparing to navigate civic, academic, or workplace environments.

Law courses also open doors to new interests and pathways. Many students make meaningful connections between what they learn in class and the events they hear about in the news or experience in their communities. Teachers often see students discover unexpected areas of curiosity or even new career aspirations as they recognize how closely the law relates to justice, equity, and public life.



The Teachers Episode

Above all, studying law shows students that they are part of a broader society and that they can question, participate in, and improve the systems around them. Legal education helps young people understand both the impact of the law on everyday life and their own capacity to contribute to a more just world.

Exercise

Exercise 1: Law in my life

Goals: This activity helps educators learn about students' interests, lived experiences, and reasons for taking a law course. Understanding these perspectives supports stronger engagement and allows educators to design lessons that feel relevant and meaningful. It also gives students a chance to reflect, share, and begin building a supportive classroom community.

Steps

1. Self-reflection
 - At the beginning of the course, ask students to respond in writing to the following prompts:
 - Why did I choose to take law?
 - What are my experiences with the law (direct or indirect)?
 - What aspect of the law am I most excited to learn about?
2. Small-group sharing
 - Place students in groups of 4–5 and invite them to share their reflections.
3. Large group discussion
 - Ask groups to share any common themes or insights with the class. These themes can help educators identify topics to emphasize and anticipate areas that may require additional support or sensitivity.

Exercise 2: Compass Points activity

Adapted from Harvard's [Project Zero Thinking Routines Toolbox](#).

This routine can be used at the start of the course or after listening to the podcast episode to help students reflect on their learning, questions, and expectations.

Instructions: Complete each of the prompts below.

E = Excited

What excites you most about taking this law course?

Is there a topic or hands-on activity you're especially interested in?

W = Worrisome

What challenges do you expect to face in this course?

Are there skills or past experiences that might help you navigate them?

N = Need to know

What information do you need to feel confident and succeed in this course?

S = Stance or suggestion for moving forward

What is your current stance on taking this law course?

How do you think this might change as you progress through the term?

Exercise 3: Letter to a future law student

This activity invites students to reflect on their growth by comparing their early expectations with their later experiences.

Instructions:

At the beginning of the course, ask students to write a letter to their future selves. Include prompts such as:

- What goals am I setting for myself in this course?
- How am I feeling about starting a law class?
- What am I most looking forward to learning?

Collect the letters and return them toward the end of the course.

Students can read their letters privately and reflect on how their understanding, confidence, and interests have evolved.