BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE STUDY 
AND PRACTICE OF LAW

In her recent article in the Saint Louis University Law Journal, Professor Marcia L. McCormick\(^1\) recognizes a disconnection between the Socratic method of teaching and the legal profession. The stagnant teaching methods utilized in law school, McCormick suggests, have left the legal education “in a state of chronic existential angst.”\(^2\) The Carnegie Foundation issued a report in 2007 on the effectiveness of legal education and found that legal education is in need of several reforms.\(^3\) The need for reform, according to McCormick, is due in part to a lack of educational training among law professors.\(^4\) Some law professors teach using the same methods used while they were in law school, creating a cyclical pattern of archaic teaching methods.\(^5\) As a result, the gap between the study and practice of law is widening.\(^6\) McCormick has attempted to bridge this gap with the use of technology. In this short essay, I will offer a law student’s perspective on the use of technology and other non-Socratic methods to reinvigorate legal education and better prepare law students as they transition to the legal profession.

McCormick’s philosophy for teaching circumvents the traditional law school methods. Rather than reading court opinions, McCormick’s approach focuses on statutory interpretation.\(^7\) For example, McCormick teaches criminal law by applying statutory language to real events and challenges her students to form their best arguments based on the statutory language.\(^8\) McCormick uses technology to supplement her class material, namely, podcasts and “treasure hunts.”\(^9\) McCormick creates podcasts to summarize big picture

1. Professor McCormick is a professor at Saint Louis University School of Law, as well as, Director of the William C. Wefel Center for Employment Law. McCormick’s areas of expertise include Employment Law, Civil Rights, Gender and the Law, Federal Courts, Employment Discrimination and Constitutional Law. Faculty: Marcia L. McCormick, SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW, http://www.slu.edu/colleges/law/slulaw/faculty/mmccor20.
3. Id. at 128.
4. Id.
5. Id.
6. Id. at 130.
7. McCormick, supra note 2, at 132.
8. Id. at 133.
9. Id. at 131.
Within each podcast, McCormick provides a user-friendly audio summary of individual units of material that students can listen to while performing other tasks. McCormick also uses “treasures hunts,” activities akin to quizzes, to focus students on the intricate details in statutory provisions. Treasure hunts test technical understandings while also providing an opportunity for immediate feedback. Both the podcasts and treasure hunts enhance the student learning experience.

Technology has brought new challenges, as well as new efficiencies, to the legal profession. It is important for legal education to address the challenges and embrace the efficiencies. I fully support McCormick’s innovative efforts to improve the current state of legal education with technology in the classroom. Incorporating technology into the classroom will likely reduce the technology learning curve for apprentice lawyers entering the legal profession.

In addition to McCormick’s suggestions, I propose two additional ways to revitalize legal education. First, I believe law schools should implement a mentoring program to connect law students with experienced practicing attorneys. Additionally, I believe legal education would benefit immeasurably through increased levels of engagement between students and law professors.

A mentoring program that pairs law students with practitioners and alumni is another way to shrink the widening gap between the study and practice of law referenced in McCormick’s article. The goal of implementing a mentorship program would be to supplement theoretical concepts taught in law school with practical knowledge of the legal profession. Students would have the opportunity to gain practical knowledge and develop a support system within the legal community. Some states, including Utah and Georgia, have found great success in the implementation of mandatory mentorship programs for new lawyers. Providing a mentorship program is one way to reform the law school experience in a way that benefits the legal community and bridges the gap between the study and practice of law.

Law professors are their own greatest tool when it comes to engaging students, as evidenced by McCormick’s successful efforts to engage her students through innovative teaching methods. It has been suggested, and I think most people in the legal community would agree, that law students are like infants — each feels “just as helpless and bewildered at the start of their

10. Id.
11. Id. at 134.
12. Id. at 139.
13. Id. at 140-41.
15. Id. at 371.
16. Id. at 377.
17. Id. at 373.
legal life . . . and . . . nearly as vulnerable and inarticulate.” 18 As a result, law students turn to their professors for guidance during this time. 19 Law professors can help reform legal education simply by being more accessible to their students, in and out of the classroom.

Within the classroom, it is the goal of the professor to “channel group anxiety and aggression into academic pursuits.” 20 Often, however, this is not accomplished because the professor feels more comfortable with the Socratic method. 21 This may be due in part to the lack of educational training among law professors, as McCormick asserts. 22 Many professors view this method as a rite of passage to the legal profession. 23 However, more times than not, “[t]he Socratic method becomes a hunt for the answer that will stop everyone cold.” 24 The result, as McCormick expressed, is an environment where students are left guessing what their professors want from them.

A law school classroom is said to be “the first and most important environment for legal growth,” 25 suggesting the importance of creating an environment conducive to learning. To accomplish this end, law professors should create a safe environment. 26 Students should feel comfortable not being in control and, in some instances, just completely wrong. 27 Engaging with students in this way may open the door for students to rely on their professor in areas of law and life. 28

Law schools are stuck in a cyclical pattern based on tired methods; it is time for a reform of legal education to reflect modern times. Professor McCormick suggests using technology in the classroom to encourage student engagement and bridge the gap between theory and practice. In addition, I believe law schools could benefit from a mentorship program, connecting

19. Id. at 15.
20. Id. at 22.
21. Id.
22. McCormick, supra note 2, at 128.
24. Id.
25. Id. at 30.
26. Id. at 31.
27. Id.
28. Coleburn & Spring, supra note 18, at 29.
students with the legal community, and increased levels of interaction with professors, both in and out of the classroom.

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