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CPL Podcast: Legal Studies 11-12

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Aarti Nand

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning, here is your host Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL podcast for the New South Wales Teacher Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the editor of the JPL. Today, I'm talking with Aarti Nand and we're talking about teaching Legal Studies and what you can do to help your students do well in that great subject. Aarti, welcome!

Aarti Nand:

Thanks Carly.

Carly Boreland:

We're really happy to have you here today and we want to ask you about why you love Legal Studies and why you think it's so important in that big sweep of HSC subject options?

Aarti Nand:

My passion for Legal Studies began when I was a high school student myself. It took me into learning about the world, about our community, our legal system and I think that led me to study and become a teacher in Legal Studies. So to me, becoming a Legal Studies teacher meant being able to teach this wonderful subject. So, very excited to do that and pass on that passion to my students.

Carly Boreland:

Students of Legal Studies [they] don't have to go on to be lawyers do they? It's not a direct training course in that kind of way. Who does Legal Studies and why is it for everyone?

Aarti Nand:

Absolutely not! You do not have to be an aspiring law student in your tertiary years. A lot of our students have an interest in the Australian Legal System and they're really interested in also studying about how the law influences those vulnerable people in our society. It's almost like a law and society course not just a law course. So in the classroom our students are really keen to have discussions on legal issues in our community that affect them and people around them and that's why they're choosing this subject.



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Carly Boreland:

There are a few different pathways I suppose students would go through before they decide to choose Legal Studies. What are some ways that you can encourage students to pick the subject and how can you begin in the junior years to build them up towards feeling like they could be confident and also successful in that HSC course?

Aarti Nand:

Looking personally at our school and the girls who tend to pick Legal Studies in the senior years they tend to do the junior subjects like Commerce or International Studies, which I also teach, [and which] are quite popular as well. We cover those social justice issues in those subjects and law issues and so those girls tend to enjoy that in the junior years. They're quite passionate about social justice issues in our community and then they'll tend to pick Legal Studies in Year 11 and 12 for that reason. I personally think Legal Studies is a really rewarding subject for students to be choosing and I encourage them. If they're passionate about those pressing issues in our community, in our country and even in the world and politics then they need to think about doing this as a subject. Because, I guess at the end of the day, we want them leaving becoming really well – educated, active citizens of our community and that's what I think the subject does. It really does help build their understanding and helps them become critical thinkers and become an individual in our society and to be happy to question the law and other institutions and that's what the course really gets them to do for Year 11 and 12.

Carly Boreland:

And, what about good ways to start thinking about teaching Legal Studies? People come to it in all different ways. So, typically faculties these days are either HSIE or Social Science faculties, [and] some teachers are teaching five or six different subjects all at the same time. What are some ways for people who are starting out as Legal Studies teachers can begin to plan lessons and think about programing and assessment in ways that are going to be good to begin with? And then maybe you can help us with, (once you're established and feeling confident) how can you take things to that next level as well?

Aarti Nand:

Yes, I would encourage, I guess, beginning teachers who are juggling many subjects to think about keeping their focus with the Syllabus. I would say stay there - when you begin - and make sure you follow the course correctly. But then starting to broaden their skills through joining Associations I would say. A good way to start is joining the Legal Studies Association; that would be a great example. There you can get a lot of access to resources from other teachers who, on their journals, publish worksheets, ideas. They run conferences as well, targeting beginning teachers, where they can really get some training and development on subject content, teaching and learning strategies, assessment strategies.

Working with colleagues; so looking for someone, that might be in your staff room, who also teaches the same subject [and who] has got the skills and working with them; picking their brains; their skills. I



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know I did that when I began teaching, I took advantage of everyone around me who had the experience and really, even now, working with people that have got 20-30 more years' experience than me, getting their ideas and talking to them. That would be a good way start. But, in Legal Studies, the text book is out of date very quickly. So it's not something I would suggest sticking to very closely, for beginning teachers, or any teachers, in general, including myself.

Carly Boreland:

It's probably obvious to Legal Studies teachers, but why does it become outdated so quickly and what's that really important thing that you've got to be always finding new resources for?

Aarti Nand:

Right, well, what stands out is that current law reform and change in law and politics. Depending on your options, but even the cores like *Human Rights* and *Crime*, there is a myriad of law reform and changes every year. So you can't even use the same resources, year to year. You need to be constantly updating and following the news media.

Carly Boreland:

How could someone starting out (because that sounds kind of overwhelming you have to be update with the law and law reforms), are there some ways to hack the system and find out? Where do you get these resources from? Is it a matter of buying the Sydney Morning Herald every day, or what do you do to make sure that you're up to date?

Aarti Nand:

Well, to be honest, I keep up to date with current affairs. I do follow, through social media, a lot of Sydney Morning Herald, Guardian, and The Conversation, through Twitter or Facebook. And so you get the trends -they work out what you're looking for; which articles - and you get that feed. I even get my students to do it. So, you know, I get them onto Twitter following the right organisations whether it's a media outlet or it's the United Nations.

Carly Boreland:

Wow, so this is like possibly the first good use of social media!

Aarti Nand:

You need to be on top of it. So that's a really a quick easy way for them. Especially because the kids are better at it than us: being on social media; and following these different groups of people; and just following what's new and what's current, and what's changing, which really helps them with their notes I guess.



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Carly Boreland:

And so it sounds like, if you're a new teacher starting out, you obviously have the text book and then possibly a 5 or 10 year gap sometimes between what's actually happening and the text book resource you might have. So, if you're on your own in a school doing Legal Studies for the first time, maybe contacting neighbouring schools and trying to quickly catch up the last couple of years and where things are up to.

Aarti Nand:

Yes, so working with people, networking, joining Facebook groups which are Legal Studies groups where they often share resources of changes in legislation.

Carly Boreland:

And I guess you have to be a bit selective then about what you use. Because, it's not just knowing something exists, but then applying it to the Syllabus and working out – "how do I use this in a written answer?"

Aarti Nand:

Yes, I often tell them too; you can't just take someone's personal blog and use that as evidence in your essay writing. It has to be a credible source. So I'll direct them on whom to follow. But then also knowing how to use that in the context of their writing is important too.

Carly Boreland:

So can we go back to, and talk about, the Syllabus a little bit in terms of how it's structured and what teachers need to be focusing on? So there are some things mandatory, some things options?

Aarti Nand:

You'll have the mandatory in the HSC course: the core topics which will be *Crime* and *Human Rights* and then you get your Option studies where teachers will like to pick things like *Family Law*, which is quite popular. They will also look at things like *World Order* (which I teach) or other teachers look at *Workplace Law* or *Consumer Law*, *Environmental Law*, *Indigenous Peoples*. So there's quite a variety of areas, according to, I guess, student interest and teacher experience and skills, that the course can take different directions.

Carly Boreland:

I'm imagining that you certainly want to choose things that suit your particular student's interests, but, I know that in some other subjects, (I've taught Society and Culture and History) there are some topics that are a little bit easier to grapple with, in the beginning, for a teacher who is starting out. Are there any things like that in Legal Studies where if you don't have any necessarily personal preference? Are there some things that would be better options to begin with possibly because of availability of resources or things that are more popular?



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Aarti Nand:

Yes, well I guess two things are important; what are your students interested in? Are you teaching a group of - a cohort of - kids who are also doing Business Studies and maybe, therefore, you might want to go down the *Consumer Law/Workplace Law* interest. But, also, what's your experience and what's your knowledge and background?

At my school I teach *World Order* because my background at University was an International Studies degree. I tend to go with what I have my experience and knowledge in. I mean the other teacher I'm working with is doing *Workplace* and that's where her experience and expertise is. So I would really suggest teachers [who are] starting out pick what they're confident in and what they have the experience and knowledge in, and then, also, what they're interested in learning about. Because that extra reading, and following news media, has to be something you're passionate about: so it's not a chore and you really are watching out of interest anyway.

Carly Boreland:

Oh yes, that's such a good point. You know teaching is one of those professions, I suppose, where once you're a teacher, you never read a newspaper the same way again or you never watch the news the same way again because you're always thinking about resources and thinking about - "what can I do with this and what can I do?" Sometimes to the detriment of families who would really just like to sit down and watch the news. But, that just becomes part of your life, I suppose, doesn't it?

Aarti Nand:

It does! It's how I am always thinking when I'm teaching Legal Studies. "What was the outcome of the 'Pell' sentencing?" and taking that to class and "how I am going to use it?" It's always happening, and that's what's exciting and passionate about this subject too; that it is applicable every day in our lives and it's changing.

Carly Boreland:

Guess it could be empowering for students as well because it potentially gives them skills and capacities to advocate for themselves, or to be aware of what their place in the world is, or things that are happening to them.

Aarti Nand:

Yes! I feel like, in the last few years that I've been teaching for sure, that I've seen a lot of my students become very passionate about the issues that we've studied whether it's *Human Rights* and want to become Human Rights advocates and lawyers and actually gone to University doing this. So it's quite inspiring but it does kind of lead them down that path of wanting to become further skilled in that field



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Carly Boreland:

What about, once you have gotten over those first few years, and you're starting to think about – “how can I get my students really performing well in Legal Studies?” What are some of the key things they need to be getting ready for, and some things maybe you've had success with? I'm thinking about writing, and essay writing in particular, and working with evidence and balancing that with other demands of the subject?

Aarti Nand:

Yes, so that constant pressure, of trying to get through the course, in enough time, but also develop their writing skills in the classroom, is a constant challenge. And even, just this week, marking their assessment tasks and looking at what they are producing and going, - “they're not getting it - I need to go back again even though I've looked at it!” And I would suggest looking at, right from the start, teaching the text types: we're looking at *extended responses*; we're looking at task directed words like *evaluate* and *analyse* (right from the beginning). *Structuring argument*: getting them to understand that they need to form an opinion and judgment in our subject area. And then having to develop that, with research and evidence, and becoming an informed piece of writing is important. One year later and they are still having a difficult time.

Carly Boreland:

And you feel like “oh I've done that already, we did that, I taught them that!” and, I guess, getting them to write regularly, and looking at their writing often, are good ways to have that reality check.

Aarti Nand:

Informal assessment is really important (out of that formal [assessment]) Even though the kids will take the formal assessment very differently I find that's when they really do prepare and study. If you can do a lot more drafts with them - informal drafts - and look at their writing. Model, I think from what I did - the marking that I've done in the last week, - I've looked at it and I've gone, “I need to model a lot more”. They need to see many responses; how to evaluate in an essay. They need to go back and look at paragraph structure: topic sentence; forming an argument; then supporting that with evidence.

Carly Boreland:

I think that sometimes we're really good at doing those structures where we tell them – “it's got to have an introduction, a body and a conclusion”. They know that already but it's more that one-on-one, and in small groups, looking at sentence level: what is it about this sentence that is going to be helping us to answer the question and build in evidence?



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Aarti Nand:

Yes! So many of them will say “it is effective” but not why [it is]? Or, how? - in supporting that argument *to the extent of*. So just getting them to go back and to look at good responses and go okay – “what is missing in mine and what is this good response got that I don’t have?” and doing sort of a pull apart.

Carly Boreland:

And doing all of that in a low stakes environment which is in the classroom rather than when it’s formal assessment time. Have you got any tips for us about timing? You were mentioning that sometimes there can be that pressure to get through the course, have you figured out any ways to make your life easier on that?

Aarti Nand:

I don’t know if I’ve found the answer yet because it’s one of my biggest worries every time I teach the course just trying to get enough done. I always do the ‘*Crime*’ topic first in Term 4 because it is the biggest topic; it’s a 30% course. I try to get that done right away in Term 4 and then still we have to come back to it the next year for a couple of weeks. If I am lucky, the girls will do a little bit of work over the holidays to get us through, but it is the option [part of the Core] I start off with right away because it is the topic that takes the longest in the course.

Carly Boreland:

So ‘*Crime*’ is going to be mandatory and that’s the Core. People probably know this already but that means that moderates the rest of the options. So it’s important for people to think about that in terms of doing well in the Core because it influences the rest of the paper.

Aarti Nand:

So even at the [HSC] marking centre, that is what they will look at. The judges will look at.

Carly Boreland:

Have you got any things you’ve learned over time? Maybe things you wish you’d have known when you started teaching Legal Studies that you could share with us?

Aarti Nand:

I wish I had more confidence to begin with. It is quite a daunting subject to begin with, as a beginning teacher, and you kind of stick to the Syllabus really closely, and the textbook, and you are scared to take risks. I wish I had more confidence in veering away from that because I find my best lessons are where I am passionate and the kids get excited and passionate when you show that. And you go in teaching from the heart what your interests are and not just sort of text book style teaching which can get boring. I wish I had done that and I guess looking around you and taking advantage of all the resources around you. Things like the ‘Rule of Law Day Out’ is a great tool for teachers where you can go out to



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the courts: they run that excursion for you and you get to meet a Judge and the kids get to ask Q&A with the Judge. And that's exciting and it brings that sort of significance, and real life experience, to the whole course which is a really interesting way of teaching, and having that experience, while we're teaching 'Crime'. I would have done things like that. I often would take them on my own but I think it's quite interesting to go that way and getting to meet a Judge as well.

Carly Boreland:

Do you want to talk at all about assessments that have worked compared to assessments that have maybe been less effective? Like styles of assessment or approaches that you've used? Because, I know that that's one thing, over time, you come to see that – “ah that seemed like a good idea at the time but it created all these other problems for me!”

Aarti Nand:

Exactly, we did an oral task this week where they had to verbally present their essay plans. But, later on in this term, I will get them to write one, out of those five that we got them to practice. So, even though it wasn't a formal written assessment, I will get them to still practise their writing, later in the term, so they can get that extra writing practice that they need.

Carly Boreland:

Can I ask you what's the logic behind that because it's not just “this is what we do”. What are you trying to achieve there? So you get them to explain their essay plans - what are you thinking there? What's the thing you are looking for?

Aarti Nand:

Comprehension! They've got to understand! I think when you write something down it's a lot easier than getting up and verbalizing and articulating yourself. So, if you can stand up and explain how you would answer an essay and, I can hear that when I'm marking a student, you can straight away tell whether they understand the question or not and they have comprehension and understanding of the question.

Carly Boreland:

And then their capacity to *synthesize*, all of the things that they have done, and bring it together.

Aarti Nand:

Yes, and it's a very good formative assessment tool. You can straightaway see where the gaps are and where you need to focus your teaching and learning with the goals as well. It's been something new that I hadn't done this year, but was brought in with a more experienced teacher that works with me. I tried it out and it's been quite an interesting assessment tool.



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Carly Boreland:

What do the students think of this? I know that teachers can sometimes worry that being on show like that can be problematic? What do they think?

Aarti Nand:

Well it's the first time they were doing it too so they were quiet hesitant about it. And I assured them that -"this is a lot easier than just coming in and doing an unseen essay question, which is what you could have been doing". What they enjoyed was the informal nature of it too. They were up there and, it wasn't them reading an essay out, it was them talking to the class about "if I got this question this is how I'd do it this: this is what my points of arguments would be; this would be my evidence; this would be my supporting statement" etc. So I think they would have enjoyed that part of it more.

Carly Boreland:

And, I guess, it's how you set it up. With all teaching: that's the key to the success of it. How you explain it, how you lower that anxiety, how you reassure students that they're doing something that's really going to help them to learn and it's going to be of benefit to them.

Aarti Nand:

Well yes, because it was the first time that we did it, it took a lot of reassuring. I think with the assessment tasks also, one of the things that we learnt quite recently, that's important, is looking at your data; going back to the RAP data and looking at what you're doing well in the HSC, over the years, and what you're not. Because, we did that earlier this year, And through looking at our mean for multiple-choice ([which] was below State average but we were excelling in our options and essay writing) it became clear to us we need to practice multiple-choice questions. So in the future, next year's group, we are going to look at bringing in more multiple-choice style assessment as well and practice for the girls.

Carly Boreland:

And I guess multiple-choice is one of those things where most teachers don't think it's great. It's something that we got and we are dealing with it at the moment. What's your tip with multiple-choice in terms of what you think you want to be doing with multiple-choice and what are the things that students get trapped up on?

Aarti Nand:

Never overthink it! They always trapped up on overthinking. I find some of my strongest students are the ones who do the worst in multiple-choice because they're analyzing it way too much, going with their gut feeling. Often the most common strategy would be: reading it through; eliminating two; there would be two that would be very similar, and through process of elimination, picking your best answer of the two. And Legal Studies does not suit multiple-choice questions and there always will be those



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questions that are debatable. So as much practice they can do through past papers would be something I would recommend over and over and over again.

Carly Boreland:

I know in History we've just moved away from multiple-choice. I don't think there are any Historians that think that is a bad idea

Aarti Nand:

That's great! I would love that to happen for us as well.

Carly Boreland:

And, I guess, another strategy could be, with multiple-choice is, to read the question and think what you think the answer would be first before looking at what the options are.

Aarti Nand:

Even, not in multiple-choice, but in just normal exams - essays, short answers - read the question. Because often the mistakes are because they have not read the question carefully.

Carly Boreland:

So we talked about, Aarti, that Legal Studies is important for people beyond the HSC, most importantly, and you want to encourage students to choose that subject because they are passionate about the world that they live in - not only about the law, but making a difference and understanding the world that they're in. That you can take advantage of junior subjects like Commerce and International Studies to build up those students and build up their interests and that for the teachers, especially when they are starting out, you should keep that interest in mind for yourself too, and stick to your strengths and stick to what you've studied and being interested in and being mindful of what's going to be relevant to the students as well. And in doing all of that, you need to be really aware that you can't just stick with the text book for this one. You're going to have to be constantly collecting and keeping yourself updated with trends in law and associated ones in society as well.

And when it comes to planning on how to teach this subject, and how you're going to manage your time, you need to be really aware of that balance between getting through the content but also seeing that the content is teaching the skills that they are going to need to successfully communicate their passion and understanding. And that there are some ways that you can do that through assessment: that means your life can be good as well and it doesn't all have to be long essays or high pressure activities. And to reach out to, and really connect with, other Legal Studies teachers who are around and take advantage of their skills.



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Aarti Nand:

I guess the only thing I would suggest that really helped me as well was marking and getting marking experience. So, if they're feeling like they're on their own, a great professional learning tool is becoming a HSC marker. I encourage more people to get into it. And, therefore, you're reading what students across the state are writing and you're learning, yourself, what you need to go back and maybe change in your teaching in the classroom. So I would suggest it's probably one of the biggest ways I've learnt and refined my teaching practice and would suggest and encourage everyone else to do.

Carly Boreland:

Thank you for coming in and for chatting with us.

You've been listening to the JPL podcast for the Teachers Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the Editor of the JPL. I've been speaking with Aarti Nand about teaching Legal Studies especially in your early years. And to find out more and to listen to further podcasts you can visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CONCLUSION:

The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers' Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers, and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Aarti Nand has been teaching for 14 years in both Western Sydney (Elizabeth MacArthur HS) and Sydney's Inner West (at Canterbury Girls HS)

She is an HSIE teacher, with extensive teaching experience in senior Legal Studies, Business Studies and a mix of junior HSIE subjects including Commerce and International Studies.

She is a Senior HSC Marker in Legal Studies.

Aarti has experience in Head teacher leadership positions and is passionate about educating students on issues in our community and encouraging them to become independent and active citizens.