



# **Interdisciplinary Journal of Arts, Politics and Law (IJAPL) – ISSN 3080- 3284**

## **Beyond the Drama: Why Real Courtrooms Leave Law Students Disenchanted**



**Volume 1 – Issue 1 – August 2025**

 **Title of Article**

***Beyond the Drama: Why Real Courtrooms Leave Law Students Disenchanted***

 **Author**

Clarance Erenes Gandawa  
Springfield Research University  
Ezulwini, Eswatini

**Abstract**

Television and film have long influenced public perceptions of the legal profession, painting courtrooms as high-stakes arenas filled with suspense, charisma, and swift justice. For many aspiring lawyers, these portrayals become the reference point for what legal practice particularly courtroom litigation ought to look like. However, when law students encounter real court proceedings, they are often met with a starkly different reality, slow-paced procedures, formalities, delays, and a lack of theatrical flair. This paper explores the dissonance between media portrayals of courtrooms and the actual courtroom experience, analyzing its impact on student motivation, legal identity formation, and expectations of practice. Through a review of student reflections, legal education literature, and courtroom observation studies, the paper argues that this gap contributes to a subtle but significant form of disillusionment among students, especially in the early stages of their training. The paper also proposes pedagogical interventions such as courtroom orientation programs, critical media literacy, and experiential learning to help align legal education with the realities of practice without dampening student enthusiasm. Ultimately, it calls for a more intentional approach to managing legal expectations in the age of media saturation.

**Keywords:** *Legal education, Courtroom observation, Professional identity formation, Expectation-reality gap, Legal pedagogy, Student disillusionment, Experiential learning, SADC legal systems, Critical media literacy*

**Introduction**

From *Suits* to *How to Get Away with Murder*, legal dramas have become cultural staples that portray the courtroom as a stage for brilliance, conflict, and dramatic resolution. For many first-year law students, these shows are more than just entertainment they are informal educators that shape expectations of what it means to be a lawyer. The adrenaline-fueled cross-examinations, surprise evidence, and charismatic attorneys reinforce the belief that litigation is dynamic, glamorous, and intellectually thrilling.

However, when students first visit a real courtroom often as part of their legal training they are quickly confronted by a slower, more procedural reality. Instead of sharp dialogue and high drama, they

encounter postponements, routine cases, administrative delays, and legal formalities delivered in low-energy tones. This moment of disillusionment, though often brushed aside, can leave a lasting impression on students' perception of the profession and their place within it.

This paper investigates the expectation-reality gap that law students face when transitioning from media-informed perceptions to actual courtroom observation. It considers how this disillusionment shapes student attitudes toward practice, and how legal education might respond through more nuanced, experience-based teaching that acknowledges the influence of media without vilifying it.

## **Literature Review**

### **Law in the Media: Constructing Courtroom Myths**

Media portrayals of the legal system especially in television dramas and films have a profound impact on how law is understood by the public (Asimow, 2000; Robson, 2012). In fictional courtrooms, trials are condensed into emotionally charged narratives, attorneys are portrayed as either heroes or villains, and justice is swift and satisfying. These depictions often center around dramatic monologues, surprise evidence, and moral dilemmas resolved in neatly wrapped endings.

Asimow and Mader (2013) refer to this as the “myth of legal drama,” noting that while such portrayals are not inherently harmful, they present a highly romanticized version of law. For law students, particularly those in their formative years, this media landscape serves as a reference point for what legal practice ought to look like. The allure of courtroom drama contributes to an idealized image of the legal profession one that is intellectually thrilling, morally significant, and socially powerful (Machura & Robson, 2001).

### **Student Expectations and the Legal Profession**

The media's influence intersects with student identity formation. Research by Stover (2004) and Jones (2013) highlights how students often enter law school with grand expectations to argue before judges, fight injustice, and “make a difference.” These expectations are not merely naïve they are shaped by media, societal narratives about the power of lawyers, and even university marketing.

When reality falls short of these ideals, a subtle form of expectational dissonance emerges. This can lead to disappointment, disconnection, or even cynicism toward the profession (Sheehy & Horan, 2019). In some cases, students begin to question whether they belong in law at all, especially when their strengths do not align with the procedural and often bureaucratic reality of legal practice (Hess, 2002).

### **Courtroom Observation: Pedagogy and Disenchantment**

Courtroom observation is a key component of experiential legal education. It is often introduced early in law school curricula to expose students to the workings of the legal system beyond textbooks. However, scholars like Holland (2004) and Marson et al. (2005) have pointed out that this exposure can produce mixed results.

Rather than sparking inspiration, many students report feeling bored, confused, or disillusioned by the pace and informality of real courtroom proceedings. Long waiting periods, lack of drama, routine applications, and unclear outcomes stand in stark contrast to the vibrant depictions they have internalized. In the SADC context and other developing regions, this experience is further complicated by administrative inefficiencies, limited resources, and courtroom environments that lack accessibility or student engagement.

### **Legal Identity Formation and Disillusionment**

Professional identity formation is central to legal education. Scholars such as Sullivan et al. (2007) emphasize the need for law schools to help students develop a sense of who they are as legal professionals not just what they know. When students enter with inflated expectations and are met with the mundane, the gap between their imagined and real professional futures can cause identity dissonance.

This disillusionment, if not addressed, can lead to disengagement or burnout even before formal practice begins. On the other hand, some scholars argue that disillusionment can be a productive force a catalyst for critical thinking, humility, and a deeper understanding of the law's social function (Brookbanks & Ekins, 2010). The challenge, therefore, is to guide students through this transition with intention and reflection.

The existing literature reveals a clear pattern, law students are deeply shaped by media narratives, and when these are unchallenged, they can lead to disenchantment upon encountering the slower-paced, procedural, and often underwhelming reality of actual courtrooms. While this moment of disillusionment is often overlooked, it plays a crucial role in shaping student engagement, legal identity, and long-term commitment to the profession.

### **The Expectation-Reality Divide: What Law Students See vs What They Get**

#### **Television as the Unofficial Legal Educator**

For many law students, the journey into legal education begins not in a classroom but on a screen. Before their first lecture, they've already "met" brilliant, fast-talking attorneys like Harvey Specter, Annalise Keating, or Jake Brigance. In these narratives, legal work is exciting, morally complex, and intellectually stimulating. Cases are solved within hours, and the courtroom is a place of confrontation, charisma, and catharsis.

These portrayals, though fictional, are internalized deeply. Legal dramas simplify the law, condense time, and amplify human conflict. They also tend to highlight elite forms of legal practice corporate litigation, constitutional challenges, criminal defense while overlooking the more routine, procedural, and administrative aspects that characterize the majority of legal work. Thus, students enter law school with skewed perceptions not just of how law works, but what it feels like to practice it.

### **The First Court Visit: Where Disillusionment Begins**

The shift from screen to reality often begins during a student's first court observation. With expectations shaped by dynamic trial scenes, many approach their court visit with anticipation only to find themselves in a quiet courtroom with low energy, unclear procedures, and drawn-out formalities.

Instead of gripping oral arguments, they witness postponements, absent parties, or back-to-back procedural applications. In many jurisdictions particularly within the SADC region factors like understaffed courts, delays, poor infrastructure, and lack of student engagement resources further contribute to the underwhelming experience.

What students expected to be a space of justice in action often appears to be a bureaucratic waiting room. As one student reflected during a post-visit interview "I thought I would be blown away. Instead, I couldn't even hear what the magistrate was saying. Everyone just seemed to be going through the motions."

### **What This Disillusionment Does to Students**

This experience of courtroom disillusionment is more than just a mismatch of mood. It can have emotional and pedagogical consequences. Students may begin to, question the excitement or value of legal practice. Doubt their place in the profession, especially if their strengths lie in communication or creative problem-solving. Detach emotionally from learning when legal practice feels distant from what inspired them to study law in the first place. Some students internalize this shift as a personal failure to understand "real" law. Others begin to separate the law as taught from the law as lived developing a quiet cynicism that legal educators rarely address.

### **The Problem Isn't Courtrooms — It's the Missing Bridge**

The issue is not that courts are boring or that students are too idealistic. Rather, the gap exists because legal education often fails to acknowledge and contextualize the disconnect. Students are not prepared for what to expect, nor are they encouraged to process their observations critically.

Without guided reflection, classroom support, or pre-visit framing, students are left to reconcile the contrast on their own. This silence can lead them to conclude that law is not what they thought or worse, not what they want.

If properly supported, however, this moment of disillusionment can become a powerful learning tool. It can teach students to question assumptions, appreciate procedural justice, and understand the quieter, but no less important, work of everyday legal systems.

### **Case Study: The SADC Context**

In jurisdictions like Eswatini, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, the courtroom environment presents unique challenges. Systemic delays, language barriers, unavailability of records, and lack of digital access all contribute to a more complex and often frustrating student experience.

Law students entering courtrooms in these contexts are not only encountering reality, but confronting inequity, inefficiency, and systemic strain. While this can be demoralizing, it also provides a powerful opportunity for students to connect theory with real-world justice gaps. If framed correctly, the experience could spark passion for reform rather than disappointment.

The expectation-reality divide in courtroom observation is not simply a matter of unmet excitement it is a moment of identity tension, professional awakening, and, potentially, pedagogical transformation. Rather than ignoring or minimizing this experience, legal educators should center it. Law students must be given tools not only to critique what they see, but to use it as a springboard for deeper understanding of justice, power, and legal reform.

### **Bridging the Gap: Recommendations for Legal Education**

To transform courtroom disillusionment from a point of discouragement into an opportunity for growth, legal education must intentionally guide students through the expectation-reality divide. This requires both practical tools and pedagogical shifts that validate student experiences, contextualize courtroom realities, and support professional identity development.

### **Integrating Media Literacy into Legal Curricula**

To address the expectation-reality gap in legal education, law schools must begin by integrating media literacy into their curricula. Many students arrive with perceptions shaped more by television dramas than by actual legal practice. Rather than dismissing these influences, educators should engage them critically. Early seminars on law and media representation, paired with analyses of courtroom scenes from shows like *Suits* or *How to Get Away with Murder*, can help students recalibrate their expectations. These discussions foster analytical thinking and self-awareness, allowing students to distinguish entertainment from professional reality without losing their initial enthusiasm.

### **Structuring Courtroom Visits Through Orientation and Framing**

Courtroom visits, often treated as passive observational exercises, should be reframed as structured learning experiences. Pre-visit orientation is essential to prepare students for the procedural and atmospheric realities they will encounter. Short lectures, etiquette guides, and contextual briefings about local court systems can transform these visits into meaningful engagements. When students enter the courtroom as critical observers rather than spectators, they are better equipped to interpret what they see and connect it to broader questions of justice and legal process.

### **Using Reflective Assignments to Deepen Understanding**

Reflection is a powerful pedagogical tool, especially when students confront disillusionment. After courtroom visits, educators should encourage students to articulate not just what they observed, but how it made them feel. Reflective essays, journal entries, and guided class discussions can help students process discomfort, confusion, or disappointment. These exercises validate emotional responses and reinforce the idea that disillusionment is not a failure, but a step toward becoming a thoughtful, resilient practitioner.

### **Introducing Realistic Mock Trials and Legal Simulations**

To bridge the gap between media dramatization and procedural reality, law schools should introduce realistic mock trials and legal simulations. These should go beyond high-stakes litigation to include routine procedures, ethical dilemmas, and administrative hearings. Scripts based on local cases, simulations of postponements or bail hearings, and co-facilitation by practicing lawyers or magistrates can ground students in the everyday workings of justice. This approach helps students appreciate the value of legal practice beyond its dramatic moments.

### **Humanizing the Law Through Storytelling and Dialogue**

Humanizing the law is essential to sustaining student engagement. Often, what students find dull about courtrooms is not the pace, but the absence of context. By incorporating storytelling and dialogue into legal education, educators can illuminate the human stakes behind legal proceedings. Inviting litigants, clerks, or interpreters to share experiences, using anonymized case studies, and exploring justice issues like access barriers or language rights can restore the emotional and ethical dimensions of law. This reminds students that even routine cases impact real lives.

### **Embracing Discomfort and Ambiguity in Legal Pedagogy**

Finally, legal education must embrace discomfort and ambiguity as part of professional growth. While classrooms often prioritize precision and speed, courtrooms demand patience and tolerance for uncertainty. Educators should create space for conversations about boredom, frustration, and powerlessness, validating these feelings as part of the learning journey. By framing disillusionment as a rite of passage, law schools can support students in developing maturity, realism, and a deeper commitment to justice. Through media literacy, experiential learning, reflection, and storytelling, legal education can prepare students not just to practice law, but to understand it in all its complexity.

### **Conclusion**

The courtroom holds symbolic power in the legal imagination it represents justice, authority, and the ultimate performance of legal knowledge. Yet for law students encountering it for the first time, the courtroom can feel underwhelming, bureaucratic, and disjointed from their expectations. This

disconnect, often rooted in years of media consumption and romanticized portrayals, creates a moment of disillusionment that legal education has yet to fully acknowledge or address.

Rather than dismiss this experience as a passing phase or a naïve misstep, this paper argues that it should be recognized as a formative point in the professional journey of law students. It is at this intersection between expectation and reality that critical identity work begins. Students start to redefine what it means to be a lawyer, what justice looks like in practice, and where they see themselves within the legal system.

If left unaddressed, this disillusionment can lead to disengagement, cynicism, or even attrition. But if harnessed with the right pedagogical tools critical reflection, media literacy, experiential learning, and storytelling it can foster maturity, realism, and renewed commitment to meaningful legal work.

Ultimately, bridging the expectation-reality divide is not about dampening students' enthusiasm or stripping law of its idealism. It is about anchoring that idealism in truth, preparing students for the complexity of legal practice, and preserving their passion through honesty. In doing so, we help cultivate lawyers who are not only informed but also resilient, reflective, and genuinely committed to the pursuit of justice both on and off the screen.

## References

Asimow, M., & Mader, S. (2013). *Law and Popular Culture: A Course Book*.

Machura, S., & Robson, P. (2001). *Law and Film: Representing Law in Movies*.

Stover, R. (2004). *Making It and Breaking It: The Fate of Public Interest Commitment During Law School*. University of Illinois Press.

Jones, T. (2013). Legal Education and the Formation of Professional Identity. *Journal of Legal Education*.

Sheehy, E., & Horan, H. (2019). Disillusionment and the Law Student Experience. *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*.

Hess, G. (2002). Heads and Hearts: The Teaching and Learning Environment in Law School. *Journal of Legal Education*.

Modiri, J. (2017). The Time and Space of Critical Legal Pedagogy.