

# *The Professor's Puzzle: A Review and Reflection*

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**ABSTRACT:** Michael Lawson's 2015 book *The Professor's Puzzle: Teaching in Christian Academics* provides an excellent overview of how to develop a personal philosophy of teaching and curriculum that incorporates God's love. This article discusses Christian education goals, curriculum and teachers, learning theories, and relationships. Also discussed are insights into the struggle of incorporating these ideas and examples of where this author has seen the ideas in Lawson's work incorporated in the classroom.

## PIECING TOGETHER THE PROFESSOR'S PUZZLE

Michael Lawson's (2015) *The Professor's Puzzle: Teaching in Christian Academics* is a handbook that shows professors how to go from the theory of teaching to actual teaching through a Christian worldview. When looking at piecing together the professor's puzzle, there are many parts to keep in check. When teaching in a Christian institution, there are even more aspects to incorporate. When teaching accounting in a Christian institution, the complexities become even more challenging to manage. This author has struggled in the past to balance the delicate intricacies of Christian education in the accounting courses she teaches at Greenville University. Lawson's (2015) work can help with this balance. It is about creating a personal philosophy of teaching surrounding Christian education goals, learners, curriculum, teachers, learning theory, methodologies, measurements, rules, technology, and communication. Lawson (2015) provides a comprehensive overview of each of these areas and ways to incorporate them into the classroom and curriculum. Below are some highlights that stood out to this author in Lawson's (2015) work about the goals of Christian education, curriculum, teachers, learning theories, and relationships. Also included are examples of where this author has seen Lawson's (2015) ideas integrated and where this integration can be difficult.

### GOALS

Instructors need to understand the goal of Christian education. According to Lawson (2015), "Everything in

Christian education should orbit around a love for God in such a way that no one could ever doubt it as the central goal" (p. 21). In the Bible, Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Jesus calls this commandment the greatest one. If God's love is to be the center point of education, then teaching, assignments, readings, exams, projects, and presentations should also orbit around a love for God.

This can be extremely difficult in some courses. In the financial accounting course that this author teaches at Greenville University (GU), integrating God's love is a struggle. Many of the students that come through the accounting program at GU plan to sit for the Certified Public Accountant (CPA) exam. This means that we as educators have an obligation to give them a foundation for the skills they will need for later accounting courses and the CPA exam. Many topics have to be covered in that course, and it can leave little time to explore anything beyond what they will need to know for their future accounting careers. Reading Lawson's (2015) work helped this author to realize that weaving God's love into this course needs to be a focus as that course is assessed and updated for the next semester. God's love can permeate into accounting, and students need to experience that love in the accounting world.

### CURRICULUM & TEACHERS

When a curriculum is developed, it should display as many pieces of the "puzzle" as possible (Lawson, 2015). It is the instructor's responsibility to take the curriculum and

make sure that it integrates what the student should know. Christian education should help students understand how to piece the curriculum's puzzle together and combine that with God's love. This cannot happen unless students are studying the pieces of the puzzle. Students must study God's love to know God's love. Studying does not just mean reading God-breathed Scripture or saying a quick prayer at the beginning of class. It is studying his creation and how to care for it. Christians "believe that God holds us accountable for what we do with and to his creation" (Lawson, 2015, p. 44). This is the concept of stewardship, and it is teachable through not only Scripture but also through the curriculum.

One of the underlying foundations in accounting is a commitment to stewardship. In Scripture and Christianity, stewardship is about caring for and managing well what God has given us (Lawson, 2015). In accounting, stewardship is doing the same thing but for a company. When thinking about rewriting the Financial Accounting course at Greenville University, this is an aspect that this author needs to incorporate into the course.

## LEARNING THEORIES

Lawson (2015) discusses ten different learning theories in chapter three of his book. At the beginning of chapter three, Lawson (2015) gives workable guidelines for understanding the various theories. Two of those learning theories are evaluated in more detail below.

Before explaining some of the different learning theories, one reminder that Lawson (2015) gives is that learning theories are affected by students' personal learning history. Students compensate in places that they might feel they are deficient in their education. This compensation can also be affected by their social context and overall attitude towards learning or the subject matter being studied (Lawson, 2015). If a student has had a bad experience with a subject or with something that contributes to a subject, they may feel defeated before they come through the classroom door. Many of this author's financial accounting students have had an unpleasant experience with a math course in their past. This immediately shapes their opinion of accounting before they have stepped through the classroom door. This adds to the challenge of teaching across disciplines.

### *Learning Domains*

"Learning domains help specify learning objectives for various kinds of learning in both syllabus design and lesson plans" (Lawson, 2015, p. 61). While there are different learning domains, the most well-known is Bloom's tax-

onomy. Bloom's taxonomy provides a way for professors to think through course design and planning (Lawson, 2015). According to Lawson (2015), instructors need to remember to move through the taxonomy from knowledge to evaluation throughout the student's overall curriculum.

Bloom's taxonomy is the learning domain that this author has had the most experience within course design. Thinking about Bloom's taxonomy through the context of teaching a student about God's love changes the thinking surrounding Bloom's taxonomy. Lawson (2015) believes that it can assist in Christian education as students move from knowledge or recall to evaluation or discernment about value (Lawson, 2015). Using Bloom's taxonomy can help educators make sure they have activities that will help students understand, use, break down, and reassemble their thoughts about God and his love.

### *Hierarchy of Need*

"Hierarchy of Need isolates both inhibiting and motivating factors that affect student readiness to learn" (Lawson, 2015, p. 61). This theory, which was developed by Abraham Maslow in 1954, seeks to explain the variations that can exist between students in motivation and development (Lawson, 2015). Maslow's Hierarchy starts with physiological needs, such as food and shelter on the lowest level. After physiological needs are met, safety needs and then love and belongingness needs can be met. The point of Maslow's Hierarchy is that a person cannot move on to meet higher-level needs until lower-level needs are met. When thinking through this learning theory, educators must remember that sometimes students struggle through issues that cannot be seen. A Christian educator has the responsibility to help those students come through those demanding situations, if possible. This can help professors to understand their students a little better. If a student has not eaten or is worried about a concern with their family, they might not be as motivated in class (Lawson, 2015).

If students are not eating properly, they can start to suffer from poor nutrition, and inadequate nutrition does not lead to well-prepared students. Until the fall of 2019, the dining commons at Greenville University consisted only of large round tables that seated eight to ten people. When considering a redesign of the Dining Commons, a professor in conjunction with Community Life and the university noticed that there was a lack of students eating in the commons. A group of students was tasked with diving into why and helping to redesign the space. The group of students conducted a massive student survey about eating on campus (Middleton et al., 2018). When students were asked, "True or False: I have skipped at least one meal in the Dining

Commons because I did not have someone to sit with,” the group found that 61.67% of students answered true. To combat this issue, the university redesigned the dining commons with multiple types of seating. This included multiple types of small group seating from booths, bar seating, and standing tables to tables that seat from four to twelve people. A follow-up study has not yet been completed to see if this has lowered the percentage of students who do not eat in the dining commons due to the seating arrangements.

### RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are at the core of the Christian faith. A Christian's relationship with God speaks volumes about how they view God's love. Jesus also commanded us to love each other as he loves us. Relationships are mentioned 52 times in the New Testament alone (Lawson, 2015). Relationships show God's love to others. As discussed above, finding ways to show God's love is at the core of a Christian professor's and a Christian institution's responsibilities.

Christian professors have the responsibility of managing relationships with students. “The student's perception of you, as a Christian teacher, is the platform from which you minister. Your behavior inside the classroom sets up the opportunity to minister outside the classroom” (Lawson, 2015, p. 225). Lawson (2015) suggests designing your first interactions with students in a way that promotes encounters and interactions. His suggestions include carefully introducing yourself by talking about more than your credentials, showing personal interest in your students by providing a getting-to-know-you form, letting your office be a reflection of yourself, and practicing the art of conversation by learning more about your students at each meeting.

Lawson (2015) also discusses relating to students in online settings. It is easy to invite an on-campus student to come by your office to chat about a paper or homework, but what happens when the student is hundreds or thousands of miles away. The easy answer here is email (University of Minnesota, 2015). Encouraging students to contact professors via email makes sense as it is one of the primary ways that businesses communicate in house and with clients.

However, the world today is dominated by social media (Malesky & Peters, 2012). Lawson (2015) suggests using social media as a way to contact students. Greenville University has encouraged professors to text and contact students through social media. This author firmly believes that while calling or emailing a student is appropriate, contacting a student on social media is inappropriate. Social media interaction crosses a line of friendship that can “lead

to an inappropriate and exploitive dual relationship or, at the very least, expose the faculty member to personal information about the student that he or she might not otherwise have accessed” (Malesky & Peters, 2012). There is no easy answer to the social media question. The most important aspect to remember is developing a relationship with students that encourages them to grow to love God as they come to learn more about their career path.

### KEEPING THE PIECES IN PLACE

In the preceding paragraphs, the discussion centers around three overarching aspects of Lawson's (2015) *The Professor's Puzzle: Teaching in Christian Academic*. Lawson's (2015) book is full of ideas that can help the Christian professor better integrate God's love into their courses. It creates a space where instructors can critically look at how to present the courses that they teach and how they interact with their students. While integrating God's love may be difficult in courses, it is essential to make sure that this theme is evident throughout the courses taught at a Christian university.

### REFERENCES

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