Master of Letters in Organizational Leadership

Capstone Reflection

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**Introduction**

After our three children were born, I noticed that much of what was being taught in their public school had little to do with traditional academics. I decided to run for school board, thinking I could change things. In the mid-1990s, the problems paled in comparison to today's issues. I soon found I was only positioned and trained to be a rubber stamper for a larger agenda.

Along with other parents, I started a grass-roots education organization in Minnesota that eventually grew to a mailing list of 33,000 addresses. We then provided the state-by-state prototype to sound the alarm on top-down indoctrination education. After fifteen years of speaking across Minnesota and the Midwest, I was hired by a member of Congress as her Legislative Director to oversee education policy, among other issues. Upon her retirement in 2015, realizing there was no stopping the radical federal and union plan for public education, we opened Genesis Classical Academy (GCA), a private, Christian classical school in Winnebago, MN.

As the Headmaster of GCA, I continuously seek new sources of revenue above the insufficient tuition. One day, I heard about Robert Vickers, who was nationally renowned for helping nonprofits raise money by soliciting foundations, private donors, and large corporations and teaching strategic planning. Our school decided to sponsor him at our location. He had come from a rather lengthy illness and had been out of circulation for some time. He had alum friends through Omega Graduate School (OGS), including President Dr. Geiger, Dean of Students Dr. Hughes, and Dr. Robert Woodward. They, too, were on a mission to find new funding sources for OGS.

After discovering that Mr. Vickers would be doing a rare event and not wanting to miss it, the OGS crew hopped on a plane and flew into Minnesota in less than 24 hours. I remember lending Dr. Hughes some clothing because they left Tennessee in such a hurry. We helped arrange transportation from the airport to our town of 1400, two hours south of the MSP airport, and get them rooms in the only hotel within miles of our school. These three incredible people and I quickly became good friends.

At the end of the day's event, I drove them back to their hotel. It was raining, and before they went in, we sat in the small rental car and talked. We talked about our life journeys, our mature ages, and the state of the world. We prayed for some time. Then, they asked me why I

had never furthered my education beyond an AAS and B.A. degree. They knew my heart's desire to have credentials that matched my rich life experiences and responsibilities. The 2019 fall semester registration was closing in about a week. After dropping them off, I made one of the most impactful decisions of my life: At age 62, I would enroll in the Master of Letters in Organizational Leadership program at OGS. It would not change my financial and positional standing at my job, and I may never capitalize on the credentials, but I had to do it for me. I realize that the title of "Master” doesn’t have the same standing as it once did, but I didn’t think I would ever make it to “Doctor” before my life ran out, so I sought the MLitt degree.

Over the next week, I would amass hundreds of documents, qualified references, and other enrollment documentation to substantiate credit for 9 hours of advanced standing to complete Core C. I quickly made travel arrangements to Dayton, TN. What was supposed to be a two-year or less course of study has taken me almost four. Who would have known that the demands of the Headmaster and growing a school through twelfth grade, two years of Covid craziness and shut-downs, and the fallacies of equity and gender-based education would bear on our lives with a vengeance?

This eternal quest for truth, goodness, and beauty through a genuine academic journey brought me to OGS. Serving in leadership without formal training or education left me with many questions and few resources. I was thrilled to see that others at OGS felt the same way. The Organizational Leadership course provided a framework to restructure each area of my position to serve better Genesis Classical Academy, our staff of 30, our students and families, and myself. I found myself communicating (in writing and speech) more professionally, working to create passion and trust for our mission and vision, learning to coach and mentor and be coached and mentored with a more mature understanding of the various worldviews that come into play in educational agendas.

Our school has grown from around 50 students to 120 over the last four years. We have purchased a new building and are in the process of adding a second campus. We have added the Post-Secondary Education option for our juniors and seniors, and we have become a significant employer in the small community. We bring in students from as far out as 45 miles, and even with a teacher shortage, we have been able to get and retain good teachers. My OGS education is utilized every day to survive and thrive. Praise the Lord for His goodness.

This capstone reflection paper aims to integrate and contextualize essential elements from the degree program with my area of professional interest: elementary and secondary education.

**Integration of Course Essential Elements**

The following subsections will provide a bird’s eye view of some of the courses integrated into the OGS MLitt in Organizational Behavior program and some of my key insights from the course essentials.

**Reflection on Foundations of Human Behavior**

Starting with "Foundations of Human Behavior" laid the perfect foundation for the rest of our courses at OGS. We began by comparing and contrasting worldviews and applying them to understand human thinking.

Our worldview is what we conceive the world to be like – heavily influenced by ideas, principles, values, experiences, social norms, the interpretation of language, and spiritual concepts. Our worldview also provides a rudder for determining right and wrong and may or may not include a god. After a deeper examination of my worldview, I could more clearly define my purpose and understand others.

A worldview is philosophical, but that does not mean it is well thought out. Distorted views such as cultural Marxism, taught through today's Critical Race Theory, and secularism replaced God's divine plan with human reasoning.

Within my scope of work educating preschoolers through seniors and the fear of the Lord being the beginning of their understanding, I often find myself with an opposing worldview to what is educationally popular at the time. One of today's most famous catchphrases is "social-emotional learning" (SEL). It is taught in teaching colleges, even Christian, to engineer children's character socially. In a world of violent and deviant behavior, where people lack the character once learned at home and in Sunday School, SEL is the government's response to teaching students how to act socially, show empathy, respect diversity, and establish new moral values. SEL laid the groundwork for sowing Critical Race Ideology, now mandated by law in M.N. in every course of every grade, every day.

This course also examined my most challenging worldview as an educational leader: postmodernism (PM). PM is a complicated worldview because science is meaningless, and nothing exists, so existence is subject to our interpretation. PM is the greatest threat to education for three reasons: no absolute truth, no objective knowledge, and no God.

Genesis Classical Academy provides an antithetical alternative to the secularist and postmodernist worldviews. We meet these beasts head-on. "When we understand God’s nature and character, and when we acknowledge Christ’s atoning sacrifice, the Christian worldview gains tremendous explanatory ad transformative power…" (Myers & Noebel, 2015, p. 41). This course strengthened my fortitude in opposing these worldviews and identifying more specific reasons why they directly attack what we try to teach each day. I am also more able to identify new educational winds that promote ungodly worldviews. At OGS, a more in-depth study of constructivism, PM, and secular humanism has made it easier to identify their earmarks when they come down the educational pike through curriculum, state standards, and legislation.

**Reflection on Human Relations Skills in a Pluralistic Society**

Human Relation Skills in a Pluralistic Society was more of a challenging course for me for two reasons: 1. I live in a primarily white, rural small community in southern Minnesota, and 2. I am not currently in a position that demands racial or minority conflict resolution. In my previous work in Congress in Washington, D.C., there was daily conflict. That was almost a decade ago, and it has worsened. If I went to the Congressional gift shop to buy something, and a person of color, especially a woman, was working the till I was completely ignored at the checkout while others received help. It was frustrating, and I had no voice. It was a new experience. In our OGS Zoom classroom discussions with people from various places in the U.S., I found myself at a loss for words as they expressed, in no uncertain terms, the prejudice they felt. I felt myself being targeted without even being known. I found working in the breakout groups hard and operated on as low a profile as possible. I was totally out of my element, and the conversation was one-sided.

 Here in southern M.N., there is a much more harmonious living, and race, color, and culture are not so offensive to one another. Where I live, we have a relatively large population of Hispanic families, and together, we have learned to respect each other's values and cultural differences while finding opportunities to intersect and work toward the same goals. We even intentionally learn Spanish. With the teaching of Critical Race Theory being mandated in our public schools, we see a resurgence of racial slurs, names, and violent actions from all directions.

I believe that this OGS course was an important one. How do we navigate peacefully in a world with opposing values and cultural differences, say nothing of opposing worldviews? While calling for unification, a movement based on "equity" rather than "equality" is polarizing our people and encouraging a victimhood mentality to the point of violence. Add the LGBTQI piece, and America's values are being redrawn.

In a fast-paced world, we often judge based on a glance, skin color, accent, or expression rather than taking the time to understand each other. Respect must be our starting point. “Respect serves as the basis for our attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral orientation toward people who have diverse values” (Glover & Friedman, 2015, Forward).

Healthy human relations are based on relationships. I took this class during the Covid lockdowns when relationships were broken and waning. We all agreed that we must interact with people for a healthy pluralistic society. We must enter the workplace, schools, governmental institutions, and charities to find a colorful mixture of ideas, opinions, cultural practices, traditions, and values. The Bible says in Jeremiah 29:11,"'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"' (NIV). If there is a perfect plan for every human being, there must be a bigger universal plan that everyone works together. "Christ provides the grace and opportunity to have our identities changed back from being takers to being the givers he created us to be. When that happens to individuals, communities, and even nations, cultures are transformed for the good” (Myers, 2017, p. 7).

This course brought to the forefront the depth of the issue at hand and how uncomfortable I was with it. I have learned that studying other cultures, asking questions, and listening are vital, especially in the workplace. We must continually hone our human relations skills as they are essential to a peaceful, cohesive, pluralistic society.

**Reflection on Mentoring and Coaching**

One of my favorite courses was Mentoring and Coaching in Leadership. It helped me to know just how much I didn't know. Centric to the course was the defining and contrasting of mentoring and coaching. Interestingly, I had just signed a contract with Bethel University to mentor and coach one of our employees in her Principal certification program for her degree. It was up to me to create a mentoring program based on their requirements, meet regularly with the employee to discuss goals and objectives, measure progress, and overall evaluate. OL707 could not have come at a better time.

This course helped me to understand the differences and similarities of the terms: "mentor" and "coach." Many times, one person can be in the position of both. Mentors, selected by an individual, have no agenda, have perceived value and influence, and support the individual's life and personal behavior through affirmation and learning. Coaches with proven performance have a specific plan for a pre-selected individual/s that is task-related and comes with the job. More often than not, mentoring and coaching go hand in hand. Mentoring is usually long-term, while coaching has a more defined time frame. In each course at OGS, effective leadership was the primary objective, and it is only possible to lead with the traits of a mentor and the skills of a coach or knowing someone who does.

The shortage of teachers and solid Christian leaders in the role of mentor or coach may explain why American primary and secondary education is arguably on life support. In the case of the private, Christian classical school, the realm that I work in, the same challenges exist to finding and making good Biblical leaders through mentoring and coaching. Our teachers often come in without training in the field or level we need. In that case, they are coached by other staff. In other instances, they come from a public school setting and must be "untrained" in some respects.

In the case of the principal in training: minimal coaching was necessary as she had all the skills to build spreadsheets and collect and analyze data. But she still needed mentoring. She needed to move in her positional standing, which couldn't happen overnight. She needed to learn traits and habits more so than skills. She needed to be introduced and given a "canopy" of respect by association with her mentor.

I perused a large selection of primary sources for this course because there is a great deal of excellent information on this topic. OGS also had tons of references and other course supports. Our class discussions were robust, and everyone had many personal stories. Select takeaways: I need to ensure my staff is positioned where they flourish, not just in the available opening. I was also reminded that ongoing teacher development, mentoring, and coaching are not optional. It is survival. Taking time to identify missing skills or peer support can be the difference between retaining a good teacher and having a continual turnover.

Reflection on Fundraising in Nonprofit Organizations

Fundraising has been one of my primary responsibilities as the leader of four education-related nonprofit organizations over the last 25 years. I was excited to take this course and exchange sources and ideas. As mentioned in my opening statement, the quest for new dollars and financial planning were the impetus for attending OGS in the first place. Once again,

this fundraising course came in the perfect season when our school was creating a plan for expansion to include more classrooms and a multipurpose building (gym/stage/conference center).

OL 706 started with the theological, philosophical, and ethical principles of financial stewardship and expanded through steps to creating a fundraising plan. In my case, I developed a capital campaign for a $6 million project.

First, as the Word says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1 ESV). He is always the starting point, and working outside His will and plan doesn't do any good. This has been made very clear to me in the last nine years as Headmaster of Genesis Classical Academy when starting a school from scratch. While writing the plan, I also learned the importance of community and partnership. We cannot go it alone. We were meant to work as a body, and fundraising can unite a group of people through a similar set of beliefs and values and solidify the mission and purpose of the organization. It is a win-win operation.

Since the plan's development, we were able to get our ground surveyed, hire an architectural firm to develop a set of drawings for the finished project, and hold steering committee meetings to identify funding sources and further our strategic plan. The building isn't built yet, but it will happen in God's time.

The OGS fundraising course provided so much more than I can identify here, including strategies to upgrade donors, multiple avenues for fundraising, setting up foundations, writing strategic plans, hiring development directors (something in our future), and how to be

blessed by giving. So many of these course elements applied to my annual budgeting and supplementing tuition shortfalls and scholarships.

**Reflection on Transformational Leadership: Moral Leadership**

OL703 Transformational Leadership: Moral Leadership was the foundation for everything I learned through the MLitt Organizational Leadership program. I began looking at everything I did through a transformational lens, asking, "Have I built a culture of trust, passion, partnership, and professionalism at Genesis Classical Academy, where staff and even our students and families feel ownership, pride, and fulfillment? Have I been a good 'pastor?' Has good leadership led to exemplary Christ-filled, character-building, and classical education?" I had not even considered some of these concepts, let alone personally thought that I could. Transformational Leadership: Moral Leadership was my favorite course.

After starting this course four years ago, I took a significant turn in my approach to leadership as I worked through the Organizational Leadership cores. I felt that I was able to move from situational leadership to a combination of transactional, where I contracted with staff to perform a particular task, such as teaching a specific grade based on a set of expectations and rewards, and transformational, where relationships are established and based on trust, sharing the same passion for the “Christ, Character, and Classical” mission and vision of our school, and where the staff integrates the leader’s goals and values.

As we added a grade a year, navigated through Covid, faced the continual need for financial support, and struggled with teacher shortages, our mission and vision have not changed, but policies and procedures have. "Good leaders adapt. They shift. They don't remain static because they know the world around them does not remain static. This has always been true, but it's never been more obvious than today, nor has the ability to change quickly been more important. And when I say good leaders adapt, I don't mean that they conform" (Maxwell, 2019, p. 5). The world has indeed not remained static. In the short years since I entered OGS, critical race theory, comprehensive sex ed, cultural competency, social-emotional learning, gender fluidity, Title IX violations, and equity vs. equality doctrines have become the new public educational foundation. As private Christian school administrators, we have had to "gird our loins" and navigate the same world without conforming to it. Godly leadership is vital to the wisdom it takes to stand and stay standing.

We, as leaders, cannot treat people as sheep that mindlessly follow us. But a seasoned transformational leader will nurture, develop, and encourage employees to think on their feet and make decisions, even with uncertain information, through a Biblical lens. We must also remember that what we say and do is being watched and imitated. The following quote sums things up nicely: "The true measure of leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less. Margaret Thatcher, the former British prime minister, observed, 'Being in power is like being a lady. If you have to tell people you are, you aren't (Maxwell, 2007, p. 16).

After taking OL703, I critiqued my leadership style, considering situational, transactional, and transformational types. I immediately began to implement a transformational approach to reset the culture and climate of our organization through teacher/staff meetings, individual conversations, and my public actions and words. As a result, our staff worries less about pay and benefits and more about outcomes in the lives of the children they teach. They also support and pray for me.

**Reflection on Communications and Conflict**

Communication consists of four parts: coordinate action, exchange information, and meaning, make decisions, and express feelings and emotions. (Griffin & Moorhead, 2009, p. 279). Effective communication is a talent, a high standard, and a forever goal. It was hard not to be under great conviction while working through this class. We had many deep experiential discussions about our failures in effective communication and shared ideas about our successes.

Good day-by-day administrative communication with teachers and parents means successful student outcomes. "Researchers have identified communication as one of the most important variables in promoting positive family–school relations (Gartmeier et al., 2016; Park & Holloway, 2018), and studies show that students do better in school when parents and teachers communicate frequently (Learning et al.)" (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021, p. 11). Loss of trust is at risk when I have waited too long to get out an update or newsletter. Everything breaks down when they are not repeatedly reassured, brought up to date, pre-informed, or consulted. They start talking amongst themselves. My door is always open, but they prefer talking to the first person they meet rather than calling me to get information. My team and I are responsible for actively trying to "over-communicate" rather than under-communicate. My teachers, especially, do not like surprises, and each of them has preferred means of communication. The course outlines various communication types and styles, and knowing another person's preferred communication method is the key to a great, long-lasting relationship.

Through this course, we addressed how communication can cause and resolve conflict. We also discussed the vital role that listening plays in effective communication. We even discussed different types of listening. I was under conviction when we addressed the listener who uses their non-verbal time to think of their response rather than truly concentrate on what the person is saying. Also, understanding how personality and culture affect communication led me to do outside research on personality types and cultural communication mores. Understanding how to start with smaller groups to influence the messaging of the overall larger group has also been a help to me with trying to change a policy or procedure that has been in place for a long time.

In most cases, misunderstandings, lack of support, conflict, offense, or the feeling of being taken for granted can be traced back to poor or no communication. This course is so crucial to success as a leader. Without good communication, a leader will not have anyone left to lead.

**Synthesis**

The MLitt program of organizational leadership was a career and life-changing journey. My motivation for entering the program was to align my credentials with my life experiences. But the experience has become so much more than that. As Headmaster, a Master's Degree is preferred, but I entered my position with an AAS in graphic design and a B.A. in studio art. My formal education did not begin to measure up to my informal life experiences of being a multi-business owner, real estate agent, insurance agent, legislative director for a member of Congress, President, and founder of three education and child-advocacy nonprofits. When I came into the program, I thought it would be a breeze because I have been there and have already done that. However, I immediately found that not only was I bitterly wrong, but I was also out-classed by the people around me. They were a fantastic group of students returning for additional training; some were in leadership positions far above mine.

Starting in 2019, I planned to finish the MLitt program in less than two years, but I skipped some semesters, picked up some, and will receive my degree in September of 2023. Life has been very challenging, but OGS has worked with me all along the way to encourage my continuance. Each time I picked up another course, I felt at home - that I had never left. The intersection between our studies was the dedicated, Spirit-filled staff and the continual message that leadership begins with knowing God and following His plan for your life.

Each course led me to another level of professionalism. Some courses built on what I already knew and was doing but also gave me a new understanding through intense research and learning from other great leaders.

A valuable benefit of the program is that it stimulated my love of continuing education. I loved the courses and schedule and would like to move on with a doctorate program, but my life is running out. Ironically, in just a month, and as I train my replacement, I will finally attain the credentials that my position as Headmaster called for nine years ago.

**Spiritual, Social, and Emotional Growth**

Being able to participate in a program where Biblical applications are woven through the curriculum means that we covered information and received the Truth. Our discussions were so rich because they included the natural and the supernatural. We approached communication, plurality, and leadership through a Biblical lens – "love God and love each other." It is the basis for authentic transformational leadership, where morality is essential.

As a student who studied on the original OGS campus for two cores with other students, friendships were made with our faith being a strong commonality. There was always prayer, so each class period was blessed. That is why there was greater understanding and deeper discussions. I miss them.

Even before attending OGS, I knew the value of following the call of God on your life rather than trying to figure out your own way. Often, He has placed me in positions where credentials were needed for the job but overlooked. Nevertheless, at OGS, I found others who understood the same aspect of a "calling" and were changing occupations, positions, or locations even in mid-life or senior years. OGS encouraged education continuance at any age. They encouraged our ministry and were excited to talk about it. In many cases, OGS gave me an outlet to befriend and communicate with others who felt like me and had similar missions in life. It also provided a fertile environment to exchange ideas and pray for one another.

My journey to OGS started with a prayer in a small car with OGS staff and alums on a rainy day, and prayer carried me through the program. The Lord had covered me in positions of leadership with no formal training. With ever-increasing responsibility and higher stakes, the OGS course came as a divine appointment. There was no encouragement on this end, only spiritual opposition. However, God has prevailed, and once again, I am reminded of His timing and faithfulness. This experience has enhanced my faith, built my confidence in His will for my life, and again proved His faithfulness to complete the things He begins.

**Conclusion**

I cannot overstate the benefits of the tutorial approach: an intense week of group study with a scholarly teacher and the systematic process of moving from the 20-day paper, where a student articulates thoughts about the course content, to the 60-day developmental reading paper requiring the student to attain a level of academic competency concerning the course material, to the 100-day assignment where the student can formulate proof of understanding the content with scholarship.

At the end of my first core, I could look at my work with pride. I have gone back to read my papers for information refreshment, and I am impressed, over and over again, with the knowledge gleaned from the instruction, research, and professional documentation. I wish the papers from the other students in my class were available to read. If they were published, we could benefit from each other's experiences and evaluation of each course topic. There is much to learn from others on the same journey.

 I doubt anyone will notice a different Headmaster from one day to the day after this woman receives her MLitt degree. Still, I know that she will feel incredible satisfaction in her heart, even though those closest to her do not understand her intense need for information and meaning in life.

 My career has been blessed by the OGS Master of Letters in Organizational Leadership program. It has made my job easier, explained things I did not understand, and given me more confidence in decision-making. I will be the MC at a large education conference in Minneapolis this fall. They asked me, not because of my credentials or lack thereof, but because of my life’s work protecting children and their education. But I will be honored to be able to say in my biography, “Renée T. Doyle has a Master of Letters Degree in Organizational Leadership.” At 67 years old, it has been a long time coming, and I am so grateful to God and the staff and alums of OGS for granting my dream.

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