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Source: *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 39, No. 4/5 (October 2008), pp. 656-665

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24439698>

Accessed: 26-04-2020 09:08 UTC

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The Philosopher as Teacher

AUGUSTINE'S ADVICE FOR COLLEGE TEACHERS: EVER ANCIENT, EVER NEW

JOHN IMMERWAHR

Abstract: St. Augustine's short treatise *Instructing Beginners in Faith* (*De Catechizandis Rudibus*) is one of his less well known works, but it provides some fascinating insights on pedagogy that are applicable to college teaching. For Augustine, education is best understood as a relationship of love, where teacher and learner function in a reciprocal system. If the teacher is enthusiastic, the students respond, drawing even more energy from the teacher. If the teacher is dull, or if the students are unresponsive, the learning environment spirals downward. Augustine's relational analysis allows him to diagnose and prescribe cures for some of the problems contemporary college and university teachers often encounter in their classrooms.

Keywords: *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, Augustine, teaching, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*.

Sixteen hundred years ago a deacon wrote to his bishop asking for advice about what to say to candidates who wished to become Christians. The bishop, as was his custom, gave more than he was asked for, and explained not only *what* to say but also *how* to say it. The deacon asked for content, in other words, but the bishop—we know him today as St. Augustine of Hippo—gave him the pedagogy as well. The result is the treatise called *Instructing Beginners in Faith* (*De Catechizandis Rudibus*).¹ This work has received much less attention than *On the Teacher* and *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine's other works on education, and it certainly lacks their philosophical and theological heft.² Nonetheless, *Instructing*

¹ I use the edition translated by Raymond Canning and edited by Boniface Ramsey (2006). The work appears to have been written sometime between 400 and 405; see Canning's introduction, pp. 9–10, for a discussion of the dating. My references indicate section and paragraph number. I am indebted to Phil Carey and Jonathan Yates for comments on an earlier draft of this essay. The phrase in the subtitle, "ever ancient, ever new," is adapted from Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.4.4.

² Canning's introduction to *Instructing Beginners* gives references to several modern scholars who have commented on this work (mostly on its religious context), but Canning

Beginners is interesting in its own right because it shows us a more practical side of Augustine. Indeed, the pedagogical problems that Augustine wrestled with and the solutions he proposes will still resonate with the experience of many contemporary college and university faculty members.

For obvious reasons, contemporary discussions of postsecondary education seldom speak of the relationship between learner and teacher, especially in sentences that contain the word “love.” As Peter Beidler and Rosemarie Tong say, “We all know about such love, but we seem never to talk about it” (1991, 54). Augustine has no such qualms. For him, the relationship between the teacher and the learner is at the heart of education, and love, rightly understood, is the energizing force. When the relationship is strong and positive, both the teacher and the learner work together to create real learning. Conversely, the problems that often arise with adult learners—lack of motivation, unresponsiveness, and lethargy—can only be addressed by mending the relationship. Augustine’s unique vision can help us rethink and reframe some issues in contemporary college teaching.

A Disclaimer

In this essay I try to abstract Augustinian principles and apply them to the situation of contemporary college professors. The results are, I hope, interesting and provocative, but we also need to keep in mind how different Augustine’s context is. While most readers of this article will be thinking of a secularized higher education environment, with students of all walks of faith, Augustine was speaking about candidates who would soon become his brothers and sisters in Christ. When Augustine speaks of “love” and “friendship,” he understands these terms in a rich theological context foreign to most of us today. So while the principles I describe are certainly inspired by a reading of Augustine, some Augustine scholars might say that the context is so different that they could hardly be called Augustinian principles. A full discussion of the theological dimension of Augustine’s understanding of teaching would, at any rate, require a much different and longer treatment.

Augustine’s Relational/Affective Analysis

Two ideas permeate many of Augustine’s works, and we find both of them in *Instructing Beginners*. On the one hand, Augustine often focuses on themes of relationship, friendship, dialogue, and community. A

points out that there is not a single reference to it in Hughes and Paffenroth 2000. I also find no reference to *Instructing Beginners* in the special issue of *Metaphilosophy* devoted to a “Symposium on Augustine and Teaching” (1998), nor any in several other recent discussions of Augustine’s theory of education, such as Valentine 2002, Harrison 1998, and Quinn 1998.

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second, equally prominent Augustinian motif is the primacy of love for understanding human nature. It is not surprising, then, that *Instructing Beginners* understands education as a relationship of love between the teacher and the learner.

The Teacher-Learner Relationship

Augustine sees both teacher and learner as functioning in a reciprocal and dynamic relationship, where each is constantly influencing the other. He illustrates this from his own teaching practice: "I can testify to you from my own experience that I am swayed now in one way, now in another, according as the person that I see before me to receive instruction is learned or lacking in skill, a fellow citizen or a stranger, rich or poor, an ordinary citizen or a man of rank holding a powerful position, a person from this or that family, of this or that age or sex, coming from this or that school of philosophy, or from this or that common error. And it is in keeping with these various influences that my actual address opens and moves forward and comes to a close" (15.23).

The emphasis on the relationship guides Augustine's analysis of what makes a classroom work well or poorly. Here is his diagnosis of what can go wrong; the teacher begins the class with enormous enthusiasm for the ideas to be presented, but somehow the words fail to convey that excitement to the students, who then are lukewarm in their response. Then, of course, the teacher senses that the students are not responding, and the situation starts to deteriorate: "We feel distressed at our failure and, like people expending effort to no avail, we become limp with disgust and, as a result of this very disgust, our speech becomes even more sluggish and colorless" (2.3). As Augustine reminds us, when "we see no reaction from our hearer, it is really tiring to continue speaking right to the end of the allotted time" (13.18). The problem is not just with the teacher or the students but in the interaction between teacher and learner.

This focus on the relationship also explains an important factor in effective teaching. Augustine writes that he himself is often "depressed" because what he presents does not seem to capture the excitement that the ideas have in his own mind (2.3). What saves the situation is the response from the other partner in the teacher-learner relationship: "For me, however, the enthusiasm of those who want to hear me is often an indication that my speech is not as dull as I think. Also, from the enjoyment with which they listen I see that the hearers derive some advantage from my words. And so I take great care not to fall short in offering this service, because I see that what I am offering is being received by them with approval" (2.4). Here, in other words, the positive reception of the students gives encouragement to the teacher, which then helps the teacher become more effective.

Augustine is really describing what every teacher knows already, that a positive response from our students helps us be more effective as teachers. Augustine puts it this way: "And, in actual fact, we are given a much more appreciative hearing when we ourselves enjoy performing our task. Then the texture of our speech is suffused with the very delight that we take in speaking, and our words flow more easily and more pleasingly" (2.4). Again, teacher and learner function in a dynamic psychological system.

Augustine does *not* believe that teachers should seek to have their students like them as a means of personal gratification; we should not be "impatient to receive human commendation" (10.14). This is not about getting glowing student evaluations to make us feel better about ourselves. But the reality is that if our students do not find our instruction appealing, we as teachers will "grow discouraged and, in the very midst of the instruction . . . begin to falter and feel ground down because all our effort seems to be for nothing" (10.14). The students should like us, not to make us feel better about ourselves, but to make us better teachers and to make them better learners.

For Augustine, then, teachers and learners coexist in a relationship characterized by what systems theorists call positive and negative feedback loops. If things go well, each side gives the other positive feedback, and the system improves. If the teacher is dull or the students unresponsive, the relationship may spiral downward in a negative feedback loop.

The Primacy of Love

For Augustine, the clearest example of a reciprocal relationship is love. More than anything else, love from one person has the power to evoke love in others: "There is quite obviously no stronger motive for love, either in its initial stage or in its growth, than for the person who does not yet love to discover that he is loved, and for the person who is first to love to hope that his love can be reciprocated or to have clear signs that it already is so" (4.7). Conversely, nothing can cool love faster than the perception that it is not reciprocated: "[Suppose] our friends . . . think that we do not love them, or that we love them less than they love us. If they come to believe this, they will be cooler in that love which people enjoy for one another in the exchanges of a close friendship" (4.7). This reciprocal relationship of love occurs in all kinds of relationships. As humans, we cannot resist the power of love in any relationship, and teachers naturally want to be loved by their students, and vice versa.

This means that what really makes the teacher-learner relationship work is reciprocal love, both between teacher and learner and between them and what they are learning. At various places, Augustine compares the love of a teacher for a student to the love of God for humanity and of parents for their children (10.15). Augustine concludes his analysis with a

description of how love inflames the work of the entire educational setting: “[We will] find ourselves in the right frame of mind to give the introductory instruction. Fluent and cheerful words will then stream out from an abundance of love and be drunk in with pleasure. For it is not so much I who say these words to you as it is love itself that says them to us all” (14.22). The successful classroom, for Augustine, is literally a “love fest.”

Implications of Augustine’s Perspective

At least three suggestions for contemporary college professors flow from Augustine’s analysis:

1. The Hardest Part of Teaching Is Not the Content but the Creating of a Mutually Reinforcing Relationship in the Classroom

As teachers, we sometimes have so much content to cover that the class experience suffers. While Augustine would admire our love of truth, he also tells us that our first task is to create a positive and “cheerful” relationship. If we fail at that, even the most impeccable content will not reach the students:

Hence the difficult part of our task is not in giving rules about where to begin and where to end the historical exposition in which the content of faith is communicated; or about how the historical exposition should be adapted to circumstances, so as to be shorter at one time, longer at another, yet at all times perfectly complete; or about when to use the shorter and when the longer form. No, our greatest concern is much more about how to make it possible for those who offer instruction in faith to do so with joy. For the more they succeed in this, the more appealing they will be. . . . But for cheerfulness to be present at the opportune time depends on the compassion of the one whose teaching this is. (2.4)

It is not that Augustine trivializes content; indeed, Augustine writes out the entire script for what he thinks should be said in the instruction of the candidates, but he also tells his correspondent that he “would learn more by watching and listening” the way Augustine actually delivers a presentation than he will by merely reading what Augustine has written (15.23).

2. We Need to Know Our Students and to Let Them Know Us

If the relationship between teacher and learner is the primary factor for success in student learning, the teacher cannot be successful without knowing the student, and vice versa. As mentioned previously, Augustine adapted his own teaching to the educational, economic, and demographic background of his students (15.23). Augustine suggests learning about the students’ motivation; “if there is no one else to give us this information, we have to question the newcomer himself, so that we can then build the introduction to our address around the replies that he has given” (5.9),

and we should also “ask about the factors that have influenced” the student to seek instruction (8.12). Augustine, in other words, would resonate with Ken Bain’s observation that “the best teachers try to find out as much as possible about their students” (1994, 157).

In Augustine’s context of individuals seeking to become members of the church, of course, the best way to get knowledge about students was to ask them or people who knew them. Today we function in large institutions, and we would hardly be comfortable with doing personal background checks on our students, even if we could do so. We do, however, have a great deal of research on the general characteristics of students, concerning such matters as intellectual development, learning styles, the generational characteristics of different age groups, and the pedagogical issues created by differences in gender, race or ethnicity, and disabilities. Perhaps it is not too far from the spirit of Augustine to suggest that as teachers we need to familiarize ourselves with some of this research.³

In a relationship of love, each party needs to know something about the other, and so our students need to know about us as well. Although Augustine could assume that his teachers knew something about him, in today’s context he would most likely remind us that we must not hide behind a mask of impersonal professionalism. Instead, we should let our students know us as well. This is not to say that the class should be more about us than about the subject, but we can reveal selective portions of our own journey and commitments. Indeed, at least one study shows that the most effective teachers are those whom students perceive as “disclosing small facets of their personal lives in the classroom” (Ginsberg 2007, 5).

3. When Education Is Going Poorly, the Solution Is Often to Repair the Teacher-Learner Relationship

Educational problems can start with either partner in the relationship:

a. Student problems: Low motivation, lack of responsiveness, losing energy. Just as in today’s college classes, some of Augustine’s students were taking instruction not out of a sincere interest but “to secure advantages in this world or avoid the troubles of life” (5.9). To put it bluntly, even some of Augustine’s students were only in the course because it was a requirement. In addition to issues of motivation, Augustine dealt with students who were unresponsive (13.18). Other students started out strong but then lost energy as the instruction went down. Of this kind of student Augustine says, “He opens his mouth no longer to express approval but to yawn, and he makes it clear even despite himself that he wants to go away” (13.19). These behaviors are problematic not only because they are unpleasant but also because they will inevitably sap

³ For a summary of some of this research, see Immerwahr 2008.

energy from the teacher and create the downward spiral mentioned above.

Augustine's solutions have a remarkably contemporary ring. We must treat unmotivated students positively, acting as though they are sincerely interested, hoping that by imparting positive, infectious energy we "bring [the unmotivated student] to the point that he actually enjoys being the kind of person that he wishes to appear" (5.9).

Unresponsive students, Augustine tells us, may be inhibited by fear, natural shyness, or difficulty with the subject (13.18). Augustine tells us that we need to learn more about the students, to seek to understand the obstacles that prevent them from reacting. Ultimately, the best way to help a student become more interactive is by using "gentle encouragement" to "drive out the exaggerated fear that prevents him from making known where he stands" (13.18). We can "temper [the student's] shyness by instilling in him the value of our fraternal communion" (13.18). In short, we need to use our love and friendship to build up the student's self-esteem.

Augustine also has the usual tricks for students who lose energy. We should make a joke, spiced with "seemly good humor," tell a story, or make the class relevant to the student's "own situation so that, stung by solicitude for himself, he may become alert again" (13.19). By no means should we embarrass the student; rather, we should "win him over by our friendly tone" (3.19). Augustine also urges us to attend to the physical comfort of students, offering them a seat rather than requiring them (as was the custom) to stand (3.19). We can imagine today that he might advise opening the window, or ask the students to stand up and stretch for a moment. The solution to all of the problems, in one way or another, is to treat the student with more love, friendship, and kindness.

b. For the teacher: Learning to make the old things new. The main problem for teachers, as Augustine sees it, is that it is hard to bring the material down to the student's level without destroying our own enthusiasm for it, especially when we have to teach the same material over and over again (2.17).

Once again, the cure is to draw on the energy of our love for our students. If we love the students enough, we will learn to take delight in their responsiveness to the material. In a passage that reminds us what life was like before the invention of commercial baby food, Augustine compares the love of a teacher for a student with the love of a parent for an infant: "For a mother, there is more enjoyment in chewing food into tiny pieces and spitting them into her little son's mouth than in chewing and gulping down larger portions herself" (10.15). We need to find our own enjoyment, in other words, not in the intellectual nourishment of the ideas we are teaching, but in the response of the student.

In one of the most beautiful passages in *Instructing Beginners*, Augustine writes that if our love for our students is sufficient, even the most

familiar material will come alive for us in a new way: "The oft-repeated phrases will sound new to us also. For this feeling of compassion is so strong that, when our listeners are touched by us as we speak and we are touched by them as they learn, each of us comes to dwell in the other, and so they as it were speak in us what they hear, while we in some way learn in them what we teach" (12.17). There can be a joy, as Augustine explains, in showing a beloved friend the beautiful parts of the town where we live, even though we are see those sights every day. In the same way, if we love our students, we will learn to take delight in exposing them to these familiar ideas: "Our own enjoyment is revived by sharing in the enjoyment that others derive from seeing them for the first time. And this we experience the more intensely, the closer our friendship is with one another is, for the more the bond of love allows us to be present in others, the more what has grown old becomes new again in our own eyes as well" (12.17). If we find the deep well of compassion and love for our students, teaching the same material over and over again will no longer seem boring.

The Larger Theological Context

So far, we have discussed Augustine's theory of pedagogy purely in terms of technique. For Augustine, however, separating his pedagogical technique from its theological context would be incomplete and misleading. What energizes the kind of teaching that Augustine speaks of is the powerful blending of the love of the student *and* the even greater love of God; this teaching is exciting precisely because it involves instructing beginners in *faith*.⁴ Augustine found little joy in his secular teaching of rhetoric, which he described as teaching "word-chopping" (*Confessions* 5.8.14, 5.13.23, 9.5.13). What makes teaching a passion is not just technique but our love for truth, which for Augustine is ultimately our love for God. Phillip Carey traces these connections this way: "To put teaching and learning in the category of love is, for Augustine, to put it in the realm of ethics—for Augustinian ethics is, famously, an ethics of love" (2000, 63). And for Augustine it is impossible to live an ethical life that is not rooted in the love of God, and impossible to be a good teacher purely because of good technique.⁵ For Augustine, actions that seem good (without being grounded in faith) are "vacuous," and a teacher with superb technique who does not bring students toward God could be compared to a highly trained athlete who is "running with great power and at high speed, but off course" ("Exposition 2 of Psalm 31," 365).

⁴ For a discussion of *Instructing Beginners* that sets it in its theological context, see Howie 1969, 150–53.

⁵ In *Of Free Choice of the Will* Augustine writes that only a person who leads toward goodness can be called a teacher. If a person instructs in evil, "he is not a teacher; if he is a teacher, he cannot be evil" (bk. 1, chap. 1).

In defense of the procedure of reading a religious text for secular guidance, one could remark that Augustine himself did the same thing. In fact, it was precisely the search for technique that initially started him on his own religious journey. He tells us in *Confessions* that his quest was inspired by his reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*, which he initially read only as a way to hone "his verbal skills" (3.4.7). This pattern was repeated later in life in his encounter with his own teacher, Ambrose. Late in *Confessions*, Augustine tells us that he was originally drawn to Ambrose to learn rhetorical tricks, but then "the recognition that he was speaking the truth crept in at the same time, though only by slow degrees" (5.14.24).

Concluding Remarks

Augustine's way of talking about teaching and learning sounds strange to modern ears. Much of the writing on postsecondary education focuses either on student issues or on faculty techniques, but often students and faculty are treated in a kind of isolation from each other. Nonetheless, Augustine is surely correct that the relationship between teacher and learner is central to understanding effective education. It is also true that many teachers—especially the best ones—do love their students, evoke love in their students (both for the subject and for the teacher), and then are further inspired by that love. Beidler and Tong put it this way: "Is there a single one of us who did not, on the way to becoming a teacher, fall in love with some teacher we had? Is there a single one of us who has not, in one sense or another, fallen in love with one or more of our students, and had one or more of our students fall in love with us?" (54). Looking through Augustine's eyes makes it surprising how little we talk about love as a factor in higher education. Teachers do talk about favorite classes and students, and students are not shy as to their own preferences, but the circumstances of a modern university make it hard for us to articulate the importance of the relationship and the feelings of love. Augustine's perspective, then, can let us step outside our professionalism and legalism, to take a fresh look at the power of love to set our "hearts on fire" for wisdom and its rewards.⁶

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⁶ The "burning heart" is a symbol for Augustine in religious art; one textual reference is *Confessions* 3.4.7.

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