

# Augustinian Pedagogy

## Merrimack College Website - 2007

### Anton Pegis has called Saint Augustine of Hippo “the disciple of the love of God.”

For him, Augustine’s love of God is not a doctrine but a life, not an abstract analysis but a journey, not a theory but an experience. Likewise, Augustine does not provide us with a detailed methodology for teaching and learning (pedagogy), like Montessori. Rather, he provides us the directions of:

#### 1. Transforming Experiences: The Key to Learning

Augustine, in his “Confessions,” presents his experiences as transformational, often termed conversions (philosophical, intellectual, moral, religious). His transformations came through dialogue with the Inner Teacher.

In “De magistro,” he introduces this dialogue as a practice of learning that assists students to understand abstract concepts like signs and symbols. This dialogue (Augustinian interiority) also teaches a Desire for Authenticity, a Capacity for Discernment and a Sense of Transcendence.

In “De Trinitate,” Augustine describes experiences of knowing through the trinity of memory, understanding and will. “De doctrina christiana” presents instruction on how to interpret scripture and how to use non-Christian learning in a Christian curriculum. “De catechizandis rudibus” adds the role of attitudes in successful learning transformation (conversion).

Since scripture is so essential for Augustine, it is not surprising that learning from transforming experiences can be found throughout Augustine’s sermons and letters. Learning is not just a mental exercise.

Augustine expects learning to impact our lives and actions. He tells us, “Possess wholehearted love (*caritas*), be passionate for truth (*veritas*), desire unity (*unitas*), if you wish to live in the Holy Spirit to reach eternal life.

#### 2. Searching and Discovering: A Journey on the Way to Understanding, Meaning and Truth

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- When learners are tired, a teacher should help them build up the good habit of a cheerful attitude.[40]
- When learners are discouraged, a teacher should help them build up the good habit of patience.
- When learners are bored, a teacher should help them build up the good habit of finding excitement in learning.
- When learners are sad, a teacher should help them build up the good habit of finding joy in learning.
- When learners are unmotivated, a teacher should help them build up the good habit of finding energy for learning.
- When learners are tense and fearful, a teacher should help them build up the good habit of trusting.

### **3. Engaging in Community: Learning with Others**

For Augustine learning is not individualistic. Community as a locus of learning can be found in *The Rule*, *De opera monachorum*, *De civitate Dei*, his *Sermons* and his *Letters*. Augustine tells his community, “Live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart.”[18] This is not easy friendship. Augustine knows the difficulties of community life. His reflections on what he has learned from difficult community experiences can show a disenchantment,[19] even a pessimism. His teaching, through writing, placed many annoying and distracting demands on him.[20] He became weary from the scandals of the world[21] and his community at Hippo[22] as well as his own bad

decisions.[23] Paradoxically these troubles were also liberating. He learned from his own writing.[24] His teaching taught him how to build a structure of cohesive interdependence (unity) among the elements and methods involved in arriving at understanding, meaning and truth.[25] Engaging with others in community taught him reciprocity among learners working at different paces.[26] For Augustine, engaging in community became a school for dialogue with the Inner Teacher, meeting Christ in His Fullness (*Totus Christus*) and learning that humility is essential for true learning[27] as well as discovering that true teaching is service to others not a means to higher power or status.[28] This learning **with** others is a distinctive characteristic of Augustinian Pedagogy. It differentiates Augustine's approach from others, e.g, Ignatian (Jesuit) pedagogy which highlights being a person **for** others.

#### **4. Good Habits: The Building Blocks of Learning**

Augustine's life experiences taught him vulnerability. Knowing the right thing was never sufficient. He also had to develop the will to act rightly. Augustine sees such education of the will as building character.[29] It draws its power from dialoguing with the Inner Teacher and from reasoning which aids us to climb above ourselves (transcend).[30] Transcendence is not just a religious experience. For Augustine, it is also a desire to search out the unknown.[31] It is a practical act of courage overcoming a divided will and fear of the unknown.[32] Augustine's understanding of this courage comes from the biblical concept, "Love casts out fear." [33]

For Augustine our divided will leads us to love both good and evil. In our love of evil we easily develop bad habits. He believes that we need to work at loving in right ways and that we need to develop good habits to build up the ability to love rightly. Good habits that Augustine identifies for a true love of learning include sharpening mental powers[34] by building chains of reasoning building from what one knows to the unknown. Augustine suggests the habit of using knowledge as a kind of scaffolding[35] or a ladder of humility[36] to learn and even to teach. By humble models of the development of their own wills (good habits), teachers can demonstrate their own ladders and scaffolding for learning. But, Augustine also cautions that the way teachers present their own reasoning can create confusion and be an obstacle to student learning good habits.[37]

Augustinian-style teachers and schools overcome timid learners' fear by helping them to develop a confident will.[38] In response to the request of the preacher/teacher Deogratias for ways to deal with learners who lacked the will to learn, Augustine identified good habits that could act as building

blocks for developing the right will needed for learning.[39] These can be summarized this way:

- When learners are tired, a teacher should help them build up the good habit of a cheerful attitude.[40]
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- When learners are sad, a teacher should help them build up the good habit of finding joy in learning.
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- When learners are tense and fearful, a teacher should help them build up the good habit of trusting.

Learners should not wait for a teacher to assist in building up good habits. They should take personal responsibility for this. Working to develop good habits, the building blocks for a wholehearted love for learning, should be our ongoing project. For Augustine, this is not just a process. It is aimed at truly knowing – which is for him is loving Truth.

In any of these four dimensions, comparing Augustinian Pedagogy to other models we should find it free from any perfectionism or completion. Like Augustine we should find hope in always needing to travel ahead on our learning journey. As he tells us “Always add something more. Keep on walking. Always forge ahead.”