

The Educational Theory of Augustine of Hippo

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1. Theory of Value:

What knowledge and skills are worthwhile learning?

Augustine was born on November 13, 354. He was a pagan who studied many doctrines/faiths before converting to Christianity. As a result, much of his educational focus was on the interpretation of Scriptures and Christian beliefs. Although he became a believer in Christian principles, his writings, "Letters of Saint Augustine", strongly support that his ultimate faith was based on the intense study of Scriptures and other authors' writings on religious matters. Augustine was a strong advocate of critical thinking skills that was referred to as "skeptical philosophy" (Kirwan, C. 1999, p.16). In his letters, he critically "tore apart" analysis of Scriptures by others that were not fully supported by logical thinking. "The theology and philosophy of the medieval schoolmen and the creator of medieval universities were rooted in Augustinian ideas of the relation between faith and reason" (Chadwick, 1986, p. 1).

Language translation skills were important because books and their knowledge were not accessible unless they could be translated. "I cannot marvel enough that anything should still be in Hebrew texts which has escaped so many learned scholars" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 41). "They disturb me more who have made the translations more recently, and who have said to have a better grasp of the style and syntax of Hebrew words and phrases" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 41).

Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric and a great admirer of Cicero, acknowledging him as "the greatest master of Roman eloquence." (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 222). Because written works were still rather limited during this time, spoken communication of knowledge was very important.

Augustine was a strong advocate that the written and spoken word were powerful skills worth learning. He enjoyed "playful debates" with students and friends. "This kind of intellectual gamesmanship is said to have been very popular among African Christians" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 11). However, he strongly critiqued other learned writers or speakers.

Although Augustine is known for philosophy rather than mathematics, The Greatness of the Soul makes heavy use of geometry (see Colleran, 1964).

What are the goals of education?

Augustine had a unique and powerful goal of education. He equated education with happiness. "What if even the ignorant can lead a happy life? That's hardly possible. If it were so, ignorance would have no importance, instead of being the only true unhappiness" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 18). Also, he stated, "the soul grows by learning" (Colleran, 1964, p.53).

2. Theory of Knowledge:

What is knowledge?

Augustine would view knowledge as a product of a learning process of gathering information (reading or listening to learned speakers), referred to as "reasoning", and examining this information on a given subject (referred to as "reason") to develop "knowledge" (form conclusions or views on a subject.) However, after considerable thought, he determined that some knowledge, that is inborn, must be present to start the "reasoning/reason" process.

"And so, when the sight of the mind which we call reason, is directed upon some object and sees it, that is called knowledge; but when the mind does not see, though it focuses its sight, that is called not-knowing or ignorance" (Colleran, 1964, p. 79). Aug: "Now, then, considering that knowledge and reason are two distinct realities, do we attain to reason by knowledge, or to knowledge by reason?" Ev: "The two of them, to my way of thinking, are so interconnected that it is by each that the other can be attained. For we could not attain to reason itself, unless we knew that we should attain to it. Therefore, knowledge came first, so that by it we might come to use reason." Aug: "What? Do we actually arrive at knowledge, which you say comes first, without reason?" Ev: "Never would I say that; for that would be utterly unreasonable." (Colleran, 1964, p. 76) Aug: "By what means, then?" Ev: "Without any means; knowledge, you know, is inborn in us." (Colleran, 1964, p. 76)

"But where there is awareness of something there you certainly have knowledge." (Colleran, 1964, p. 75)

"Later in book 1 we find the suggestion that wisdom is the knowledge of those human and divine things that pertain to a happy life (Kirwan, 1999, p. 20).

"The purpose of knowledge was always the attainment of happiness by a closer union with God" (Colleran, 1964, p. 8)

How is it different from belief?

Referring to the specific details of an event, Augustine writes: "(what) actually happened at that time and in the manner described, is something that I admit I believe rather than know. And here we have a difference of which those we believe were not aware; for the Prophet says: Unless you believe, you shall not understand. He certainly could not have said that if he thought there is no difference between the two. Therefore, what I understand, I also believe. But I am not for that reason unaware of how useful it is to believe also many things which I do not know; and in this usefulness I also include the account of the three boys. Hence, although the majority of things cannot be known by me, yet I know how very useful it is to believe them" (Colleran, 1964, p. 177).

Augustine view is a that a belief is different from knowledge in that a belief is not attained "by profound reasoning."

What is a mistake?

A mistake is an unintentional error (without malice) that occurs due to insufficient effort or forethought. " I admit that I endeavor to be one of those authors who write as they make progress and make progress by their writing. Therefore, if I set down something with insufficient forethought or knowledge, it deserves to be condemned, not only by those who see it, but even by me" (Leinenweber, 1992, p.148).

A lie?

"There are two things this speaker may do: (i) say what he thinks is true with the purpose of inducing belief in what he thinks is false, or (ii) say what he thinks is false with the purpose of inducing belief in what he thinks is true. The former purpose is deception: and Augustine shows that the question which of these two performances is a lie turns on two candidate conditions for lying: (a) an utterance with the will to utter a falsehood or (b) an utterance with the will to deceive" (Kirwan, C. 1999, p.197). Augustine states "it is possible for anyone to avoid lying if he avoids both (i) and (ii), and chooses instead to say what he thinks is true without the purpose of inducing belief in anything other than what he says" (Kirwan, C. 1999, p.198).

3. Theory of Human Nature:

What is human being? How does it differ from other species?

A human being differs from other species since it has a soul. Augustine believed strongly in this premise. He wrote an entire book, *The Greatness of the Soul*, on this subject. "The gospel shows this clearly in the scene where Jesus allowed the demons to use swine as they wanted. Can we rightly say this of a human? A human is an animal, certainly, one with reason even though mortal. A human possesses a rational soul in its members, and this soul is punished by these great afflictions" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 18). {Referring to afflictions as a result of evil.} "A human person is a combination of soul and body, and the person of Christ is a combination of God and man: when God's Word was combined with a soul having a body, he took to himself both the soul and the body" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 127).

What are the limits of human potential?

"Augustine preached that people could not change their sinful ways unless helped by the grace of God. He believed that God chooses only certain individuals to receive His grace" (Burrell, 2001, p. 888).

4. Theory of Learning:

Augustine would view learning as a process that results in either knowledge or ignorance. Learning has several components. First, the use of senses, such as the eyes to read a book or ears to hear a speaker. Second, the use of the mind, which uses "reason" and "reasoning."

Ev: "Because you stated a little while ago that I must agree with you that we have knowledge before reason, because reason proceeds from a basis in something known is leading us to something unknown. But now we have discovered that when this occurs, the operation should not be called reason: for a sound mind is not always performing

that operation, although it always has reason. With rather good cause, though, the operation is called "reasoning." Thus, "reason" is in a sense mental sight, while "reasoning" would be reason's search, that is, the moving of that sight over the objects that are to be seen. Hence, the function of the latter is to search, that of the former, to see. And so, when the sight of the mind which we call reason, is directed upon some object and sees it, that is called knowledge; but when the mind does not see, though it focuses its sight, that is called not-knowing or ignorance" (Colleran, 1964, p. 79).

How are skills and knowledge acquired?

Skills and knowledge are acquired through the study of written and spoken words, and the interaction with learned people. Augustine strongly believed in the interaction with learned people to obtain skills and knowledge. "To Vilusianus, he (Augustine) writes as to an intelligent man who will appreciate the arguments of an educated mind; to Discocous, a student, the aging bishop sputters out his complaints and then answers the questions asked of him" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 11). "Correspondence with Jerome, as it show us Augustine engaged with the most learned man of his time in a duel in which he stood to lose much more than he could gain" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 11)

This interaction with learned people also included formal schooling. It would appear that Augustine would view schooling as an important method of acquiring skills and knowledge (see "What will the curriculum be?").

5. Theory of Transmission:

There is conflict between Augustine's writings and his actions with respect to this question. In his work, *The Teacher*, Augustine concludes: "Men cannot teach one another. God is the only teacher of men" (Colleran, 1964, p.117). Despite that conclusion, he accepts that man's words are a mechanism for God to teach.

Aug: "What do you think we purpose to do when we speak?" Adeodatus: "As far as occurs to me at this moment, we intend either to teach or to learn." ... Aug:"So you see that the purpose in speaking is solely to teach" (Colleran, 1964, p.129).

By what methods?

Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric and recognized that formal schooling was an important method of teaching, especially, because books were limited. He seemed most interested in the study of the written word but was frustrated by the problem of translating writings from different languages. "It is my request, therefore, in the company with all the members of the churches of Africa who are devoted to learning, that you not refuse to expend care and effort to translate the writings of those who commented so well in Greek on our holy scriptures" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 41).

What will the curriculum be?

"Augustine records with some astonishment that there were contemporary Christians in Africa who read no book other than the Bible, and who conversed in the often strange translationese of the old Latin Bible; an anticipation of Quaker English. He was sure that wider studies were necessary. A biblical scholar needed to know some history, geography, natural science, mathematics, logic and rhetoric (how to write and speak clearly and appropriately)" (Chadwick, 1986, p. 35).

6. Theory of Society

"Augustine has left us no blueprint for human society on earth, the 'terrena civitas'. We cannot suppose this an accident" (Kirwan, 1999, p.218). "If we examine St. Augustine's own teaching more closely, we see why the notion of a temporal human society, endowed with its own unity and including the whole human race could not present itself to his mind" (Walsh et al, 1958, p. 32). Although *The City of God* focused on moral, philosophical and religious aspects of the human race over time, it did provide some insights into Augustine's view of temporal society. "Some passages in the *City of God* give the impression of wholly discarding the Roman Empire and all political institutions as power-hungry organizations for wicked domination and oppression by the powerful" (Chadwick, 1986, p.99). "The mature Augustine of the *City of God* no longer used such optimistic words about political structures" (Chadwick, 1986, p.100). What institutions are involved in the educational process?

The family was critical to the educational process. Personally, Augustine spent considerable time educating his son. "The *Teacher* was written as a memorial to his clever natural son Adeodatus, in conversation with whom the ideas were worked out" (Chadwick, 1986, p.47). Speaking about his son, Augustine states: "When he was only fifteen years of age, he already excelled many grave and learned men in talent" (Colleran, 1964, p.115).

Because of the importance of religion, Augustine recognized the Church as a potentially important teacher. However, he was "a combative critic of Catholic orthodoxy and conscious of his own intellectual superiority to members of the Church, whose bishops he held in contempt for their lack of education and critical inquiry" (Chadwick, 1986, p. 14).

Although universities were mentioned in my research, no strong opinions by Augustine on their role were found.

7. Theory of Opportunity

Who is to be educated?

"His (Augustine's) own family background was not one of high culture. That culture he acquired was through education" (Chadwick, 1986, p.1). Augustine clearly viewed education as a passion and a process of opening up the mind to ideas and critical thinking ("skeptical philosophy"). In that sense, all people, regardless of class should be given the opportunity to be educated. "He (Augustine) was certainly no elitist, not one to reserve his time and energy for those he considered worthy of a reply. It has been remarked of Augustine's preaching that he never held back because some idea might go over the heads of some of his flock" (Leinenweber, 1992, p. 13).

Although my research did not clearly determine the status of women with respect to education, his letters "To the Nuns of Hippo" and to his sisters indicates that he treats women as equals to men in terms of learned discussions about Christian works.

Who is to be schooled?

Although Augustine's personal experience with formal schooling at an early age was not pleasant, {"Augustine later looked back on his school days as a miserable experience"} (Chadwick, 1986, p.7), he saw value in formal schooling (see "What should

the curriculum be?") My research did not uncover any specific writings by Augustine on this subject. However, nearly all comments and findings on "Who is be educated?" would appear to be applicable.

8. Theory of Consensus

Why do people disagree?

People disagree because of many of the issues raised in earlier sections. This includes: intellectual differences (i.e., more experience such as a teacher to a student), mistakes and lies. Also, mistakes, not in thought, but in language translation caused disagreements. However, many disagreements were more deeply seeped in authority, especially in religious matters. "Augustine began his anti-Doratist campaign with tact and caution. His first letters to Doratist prelates are courteous and emphasize his faith in good will. He assumed that reasonable men could settle this controversy peaceably. But Augustine quickly discovered that reason and good manners would get him nowhere" (O'Donnell, date unknown, p. 6 of 8).

How is consensus achieved?

As shown in his letters (see Leinenweber, 1992), consensus can be reached on an intellectual level if a controversy is discussed honestly. Augustine respected the views of learned individuals who legitimately practiced "skeptical philosophy." However, he was well aware that power struggles, such as occurred in Church and government, were resolved based on their position of authority rather than on their intellectual merits.

Whose opinion takes precedence?

"Nevertheless, the problem of authority was prominent in the controversies between the Catholics and Manichees" (Chadwick, 1986, p.27). "Without reason how can one discriminate to competing claims of authority? How can one distinguish between authentically divine authority and that of inferior spirits venerated by pagans who claim to predict the future by divination and soothsaying?" (Chadwick, 1986, p.28).

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