

**TEACHING IN THE INSPIRATION OF ST. AUGUSTINE:
 SEVEN AUGUSTINIAN PRINCIPLES**

Sixteen hundred years ago, a deacon wrote to his bishop to ask for instructions about how to teach the candidates who sought to become Christians. As with my own students, some of the candidates came with a sincere desire to learn, but others were there “to secure advantages in this world or avoid the troubles of life.”¹ The deacon wanted to know *what* to say, but the bishop (as was his custom) gave him more than he asked for. He told him what to say but also *how* to say it, giving him not just content but pedagogy. In fact, the bishop, St. Augustine of Hippo, turned his advice into a short book called *Instructing Beginners in Faith*. Augustine’s context was different from my own. He was speaking about candidates who would soon become his brothers and sisters in Christ; I teach in a contemporary American university with students of all different religious commitments. Despite the differences, his remarks have inspired me in a number of ways. Some of what he says lends confirmation to things I have learned from my own reading and experience; beyond that, his thinking -- especially his focus on the student-teacher relationship -- has helped me rethink my own pedagogy. Here are seven pedagogical principles with an Augustinian flavor, intended not as a final word but as a starting point for thinking and dialogue.

Suggested Principle	Practical implications	In St. Augustine’s words
<p>1. The teacher-learner relationship is vital. As Augustine reminded us, a classroom is a dynamic system; the excitement and love of the teacher for the material and the teachers regard for the students themselves create a positive response from the students, which then further inspires the teacher. But if the students become bored and unresponsive, and if an adversarial climate develops, the teacher will become less effective and the students will learn less.</p>	<p>If we want to be effective teachers, we must create an environment where the students are excited about learning, not merely jumping through hoops to get the highest grade for the least work. This means giving high priority to creating a positive classroom dynamic so that students enjoy learning and “drink in the knowledge with pleasure.”² Their response is important, in other words, because it will bring out our best efforts.</p>	<p><i>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.</i>³</p> <p><i>When we see no reaction from our hearer, it is really tiring to continue speaking right to the end of the allotted time.</i>⁴</p>
<p>2. Creating a positive learning environment is even harder than getting the content right. We are often so concerned with packing in content that we lose sight of the task of creating a positive classroom dynamic. But unless students are engaged by the process, they won’t really absorb the knowledge.</p>	<p>We need to reframe our thinking to ask not how much material we are covering, but how much the students actually learning. If the students are unmotivated and hostile, they may still absorb the facts, but in order for them to get to higher level thinking, they need to be positively engaged and excited by the educational experience of our class.</p>	<p><i>The difficult part of our task is not in giving rules about [covering the content]. No, our greatest concern is much more about how to make it possible for those who offer instruction 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 teacher.</i>⁵</p>

<p>3. Know your students and customize the class for them. Real learning is a function of the character, motivation, skills and limitations of the learner. As Ken Bain says in <i>What the Best Teachers Do</i>, “the best teachers try to find out as much as possible about their students.”</p>	<p>Some techniques:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students about their background and interests. • Understand pressures of campus life. • Throughout the semester, give ungraded assessments to find out what students are learning. • Familiarize yourself with research on student development, learning styles, backgrounds. 	<p><i>In my own experience as a teacher, I am swayed now in one way, now in another, according as the characteristics and background of person that I see before me to receive instruction. And it is in keeping with these various influences that my actual address opens and moves forward and comes to a close.</i>⁶</p>
<p>4. Understand student fears, and help overcome them. Many professors ask why their students are so quiet and shy in the classroom, although the students are noisy enough before and after class. Students are often quiet and shy because of fear and insecurity. We need to create a safe space for them to express themselves.</p>	<p>Students are often afraid to appear either stupid or as “teacher’s pets.” Some strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin discussions by asking questions that do not have a right answer (e.g., “What is an example of this?”) rather than asking students to provide the content for your class. • Give students time to think before they are asked to respond. 	<p><i>With gentle encouragement we should drive out the exaggerated fear that prevents the student from making known where he stands, and we should temper his shyness by instilling in him the value of our fraternal communion. By asking questions we should try to find out whether he understands what has been said, and we should give him confidence to voice freely any objection he thinks out to be raised.</i>⁷</p>
<p>5. Constantly reset the students’ attention. Students often live chaotic lives, have poor time management skills, and don’t get enough sleep. Even good students lose attention, and good teachers look for ways to re-engage them, especially during lectures.</p>	<p>Some ways to reengage students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inject humor or anecdotes • Interject a period of small group discussion to break up a lecture • Ask students to do a brief ungraded writing assignment. • Have students stand up and stretch for a moment. 	<p><i>It often happens that someone who was listening in the beginning with pleasure later becomes tired and now he opens his mouth no longer to express approval but to yawn. We should reawaken his attention by making a remark spiced with seemly good humor and appropriate to the subject under discussion. Or we can relate something that arouses great awe and astonishment.</i>⁸</p>

<p>6. Connect learning to the student's own experience. Students are often most engaged by things that touch on our own lives, we can use this focus to capture their interest.</p>	<p>Some techniques:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illustrate material with practical, real world applications, especially from the students' own experience. • Use role plays, simulations, and active learning techniques. 	<p><i>What we say should touch preferably on the student's own situation so that, stung by solicitude for himself, he may become alert again.</i>⁹</p>
<p>7. Find the joy in making the old things new. Most of us got into our field because we were fascinated by the deep puzzles and challenges of our discipline, but Augustine reminds us that as teachers we need to find joy in making our field more simple, rather than more complex, and watching students learn, even if we have done the same material many times over.</p>	<p>We need to take on a new task, every bit as challenging as what we face in our research: how to make students feel some of our excitement, even though they do not share our initial interest. If we can learn to find joy in this challenge, our work will be pleasant and rewarding. If we cannot engage with it, teaching intro classes will be a painful task, not very rewarding for either us or the students.</p>	<p><i>Although we may pay no attention to the beautiful sights of the city where we live, 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, 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.</i>¹⁰</p>

Augustine's words provide some sound classroom advice (break up the lecture, make the material relevant, overcome student fears), but his thought also calls us to a deeper principle as well. Teacher and learner function in a dynamic relationship; when it works well, each side brings out the best in the other. Our task is to help the students help us be more effective teachers, so we can help them be more effective learners.

Additional material and sources:

For more ideas and readings on these topics, visit the author's website www.teachphilosophy101.org, especially the tabs on "Obstacles and Challenges," and "Lectures and Discussions." An essay, discussing this material in more detail is available in the tab on "Background Reading: Theory and Reflection."

Footnotes: ¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, trans. Raymond Canning, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2006), 5.9; ²14.22; ³2.18; ⁴13.18; ⁵2.4; ⁶15.23; ⁷13.18; ⁸13.19; ⁹13.19; ¹⁰12.17. Some quotations have been shortened or slightly rewritten. I am grateful to Jonathan Yates for comments on earlier drafts.

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