Social and Emotional Learning in the Thought of Augustine of Hippo

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In contemporary educational psychology, much is written concerning the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEL), especially with respect to student/learner-centered learning.[1] While theorists and practitioners often see this focus as a relatively recent phenomenon, this essay presents social and emotional aspects of learning that were prominent in the thought of Augustine of Hippo. From the various forms of his writings, this essay will present the development of social and emotional aspects of Augustine's thought.

What is Social and Emotional Learning?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.[2]

Within the framework of SEL, 5 core competencies have been identified through research. These core competencies are:

- **Self-awareness** — the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of self-confidence, optimism and a "growth mindset."

- **Self-management** — the ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviors in different situations – effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.

- **Social awareness** — the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- **Relationship skills** — the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate

clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

- **Responsible decision-making** — the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.[3]

Where is Augustine of Hippo in the framework of SEL

Despite the images we have of Augustine of Hippo in a reflective posture, such as the 6th Century C.E. fresco in Rome's Lateran Basilica, Sandro Botticelli's and Vittore Carpaccio's "Saint Augustine in His Study" and Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco in San Gimignano of Saint Augustine in his study, it is more apt to approach Augustine through the SEL core competency of Social Awareness than Self-Awareness. Within his Late Latin Antiquity experiences and North African context, Augustine is very often dialoguing with his peers sharing his ideas and advancing his and their learning. This can be seen in *Dialogues*, *Sermones* and *Epistulas*. In his dialogues, like *De Magistro*, we can see him attend to his dialogue partners. In his *Sermons*, we can see the differences in the simple way he addresses his flock in his Basilica of Peace in Hippo[4] and the eloquence in addressing some audiences in Carthage.[5] Augustine undertook his major writings, including *Confessions*, *De Civitate Dei* and *De Trinitate* at the request of others with a Social Awareness of the requester's need for explanations of belief.

Augustine's Social Awareness led to his own learning as well as the learning of others. As he noted in *De Trinitate*, "May God grant that even I should make continuing progress when I provide others with books to read. Also, even I find what I am seeking when I try to answer the questions of others."[6] Learning through writing for others was not always pleasant. In *Epistula* 23A he writes of his teaching, through writing, as placing many annoying and distracting demands on him. At times it seemed everyone wanted him to deal with their problems. He also writes in *Epistula* 73 of being "weary from the scandals of the world."

Augustine's Social Awareness leads him easily into his exercising of the SEL core competency of Relationship Skills. Augustine presents in his *De catechizandis rudibus* concern for social and emotional obstacles to learning that the preacher/teacher should consider. In this work, Augustine is responding to a request of the Deacon Deogratius from Carthage. As the person responsible for catechetical teaching/preaching Deogratias requests the "perfect" sermon from Augustine. Instead Augustine gives him two sermons, with the instruction that Deogratias will need to choose the sermon based on the audience. Along with the sermons, Augustine provides an introduction on the Relational Skills of attending to the hearers of the sermons, particularly the unmoved hearers. A summary of part of this introduction[7] might be:

When hearers are tired encourage them with a cheerful attitude.

When hearers are discouraged encourage them with consideration and patience.

When hearers are bored encourage them with care to find new and exciting things.

When hearers are sad encourage them with love and joy.

When hearers are apathetic encourage them with compassion and energetic exhortation.

When hearers are tense and fearful encourage them with kindness and tact in building trust.

For Augustine, Relationship Skills are not only interpersonal but also about understanding the relationships among the various aspects of knowledge. One of the relationship images that he uses is scaffolding, as he wrote, "Use knowledge as a kind of scaffolding to help build the structure of love and understanding, which will last forever even after knowledge destroys itself. Knowledge is useful when it is used to promote love. But it becomes useless, even harmful in itself, if separated from such an end."[8] Another metaphor for him is a ladder, as he preached, "To reach a high spot you need a ladder. To get to the height of greatness, use the ladder of humility."[9] He even uses building/architectural images to convey how he understands relationships in knowledge. He preached that, "If the beam and stones of the house were not fitted together by a definite order (in a way if they were not connected to one another in peace, united in love

by mutual cohesiveness), no one would ever dare enter this house. We know this because when you see a building in which the beams and stones are solidly joined together, you enter with confidence and do not fear its falling apart."[10]

Augustine's penchant for Social Awareness and Relationship Skills may emanate from his fundamental personality characteristic of a "genius for friendship." After his conversion this genius for friendship transforms into a preference for community that can be seen in his *Rule*. Early evidence of the importance of Social Awareness and Relationship Skills to Augustine's learning can be seen in his famous description of school time friendships, when he observes,

> My soul found all manner of joy when I was in their company — to talk and to laugh and to be kind to each other — to read engaging books together, to go from the lightest joking to talk of the deepest things and back again — to differ without discord, as I might differ with myself, and when on the rarest occasion disagreement arose, to find it highlights the sweetness of our normal agreement — to teach or to learn from each other — to be impatient for those absent and welcome them with joy when they return — these and similar things, emanating from our hearts as we gave and received affection, shown in our faces, our voices, our eyes, and a thousand other gratifying ways, ignited a flame which fused our very souls together and made the many of us one.[11]

While Social Awareness and Relationship Skills are entry ways into Augustine's experience of SEL, he is not without his approaches to Self-Awareness and Self-Management. In his *Soliloquia* Augustine models some ways to process reflectively his dialoguing through what has commonly been termed his Interiority. From all his interactions with other people and their thoughts, Augustine had a lot of information and ideas that he needed to work through. He had much noise of information and experiences from which he had to obtain a clear signal or direction. This inner reflection to find Self-Awareness was something more for Augustine than clarifying ideas and thinking. For Augustine the true teacher is the Inner Teacher/Teacher Within. As he observes,

As for all those things which we "understand, " it is not the outward sound of the speaker's words that we consult, but the truth which presides over the mind itself from within, though we may have been led to consult it because of some words we heard. The one who is able to see them inwardly is a student of the same Truth and is critical of the one who expounds them, that is to say, of their words.[12]

He also posits, "Consider this great puzzle. The sounds of my words strike the ears but the Teacher is within. Do not think that any human teaches another. The sound of our voice can admonish, but the one Who teaches is on the inside. The sound we make is useless."[13] (*Tractate on I John* III, 12.)

Augustine's exploration for Self-Awareness is not just inner questions of his *Soliloquia* or an exploration of his prayer, "Let me know myself, let me know you."[14] His exploration has become processes that have been seen as his approach to Interiority. Miguel Angel Keller and Francisco Galende have derived descriptions of processes of Augustine's Interiority from Augustine's admonition, "Do not look outside. Return to yourself. Truth resides inside a person. When you discover that you can change, transcend yourself…. Go where the light of reason is illuminated."[15]

For Keller this attention to inner life is a spiritual process or dynamic consisting of four inseparable steps. These can be summarized as:

1. Return to yourself, i.e., go from outer life to inner life.
2. Go beyond yourself, i.e., go from inner life to the truths of reason.
3. Transcend truths, i.e., go from the varied truths of reason to ultimate Truth.
4. Experience Enlightenment, i.e., return to the outer life with a truer vision of self and reality.[16]

Galende summarizes the inner dialogue, this style of interiority, as a four step process through which Saint Augustine invites us join him.

1. Do not be eager to expend all your energy on external things.
2. Go within yourself .
3. Transcend yourself.
4. Now experience all things external from your interior life.[17]

The fourth step in each of these processes is a return from contemplation to the world of action and social interaction with contemplation impacting action as Augustine describes in *De Civitate Dei*.[18]

We can see this "return" as a movement of Self-Management in SEL terms. Arthur Chappell sees the return (Self-Management) as an exercise of Augustinian humility that "impels us into the world so that we can share the vision we have discovered deep within, to share who we are and to share our many gifts and talents in service."[19] Humility for Augustine is the way to truth. As he tells us,

> The first step in the search for truth is humility. The second, humility. The third, humility. And the last one, humility. Naturally, that doesn't mean that humility is the only virtue necessary for the discovery and enjoyment of truth. But if the other virtues aren't preceded, accompanied and followed by humility, pride will find an opening and infiltrate them and, sooner or later, finish up destroying good intentions. All other vices are recognized when we are doing wrong; but pride is to be feared even when we do right. Test those things which are done in a praiseworthy manner lest they be spoiled by the desire for praise itself.[20]

Humility is not the only Augustinian approach in line with the Self-Management core competency of SEL. Santiago Insunza gleans from Augustine what he terms an "Augustinian Process of Personal Development."[21] This process has three elements found in Augustine.

- Know Yourself

    "Let me know myself, let me know you."[22]

- Accept Yourself

    "Accept your imperfection. It is the first step to perfection."[23]

- Surpass Yourself

    "Do not get stuck where you are, always forge ahead."[24]

On the SEL core competency of Responsible Decision-Making, Augustine has a number of contributions for us. First, his *Confessiones* contains a review of his decision-making on the way to his religious conversion. As he describes it, "The thirteen books of

my *Confessions* praise the just and good God for the bad and the good that I did, and they draw a person's mind and emotions to him."[25] Further, in his *Confessiones* Augustine provides a model for sharing with others that is part of his belief that any truth learned is the common property of all. He tells us in the *Confessiones*, "I must tremble in the face of your judgments, Lord, because your truth is neither mine, nor his, nor hers. Rather, it belongs to everyone whom you call to share it in communion with you. Likewise, you give us the terrible warning not to take truth as personal property, for fear we will find ourselves deprived of it." [26]

In his *Retractationum Libri Duo* Augustine shows us reflection through the reconsideration of his writings. In his description, "My task is to reconsider my works from an uncompromisingly critical perspective, whether they be books, or letters or sermons, and in these pages to single out for censure what I disapprove of."[27] He also posits, "Those who are going to read these works should not imitate me in my errors but in my progress towards the better. For whoever reads my works in the order in which they were written will perhaps discover how I have made progress over the course of my writing."[28] For Augustine this review of his writings is in line with his thought that we are all cracked pots. In his words, "Many people promise themselves that they will live a holy life. But, they fail because they go into the furnace and come out cracked."[29] Donald Burt uses this concept "cracked" in reflections on the "cracked self" that he finds in Augustine.[30] Recognizing ourselves as cracked selves is an important aspect in our work on Responsible Decision-Making and our continuing search in that regard. As Augustine advises, we should, "Search in ways by which we can make discoveries, and discover in ways by which we can keep on searching."[31]

Concluding Thoughts

While this study has made connections between the core competencies of contemporary Social and Emotional Learning frameworks, we should be careful of making grand conclusions. Robert Dodaro gives us a guide for caution in making conclusions about Augustine and contemporary circumstances. He observes,

The more I read him [Augustine] and read studies about him and about his times, the more that two conclusions, apparently disjunctive, continue to strike me more forcefully. First, I find it increasingly difficult to 'domesticate' Augustine, that is, to make him appear 'at home' in our times. Secondly, I find his theology and his approach to various pastoral issues increasingly more relevant for our times. On the one hand, I am saying that Augustine's church and the times in which he lived – late Roman antiquity – have to be seen as strange, as alien to our own times, between his church and our church. And, secondly, in spite of the fact that I continue to reach this difficult conclusion, I continue to see the urgency of Augustine's theology and his pastoral responses for the Church in our times.[32]

With this caution in mind, we can still find at least four factors related to SEL that we can take away from Augustine's approaches. First, experiencing Social Awareness and Relation Skills can be a major entry point into SEL. Such experiences can be powerful moments that spur us to work on Self-Awareness and Self-Management. Thus, what might be taken as a linear approach entering through Self-Awareness may work for some people but not work so well for others. The Social experiences of Augustine should lead us to find the best way for each individual to enter into the SEL world.

Second, while SEL has a lot to do with social interactions, our growth in social and emotional learning is fundamental to an inner journey. Teachers and others can introduce us to ideas and facilitate and guide our experiences, but we must do the inner reflection and development that incorporates our progress into our ways of thinking and acting.

Third, as we experience SEL we should include a factor of reviewing or reconsidering how we are making progress on an ongoing basis. It is not enough to judge whether we have engage in Responsible Decision-Making at the moment of a decision. We also need to review our decision-making after some time has passed to see how responsible the decision-making holds up in the face of additional elements of our reality interacting with our decision-making.

Fourth, the processes of Augustine's Interiority should help us to see SEL as more process than product. Even with terms like skills, SEL is not a collection of elements but approaches to aspects of learning for becoming an integrated and whole person and that becoming such a person is a life-long journey. As Augustine would observe, "On earth we are always travelers, always on the go. Do not grow complacent with what you are. Where you have become pleased with yourself, there you get stuck. If you say 'That's enough,' you are finished. Always add something more. Keep on walking. Always forge ahead." [33]

[1] A good source for the direction of research and application of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) theory is The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) which can be accessed at http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/. Retrieved October 17, 2016.

[2] *Ibid.* Retrieved October 17, 2016.

[3] http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning__trashed/core-competencies/. Retrieved October 17, 2016.

[4] Chadwick, Henry, *Augustine of Hippo: A Life.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 88-89.

[5] Lancet, Serge. *St. Augustine,* trans. by Antonia Neville. London: SCM Press, 2002, p. 196.

[6] Augustinus, Aurelius, *De Trinitate*, I, 8,

[7] _____ , *De Catechizandis Rudibus,* 10,14-13,19

[8] _____ , *Epistula 55*, 33.

[9] _____ , *Sermon 96,* 3.

[10] _____ , *Sermon 336,* 1-2

[11] _____ , *Confessiones,* IV, 8, 13.

[12] _____ , *De Magistro*, 38.

[13] _____ , *In Epistulam Joannis ad Parthos Tractatus*, III, 12.

[14] _____ , *Soliloquia*, II, 1, 1.

[15] _____ , *De Vera Religione,* 39,72.

[16] Keller, Miguel Angel, Human Formation and Augustinian Anthropology in *Elements of an Augustinian formation*. Rome: Pubblicazione Agostiniane, 2001, p. 210.

[17] Galende, Francisco, Augustinian Interiority in *Our journey back to God: Reflections on Augustinian Spirituality*. Rome: Pubblicazione Agostiniane, 2006, 278-279

[18] Augustinus, Aurelius, *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, 19).

[19] Chappell, Arthur, St. Augustine on Humility in *Elements of an Augustinian Formation. op. cit.*, p.116.

[20] Augustinus, Aurelius, Epistula 118, 3, 22.

[21] Insunza, Santiago Affectivity in Religious Formation in *Affectivity and Formation for Religious Life: Course for Augustinian Formators 2004*. Rome: Pubblicazioni Agostiniane, Curia Generalizia Agostiniana, 2006, pp. 216-222.

[22] Augustinus, Aurelius, *Soliloquia*, II, 1, 1.

[23] _____ , *Sermo 142*, 10.

[24] _____ , *Sermo 169*, 18.

[25] _____ , *Retractationum Libri Duo,* II, 6, 33.

[26] _____ , *Confessiones* XII, 25, 34.

[27] _____ , *Retractationum Libri Duo,* Prologus , 1.

[28] *Ibid., 3.*

[29] _____ , *Ennarationes en Psalmos* 99, 11.

[30] Burt, Donald X., *"Let Me Know Myself…" Reflections on the Prayer of Saint Augustine*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002.

[31] Augustinus, Aurelius, *De Trinitate*, IX, 1, 1.

[32] Dodaro, Robert, The courage to be intolerant: crisis, dialogue and diversity in the pastoral theology of Augustine of Hippo in *Augustinian Family Prepares for the Third Millennium*. T. Cooney (ed.) Rome: Pubblicazioni Agostiniane, 1999, p. 76.

[33] Augustinus, Aurelius, *Sermo 169,* 18.