

Teaching Love as the Foundation for Business Communication: A Strategy for Spiritual Formation and Concept Cohesion

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ABSTRACT: When teaching business communication, Christian faculty can integrate the virtue of love to help students cultivate ethical reasoning and bring cohesion to disparate writing and speaking assignments. “How can you love your audience?” is a central question around which a spiritually formative business communication class can be built. In answering this question in a variety of contexts, students practice cultivating an others-oriented focus in their communication, which provides a cohesive foundation for practical instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Written and oral communication skills are some of the most important soft skills for students to hone, and various business faculty, whether in marketing, sales, or other business fields, either teach these skills directly or require students to use them for presentations or written assignments. Many business schools require students to complete entire courses on business communication. As Christian business faculty members seek to contribute to their students’ moral and spiritual formation, they might think about how best to do so through teaching communication skills. How might Christian business faculty cultivate virtue while teaching students to write and speak to an audience well? This question is important partly because the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) notes that ethical understanding and reasoning is one of the most important objectives of business courses (“Eligibility Procedures,” 2018, p. 37). Cultivating virtue is also important simply because it is a way to contribute positively to the 21st-century marketplace and to our democracy. Most importantly, Christian business faculty seek to glorify God in their teaching by participating in students’ spiritual formation.

In courses that focus on business communication specifically, the practical nature of the content might seem difficult to connect to spiritual formation or virtue, but doing

so could provide helpful cohesion. Amid teaching presentations, research reports, persuasive emails, resumes and cover letters, and memos that present bad news versus good news, instructors might feel that there is not a cohesive connection between these disparate assignments. However, L. Dee Fink (2003) in *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* emphasizes the importance of integrating all material within a course (p. 31) and “assembling the components into a dynamic, coherent whole” (p. 257). Integration enables students to make connections between discrete assignments and topics within a course. Fink emphasizes that students need not only facts but also an “understanding of [a] subject’s underlying conceptual structure” (p. 36). Toward this end, Fink encourages finding “a way to help students clearly see and understand the central focus of the whole course. The simplest way to do this is to find a theme, question... that reflects the main focus of the whole course” (p. 146). What is the conceptual structure for business communication? What deeper question or theme could instructors use to unify its diverse and practical contents?

Like Fink in his call for course integration, Ken Bain (2004) in his book *What the Best College Teachers Do* describes teachers who organize each course around a central question or issue that students must answer or solve. Bain argues that the best college teachers “believe that students must learn the facts while learning to use them to make deci-

sions about what they understand or what they should do. To them, ‘learning’ makes little sense unless it has some sustained influence on the way the learner subsequently thinks, acts, or feels. So they teach the ‘facts’ in a rich context of problems, issues, and questions” (p. 29). All subjects need a context so that they are properly understood, and true learning should produce significant change in learners’ lives.

Indeed, a class that reinforces one fundamental principle and/or leads students to wrestle with a central problem or challenge will likely be more transformative than a class that provides discrete sets of instruction with no unifying factor(s). In this article, I make the somewhat audacious assertion that love can be taught as the foundation of business communication. “How can you love your audience?” is a central question around which a morally formative business communication class can be built. In answering this question while writing and speaking for different purposes and audiences, and in varying genres, students reflect upon and practice cultivating an others-oriented focus in their communication, a practice that provides the foundation for all the practical instruction. First, “love” in this context will be defined. Then other recognized authors who believe in the importance of love in business will be cited. Finally, various pedagogical applications of focusing a communications class around the central theme of love will be explored.

DEFINING LOVE

To teach love as foundational for business communications, instructors must first define love as a virtue as opposed to a romantic feeling. Lynn G. Underwood (2008) in *The Science of Compassionate Love* distinguishes “compassionate love” from romantic or altruistic love and refers to it as love that “includes both the attitudes and actions related to giving of self for the good of the other” (p. 4). Compassionate love involves self-sacrifice and service. Matt Perman (2014) also helpfully clarifies the definition of love in the workplace, which is distinct from the emotional, sentimental connotations of the word. He explains, “To have love as the guiding principle of our lives means that our continual mindset in all we do should be ‘What will serve the other person?’ It is not ‘What will serve *me*?’ but ‘What will serve *them*?’ The guiding mindset of our lives is to be: how can I do good for others?” (p. 87). Similarly, when Mitchell J. Neubert (2015) describes teaching this virtue, he defines it in this way: “Love is showing compassion or care for others. It involves behavior that is unselfish and concerns itself with benefits for others” (p. 3). This kind of love is what Christians are called to do in the second great commandment, to love their neighbors as themselves.

This practice of an others-oriented service mentality works well to give students a framework for the important concerns in communication. The primary goals in writing or speech are to appropriately and helpfully reach a specific audience with the author’s content and to motivate that audience to take the appropriate next step. To do so, communications instructors often ask students to analyze their audiences, but taking audience analysis one step further to love, wanting to understand the audience and give of oneself to benefit the audience, could strengthen students’ virtue as well as their rhetorical skills. Perman (2014) states, “Putting the interest of others first involves finding out what matters to *them*” (p. 89). Calling students to love their audience requires helping them to think carefully about what their audience needs and values, thus deepening students’ consideration and analyses of their audiences. Underwood (2008) similarly notes that compassionate love “includes understanding something of the needs and feelings of the person to be loved, and what might be appropriate to truly enhance the other’s well-being” (p. 7). Teaching students to think about how to love the audience provides a helpful expansion of audience analysis, so students are not merely considering their audience’s demographics, knowledge, and values; students also contemplate what information and communication strategies will serve each audience the most.

As Kolp and Rea (2006) note, love or care is the opposite of carelessness, “marked by a lack of attention” (p. 215). They continue, “To develop the virtue of love necessitates paying attention to people” (p. 225). What most business communications faculty wish for their students is for them to be closely attentive to their audiences. Calling students to love their audiences could push their analyses toward deeper effectiveness. No longer are they analyzing their audiences as an object; they are now considering each audience member as an other, a being to be valued, served, and honored.

LOVE’S RELEVANCE IN BUSINESS

Tim Sanders (2002) in his book *Love is the Killer App* specifically applies this concept of love to business in the 21st century. Sanders defines love in business by emphasizing the benefits of contributing one’s knowledge to help others, giving of one’s network to assist and connect others, and listening to and caring about others in relationships. He claims that serving others in these ways is more important than any technological innovation today. He asserts that love is a key ingredient to success in the business world because of choices available to consumers and the prevalence of online reviews. In other words, customers go elsewhere quickly if their needs

are not considered, and if they are not benefited, and in our digital age, they have plenty of options.

Kolp and Rea (2006) similarly note the value of love in business. They note that while “we are not likely to approach a colleague or business employee and tell him or her, ‘I love you,’ if we do not exhibit the qualities of love, the business will be poorer” (p. 225). Kolp and Rea even quantify the potential benefits of providing others-oriented customer service:

Often companies must compete on the intangible of service—care for customer concerns. When companies demonstrate extraordinary care for customers, they are rewarded financially. Companies can earn six times higher profitability when they achieve a 4.5 in customer satisfaction on a 5-point scale, compared with companies that achieve a 4.0 satisfaction level. When this level of service is achieved, the satisfied customers are likely to recommend the company’s products and services to 15 people. (p. 222)

The attitude and practice of giving of self for the good of the other in business leads to helpful, productive customer service and consequent positive reviews and recommendations.

Dale Carnegie (1936/1981) does not use the word “love” but would agree in the real-world benefits of an others-oriented focus, which is a central theme of his famous book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Carnegie states, “You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get others interested in you” (p. 82). Business communications instructors tell students that everyone is asking, “What’s in it for me?” However, if students can learn to think about others instead of themselves, they will become more effective communicators. Students need to know that their audiences are asking, “What’s in it for me?” but students need to be challenged to think outside of this mindset for themselves, as they learn to ask, “What’s in it for others?” Carnegie (1936/1981) similarly observes, “The world is full of people who are grabbing and self-seeking. So the rare individual who unselfishly tries to serve others has an enormous advantage. He has little competition” (p. 74). While Carnegie does not explicitly extol the virtue of love, he does thoroughly endorse this definition of love: considering, being genuinely interested in, and serving others.

More recently, organizational psychologist Adam Grant (2014) in his book *Give and Take* shows that givers, those who have a generous, others-oriented focus, are more successful in the long-term than people who seek only to take from others (takers) or to be generous only insofar as they

receive (matchers). He asserts, counterintuitively, “Most people assume that self-interest and other-interest are opposite ends of one continuum. Yet in my studies of what drives people at work, I’ve consistently found that self-interest and other-interest are completely independent motivations: you can have both of them at the same time” (p. 157). Grant shows that givers help both others and themselves through their giving because customers, colleagues, and employers learn to trust givers. Successful givers “get to the top without cutting others down, finding ways of expanding the pie that benefit themselves and the people around them” (p. 258). Grant does not use the word “love” to describe givers, but this idea of service and work toward the benefit of others is the same. This principle is like Stephen Covey’s (1989) notion of the win/win habit of effective people. Covey claims, “Most of life is an interdependent, not an independent, reality. Most results you want depend on cooperation between you and others. And the Win/Lose mentality is dysfunctional to that cooperation” (p. 209). Teaching love as the essential ingredient of successful communication helps students to develop a win/win mentality, as they seek to benefit others as well as themselves.

The notion of love as the foundational building block of communication is a way to deepen the concept of the “you” view or attitude, of which many business communication textbooks teach and give examples. For example, Thill and Bovee (2017) in their *Essentials of Business Communication* explain that the “you” attitude “is a matter of demonstrating genuine interest in your readers and concern for their needs” (p. 129). The concept of analyzing, considering, and appealing to a communicator’s audience is central to any effective speech or document, but the concept of love communicates sincere goodwill toward the audience that goes beyond mere words. Students should not merely show others what is in it for them; they should honestly care about helping their audience. Ethos, an essential attribute of persuasion, is closely related to ethics. What if students went beyond proving to their audience that they, as speakers and/or authors, were ethical? What if students really were ethical, communicating for the best interests of their audiences? Teaching love for the audience is a way to provide helpful continuity throughout multiple topics that business communication instructors discuss with their students. Cultivating an attitude of love, generosity, service, and a focus on others is helpful for students’ success, and this principle of loving one’s audience, whether that audience be customers, colleagues, supervisors, or others, can be applied to virtually every subject that is normally discussed in business communication.

PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

When discussing correspondence, report writing, and document design, students can reflect upon how to do more work themselves to save their audience's time. As Perman (2014) admonishes, Christians should "create products that lift burdens, not products that create burdens" (p. 99). Christian business faculty should continually ask students to consider how they can make their audience's life easier. They can do so in email, for example, through creating a specific subject line, beginning with a warm greeting, providing all the necessary information that the audience needs, and giving clear next steps and/or deadlines at the closing of each message. They can also take extra pains to make their documents attractive and easy to read, using bullet points and headings, to save their audience's time. As Perman notes, "good design" is an example of "excellence as a form of love" (pp. 99-100). Students need to be pushed outside of what is most comfortable and easy to them toward considering how they can serve and benefit their audience, both in what information they convey and in the way that they design their documents.

As students consider the content of their messages, they should reflect upon these simple questions: Have I provided my audience with all the information that might be helpful to him/her? Have I given enough information so that my audience is fully equipped to do what he/she needs to do next? Hopefully, this reflection upon loving one's audience can push students away from laziness and apathy, a lack of care or compassionate love, to giving thorough, useful content to their audiences.

Moreover, when students learn to do presentations, they should think about what it means to love their audience by showing them the content's relevance to them, engaging them, and designing excellent and helpful—instead of sloppy or dull—visual aids. Students benefit from pondering questions such as, "What makes you enjoy a presentation?" and "What do you find helps you to remember presentation content the most?" These questions help them to apply the Golden Rule to their presentation strategies, and, hopefully, they move out of a mindset of doing what is easiest or quickest and into an attitude of others-oriented service that leads them to spend extra time on their PowerPoint slides to make them excellent and visually appealing. They will organize their presentations clearly to give their audience an indication of their progress through the presentation's key points. They will use strategies, such as storytelling, to actively engage and involve the audience instead of talking at them and boring them. They will make eye contact with audience members to make them feel valued. They will

work on not using filler words to distract their audience. In considering love in presentations, students learn to focus on their audience members as valuable others. Their presentations are a way to serve their audiences as students take the burden of design and planned audience engagement on themselves instead of boring their audiences or relating to them distantly.

Regarding another important business communication topic, when discussing interpersonal communication and listening skills, students can find that, once again, love is a crucial foundation that can lead them to empathize with any audience. Indeed, a focus on love can increase empathy in many situations that are helpful in business. Kolp and Rea (2006) explain that "research in the field of emotional intelligence (EI) reveals how [love contributes] to leadership success, as successful businesses increasingly rely on teamwork" (pp. 216-17). In whatever the context, a communicator can love his or her audience by listening attentively with an intent to understand and to help the audience. One of Covey's (1989) habits of highly effective people is "seek first to understand, then to be understood" (p. 237). When Covey describes empathetic listening, he emphasizes that the listener must not pretend to care but must actually care: "The skills will not be effective unless they come from a *sincere desire* to understand. People resent any attempt to manipulate them" (p. 252). A focus on love in communication could prevent persuasive attempts that seem disingenuous and manipulative.

Considering the good of the audience is perhaps most important when discussing the ethics of persuasion, which has a famous history. Plato's (1987) Socrates, in *Gorgias*, calls persuasive speech "pandering" (p. 30), and he claims that it "pays no regard to the best interests of its object, but catches fools with the bait of ephemeral pleasure and tricks them into holding it in the highest esteem" (p. 32). Indeed, much persuasive discourse can seem like obsequious, self-centered brown-nosing, but if instructors teach students to persuade for the good of their audience, this trap can be easily avoided. Baker and Martinson (2001) have provided helpful practical criteria by which to evaluate the ethics of persuasion in their TARES test: truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity, and social responsibility. Love, serving the audience for their good, is a foundation that undergirds these more specific applications of love. Students benefit both from seeing this broad principle of love and others-oriented service and from analyzing its practical and more specific considerations. Persuasion moves from motivating an audience to do what the rhetor wants to motivating an audience to do what is legitimately beneficial for him or her.

Another example of a subject-specific application is in teaching intercultural communication. As students learn about communication practices in other cultures, they would benefit from trying to be understanding instead of becoming annoyed by cultural differences. American students may feel an impulse to reject or resent communication practices that they do not understand from other cultures. Loving their audience in this context would mean seeking to understand rather than to be understood and taking the burden of learning about and practicing the other culture's communication practices to give to and serve that audience. In this framework of doing extra work for the sake of serving their audiences, students would hopefully do research to understand a new culture's communication practices and adapt to their practices instead of expecting to be accommodated themselves. These applications shift the focus from what students can gain through communication to how they can love others through communication and grow in audience-oriented service.

A final helpful application of love in business regards the topic of networking. In *Never Eat Alone*, Keith Ferrazzi (2014) emphasizes the importance of generosity over greed. He states, "I'll sum up the key to success in one word: generosity" (p. 14). Throughout his book on networking, he tells stories of the ways he has found to be valuable to others with the result of building his network and enabling people to remember him. He argues, "The real currency of networking is not greed but generosity" (p. 21). Like the givers in Grant's research, Ferrazzi says that when he meets someone new, he tries to determine how he can be of service to him or her (p. 114). When business communications instructors discuss networking with students, it might be helpful to have them make a list of people with whom they need to build relationships to gain skills or experiences they will need to reach their goals. Then students might brainstorm and share with each other about what they can do to love each of those people individually. They might consider the following questions:

- Can you share another networking contact to help that person? What other person do you know who could be of service to him or her?
- Can you share some knowledge with this person? What do you know that would be helpful to impart to him or her?
- Can you listen and show compassion to this person? When/how can you meet with, call, and/or email him or her?
- Can you help this person by serving him or her in some way? What does he or she need? How can you help him or her?

Some business communications instructors might object that the term "love" is too easily misunderstood by students and is too touchy-feely to be useful. As Kolp and Rea (2006) note, the virtue of love within the business world "can be scary or irrelevant, unless . . . it has the perspective of care, compassion, and mercy" (p. 21). Granted, spending time on defining this term at the beginning of a semester is crucial, but for students' own ethical formation, they should possess an understanding of love that goes beyond romantic feelings. In order for this critical lens to be effective, they must see love as adding value to others' and/or the company's endeavors, providing helpful information, making life easier/better for colleagues and customers, putting others first, having real goodwill toward others, and lifting (not creating) burdens. The breadth of all that the term encompasses is partly what makes it beneficial as a foundational concept. It can be helpfully applied to virtually any writing or speaking task.

Love is foundational for the Christian life. After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). The love Jesus commanded there was not romantic but involved others-oriented service. Similarly, Paul admonished, "always seek to do good to one another and to everyone" (1 Thessalonians 5:15). Christian business faculty desire to shape their students to be more loving and service-oriented; using love for the audience as a unified theme for communications can be helpful both for teaching cohesiveness in a business communications class and for ethical formation. Even students who are not Christians will likely receive this instruction without problem. As Doug Oman (2011) has noted, "All major spiritual and religious traditions have emphasized the importance of unselfish love and compassion" (p. 945). Love as service and concern for the good of others, in this case a communicator's audience, is a concept that most students have been taught in their families and/or faith communities. To further participate in students' ethical formation, business communications instructors can use love as a helpful fundamental concept through which to filter all the other practical aspects of instruction. Fink (2003) claims that "significant learning requires that there be some kind of lasting change that is important in terms of the learner's life" (p. 30). What better way to promote change in today's students than to call them to care deeply about others and serve others in the ways that they speak, write, and listen?

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