

Creative Love in Education

Integrating traditional and critical theological approaches

Pinhas Luzon

Abstract

This article examines the integration of theology and critical thought to develop educational love capable of generating transmissible values. Drawing on Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's philosophy, it argues that expanding apophatic theology through critical thinking can form a transformative educational framework. This love emerges from recognizing human consciousness limitations, fostering a reciprocal teacher-student dynamic. The analysis reveals that acknowledging boundaries paradoxically creates a relationship where mutual recognition transcends preliminary ideologies. Creative Love in Education offers practical applications for classroom environments that honor both individual potential and communal values.

Keywords

Critical educational theology; Creative Love in Education; teacher-student relationship; apophatic theology; values; autonomy; infinity paradox; experience of limitation; distinctness; interdependence; participation; responsibility

Introduction

Can theology and critical thinking be merged to produce an educational love that provides positive, implementable, and transmissible values?¹ Current theoretical models in education emphasize the importance of love,² with some approaches suggesting teachers should love students as they are or could be, without establishing preliminary conditions (Jasinski and Lewis 2016, 430–32). This article explores whether educational love can simultaneously embrace students' potential while transmitting values that enable them to become loving themselves.

The question emerges from a fundamental tension in educational philosophy. Traditional theological approaches to education often impose predetermined values, potentially limiting student autonomy. Conversely, critical approaches may reject all fixed values, creating

¹ On the unique characteristics of theological thinking and critical thinking that make it difficult to create integration between them in a way that produces transmissible educational values, see: Apple 2018: 3–4, Benyamini and Hotam 2015: 334–36, McLaren and Jandrić 2017: 632–35.

² On the place of love in education, its characteristics, and the challenges in implementing it within educational systems, see: Garrison 2010: 124–35, Kenkies 2019: 550–52, Lanas 2017, 560–62.

difficulties in transmitting any enduring principles. The resulting divide between theological and critical worldviews manifests in educational contexts where neither approach fully succeeds in balancing unconditional acceptance with value transmission.³ Traditional theological approaches risk constraining student autonomy by imposing predetermined values, while critical approaches may struggle to transmit any enduring principles, creating an educational vacuum where meaningful value formation becomes impossible.

This research offers a constructive response to this tension through a model I call Creative Love in Education. This love emerges from a philosophical framework – Critical Educational Theology (CET) – that merges elements of theological thinking with critical perspectives. Drawing significantly from the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, CET establishes a foundation where both theology and criticism contribute to a cohesive educational philosophy (Luzon 2023b, 100–105).

The model presented here offers a solution to a core paradox: how can educators love students unconditionally while simultaneously imparting transformative values? By examining this question through the lens of expanded apophatic theology, I demonstrate how recognition of **the limitations of human knowledge** creates space for an educational relationship that transcends this paradox. This relationship, Creative Love in Education (whose defining characteristics will be outlined below), enables both unconditional regard for students and the transmission of values without contradiction. As will be elaborated below, this transformative love emerges through a specific process wherein mutual recognition of limitations creates reciprocal dependency, establishing a relationship where each participant's distinct existence depends upon the other's presence.

Critical Educational Theology: Theoretical Foundations

Critical Educational Theology is a philosophical worldview examining human relationships with both environment and divinity. Though fundamentally theological, it incorporates critical thinking principles and yields significant educational-moral implications. The framework combines theology and criticism through three interrelated principles that resolve the apparent conflict between these modes of thought.

The first principle – philosophical-critical – asserts that human knowledge is inherently limited, bounded by that which has no boundary: the infinite. Human consciousness must recognize its inability to appropriate absolute capabilities or knowledge. This principle represents the critical foundation, challenging any human claim to absolute authority or knowledge that would justify oppression (Luzon 2023b, 100–105).

The second principle – theological – maintains that God is unattainable and cannot be grasped directly. However, humans can perceive divine existence through regressive inference. When confronting the boundary between finite human knowledge and infinity, a paradox emerges:

³ In his writings, Yotam Hotam extensively presents the gap between theological and critical thinking, while elaborating on the factors that led to the creation of this divide. From there, one can also learn about the way in which remnants of theological thinking still remain in the 'folds' of critical thought. See: Hotam 2023, 28–45. Hotam 2024: 200–202.

infinity itself appears limited by finite human existence. This “infinity paradox” leads to recognition of an incomprehensible entity – God – that transcends both finite and infinite categories (Luzon 2023a, 14–17).

The third principle – reconstruction – focuses on how every encounter with reality reconstructs the processes described in the previous principles. Each manifestation in reality serves as a boundary to human knowledge, stimulating consciousness to recognize its limitations and, through inductive thinking, to rediscover both infinity and God’s unattainable nature. Thus, each encounter with reality reminds humans of their distinct, limited existence, separate from infinity and differentiated from God.⁴

At the educational-moral level, these principles establish a framework where the educator must create norms aligned with human knowledge’s encounters with reality. These norms serve to reconstruct the process by which reality stimulates consciousness to rediscover its limitations and God’s existence. The supreme educational value becomes transmitting knowledge regarding the limitations of human knowledge – not as nihilistic resignation but as authentic recognition of humanity’s position in relation to the incomprehensible (Luzon 2023b, 107–109).

This theological-critical synthesis resolves a fundamental tension: rather than abandoning all supreme moral systems (which paradoxically assumes absolute knowledge about morality’s absence), it establishes one supreme morality based on recognizing the impossibility of humans knowing what is absolutely good. This formulation aligns with CET’s requirements by establishing clear moral values that promote discovering human knowledge’s limitations through direct encounters with reality.

Creative Love in Education: A Conceptual Framework

Creative Love in Education emerges directly from Critical Educational Theology’s principles, manifesting when two individuals encounter each other as mutual boundaries. In this encounter, each person’s consciousness reconstructs the fundamental experience of limitation and, through this, experiences distinct self-existence. The other person thus serves as the catalyst for one’s consciousness of unique existence. Without this encounter, this particular awareness would not exist (Luzon 2023a, 18–19).

This creates a remarkable dynamic: each person’s distinct existence depends upon the other’s presence. Neither threatens the other’s existence; rather, each constitutes the other’s conscious experience of distinctness. This mutual dependency establishes a relationship system where each participant experiences their unique existence as dependent on the other, creating a reciprocal appreciation that transcends mere acknowledgment to become love.

In the educational context, this means the teacher recognizes that the student’s existence ‘creates’ the teacher’s consciousness of distinct existence. This recognition engenders a desire

⁴ On the fundamental and unique distinction between God in His essence and His manifestation within divine infinity, one can learn from the writings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslav. See: Nachman of Breslav, *Likutei Moharan*, 24:8.

to preserve the student as they are – not just in their current state but as they could be or choose not to be. Similarly, the student experiences the teacher as constituting their distinct existence, establishing mutual recognition beyond hierarchical power dynamics.

Crucially, this love differs from relationships where one party imposes predetermined values. Neither teacher nor student begins with absolute knowledge or values to impose. Instead, both recognize their limited nature and mutual dependency. Even the value of loving the other emerges secondarily from this mutual recognition rather than as a predetermined condition. When both acknowledge their limitations and interdependence, the student functions simultaneously as beloved and lover, rather than as merely the recipient of the teacher's affection (Luzon 2023a, 18–19).

Within this relationship, educational values emerge from reconstructing reality's stimulation of consciousness. The teacher does not abandon values but derives them from the need to reconstruct the consciousness that produced this love. The encounter with the student requires educational practices whose purpose is to reconstruct how the student created the teacher's consciousness of unique existence, and vice versa. This resolves the paradox of educational love: the teacher can love the student as they could be without relinquishing educational values, as these values emerge from and preserve the love relationship itself (Luzon 2023b, 105–15).

Practical Applications and Educational Values

The practical implications of Creative Love in Education extend throughout educational practice. Regarding the teacher's role, this approach positions educators as guides in a joint investigation about human consciousness and knowledge boundaries. This reframes lesson planning and management, encouraging learning spaces based on authentic encounters, open dialogue, and reflective observation of learning processes.

In assessment and feedback, Creative Love in Education nurtures a climate of mutual respect acknowledging all participants' limitations. It transforms the educational environment from one focused on hierarchical knowledge transmission to one inviting questioning and joint exploration. These principles can permeate pedagogical culture through implementation in teacher training programs (Luzon 2023b, 110–20).

The model translates into specific classroom behaviors and practices. Teachers can cultivate epistemic humility by presenting themselves as co-investigators rather than all-knowing authorities, using phrases like “let us explore together” instead of “I will explain to you,” sharing their own learning experiences, and establishing “wondering corners” for unanswered questions. They can develop constitutive mutual responsibility through peer mentoring systems and cooperative projects emphasizing interdependence.

Teachers can establish direct discourse about personal knowledge boundaries, creating frameworks where students pursue answers to questions the teacher cannot answer and where teachers learn from students. They can preserve student autonomy by adapting teaching methods to individual needs and creating opportunities for expressing disagreement. Lessons can evolve through student-teacher interaction, with predetermined plans modified in response to student contributions.

At a deeper level, Creative Love in Education produces values that can be systematically implemented. One such value, *Renewed Artistic Humility*, consists of three components: recognizing personal perspective limitations, embracing multiple interpretations as mutually constitutive rather than competitive, and continuously renewing one's perspective. This translates into educational practices like the *Circle of Renewing Perspectives*, where students share observations and discover how each perspective reveals others' limitations.

Similarly, *Renewed Ecological Humility* emerges as a value oriented toward nature, comprising recognition of the limitations of human understanding regarding natural systems, openness to complexity revealed by every living creature, and constant perspective renewal. This manifests in practices like *Ecological Observation Circles*, where students monitor living organisms while discovering new complexity layers that exceed human comprehension.

These values exemplify how Creative Love in Education can generate a range of educational principles aligned with expanded apophatic theology. Each value translates the fundamental recognition of human limitation into concrete educational practices that preserve both student autonomy and transmissible values.

Comparative Analysis with Other Educational Models

Creative Love in Education addresses limitations in existing educational approaches. Traditional theological models often establish predetermined values that students must adopt, potentially constraining their autonomy. Conversely, critical models may resist all fixed values, creating difficulties in transmitting principles between generations (Luzon 2015, 464–70). Creative Love offers an alternative that preserves both autonomy and value transmission.

This approach particularly complements Agamben's concept of *Whatever Love*, which emphasizes loving students for their potential, whether realized or not (Jasinski and Lewis 2016, 430–40). While *Whatever Love* prevents educational activity from being conditioned by preliminary social requirements, it still positions the student exclusively as beloved, possibly limiting their capacity to become loving themselves. This limitation emerges precisely because the absence of preliminary conditions for love paradoxically creates its own constraint: if no preliminary conditions exist – not even the condition of learning to love others – then the capacity to love cannot itself be positioned as a necessary prerequisite in educational practice. This paradox reveals how unconditioned love, when applied unidirectionally from teacher to student, inadvertently restricts the intergenerational transmission of the very love ethic it embodies. Creative Love resolves this by establishing a bidirectional relationship where both teacher and student function simultaneously as lover and beloved.

This distinction becomes particularly significant in addressing what Agamben terms the “death of the student as a form of life.” This concept, developed in response to educational practices that subordinate learning to technological or political imperatives, describes the disconnection of individuals from authentic learning communities. *Whatever Love* offers partial protection against this by rejecting preliminary conditions on educational love. However, Creative Love

provides more comprehensive protection by enabling the intergenerational transmission of this unconditional love ethic.⁵

The model also addresses the limitations of apophatic theology. Traditional negative theology, focusing exclusively on God's unattainability, struggles to generate positive educational values. By expanding the apophatic approach to encompass human knowledge limitations, Creative Love creates space for positive values emerging from these limitations rather than in spite of them. This transformed apophatic framework resolves the apparent paradox between loving students unconditionally and transmitting values that may change them (Luzon 2023a, 20–21).

Unlike approaches that position God as a direct source of predetermined educational values, Creative Love derives its values from recognizing the boundaries of human attainment concerning God. This fundamental shift prevents educational values from being harnessed to serve divine existence, instead allowing them to emerge from the recognition of mutual limitation and interdependence.

Concluding Discussion

This research demonstrates that theology and critical thinking can indeed merge to produce a unique educational love – Creative Love in Education – that provides positive, implementable, and transmissible values. The study expands on previous research by not merely identifying theological foundations in critical thought, but actively constructing a framework where theology and criticism mutually reinforce educational practice.

The research broadens current conceptions of educational love by anchoring Whatever Love in an expanded theological-apophatic foundation. This anchoring reveals how every manifestation in reality can serve as a vehicle for Creative Love in Education by awakening consciousness to human limitations and unattainable divinity. The resulting relationship transcends traditional hierarchical educational dynamics without abandoning transmissible values.

Implementation challenges remain significant. Integrating Creative Love in Education within traditional educational frameworks requires reconciling a model that questions knowledge acquisition with systems structured around measurable achievements. Teacher training presents complex challenges involving professional identity reconstruction and authority reconceptualization. Systemic changes in educational relationships, from parent-teacher interactions to curriculum development, will be necessary for full implementation.

Future research should examine how Creative Love in Education manifests in diverse classrooms through ethnographic studies utilizing observation protocols focused on mutual recognition of knowledge limitations. Comparative research between religious and secular educational frameworks could explore how institutional contexts affect implementation.

⁵ On the critical importance of the practical implementation of ideals such as love and youth in actual educational systems, see: Hotam 2024, 200–10.

Longitudinal studies might trace the development of students' epistemological perspectives through this model, employing interviews, reflective journals, and systematic observation. Additional research should explore whether similar theological-apophatic ideas enabling comparable expansions exist in other religious traditions. This could deepen the model's cross-cultural applicability while preserving its essential characteristics. Further investigation should examine how Creative Love addresses the paradox between unconditional acceptance and value transmission in diverse cultural contexts.

Creative Love in Education offers a promising pathway for bridging seemingly irreconcilable educational approaches. By transforming limitations into foundations for mutual recognition and shared value development, it creates educational relationships where both teacher and student participate in a dance of mutual constitution rather than hierarchical transmission. In a world increasingly divided between uncritical acceptance of tradition and rejection of all inherited values, this middle path may provide the educational foundation for sustainable, humane communities.

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Dr. Pinhas Luzon

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5164-1922>

Jerusalem College of Education

Department of Educational Systems Management

32 Dudvani Street, Jerusalem

Israel

pinhaslu@gordon.ac.il