

CARITAS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AN AUGUSTINIAN PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the implementation of the CARITAS Framework, an Augustinian-inspired pedagogical model designed to support transformative and values-centered learning in AI-influenced educational contexts. The framework was implemented in two higher education classroom settings - a theology-oriented course and a non-theology general education course - and examined through student reflective journals, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and a semi-structured instructor interview. Thematic analysis indicated that CARITAS fostered structured learning, dialogical engagement, reflective integration, and values formation across contexts, while also supporting instructor renewal and pedagogical creativity. Findings further suggest that CARITAS discourages passive reliance on artificial intelligence by prioritizing human reflection, dialogue, and ethical discernment. Generally, the study highlights CARITAS as a classroom-tested, human-centered pedagogical framework with practical relevance for educators navigating AI-mediated learning environments.

Keywords: AI in Education, Augustinian Pedagogy, Reflective Learning, Values-Based Instruction.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary educational environments. Across higher education, AI-driven technologies are widely used to support adaptive learning pathways, automated assessment, content generation, and instructional efficiency (Krstić et al., 2022; Jackman et al., 2025; Vieriu & Petrea, 2025). This expansion reflects a broader shift toward technology-mediated learning, in which digital tools play a central role in shaping instructional design, learner engagement, and access to knowledge (Floridi, 2022).

Recent analyses highlight the rapid growth of AI-supported personalization, assessment, and efficiency, while cautioning that such developments risk reducing education to automated processes if not guided by clear pedagogical and ethical frameworks (Zawacki-Richter, 2023). Research in teacher education further emphasizes that the educational value of AI depends on educators' critical engagement, professional judgment, and their capacity to integrate technology in ways that sustain inclusive, reflective, and human-centered learning (Zhang & Zhuo, 2024). In this regard, critical scholarship calls for a move beyond techno-solutionist perspectives to examine how AI reshapes pedagogy, professional judgment, and educational values (Selwyn, 2024).

Concerns have also been raised regarding learners' overreliance on AI-generated outputs, the erosion of reflective and critical engagement, and the marginalization of ethical and values formation in technology-driven classrooms (Luckin, 2022; Çela et al., 2024). When efficiency and automation are prioritized without intentional pedagogical grounding, learning risks becoming instrumental rather than formative, thereby diminishing opportunities for dialogue, moral discernment, and personal transformation (Chan & Tsi, 2024). These are further supported by studies highlighting the ethical, psychological, and pedagogical implications of AI integration, particularly in relation to learner autonomy and formation (Diener, 2022; Wang, 2021; Papathanasiou, 2023).

These concerns are particularly significant in values-oriented and faith-based educational contexts, where education is understood as holistic human formation rather than mere knowledge transmission. Human-centered approaches further emphasize relational learning, empathy, and authenticity as essential to meaningful instruction (Zhou, 2023; Worabo et al., 2022).

Empirical studies comparing AI-simulated and human tutoring dialogues further indicate persistent differences in responsiveness, contextual sensitivity,

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and pedagogical depth (Li et al., 2025). Consequently, there is a growing need for pedagogical frameworks that intentionally promote reflection, learner agency, ethical integration, and community engagement in AI-influenced environments (Knox, 2023; Holmes et al., 2021).

Within this context, historically grounded pedagogical traditions offer important conceptual resources for re-centering the human person in education. Transformative education has been increasingly emphasized in religious-based schools as a means of fostering character development and holistic formation (Megawati & Sulisworo, 2025). The educational thought of Augustine of Hippo, with its emphasis on interiority, reflection, and rightly ordered love (*caritas*), provides a compelling foundation for integrating intellectual development with moral and ethical formation (Augustine, *Confessions*; *On Christian Doctrine*; *De Magistro*). This perspective aligns with pedagogical approaches that emphasize attentiveness, responsiveness, and “teaching that listens” within learner-centered environments (De Guzman & Mendoza, 2023; Irons & Elkington, 2021). Contemporary scholarship further situates Augustine’s pedagogical insights within learner-centered, adaptive, and reflective instructional approaches (Richmann & Fogleman, 2021).

Building on this Augustinian foundation, the CARITAS Framework was developed as a structured pedagogical model designed to integrate reflective learning, dialogical engagement, and values formation within contemporary classrooms. Organized into seven instructional phases - Create, Attend, Respond, Integrate, Teach, Assess, and Synthesize - the framework is intended to support human-centered learning in AI-influenced educational environments.

Accordingly, this study examines the implementation of the CARITAS Framework across two higher education classroom contexts: a theology-oriented course and a non-theology general education course. The study seeks to contribute to the development of pedagogical approaches that sustain reflective, ethical, and human-centered learning in the age of AI. At the theoretical level, it operationalizes Augustinian pedagogy within contemporary educational research. At the level of practice, it offers a classroom-based model for integrating reflection, dialogue, and values formation. At the institutional level, it supports efforts to align pedagogy, ethical formation, and educational systems in response to technological change (Mahajan, 2025; Garira, 2024; Leal Filho et al., 2022).

This study explores the implementation of the CARITAS Framework as a pedagogical model for transformative and values-centered learning in AI-influenced educational contexts. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students in a theology-oriented course experience the CARITAS Framework in relation to learning, reflection, and values formation?
2. How do students in a non-theology general education course experience the CARITAS Framework in relation to responsibility, collaboration, and values-oriented learning?
3. How does the implementing instructor describe her experiences, insights, and challenges in applying the CARITAS Framework?
4. What instructional insights emerge from structured classroom observations of CARITAS-based teaching?
5. In what ways do student and instructor experiences converge or diverge, and what do these patterns suggest about the transformative potential of the CARITAS Framework?
6. What implications does the CARITAS Framework suggest for ethical and human-centered education in the age of AI?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the implementation of the CARITAS Pedagogical Framework and to capture students’ and instructors’ lived experiences across two higher education classroom contexts. The design enabled contextualized descriptions of how participants engaged with the framework and how it influenced reflection, moral awareness, and learning engagement.

Prior to implementation, research instruments underwent expert validation and pilot testing to ensure clarity, coherence, and alignment with pedagogical objectives and Augustinian educational values. The qualitative descriptive approach was selected for its accessibility and relevance to instructional practice in AI-influenced learning environments.

Participants of the Study

Participants included students enrolled in two higher education courses and the instructors who facilitated CARITAS-based instruction in a private Augustinian institution in the Philippines.

Students participated through whole-class implementation of the framework and engaged in reflective journals, classroom activities, and focus group discussions as part of regular instruction.

Participation followed informed consent procedures, and responses were anonymized using neutral identifiers (e.g., Student A, Student B).

Two instructors were involved. The theology-oriented course was implemented by the teacher-researcher, while the non-theology course was facilitated by a trained participating teacher. To minimize bias, only the participating teacher was included in the interview component.

Instruments of the Study

Multiple instruments were used to support data triangulation:

1. Classroom Observation Rubric – documented instructional flow, engagement, dialogical interaction, reflection, and values integration aligned with the CARITAS phases.
2. Student Evaluation Rubric – assessed outputs focusing on articulation, reflection, conceptual integration, collaboration, and ethical awareness.
3. Reflective Journals – elicited perceptions of learning, insights, and values integration.
4. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Protocol – explored experiences of engagement, collaboration, and instructional impact.
5. Instructor Interview Guide – documented instructional experiences, challenges, and pedagogical insights.

All instruments were developed based on the CARITAS Framework and validated by experts, with revisions made after pilot testing.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected across multiple instructional sessions in both classroom contexts. Classroom observations were conducted during CARITAS-based lessons, while student outputs and reflective journals were gathered across instructional phases.

Focus group discussions were conducted after the instructional unit, and the instructor interview followed the implementation period. All participation was voluntary and supported by informed consent, with data anonymized during transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns across qualitative sources. An initial coding framework based on the CARITAS phases guided categorization, followed by open coding to identify emergent themes.

Analysis followed an iterative process: familiarization, coding, clustering, cross-source comparison, theme refinement, and synthesis. Triangulation across observations, journals, FGDs,

rubrics, and interview data strengthened credibility. No statistical treatment was applied.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols included informed consent, confidentiality, and secure data handling. Participation in interviews and focus groups was voluntary.

To address the teacher-researcher's dual role, reflexive practices were employed, including triangulation, reliance on the participating teacher's interview data, and maintenance of an audit trail. The study adhered to established standards for qualitative credibility, transparency, and ethical integrity.

Results and Discussion

The implementation of the CARITAS Framework across two higher education classroom contexts generated convergent patterns of student engagement, reflective learning, and pedagogical transformation. Data drawn from reflective journals, focus group discussions (FGDs), classroom observations, evaluation rubrics, and a semi-structured instructor interview were analyzed thematically and are presented according to the six research questions.

SOP 1: Student Experience in a Theology-Oriented Course

Students in the theology-oriented course consistently experienced the CARITAS Framework as a structured, dialogical, and spiritually integrative pedagogy. The sequence of instructional phases provided clarity and coherence, reducing anxiety while sustaining engagement. Rather than constraining participation, the structured rhythm enabled reflective freedom, allowing students to anticipate, process, and articulate learning more confidently.

A dominant pattern across data sources was the emergence of a safe and dialogical learning environment. Students who initially hesitated to participate reported increased willingness to speak, engage, and listen. Dialogue functioned not merely as participation but as a formative process; exposure to diverse perspectives deepened understanding and fostered perspective-taking. Repeated opportunities to respond and synthesize contributed to growth in confidence, indicating that dialogical engagement supported both cognitive and affective development.

Distinctively, theology students emphasized prayer and spiritual integration as central to their learning experience. Prayer embedded within the Create and Synthesize phases shaped attentiveness and reflective disposition, positioning learning as a spiritually grounded process rather than a purely

academic exercise. Students described CARITAS as facilitating personal spiritual growth, integrating faith with daily life and transforming theological knowledge into lived meaning.

These findings align with transformative learning literature emphasizing reflection and dialogical engagement as mechanisms for deep learning and personal change (Merzel, 2023; Costa Mendes et al., 2023). In religious education contexts, reflection and values integration are similarly identified as key to character formation (Megawati & Sulisworo, 2025). From an Augustinian perspective, these patterns reflect a pedagogy of interiority, where learning is understood as an inward journey toward wisdom. As Augustine expresses, “You were more inward to me than my inmost self” (*conf.* 3.6.11). CARITAS operationalizes this inward movement by structuring learning as a rhythm of reflection, dialogue, and synthesis, engaging intellect, affect, and spirit within a communal context.

SOP 2: Student Experience in a Non-Theology General Education Course

In the non-theology context, CARITAS was experienced primarily as a framework for responsibility, collaboration, and communicative competence, while still maintaining its values-oriented orientation. Students consistently reported that the framework encouraged ownership of learning, supported by structured opportunities for participation and shared responsibility.

Collaboration emerged as a central feature of the learning experience. Students described CARITAS as fostering peer support, teamwork, and collective engagement, enabling them to co-construct understanding through dialogue. This collaborative dynamic reinforced accountability, as learners felt both empowered to contribute and responsible for the quality of their participation. These patterns also reflect broader findings on collaborative and participatory learning environments that enhance engagement and shared responsibility (Amsari et al., 2024).

Students also reported significant growth in communication skills and confidence. The structured yet supportive environment enabled them to overcome fear of public speaking, articulate ideas more clearly, and engage in reflective discussion. The teacher’s facilitative role was identified as critical in sustaining this environment, balancing guidance with learner autonomy.

Although explicit theological language was less prominent, values formation remained evident, particularly in terms of respect, humility, and awareness of others. Reflective closure - often supported by guided reflection or prayer - enabled

students to integrate learning meaningfully, reinforcing motivation and ethical awareness.

These findings align with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the cycle of experience, reflection, and application in promoting engagement and professional formation (Wijnen-Meijer et al., 2022). The collaborative and dialogical dimensions of CARITAS further resonate with social learning perspectives, where knowledge and values are constructed through interaction (Khozin et al., 2024; Wibowo et al., 2025). From an Augustinian perspective, the communal nature of learning reflects the understanding that truth is sought within dialogue and shared inquiry (*mag.* 11.38). The adaptability of CARITAS across contexts demonstrates its capacity to sustain human-centered and values-oriented learning beyond explicitly theological settings.

SOP 3: Instructor Experience of Implementing CARITAS

The cooperating teacher described CARITAS as a transformative pedagogical journey that reshaped both instructional practice and professional identity. Implementation fostered increased creativity, deeper engagement with students, and a renewed sense of vocation, suggesting that the framework functions not only as a student-centered pedagogy but also as a form of reflective professional formation.

A key theme in the teacher’s experience was the tension between reflection and application. The application phase was identified as both the most challenging and most meaningful component, as it required students to translate reflective insights into concrete action. This phase served as a diagnostic moment, revealing the depth of student transformation beyond content comprehension.

The teacher also reported increased student participation and productivity, attributing these outcomes to the structured yet dialogical nature of CARITAS. The framework supported a shift from content transmission to facilitative teaching, aligning classroom practice with learner-centered pedagogy.

These findings align with Transformative Learning Theory, which emphasizes that transformation is validated through action rather than reflection alone (Kokkos, 2024; Formenti, 2023; Merzel, 2023). From an Augustinian perspective, this emphasis reflects the movement from knowledge to love and ethical action (*cat. rud.* 4.7). Notably, the teacher reported a renewal of passion for teaching, echoing research suggesting that reflective pedagogical frameworks can revitalize professional commitment (Gore et al., 2021).

The teacher's recommendation for institutional adoption further suggests that CARITAS holds potential as a system-level pedagogical model, extending beyond individual classroom practice.

SOP 4: Instructional Insights from Classroom Observation

Classroom observation confirmed the faithful implementation of all seven CARITAS phases, demonstrating the framework's operational viability. Instruction consistently integrated prayer, reflection, dialogue, and synthesis, indicating coherence between theoretical design and classroom enactment.

Observation data revealed high levels of participation, inclusivity, and dialogical engagement. Students were encouraged to articulate ideas freely within a non-judgmental environment, while the teacher's facilitative approach balanced academic content with values integration. These observations corroborate student and teacher reports, strengthening the credibility of findings.

A notable instructional tension emerged in relation to time management. The depth of dialogue occasionally limited content coverage, reflecting the broader challenge of balancing reflective engagement with curricular demands. This tension is characteristic of transformative pedagogies and aligns with Augustine's recognition of the need for pedagogical discernment in balancing discursiveness and structure (*cat. rud.* 1.1).

Importantly, classroom practice revealed an implicit AI-safeguarding effect. The emphasis on dialogue, reflection, and interpretive judgment minimized opportunities for passive reliance on AI-generated outputs, reinforcing human agency in the learning process. The teacher's adaptive facilitation further reflects contemporary understandings of effective pedagogy as responsive and reflective (Richmann & Fogleman, 2021).

SOP 5: Convergence and Divergence Across Data Sources

Triangulated analysis revealed strong convergence across data sources, with CARITAS consistently emerging as a structured, dialogical, and values-oriented pedagogy. Students, teacher, and observational data all confirmed patterns of engagement, reflection, and inclusive learning environments.

At the same time, purposeful divergence was observed. Theology students emphasized spiritual integration; non-theology students highlighted collaboration and responsibility; and the teacher focused on application and professional renewal.

These variations reflect contextual responsiveness rather than inconsistency.

This convergence–divergence dynamic indicates that CARITAS effectively integrates interiority and exteriority, enabling reflection to translate into action. Learning was consistently described as communal and dialogical, aligning with perspectives that view transformative learning as socially mediated (Formenti, 2023).

Triangulation also strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of findings, as participant experiences aligned with observed classroom practice. Overall, CARITAS demonstrates both structural stability and contextual flexibility, supporting its applicability across diverse educational settings.

SOP 6: Implications for Ethical and Human-Centered Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Across all data sources, CARITAS-based instruction consistently positioned AI as secondary to human-centered learning processes. Learning required reflection, dialogue, and interpretive judgment, limiting reliance on AI-generated outputs and reinforcing human agency.

This orientation reflects Augustine's distinction between information and wisdom, emphasizing that knowledge without moral discernment does not constitute true understanding (*doc. Chr.* 4.5–7). CARITAS addresses this limitation by structuring reflective and dialogical processes that guide learners toward meaning and ethical responsibility.

Empirical findings align with arguments that AI should function as an assistive rather than substitutive force in education (Chan & Tsi, 2023; Fernández-Sánchez, 2025). The framework also supports calls for ethical integration of AI through community-based pedagogical practices (Holmes et al., 2021), resisting technologically deterministic approaches (Knox, 2023).

From a broader perspective, CARITAS represents a contextual instantiation of transformative learning, integrating Augustinian pedagogy with contemporary educational theory (Kokkos, 2024). By embedding reflection, dialogue, and values formation within instructional practice, the framework sustains human-centered education while engaging with technological realities.

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the implementation of the CARITAS Framework as an Augustinian-inspired pedagogical model for transformative and values-centered learning in AI-influenced educational contexts. Drawing on student

experiences from theology and non-theology courses, instructor reflections, classroom observations, and triangulated findings, the study demonstrates that CARITAS functions as a structured and reflective pedagogy capable of sustaining both academic engagement and ethical formation.

Findings indicate that, in theology-oriented contexts, CARITAS integrates prayer, reflection, and dialogue in ways that extend learning beyond content mastery toward personal and spiritual meaning. In non-theology settings, students emphasized responsibility, collaboration, confidence, and real-life relevance, demonstrating the framework's adaptability across disciplines while maintaining its human-centered orientation.

At the level of teaching practice, CARITAS emerged as both student-transformative and teacher-renewing. The cooperating teacher reported increased creativity, strengthened vocational commitment, and heightened student engagement, while also identifying the pedagogical challenge of translating reflection into action, particularly within the application phase. Classroom observations corroborated these findings, confirming consistent implementation of the seven phases and highlighting the need to balance reflective depth with time constraints.

Importantly, the study underscores the relevance of CARITAS for ethical and human-centered education in the age of AI. Across data sources, CARITAS-based instruction positioned AI as a supportive tool rather than a substitute for human judgment. By foregrounding reflection, dialogue, and presence, the framework limited passive reliance on AI-generated outputs and reinforced learning environments grounded in discernment, relationality, and ethical responsibility.

These findings suggest that the CARITAS Framework offers a coherent, adaptable, and ethically grounded pedagogical model that responds meaningfully to contemporary educational challenges. Rooted in Augustinian philosophy and aligned with contemporary learning theories, it contributes to alternative educational trajectories that resist reductive, efficiency-driven models of AI integration (Knox, 2023). By translating Augustinian pedagogical insights into a structured instructional sequence, CARITAS advances discussions on human-centered education in technologically mediated contexts (McCloskey, 2021) and supports ongoing efforts toward transformative character education in religious-based institutions (Megawati & Sulisworo, 2025).

At the pedagogical level, the findings highlight the value of structured instructional sequencing that integrates engagement, dialogue, reflection, and synthesis, thereby supporting learner agency and ethical awareness across disciplines. The emphasis on facilitative teaching underscores the importance of cultivating safe learning environments in which students are encouraged to articulate ideas, engage diverse perspectives, and connect learning with lived experience.

At the institutional level, the study points to the need for integrating reflective and values-centered pedagogies into curriculum design, assessment practices, and faculty development initiatives. Rather than treating such approaches as isolated practices, institutions are encouraged to embed frameworks such as CARITAS within broader strategies for teaching and learning enhancement (Garira, 2024). In this way, pedagogy becomes a central response to ethical concerns related to AI, complementing technological regulation (Floridi, 2022).

Furthermore, CARITAS demonstrates potential as a framework for professional formation, supporting teacher motivation, creativity, and instructional quality (Gore et al., 2021). Its emphasis on shared responsibility, reflective judgment, and dialogical engagement aligns with emerging calls for community-based approaches to ethical AI integration (Holmes et al., 2021) and with whole-institution approaches to educational sustainability (Leal Filho et al., 2022).

The CARITAS Framework affirms that the central task of education in the age of AI is not the optimization of information delivery, but the formation of persons capable of reflection, responsibility, and meaningful engagement. By sustaining interiority, dialogue, and ethical discernment, the CARITAS Framework offers a pedagogical response that preserves the human core of education amid rapid technological change.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in this manuscript.

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