

Course Syllabus - Uncommon Reading
Why Learn? Toward a Transformative Vision of University Education
(or “What are we doing here, anyway?”)
IDH 2930 (27667) - Fall 2022

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 9-10am or by appointment

Meeting time: Wednesdays, Period 9 (4:05 - 4:55), Little 119

Required Text: Mark Edmundson. *Why Teach? In Defense of Real Education*.
Bloomsbury.

Course Description:

Topic: What’s the point of college? What does a bachelors degree get you these days? Is the university merely a place to gain skills that lead to a job? Or can it be a place to explore curiosities and passions, wherever they may lead? What’s the ultimate purpose of an education, anyway? In this course we will consider these questions and more as we try to imagine what the classroom can offer those who enter? Specifically, we will explore whether there are ways that higher education can contribute to one’s life that cannot be measured by the kind of employment that may (or may not) follow? Through this collection of essays, English professor Mark Edmundson, offers, on one hand, a clear criticism of the ways university education has taken shape in recent years, and, on the other hand, he considers ways to support, reclaim, and reinvigorate the undergraduate educational experience. Edmundson weaves classic literary works with his own reflection and experience to suggest that there might be space cleared (or guarded) so that the classroom can contribute in significant ways to the lives of those who fully engage. But what shall we put in this space? This class will unpack Edmundson’s thought, consider whether our own experience in the university fits, and, in the end, try to make our own space for working out an answer to the question: why learn? and related questions.

Format: This seminar style course, defined by classroom conversation, will provide students the opportunity to read and discuss the course material carefully and reflectively. We will consider Edmundson’s thought alongside related articles, poetry, and film. Our reading will culminate weekly in classroom discussion to interact with the author’s ideas and formulate our own. Additionally, students will participate in reflection through short writing assignments as they interact with the topics we cover.

Categorizing the course: an experiment for a richer classroom. This course will move back and forth from the various focal points in university education to wider experiences in learning that will help us test the notion that the ideas and conversation that happen in a classroom can contribute to the enhancement of human experience beyond the classroom. To that end, we will be attempting to live out the idea that in a place as big as UF, the classroom can become a genuine community of learning, even if only temporarily.

Course Objectives:

1. Read *Why Teach?* (and related material) carefully and reflectively
2. Understand and articulate Edmundson's ideas, placing in context of our own experience
3. Engage the text *critically and respond *personally
4. Discuss the text in a thoughtful way that includes both careful reading and careful listening.

*Critically does not mean negatively only. It means that it is expected that you will be able to distance yourself enough to fairly and thoughtfully analyze the content, evaluating in ways that allow you to offer thoughtful response and not merely agree or disagree. This critical stance should be framed by a generous posture on your part. Please read "Reading Charitably" in Canvas.

**Personally* means two things: 1) as you read you are not merely seeking to find what you like and dislike about the book; more than that, you are entering into a conversation with the book/author. 2) As you interact with the reading, you allow the content to be filtered through your own experience in life.

Key questions to provide our framework

- What should a college education offer students? What's it "for"?
- What is the role that universities should play in society?
- For whatever we see now, is it what we want to see? Is there an alternative?
- What might the classroom experience look like if we are to make it what we want it to be?
- Are there commonly held values we can appeal to that help shape the classroom?
- Can higher education contribute to human flourishing?

Class Structure and Flow:

The class' structure will be quite simple: reading and involved conversation. Each week, students will come to class having read and entered a brief reflection or summary of the content for the week. During class, we will discuss the reading. There will be no lecturing by the instructor, though sometimes a side bar at the white board will be used to enhance the conversation. Periodically, there will be additional assignments in the form of short Film/Creative

Review essays.

Reading and Conversation

Each week we will read one or more chapters, sometimes accompanied by a supplemental article, video, or poem. Students will be responsible to read and actively discuss the material each week, as well as write a blog post that might also be posted in discussion. *Depending on class size, students may have rotating responsibility to lead part of the discussion.* In-class discussions will sometimes be led by the instructor, sometimes by class members, sometimes by the collective class. Each class member should come to class ready to contribute every week, and not merely to listen.

*Tip: each week, students should come with 1-2 discussion questions that you would want to ask if you were leading a discussion on the assigned reading. As much as possible, questions should reference specific passages in the text. Questions should be included in the blog posts (see below).

A Word About Academic and Human Discourse: Going Beyond Civility

This is a humanities class that raises existential questions related to the human experience. It probes issues that are sometimes thorny, don't always have clear answers and includes ones in which people can have strong differences of opinion. One way to think of the class is to see it as a big conversation about big issues. Optimal participation comes from the ability to be fully engaged: observant, reflective, and imaginative as we enter into conversation. In order for us to have a successful class, we need to be able to talk to and with each other well. That involves a conversation in which members are humble, respectful, thoughtfully engaged, and still free to critique (offer friendly push-back). We want to see the articulation and discussion of individual perspectives, while leaving room for disagreement and friendly critique. All of us should respectfully listen to the author's views as well as each other's, without becoming dismissive or defensive, a common default when disagreement is detected; and after listening, we need to be able to converse about what we hear. As these ideals are upheld we hope to create an environment where we all sense that, fundamentally, we are in this together in spite of our differences. (Please see article in Canvas: "Reading Charitably".)

Weekly Reflections

Students will write 10 weekly brief reflections (100 words minimum, 250 words maximum) in response to the reading assignments. Each weekly reflection should include 1-2 thoughtful questions that could lead to discussion in class. Reflection assignment details will be posted in Canvas.

Reflections will be submitted weekly **AT MIDNIGHT THE DAY BEFORE CLASS, with instructor response periodically. Details will be provided in class. See assignment sheet in Canvas - Assignments.

Attendance and Participation

Since this is a discussion-based class that meets only once a week, attendance is vital and assumed. Except for emergencies, absences must be cleared with the instructor prior to class. Students will be permitted **one** absence over the course of the semester. A second absence will lower the course grade by ½ a letter grade, and a third or fourth absence by an additional full letter grade each. Students cannot receive credit for the class if there are more than four absences.

In addition to attendance, each student is expected to contribute to classroom discussions weekly. Participation will be measured by verbal contribution in class as well as interaction via online discussion in Canvas (e-learning). Regarding online Discussion, the instructor will monitor and note both the frequency of comments and the quality of engagement. A worthy goal would be to initiate a discussion, comment on a discussion, or pose questions weekly in the Discussion forum in Canvas. Further participation could include making connections between class readings and your observations in culture (bringing to our attention related articles, books, poetry, film, artwork, thinkers, personal experiences).

Midterm Essay

An introspective essay on transformative learning - 250-500 words. Details will be given in class.

Final Reflection Essay/Project

The final assignment will be a culmination of each student's engagement in the class. While it will take some effort, it should be enjoyable to do. 1000-1250 words. Details given in class.

Film Nights

Film and other art forms are excellent avenues for gaining insight into the kinds of issues and questions we will encounter in this class. Discussing film with others can nurture deeper understanding as well as forge connections with our fellow viewers. In this spirit, we will seek to have one or two film nights in which we will view a film and have a short follow-up discussion. If you cannot make a film night, it will be your responsibility to view the selected film on your own. Dates and details to be announced.

Assignments and Grades:

Attendance and Participation 15% (150 points)

Weekly Reflections 25% (10 x 25 = 250 points)

Midterm Essay 30% (300 points)

Final Essay/Project 30% (300 points)

*Note: your own writing and how well you can communicate your own ideas is the primary way you will be evaluated. Writing and speaking will be the culmination of our reading and

conversation.

All assignments will be submitted through Canvas/e-learning as directed. Students will receive ½ credit for all late assignments up to one week from the due date. Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted. Grading for assignments will be based on 1) the accuracy of your understanding of the material; 2) the organization and clarity of your writing; 3) the persuasiveness of your arguments; and, 4) not least, your focus on responding to questions as asked.

Grading Scale:

93-100 (A); 90-92 (A-); 87-89 (B+); 83-86 (B); 80-82 (B-); 77-79 (C+); 73-76 (C); 70-72 (C-); 67-69 (D+); 60-66 (D); 60-62 (D-); Below 59 (E)

Classroom Decorum:

Your full attention is expected while in class. Please turn off and store out of sight all cell phones, laptops, tablets, and electronic devices prior to class. No electronic devices should be turned on in class, without consent of instructor.

Academic Integrity:

Students are expected to act in accordance with the University of Florida policy on academic integrity. Cheating, lying, misrepresentation, or plagiarism in any form is unacceptable and inexcusable behavior. For more information, visit:

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php>

Accommodations for students with disabilities:

If you require classroom accommodations because of a disability, you must first register with the Disability Resource Center <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc>. The Disability Resource Center will provide documentation to you, which you then give to the instructor when requesting accommodation.

A brief note about how to read:

Late Request

With love's confidence I'm asking,

if you should offer this book

to another, ask of him

as now I ask of you

to read slowly,

and thoroughly, tasting

each word's trouble.

Without doubt, certain passages

should never stand alone,
but will require assistance
offered by others to further
endow their meaning. I fear
for the reader who dabbles,
who gleans, who hurries to take
and flee, and who by doing so acquires
nothing but a novel form
of his current poverty and error.

—Anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*

Weekly Schedule:

For week by week reading details and assignments, see Course Schedule document in Canvas.