

Course Syllabus - Uncommon Read
IDH 2930 26719, Section F252
Why Learn? Toward a Transformative Vision of University Education
(or “What are we doing here, anyway?”)
Fall 2025

Instructor: Todd Best
Academic Advising Center
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
o: Farrior Hall, e: tabest@ufl.edu, p: 352-392-1521
Office Hours: Thursdays, 9-10am or by appointment

Meeting time: Mondays, 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 in transformative learning. 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.

(You will be thinking about university education while being a student embedded in that very realm.)

**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. Let it open you up to further thoughts. 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 taken in assigned content and entered a brief reflection or summary of the content for the week. During class, we will discuss that week's content in a lively conversation. There will be no lecturing by the instructor, though sometimes a side bar at the white board will be used to enhance the conversation.

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 weekly reflections (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; 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 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. A worthy goal would be to offer 2 or more comments or questions each week, and hopefully more. 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 - 500-1000 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%

Weekly Reflections 25%

Midterm Essay 30%

Final Essay/Project 30%

*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 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.

A minimum grade of B is required to earn Academic points towards your Honors Completion Requirements. (Exception: Honors Quest I and II sections require a C). Once you have earned your final grade in this course, please upload the course information and final grade from your Unofficial Transcript into your Honors Canvas Cohort: Honors Completion module to earn Honors Milestone / Completion credit.

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)

This course complies with all UF academic policies. For information on those policies and for resources for students, please see this link.

(<https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/>)

Media Use In Class (Laptops, Phones, etc.)

This is a class that, in part, seeks to cultivate a wise and good use of technology which means giving proper attention and priority to the human beings and conversation here in the moment. Use of phones and other communication devices in the classroom fragments your attention and disrupts continuity in the community of learning. In a sense, the classroom culture we will work to cultivate is a form of “public discourse” that will likely take some effort to make a pathway for healthy conversation. Specifically, we will need to work to overcome technological distraction. Your full attention is expected while in class. Please silence and store out of sight all cell phones, laptops, tablets, and electronic devices prior to class. No electronic devices should be used in class, without consent of the instructor. If you plan to access readings and course materials or take notes via laptop, that’s fine; however, do not veer from the course content.

University Honesty Policy

The Honor Pledge

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: ‘On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.’” The Conduct Code

specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. See the [UF Conduct Code website for more information](#), especially the [Honor Code book](#) itself. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor in this class.

A note about plagiarism:

Plagiarism is defined in the University of Florida's Student Honor Code as follows: "A student shall not represent as the student's own work all or any portion of the work of another. Please note that acts of plagiarism include:

- Turning in a paper or assignment that was written by someone else.
- Copying verbatim a sentence or paragraph of text from the work of another author without proper citation and quotation marks.
- Using and copying verbatim a sentence or paragraph of text from ChatGPT or any other AI software for any kind of course assignments.
- Paraphrasing or restating in your own words, text or ideas written by someone else without proper citation.

ChatGPT and similar AI programs pose new and complicated ethical challenges for students and instructors. UF has some guidelines and information that can help you understand what might be acceptable uses of ChatGPT. It is never acceptable to submit written work that you did not create. Using and copying verbatim a sentence or paragraph of text from ChatGPT or any other AI software for any kind of course assignments will constitute plagiarism in this class and will be subject to the same disciplinary procedures. I am happy to talk about how you (and we) might use these programs for good, e.g. in creating outlines.

I will check references if I have any questions about authorship, and I may ask for notes, outlines, and other supporting material to demonstrate that you researched and wrote an assignment yourself. Please keep dated copies of your outline, notes, and rough drafts and be ready to submit them in case questions arise about the authenticity of your work.

If you do not have convincing evidence that you authored the work yourself, I will start the honor code process. Students found guilty of academic misconduct will be prosecuted in accordance with the procedures specified in the UF honesty policy. In addition, proven plagiarism on any assignment will automatically result in a grade of "E" for this class.

For more information, see:

<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-code-student-conduct-code/>.

Honors Resources

Honors Program office: 201 Walker Hall, phone: 352-392-1519

Quick questions for an Honors advisor? Email advisor@honors.ufl.edu

Need an Honors advising appointment? Schedule via Microsoft Bookings:

<https://bit.ly/ufhonorsadvising>

A brief note about reading in community:

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 details, see Modules in Canvas.

part 1: Thinking about university education on the whole

part 2: Considering the student learning experience

part 3: Exploring the work itself: of learning and discourse

Date	Reading/Content	Written Assignment
PART 1	Thinking about university education on the whole: what is this space we inhabit?	

Aug. 25	Introducing the Learning Community -Review Syllabus -In class: “Read Charitably” out loud	
Sept. 1	NO CLASS: LABOR DAY HOLIDAY (watch film this week?)	
Sept. 8	read: Edmundson, Intro. and “Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here?” + Poem: “Mindful” by Mary Oliver (slowly!)	reflection 1
Sept. 15	read: Liberal Arts & Lite Entertainment (1-27) + “The Value of the Liberal Arts”	reflection 2
Sept. 22	read: Dwelling in Possibilities + listen/watch: podcast: Aspen Ideas - “What is College For?” or video link	reflection 3
Sept. 29	read: The Corporate City and the Scholarly Enclave + The Day the Purpose of College Changed Podcast: “Lord of the Rankings”	reflection 4: research assignment on UF mission statements
PART 2	Considering the student learning experience	
Oct. 6	read: Do Sports Build Character? +Glorious Failure (+ short film) Watch/discuss: Undefeated	reflection 5
tba Film Night 1	Film Night	
Oct. 13	read: The English Major +David Foster Wallace - “This is Water audio” (text: read here) *R. Solnit on Reading (in class)	reflection 6 assign midterm essay: “What Forms Us/You?” due 10/26
Oct. 20	(re-read) Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here? (p. 51) + Parker Palmer, The Grace of Great Things	reflection 7

	+ Wendell Berry, Bellarmine Commencement Address	
Oct. 27	read: My First Intellectual +The Uncoolness of Teachers (p. 180) (in class short film: FFBMLessmore)	reflection 8 midterm essay due Friday: “What Forms Us/You?”
PART 3	Exploring the work itself: the landscape of university discourse	
Nov. 3	“to what end” Read: Wendell Berry, The Loss of the Univ.	
Nov. 10	note: skip New Humanities Prof. Read: Against Readings +Narcissus and Common Reader	reflection 9
Nov. 17	Read: Teaching the Truths +Listen: podcast - Beyond the Ivory Tower (See assignment instructions.)	reflection 10 Announce: Final Essay due tba *extension by request
Nov. 23	NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING BREAK	
Dec. 1	The changing frontier: What (should) Frames What? (revise/reduce readings) Read: Under the Sign of Satan +Case Study: Mizzou and Corporate Governance: Day of Change + Mizzou Pres. Downfall + Skim: The After Effects + LinkedIn post of Boston Globe story about Mizzou funding (esp comments) +UVA: Ryan resigns ; VA Gov Built	reflection 11
TBA	FINAL ESSAY DUE (extension by request)	

Additional resources for further consideration:

Mark Edmundson, [Identity Now](#) (Inside Higher Ed)

Edmundson, [Students, Meet the Super-Ego](#) (Inside Higher Ed)

podcast segment: [Radiolab "Goo and You"](#) (16 minutes)

Wendell Berry: [How to be a Poet](#)