



Why Teach?: In Defense of a Real Education

Mark Edmundson

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Mark Edmundson's essays reclaim college not as the province of high-priced tuition, career training, and interactive online courses, but as the place where serious people go to broaden their minds and learn to live the rest of their lives.

A renowned professor of English at the University of Virginia, Edmundson has felt firsthand the pressure on colleges to churn out a productive, high-caliber workforce for the future. Yet in these essays, many of which have run in places such as Harper's and The New York Times, he reminds us that there is more to education than greater productivity. With prose exacting yet expansive, tough-minded yet optimistic, Edmundson argues forcefully that the liberal arts are more important today than ever.

Why Teach? offers Edmundson's collected writings on the subject, including several pieces that are new and previously unpublished. What they show, collectively, is that higher learning is not some staid, old notion but a necessary remedy for our troubled times. *Why Teach?* is brimming with the wisdom and inspiration that make learning possible.

Why Teach?: In Defense of a Real Education Details

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From Reader Review Why Teach?: In Defense of a Real Education for online ebook

Sally says

Well-written personal essays approaching from different angles the question of what education is and should be, especially considering the distortions of higher education by current university administration economics/politics and by student expectations. Some repetition, but I enjoyed reading this book.

Haley Goodwin says

The ideas were not entirely new to me. Some ideas were, plus I always like to gain a new perspective. Worth the read! If you do not have a strong vocabulary you might want a dictionary close by while reading.

Sierra says

Some condescension from an older generation to a younger generation, but good tips and reflections on teaching humanities.

Michael S says

This is not a researched book on teaching, but it is based on the author's many years of experience. It would be a good conversation starter. I believe that it intends to be provocative. The author plays the role of "crusty old man, set in his ways" in order to tease readers into defending their own attitudes and beliefs. He makes many points about reading, writing, and teaching that are worth considering.

Darrin Belousek says

I seldom recommend a book as a "must read." But if you are--or were or will be--a teacher or student in higher education (especially in the humanities), this book is essential. As a college professor of philosophy, I hear much these days about the technique of teaching and the skills to be taught with relatively little concern for the why and wherefore of a real education. Thus the college/university has evolved into a (rather expensive) form of what I'll call "entertrainment" (entertainment plus training). Edmundson gets to the core of the craft: "It is the character forming--or (dare I say?) Soul-making--dimension of the pursuit that counts."

Selim Tili says

Brilliant essays discussing the importance of a liberal arts education. Edmundson brings a craftsman's ethos

to the idea of a liberal arts education and the value it brings to people of a young age.

I didn't realize it as I was exploring my interests back in college; I thought I was just taking classes with professors who I liked, but in reality I was confronting and finding a path of self development through literature.

It is unfortunate that fewer college students today will take that journey because of the belief that college is only there to develop skill sets that will be of immediate value in the work place.

Mr. Brammer says

Edmundson's literary interests aren't as wide-ranging as you would think - he likes the Romantics, Freud, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Whitman, Emerson, etc. In the Romanticism class I took with him, all of these thinkers were touched on, with the occasional reference to Beck or the Notorious B.I.G. to appeal to the Gen Xers. I left the class with more to think about, which is a sign of good teaching. I got interested in John Keats especially, who is the least cosmic of the Romantic bunch, but probably the most gifted with language

This lucid defense of the humanities and critique of the corporate university feels weary. We have essentially lost this battle. There are no literary heroes held up by the mainstream to point the way forward. We are much more concerned with the fate of UVa's basketball team than about its soul as academic institution.

I am guilty of having the collector's mindset about my own intellectual pursuits, as evidenced by the relentless cataloguing of everything I read on this website. I have very rarely been transformed by a book, although Dostoevsky gets me there, as does Austen and Dickens, along with a lot of poetry (Dickinson, Yeats, Lowell). The trap in modern society is for easy answers, a Manichean polarization, enmity towards those who disagree. The humanities should be our shared culture, our shared heritage. Unfortunately, the academy has turned the liberal arts into another political battlefield. By doing so, they have muddied the waters and turned education into a political position instead of the process not only of soulmaking but also of citizenship. Everyone in American should read Huckleberry Finn and Invisible Man before they can join the conversation on race.

Let's save literature! Let's save our souls!

Peter Mcloughlin says

I've been reading for so long that I find many books easy enough to digest that I sometimes can blow through 2 or 3 300 page books in a day. This rather small book however was different. The ideas some familiar some new required a slow digestion in other words it took time and thinking to read this one. Mark Edmundson is an English Professor at the University of Virginia and while he admits himself that at times he is in danger of sounding like an old curmudgeon he makes some very serious foundational points about what education in our world is today (training for congenial organization men and women maybe on a hipper treadmill than of the 1950s complete with blackberry accoutrements) and what education should be which is a wrestling with the purpose ones life and how to best live in the world. Edmundson's critique of the ivory tower is not a conservative polemic about tenured radicals dissing the western canon (as much as he loves it) but instead the commercialization of education where the student (the customer) is always right and the job of an educator is to provide tools to the students so that they can become better tools of our society and fit into the global economy. People today parody the 1950s as an age of conformity remembered in stultifying

sitcoms of the era of shows today like Madmen but today's colleges and universities under the hip wired veneer are producing a generation of organization men and women every bit slavish to being a team player as the man in the gray flannel suit. Edmundson's book will not be popular with most readers but there are some who will concur with the uneasy feeling about the way things are working in our enlightened age.

Hugo Santos says

Mark Edmundson is the kind of writer that is loved by those who agree with him and tolerated by the rest of the world. He is often right, just ask him and he'll tell you, but he assumes that every reader shares his opinion. This book's premise is interesting, but the author's paternalistic tone skews the message far too often.

Chrisl says

Starts off with an "A" grade. As often, with anthologies, tending to start in the middle, I began reading on page 119, "My First Intellectual" ... about "Doug Meyers came to Medford High School with big plans for teaching his philosophy course. Together with a group of self-selected seniors, he was going to ponder the eternal questions... "

"Medford High School, whatever its appearances, was not a school. It was a place where you learned to do--or were punished for failing in--a variety of exercises. The content of these exercises didn't matter at all. What mattered was form--repetition and form ... The process treated your mind as though it was a body part capable of learning a number of protocols, simple choreographies, then repeating, repeating."

"The place was a shabby Gothic cathedral consecrated to Order."

(I had the fortune to spend some time as a substitute librarian in Portland's edge of Inner City Adams High School, a national news magazine showpiece article about a 1970s Harvard led experiment with reducing constraints. The school had opened the first year with a former US in Germany HS librarian. Reputedly ankle length skirts and beliefs. It was chaotic. That's where I observed the run through bookings ... burst into library grab books off shelves throw at rival gang ... charge out the opposite doors.) After a few years the project and the new building itself were shut down and converted to administrative functions.)

"The factories where my father and uncles worked were extension of the high school."

"Meyers ... said that prisons, hospitals, and schools were on a continuum, controlling institutions with many of the same protocols and objectives, and that Kesey, with his bitter portrait of the mental hospital, might be seen as commenting on all these places." (See Illich)

Ivan Illich

" ... Meyers was of no particular clan but his own, the tribe of rootless, free-speculating readers and talkers and writers who owe allegiance first to a pile of books that they've loved, and then, only secondly, to other things."

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Adding a quote from the book's Introduction :

"Midway through the last decade of the twentieth century, American higher education changed. Colleges and universities entered a new phase in which they stopped being intellectually driven and culturally oriented and began to model themselves on businesses. They sought profit; they sought prestige: the more the better ... in the mid-nineties, universities began dropping pretenses and putting profit ahead of intellectual and (dare one say it?) spiritual values."

"Education is about finding out what form of work for you is close to being play--work you do so easily that it restores you as you go." (Buying boxes of books for the public for 33 years had some restorative play indeed.)

Will post 3.51 stars, because the majority of the writing pieces didn't hold my interest.

Daniel says

This is the sort of book you pick up and read here and there. I found the essay on his favorite teacher interesting. His overall argument appears to be that we go to university to learn how to think about how to live rather than to gain a credential to make money. As a liberal-arts major, I certainly agree, but I'm guessing others have different objectives.

Jen Bradley says

The best and worst book I've read on education! I believe this book is meant to inspire a return to a meaningful liberal arts education (as opposed to the job training college has become), but I found it to be infuriating and frustrating. Edmundson hits it on the nose in his discussions of problems in education and society as a whole. I was and still am one of a dying (or dead?) breed of students, and I have no desire to be an educator of the consumer/student of the present. Regardless, I think this should be required reading for all college bound students. And for all educators. American education is in a sad state and this book shows us where we've gone wrong and reminds us what it is supposed to be. In fact, Edmundson has a real sense of what is wrong with American culture and personally, I think it's a pretty scary reality.

Larry says

Edmundson's essays, most reprinted from the Chronicle of Higher Education or Harper's, strongly defend the liberal arts while chipping away at the vocational focus of much of higher education. The most famous piece is "Liberal Arts & Lite Entertainment," but others ("The Uncoolness of Good Teachers") are as good. One essay in particular, "A Word to the New Humanities Professor," offers a stunning critique of today's higher education by identifying the skills that it takes to survive as an assistant professor (i.e., to get promoted and tenured).

Note: I taught for years in Teacher Education (social studies ed.), which is where the emphasis on jobs and workforce productivity seem to be the heaviest. My job, it seemed to me, faced two challenges: to provide a vocational path and a more efficient workforce, and to critique the educational process itself and to keep it rooted in an understanding of subject matter. Consequently, Edmundson probably appeals to me more than he would have to most of my colleagues, who were focused on the first function.

Nicole says

The higher education system in this country has devolved into a factory for degrees and accreditations—so postulates UVA lit professor Mark Edmundson in this collection of essays. And he does share some compelling evidence to support the claim. From the disenchanting youths of the '90s to the overbooked, hyper-involved students of today, higher education no longer challenges the status quo.

The essays range in topic from the benefits and pitfalls of sports to a dystopian peek into corporately structured universities to Edmundson's own experiences in high school, college, and beyond.

It's been nearly eight years since I was in a formal classroom, and these essays surely made me miss it. They also led me to reevaluate my own education: Although I loved learning and challenging certain tenets, I was also motivated by grade and performance when perhaps I should have been more concerned with shaking up my soul.

Highly recommend for anyone who wants to think of the bigger questions behind learning. Be warned: It's motivated me to try to read a book I merely skimmed in college ('Middlemarch') and it's quite a task—but that's probably exactly what I needed.

Laura Jordan says

Edmundson is a little full of himself -- and maybe even justifiably so -- and there were some parts of the book that seemed disconnected to the others (I didn't realize that many of these essays had been previously published elsewhere), but on the whole there was a lot of head-nodding as I read through it. I particularly loved "The Corporate City and the Scholarly Archive" that takes down shiny private schools (much like the one I work at) as simple "credential factories," where students learn how to make themselves into a salable product in the hopes of being picked off the shelf by a discerning college admissions officer. And it also got me to watch Mario Savio's famous and astonishing 1964 Berkeley speech where he rails against being a "product" and urges his fellow students to lay their bodies on the gears of the machine. Where has that revolutionary student spirit gone? (Off to Yale Law or Goldman Sachs, I'd wager.)

Devon Black says

Pedantic. Edmundson reads like an old fuddy-duddy who scorns modernity and wishes for the good old days. He states his opinion and treats it like fact while making broad claims without any, except the briefest of anecdotes, pieces of evidence.

Sarah says

Some essays made me grateful all over again that I was an English major. They articulated what it was I found so valuable about it, and why I still hold it sacred, even in the face of so many iterations of "And what will you do with that?"

Other essays made me doubt or question my own teaching, mostly in a productive way, and not a despairing

one. Should I really care if my students enjoy the class? Or find it interesting? Am I pandering to that lowest common denominator and making biology into some kind of lite edutainment?

Awfully hard to know. I'm new at this game, and now I see I'll still be asking these questions if I'm doing this in thirty years. Not sure if that's a comfort, or a curse.

Kiersten says

I feel like Mark Edmundson just walloped me over the head with his book and then shook me until my teeth chattered together. Although this collection of essays is primarily about the purpose of a good liberal arts education and a good educator, I found it to be a high-stakes master lesson on how to be a life-long student and decent human being.

Mike says

Why teach?

Because young people need to learn how to be measurably productive members of our global economy!

I'm joking, of course. No, he did not say that because Edmundson is sane.

Edmundson breaks zero new ground here. None.

Thank goodness.

But he does remind us of what we once knew before we went bonkers.

Thank goodness.

We teach, first, because, let's face it, we are--or were once--thrilled by the questions that drive our field. Also because we want to introduce young people to a world not of their making. But most importantly because what's at stake in our teaching is more or less everything--with "everything" here meaning, more or less, depth of soul.

Nathan Huffstutler says

A lot of good food for thought. A main theme is Edmundson's critique of higher education for drifting from humane values to corporate values and pragmatism.

My favorite essays were "Against Readings," "The English Major," "The Corporate City," and "Do Sports Build Character or Damage It?"
