

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

“Highest Objective” in a Transformative Learning Education

[Universities] speak of excellence and innovation, and what they really mean is money and notoriety. They talk of a well-rounded learning experience, and what they really mean is checking off boxes denoting that you’ve taken required courses that weren’t too challenging. Mr. Edmunson contends that the “corporate university” has abdicated its mission to confront our prejudices and conventions while inspiring our passions and talents. (Roth, 2013)

In the quotation above, the writer does not apply “Dr.” in front of Mark Edmunson’s name. Given that absence, you might think this criticism of the academy comes from outside our ranks. Heavens knows we see such proclamations in the news frequently enough. (Even in the Sunday comics; see, for example, [“Mallard Fillmore,” July 28, 2013.](#))

But [Mark Edmundson](#) teaches English at the University of Virginia. The quotation above is from his recently released collection of essays, *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education* (2013).

Of course, Dr. Edmundson offers an alternative: “. . . the highest objective for someone trying to provide a literary education to students is to make . . . moments of transformation possible” (Edmundson, as quoted by Roth, 2013, C4).

What prompted Edmundson’s consideration of the purposes — the “highest objectives” of teaching in college — is the same that is usually part of Transformative Learning itself: reflection. In this regard, Edmundson is much like [Eric Mazur](#), Harvard physics professor, who asked himself some important questions about his teaching, even in the light of positive student comments about his classes and general agreement at his university that he was a good teacher.

Edmundson’s reflection about his teaching is described in *Teacher: The One Who Made the Difference* (2003), his memoir about how a high school philosophy teacher made the critical difference in his life of the mind. After getting his graduate degree at Yale and landing a college teaching job came:

. . . a dozen years of successful teaching. At least my course evaluations, my enrollments, and student comments indicated that I was a success. But gradually I became sure that things were going wrong. My students went on at fluent length in their evaluations, saying how enjoyable my courses had been, what an amiable and entertaining guide I was to the material at hand—Blake or Shakespeare or Whitman. But their papers, written with more technical skill than anything I could have mustered at nineteen or twenty, were empty; they had a void, anonymous feeling about them. No one seemed to be home. Their class comments were often two- or three-word interjections, unpromising seeds that I,

always obliging, tried to raise into expansive blossoms before their classmates' eyes. Virtually no one, from what I could tell, was changed by taking my classes. (Edmundson, 2003, p. 8)

The essence of Transformative Learning is that students are changed. In the quote above, Edmundson laments the fact that he felt none of his students were fundamentally changed as human beings as a result of taking his classes. This absence of change came no matter what degree of achievement his students reached concerning the "content"; in other words, even A+ students were not, as far as he could tell, changed as a result of taking his classes.

Dr. Dee Fink, who established the instructional development program at the University of Oklahoma in 1979 and later authored [*Creating Significant Learning Experiences*](#), agrees with the necessity of fundamental change as a hallmark of transformative learning. He puts it this way: Suppose two people approach you on the sidewalk one day. One of them took your course three years earlier, and the other is someone you've never met. What's the difference between those two people? Deciding for yourself what the answer to that question *should* be requires the same reflection Mark Edmundson describes.

Edmundson, Mazur, and Fink all reached the same conclusion. Mazur characterizes the change in students as never being able to forget understanding, even though they can forget facts, because they know how to learn — something Mazur places as Priority One in his classes, regardless of content.

Fink, in the example given above, also talks about a fundamental change as a result of students taking your course — they have been changed as people. In the section of his book labeled, "The Human Significance of Good Teaching and Learning," Fink says that good teaching produces "learning that enhances one's ability to dance the Dance of Life," and produces graduates who "have a strong sense of themselves as learners" (Fink, 2003, p. 244).

But it is Edmundson who may have summed up most evocatively the transformative potential of the college professor. Roth's article about Edmundson's recent book puts it this way:

Why teach? Because great professors can "crack the shell of convention," shining a light on life's different prospects. They never aim at conversion, only at what Emerson called "aversion" — bucking conformity so as to discover possibility. (Roth, quoting Edmundson, 2013, C4)

We help our students transform themselves when we give them tools and practice in discovering possibility.

Edmundson, M. (2003). *Teacher: The one who made the difference*. New York: Vintage.

Edmundson, M. (2013). *Why teach? In defense of a real education*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Fink, L. D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Roth, M. S. (2013, August 21). How four years can (and should) transform you. *New York Times*, C4. Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/21/books/mark-edmundsons-essays-ask-why-teach.html>