

## HIGHER EDUCATION... ELECTIVE, OR PRE-REQUISITE TO LIFE?

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Stock footage from almost any college campus in the United States might look a little more like the latest Stephen King novel turned mini-series than an environment for higher education. Hundreds of dejected, dispirited, and deprived young adults, fearful and confused, trudge across a beautifully landscaped plaza. . . . University of Virginia professor Mark Edmundson describes scenes almost as bleak on his campus and in his classroom. Edmundson believes that the capitalistic American way has created a “culture of consumption” that has imbedded itself deep within students’ psyches, stifling their ambitions and limiting their ability to think and act in individual and passionate ways (3-4). Edmundson names television as the key culprit in instigating this “culture of consumption.” The hypnotic lure of MTV and Oprah keeps Americans inside the fortified walls of their home, physically isolated from the real world. Our culture has changed. It is now time to encourage students to find their own direction, enabling the truest use of one of our most intrinsic human abilities: choice.

Though television plays a large role, it is not solely to blame for the university campus being overrun by a zombotic population of students. Brazilian educational reformist, Paulo Freire, utilizes his experiences to explicate and criticize what he calls the “banking concept” of education. Within this system data is “deposited” into the student’s mind by teachers in a way that does not demand critical reflection upon that knowledge. Students are not encouraged to explore, reflect, and apply the information presented, they are merely allowed to “receive, memorize, and repeat” (72).

Veteran teacher John Taylor Gatto spent thirty years negotiating his way through crossfire in Manhattan’s public school system. Gatto’s experience illuminates many similarities between our public school system and Freire’s depiction of the oppressive “banking” pedagogy. As Gatto demonstrates, our educational system expects peaceful, patient, and absorbent behavior from students. Students are denied the opportunity to learn through rigorous discussion, individual problem solving, and critical thinking (1-3). Brilliant ideas and deeper understanding often come from passionate exchange. Unfortunately, passionate exchange often provides nothing more than a one-way ticket to the principal’s office. With this threat looming over students’ heads, they quickly learn to play the part expected—lumps of clay waiting to be molded.

But what exactly are students being molded into? Gatto asserts that the American educational system is designed to limit development, encourage “mediocre intellects,” debilitate the creative spirit, and mediate the capacity for “appreciable leadership skills” (4). American culture is a capitalistic culture. Capitalism requires capital, and capital requires the two things Gatto believes our school systems were created to produce:

“employees and consumers” (6). This method of controlling the masses, fueling the work force, and creating a society more susceptible to consumption ultimately works to impede the development of young adults. Such debilitation leaves us with a school system that distributes high school diplomas to people who cannot even balance the checkbook that they are so often encouraged to use. It also creates a detached young culture that is vulnerably left to glean what life experience it can from the beguiling advertisements it is subjected to on television.

Many present-day college students are too young, too naïve, and too confused for college. It is not hard to believe Mark Edmundson’s claim that universities are filled with a one-dimensional passionless crop of students. One-dimension is all these young adults know. Observation is the only level of consciousness they have been allowed to achieve. Listen to the teacher and memorize what he has to say. Watch the television, and it will show you how society works. The mechanical distribution of classroom information in conjunction with the television at home has denied students the opportunity to step beyond observation and take action. Edmundson states, “The TV medium is inhospitable to inspiration, improvisation, failures, slipups. All must run perfectly” (3). However, living a life beyond observation—living an independent life with responsibilities to fulfill, decisions to make, and no one to blame or credit but yourself—will show you that inspiration, improvisation, failures, and slipups are integral, and often the most rewarding elements of life. Without inspiration there would be no art. Without improvisation there would be no surprise. Without failures there would be no heartache. Without slipups, there are few reality checks to encourage us to look at ourselves in a more levelheaded way. To deny these elements is to deny truly living life.

These are not things that can be “deposited” in the classroom, and they are not things that can be demonstrated while lounging on the living room sofa watching reruns of *Friends*. Only truly experiencing life can answer such questions. This being the case, why are young adults not encouraged to live their own life and grasp a more firm hold on their wants and needs before they are sent to universities? Universities, where thousands of dollars are spent to prepare students for what they know nothing about; therefore cannot truly understand. Or more importantly, respect.

David Denby, film critic for *The New Yorker*, writes about his experience of returning to Columbia after years of writing professionally and raising a family. Denby’s perspective is different the second time around. Living life has allowed an alternative through which he can interpret and understand the core curriculum that years before had left him apprehensive and disillusioned, yet not knowing why. This new perspective also has allowed Denby to see more clearly the state in which young students arrive in universities. Denby recounts the exhausting efforts made by Professor Edward Taylor as he struggled to move his students away from the “banking” method of education and encourage participation in the classroom. Taylor had to “trick” or “con” his students into contributing their thoughts and opinions to

discussions (44). Denby describes these students as being confused. The pressures of society have hastily placed these young adults in an atmosphere that is contrary to the one they have been accustomed to. Their safe mechanical world, largely created by the educational system and consumerism, has been turned upside down and they have little independent life experience in which they can ground themselves. Denby recaps Taylor lecturing on “The Hermeneutic Circle.” This model asserts that words are merely words if you are not able to step back and place them within a context. Yet there would be no context if there were no words. Both must work together if one is to truly understand a piece of literature. This method is not only critical to employ while reading; it is also critical in life (32). If there is no greater understanding of the world at large, there will be no true understanding for the reasons of data given in the classroom. The reverse is also true. The classroom and the world at large should work together in helping one understand how to lead a fulfilled life.

Young adults should not be rushed into college so quickly. Students straight out of high school, never having had the opportunity to experience life, frequently fail to break from the “banking” mentality. As I walk around my college campus, I overhear students complaining about assignments they have been given. This professor is so horrible! This assignment is completely unnecessary. I will never use this in life! I want to scream, yes, you will! Perhaps the memory of specific content learned in the college classroom will fade, but the context in which you learn, the questions you have to raise, and the decisions you are encouraged to make are extremely beneficial lessons. The pressures of society push many young adults along, never allowing them the opportunity to come upon this realization.

Six years ago, I was a dejected, dispirited, and deprived young adult trudging across a college campus complaining about the useless load of crap teachers felt the need to dump on me. I could not see the overarching importance—or the use—of knowledge I could gain from college. Throughout my life I was told what and how to think. I had not read any books or essays by Paulo Freire, or John Taylor Gatto, but I could have written pages about the “banking” method of education and the boredom and lifelessness it creates. I had not read an essay by Mark Edmundson. However, I was disturbed by the uniformity and lack of ambition in myself and in my peers. Public schools and the television did not provide me an opportunity to learn who I truly was or what I wanted. Instead I experienced the debilitation of the spirit and the limited development that John Taylor Gatto accuses the educational system of intentionally producing. I was miserable, confused, and angry. I needed something real. Faster than you could say college dropout, my bags were packed, and I was on my way to the most “real” place I could think of: New York City.

It was not until then that I started to live my life on my terms. I learned the importance of independence and individuality. The struggle, pleasure, and confusion that accompany adult responsibilities allowed me to begin the process of learning who I was, what I enjoyed, and what goals I wanted to achieve. However, after working

and traveling for a few years I felt that there was still something missing. I needed more. I slowly began to realize that my mind was craving academic knowledge. This realization inspired an unexplainable and intense passion. In order to achieve my personal and professional goals I needed to be what John Taylor Gatto claimed capitalism feared most: an educated, independent, and creative thinker. For the first time I began to feel as though that useless load of crap did not have to be so useless. I was not clear exactly how, but I knew there was some way that I could utilize my life experience and make my education work for me. I had a passion to liberate myself by stepping beyond the state of observation and reaction that had been encouraged throughout my life and to take action.

It was time to walk across that campus once more. I knew the importance and weight of my decision, and that allowed me to bring something that was impossible to possess as an eighteen-year-old straight out of high school—respect. I brought an immeasurable amount of respect for the knowledge I could gain, ways in which this knowledge could be of use, and the opportunities it could illuminate. My life experience created a deep passion. It was this passion that gave me a good reason to write those checks for over twenty thousand dollars a year in tuition.

Rational thought suggests that the media will not loosen its tight grip around the reins driving popular culture. It is unlikely that the educational system will change either; it seems to accomplish precisely what it was created to accomplish. I do not claim to hold the key that would resolve the problems in our failing educational system. I do not know how to reverse the effects of consumerism. The only thing I claim to know is the importance of living your own life, and doing so at your own pace. No person should be pressured or forced to engage in what they do not understand. With that in mind I offer this to any miserable, confused, or angry young student: Live life, experience the world, find yourself, and do not decide what direction to continue until you can truly respect what will come from this choice. A college education should not be a pre-requisite to life; it should be an elective that will enrich the understanding of the world and your place in it.

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