

Book Review

Jonathan Zimmerman. *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. Pp. 291. \$34.95

Does Jon Zimmerman ever sleep? This is his eighth book in twenty-one years. There could have been more except for his reliance on archival sources. To ransack fifty-nine libraries for *The Amateur Hour* reflects his lifelong devotion to primary sources. And, it took time to transform his notes into remarkably well-written books. Memorable examples, clear arguments, and wry humor enliven his histories of small schools, sex education, culture wars, and now college teaching.

In *The Amateur Hour*, Zimmerman once again combines meticulous research and graceful writing. The title suggests how he made sense of so much material. As teachers, college professors were amateurs. The hallmarks of a profession—extensive preparation, technical knowledge, peer review, sanctions for malpractice, rewards for excellence—rarely marked college teaching. What mattered most was the instructors' personality. Good teaching allegedly stemmed from immutable dispositions and habits. Rather than teach old dogs new tricks, the best strategy to improve instruction was recruitment. Recruit doctoral students and hire new faculty with the right character, and they would do just fine in class.

Not everyone agreed with that point of view. Maybe the old dogs could learn new tricks, especially if they stopped sneering at schools of education. Over time there were more and more efforts to evaluate, improve, and honor teaching. But most of those initiatives fell short, and most professors continued to be classroom amateurs and research professionals, a contrast sustained by the abundant rewards for peer reviewed publications—early tenure, faster promotion, external grants, doctoral students, national visibility, and other incentives to write.¹

If that sounds depressing, life in classrooms before the emergence of research universities was no paradise. The 19th century reliance on recitations was “a toxic blend of angst and ennui” (24) as instructors quizzed students rather than discuss the assignment. Teaching was testing, and for high grades, a good memory was essential. Faculty were usually aloof and austere; personal charisma counted less than diligence in determining if students were working. It was the same no-nonsense pedagogy used in most elementary and secondary schools.

The rise of the university replaced the ordeal of recitations with the passivity of lecture halls. The core curriculum everyone studied in small 19th century colleges gave way to majors, electives, much higher enrollments, and the financial benefits of large classes. Performance at the podium varied widely, and early 20th century critics looked for better ways to connect students and faculty. Rather than abandon lectures, they supplemented them with one-on-one tutorials, small group *preceptorial* sessions, comprehensive examinations, and honors programs. Well-endowed colleges could afford those expensive innovations; most campuses could not.

Each decade saw fresh attempts to improve college teaching, and Zimmerman offers thumbnail sketches of student course evaluations, televised instruction, and fellowships for “first-class human beings” to pursue the Ph.D. (three major philanthropies funded those drives to recruit seniors who were not “narrow and limited scholar types”).² Zimmerman also profiles the creation in the late 1960s of a new degree, the Doctor of Arts, to prepare college teachers. The D.A. pioneers knew that most Ph.D. programs neglected teaching, hoping that service as a teaching assistant would suffice. But the research on college teaching was meager and inconclusive. “A shared definition of good teaching continued to elude scholars...no method appeared to be more effective

¹ The time available for teaching was also eroded by the widespread need to supplement modest salaries. For the most detailed record of a historian's extracurricular work, see Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (Oxford University Press: New York 1973).

² George Pierson to Richard Carroll, March 7, 1960, in Yale University Experimental Program of Teaching Fellowships, Box 892, Folder 3, Carnegie Corporation Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

than any other.”³ The traditional prestige of a conventional Ph.D. was hard to challenge, and for every D.A. awarded in the 1970s and 1980s, there were 350 Ph.Ds.

The eight pages on the late 1960s suggest another source of reform: significant changes in American culture. Shifts in the prevailing notions of authority, for instance, altered perceptions of what faculty should and should not do. In the tumultuous late 1960s, some professors sought more egalitarian relationships in class, and several dozen experimental colleges committed themselves to the same democratic goals. The enthusiasm for utopian enclaves diminished quickly in the 1970s, but the brief ferment raised an enduring question: Why not be less aloof in class? From the mid-1960s on, many faculty (especially younger faculty) were less remote and more caring. Amorphous notions of how young and old should get along may be just as important as well-defined reforms in altering teaching.

In the final sixteen pages, Zimmerman considers the past 40 years. He sees many signs of progress—more coaching of doctoral students, prizes for instructional excellence, centers for teaching effectiveness, course evaluation results in promotion dossiers, compelling research on best practices, and other commitments to instructional improvement. Add to that list the rapid growth of undergraduate research projects, the appointments of “professors of the practice” focused on teaching, and accreditation requirements mandating active learning by aspiring nurses, teachers, physical therapists, and so on. So the challenge ahead is sustaining the momentum, heeding what Zimmerman said about his book: “It’s a long plea to give a damn.”⁴

You will finish this book eager to know more. With one-third of higher education enrollments, the community colleges deserve more attention. So does the rapidly expanding for-profit sector. It would be valuable to examine graduate and professional school instruction. And did college teaching in other nations resemble our history, or is there something distinctively American in our emphasis on personality as the key to good teaching? The history of college teaching deserves more work. Thanks to the indefatigable Jon Zimmerman, we now have a very solid foundation on which to build.

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³Scott Gelber, *Grading the College: A History of Evaluating Teaching and Learning* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2020), 31.

⁴History of Education Society annual conference, November 5, 2020.