

## CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR GOOD COLLEGE TEACHING

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On February 9, 2021, American Historical Association Executive Director James Grossman discussed the “paradox” of history’s “seemingly lost status in higher education” at the same moment as controversies over historical memory dominate the headlines.<sup>1</sup> For Grossman, the solution is for historians to commit to civic and public engagement, a refrain that has echoed widely across the discipline recently. Left unmentioned, however, were any calls to rethink the act through which academic historians have our most sustained contact with a wide audience and through which we most shape historical consciousness—teaching.

Now is an urgent moment for college historians to reconsider what we do in the classroom. In addition to public calls to re-evaluate history curricula, faculty and students have been forced to rethink teaching and learning to rapidly adapt to conditions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than a return to an already unstable “normal,” it seems far more likely that this combination of factors will result in new challenges, controversies, and demands to reform college teaching. This, as Jonathan Zimmerman’s *The Amateur Hour* shows, would be in keeping with ongoing processes and patterns developed since the end of the Second World War. Politicians, administrators, college faculty, students, and the public have asked how college teaching serves democracy, how it might advance equality, and how content and modes of instruction might serve those ends. How might college history teachers put Zimmerman’s analysis to use as we face another intensified period of questions about the purpose, content, and methods of college teaching?

*The Amateur Hour* demonstrates the need to understand the history of college teaching and to situate our own practices within it. For many students, whether majoring or minoring in history or taking a course as part of a General Education requirement, the rationale of those courses is mysterious or expressed through learning/course objectives. Their sense for what history is often differs sharply from ours. Why not instead take the opportunity to historicize our own actions and treat the classroom as a subject of historical inquiry with our students rather than just the venue for it? Doing so will help encourage our students to see history not simply as a set of facts to be learned but rather a process of analysis that can and should be applied broadly. It will also challenge us to reflect collectively with our students on content, modes of delivery, and assessment. In doing so, we can take an opportunity to revisit the spirit of experimentation that Zimmerman describes from the 1960s and 1970s with democratic, less-hierarchical classrooms not dominated by “objective” alphanumeric grades. But we can do so while grounding students’ critiques of the material and our pedagogical choices in historical thinking, reinforcing the importance of our discipline in the process.

We can and should push this approach beyond our classrooms, assessing degree requirements and course offerings historically and inquiring whether the conditions that informed those past decisions still hold true. Even if we took these approaches, however, Zimmerman’s work still challenges us to ask exactly how they should be implemented.

A paradox is at the core of *The Amateur Hour*. “Teaching,” Zimmerman notes, “is a deeply personal and even spiritual act that defies rational organization,” (234) and the bureaucratic and administrative structures of many universities today threaten that. The pervasiveness of amateurism, he argues, has limited efforts to subject faculty to aggressive supervision and to standardize teaching. It has preserved those qualities before the university’s current phase and into it, even as it allowed “some truly appalling and unjust outcomes” (233-234). How then, do we “keep alive the mystique” (234) while moving away from ossified or harmful traditions?

Throughout *The Amateur Hour*, Zimmerman writes sympathetically about assessment as a tool for improving teaching, appearing most favorable towards efforts at peer review, though by the book’s conclusion, he seems to

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<sup>1</sup> James Grossman, “A Paradox: History without Historians,” *Perspectives on History*, 9 February 2009, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2021/a-paradox-history-without-historians>

suggest that only a few “true believers” (227) encouraged it. But making assessment—even peer review—formal, regular, and a condition of employment requires that judgment about “a “deeply personal and even spiritual act” (as Zimmerman describes teaching) be rendered bureaucratically knowable, an act of translation more likely to produce what anthropologist David Graeber called “bullshitization” than meaningful improvement.<sup>2</sup> Rather than lament that “most faculty development happened out of sight” (206) and seek to make it administratively visible, why not instead recognize that the most helpful and useful conversations about teaching happen informally and require a set number of informal peer observations and feedback sessions in which the discussions were wholly separate from evaluation processes? The path away from the most harmful aspects of amateurism may require trusting faculty as professionals capable of work outside the administrative gaze.

Finally, any meaningful discussion of college teaching requires addressing the changing nature of the professoriate. In the 1990s, as Zimmerman notes, contingent faculty (then 40% of the profession) taught under immense time pressure and without access to campus resources or the job protections of tenured and tenure-track faculty. They now make up an even greater share of faculty working in the US. Fixed syllabi and assignments over which contingent faculty have minimal or no control offer few of the opportunities for personality (as Zimmerman defines it) and sharply limit experimentation. After all, knowing the long history of conflicts over assessment and grading or attempts to find alternatives matter little for contingent faculty whose renewal or ability to pick up more courses depends on their ability to deliver set syllabi and follow established assessment procedures. This is but one example. Without significant improvements to the working conditions, wages, and job security and without full, compensated inclusion in collective decision-making and planning around curricula and pedagogy, any efforts to improve college teaching risk leaving out the majority of faculty or adding another weight to already overburdened academic workers.

*The Amateur Hour* offers a rich, useful history and should provoke many discussions about college pedagogy. The key task will be creating the conditions in which all college teachers can have those conversations.

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<sup>2</sup> David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 263-265.