

Of the criteria for highly effective instruction that we have discussed in class, the four that have most resonated with me in the context of Jonathan Zimmerman's *The Amateur Hour* include:

- respectful of students and treats them as intellectual equals ("respect"),
- high expectations for student achievement and oneself ("high expectations"),
- engaging, motivating, and exhibits passionate enthusiasm ("passion"),
- and constructs diverse ways for students to learn (which I equate loosely with Universal Design for Learning, or "UDL").

Though Zimmerman's work spans multiple collegiate settings, a diversity of academic subjects, and more than a century of history, it is safe to say that these four characteristics, at least, can be considered universally indicative of highly effective instruction throughout. Whether 1855 or 2022, students appreciate and seek out instructors who exhibit these qualities and loathe those who do not.

Before outlining some of the historical factors that have contributed to or detracted from the development of these characteristics in higher education, arguably the crux of Zimmerman's project, it is worthwhile to briefly examine what specifically they mean and what they look like in practice (or in absentia). The first two characteristics, respect and high expectations, are practices that stem from a general attitude held by the instructor. That attitude is grounded in the instructor's view of their students as promising human beings, worthy of care and intellectual nurturing; as people to be invested in, supported, and always regarded with

unbroken dignity. Words matter, actions matter, and what transpires between teacher and student in the classroom *matters* in the development of that student as a complete human being. Passion is a characteristic that flows from an instructor's love of subject matter and/or of teaching in general. Such passion cannot be contrived, for it is obvious to anyone paying attention whether the instructor is truly present, engaged, and interested. They can make even the most mundane subject matter come alive, and their passion often stokes similar feelings in those with whom they engage. And finally, although the specific pedagogical theories underlying UDL may be relatively new, good instructors have always recognized their students as individuals first and foremost and eschewed one-size-fits-all approaches to education. The creation of diverse pathways for student learning is challenging, and not always practical, especially under some teaching conditions, but it should always be a goal of instructional design.

We observe each of these characteristics on display throughout the anecdotes that Zimmerman offers in *The Amateur Hour*. The “spellbinding popularizer” William Lyon Phelps (pg. 4), the “devoted care” and gifted Socratic interrogations of Mark Hopkins (pg. 14), the audaciously interactive Eliphalet Nott, and Nathaniel Shaler with his riveting lectures; each of these men demonstrated important aspects of highly effective instruction and gained the admiration of generations of students, sometimes even to the detriment of their careers. For these characteristics, while almost universally applauded by students, have been all too frequently undervalued or even derided by fellow faculty members and by college administrators. Indeed, the story of the development of instruction in higher education is largely a story of what

objectives were most valued, when, and by whom. Highly effective instruction seems to have rarely, if ever, been near the top of the list of objectives by those who have run our institutions.

One limitation of Zimmerman's text is that he generally offers only fleeting and anecdotal evidence of the existence of highly effective instruction. Though Zimmerman does "...believe that we can differentiate between good and bad instruction" (pg. 12), he does little to spell out what those differences are. Instead, just as "each man—and each woman—must work it out for themselves" (pg. 10) what is meant by good instruction; so too for the most part must Zimmerman's readers. That being said, he generally does a much better job describing what the *lack* of good instruction looks like, perhaps because there is so much more concrete evidence of this phenomenon throughout history.

The Amateur Hour devotes significant verbiage to descriptions of student resistance to poor instruction. Such resistance has taken many forms, from the direct action of "foot-shuffling" in response to bad lectures, to the more organized dissemination of student publications (pre-digital renditions of www.ratemyprofessors.com), and even the student protest movements of the '60s and beyond, students have never been merely passive consumers of poor instruction, but have "clapped back" at such disregard at every turn of higher education's history. How much power they had at these differing points in history has varied significantly, however. There are important distinctions between the early days of higher education, for instance, when the institutions were much smaller, fewer, and more elite, and the modern day when colleges and universities nationwide face enrollment challenges and students are viewed

much more as consumers of a product than beneficiaries of a sparsely bestowed privilege. Student voice and student power have grown, and these changes are reflected in today's institutions of higher education. The institutionalization of student evaluations and student participation in shared governance are but two positive examples of such impacts.

So, on the one hand, students have and continue to directly inform us when their instructors fail them. But we also see what students value most in their education based on the success or failure of a variety of educational technologies. Two of these technologies, educational television and teaching machines, are described as failures by Zimmerman. The reasons for their failure, and whether they truly were failures or just ahead of their time, are more complex stories than *The Amateur Hour* has space to develop. But Zimmerman makes clear that important characteristics of highly effective instruction were simply not translatable via these nascent mediums. Students noticed their absence and to varying degrees rejected them because of it.

Finally, we are left with the question of the historical factors that have encouraged and/or inhibited the qualities that students so ardently desire in their instructors. To this question, Zimmerman's text leaves little doubt. First and foremost, there is the long-held idea that these qualities are somehow innate in one's personality rather than something to be developed. If the former supposition is true, then the development of schools of pedagogical instruction and professional development for faculty are a waste of resources. While personality and predisposition are and always will be important, it is safe to say that the jury is no longer out on

this question and few modern educators or educational institutions would (at least publicly) take this position. Teaching, as a skillset, can be developed, and indeed, it is an expectation that instructors do so. What remains unsettled, and has throughout Zimmerman's historical analysis, is whether society values higher education enough to provide it with the resources needed to cultivate the conditions for effective instruction—in particular, class sizes, teaching loads, and adequate opportunities for quality faculty development. And finally, institutions of higher education must themselves do a better job of valuing quality instruction in their hiring, evaluation, and retention of faculty. Perhaps Zimmerman's biggest takeaway from *The Amateur Hour* is the extent to which these institutions have consistently placed a much higher value on a faculty member's research credentials than on their effectiveness as an instructor.

Among my highest personal and professional aspirations is to achieve the level of teaching success that Zimmerman frequently alludes to in his text. How many others have entered the profession with such ambitions? And how many of us have been ground down by the excessive class sizes, the enormous workloads, the lack of professional development opportunities, and the increasingly low status and material benefit that accompanies our profession? The central tension that Zimmerman describes, teaching as “a highly public act that has remained mostly private” (pg. ix), appears to be resolving somewhat over time. However, many of the other important historical trends he points to remain very much in contention; it is the resolution of these trends that will ultimately determine the success or failure of instructors such as myself in developing our next generation of citizens with the kind of highly effective instruction and nurturing, respectful environments that they deserve.