

## **Book Review**

***Teaching First-Year College Students***, Bette LaSere Erickson, Calvin B. Peters & Diane Weltner Strommer (Jossey-Bass, 2006)

Review by

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This volume is an excellent revision of a fine, though outdated, handbook for college teachers, Erickson and Strommer's *Teaching College Freshmen* (Jossey-Bass, 1991). Much has changed since 1991, as is evident even in the gender-neutral title of the new edition. The authors have responded to those changes with new chapters, several expanded discussions, and many new resources. The earlier edition had a three-part format: understanding first-year students, teaching them effectively, and facing the opportunities and challenges of first-year instructions. This basic format remains the same, as does the book's intended audiences of beginning teachers, faculty returning to first-year teaching after an absence, and college and university administrators. All three audiences will substantially benefit from the new edition, administrators perhaps most of all.

The authors' major premise is that educators should challenge first-year students with "reasonable rigor and appropriate support" (xiii, and reiterated often). Both the challenge and the support are explained and detailed throughout, with particular attention paid to *how* to provide appropriate support to beginning college students. In order to make clear what "reasonable rigor" entails, Part One begins with a brief discussion of what we know about first year students – their common traits and also their increasing diversity. Several theories of student development are outlined in two expanded and updated chapters which work either as a review or as a quick, clear overview. Theories are appropriately treated as a means to an end, the goal of improving teaching and learning. The authors connect the research on student development with specific and precisely described classroom activities. The book's organization clearly points out previous and subsequent discussions of an idea or an approach, allowing readers to move without difficulty between theory-based discussion and practical applications.

Part Two, the bulk of the book, outlines the elements of effective instruction, from syllabus preparation to grading, in an admirably lucid manner. The clever re-titling of "lecture" as "presenting and explaining," which remains from the first edition, offers an example of the authors' creative approach. These chapters contain multiple examples from an array of disciplines (writing, chemistry, math, and art history appear very often). The first edition's chapter on learning outside class becomes two chapters on active reading and active study practices, and the section on grading expands to include portfolio grading, peer review, and requiring that students take minutes at group meetings. A new chapter, on transformative pedagogies such as problem-based learning and service learning, offers ideas tempered with caution, acknowledging the political and professional challenges facing many teachers of

first-year students.

The third section, which includes discussions of inclusive teaching, handling large classes, and teaching outside the classroom, picks up on this theme of inspiring good first-year teaching while also recognizing the challenges of the first-year curriculum. The authors stress how often first-year instruction is undertaken by the newest, least experienced instructors on campus, or by temporary or part-time instructors. The final chapter, more specific and more hopeful than its 1991 predecessor, is sharply directed toward administrators and policy-makers in higher education. In it, the authors call on administrators both to recognize and reward excellent first-year instruction and to realize that the temporary gains of short-changing first-year instruction can increase the long-term risks to our culture and country.

The book brims with vignettes, student quotations, and specific ways to adapt ideas to new contexts. Chapter summaries and briefly annotated suggestions for further reading are efficient and useful. The new edition has an open, readable layout and is very well produced, with errors at a minimum. *Teaching First-Year College Students* is a valuable addition to any library for college teachers.