

June, 2002 - Nina Shapiro, Economics

I used to think of my classes as lectures, with myself illuminating the material covered in the course. What I said was more important than how I said it, and while I recognized the importance of motivation in learning, and knew that students were not "naturally" inquisitive, my enthusiasm for the subject would convey its importance, just as my knowledge would advance its understanding.

This is not to say that there was no discussion in my classes. Students asked questions, and the Socratic structure of my lectures elicited responses. But the student involvement in the material covered was an outgrowth of its presentation - it was not built into the structure of the class –and when the attention span of students is short, and class preparation limited, the best prepared lecture cannot engage them. It will not hold their interest or inspire their efforts, and while the lecture may impart a lot of knowledge, not much will be learned from it. The traditional pedagogy fails.

While I still lecture in my classes, not all of them are lectures. Some are problem solving sessions - with the students organized into groups for the purposes of pooling their knowledge - while others are forums for student debates and presentations. Students can learn from each other as well as from their instructor, and they often pay more attention to each other than they do to their instructor. And while students cannot contribute more to their classes than they bring to them, their contributions can be enhanced through the structure of their classes. More can be required of them.

My teaching experiences have taught me the value of student-centered classes, and though they are difficult to construct and do not always work well, students learn more from their classes when they are actively involved in them.