

Professors' Place in the Classroom Is Shifting to the Side

by Dan Berrett

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Professors have long made assumptions about their place in the classroom.

They have seen themselves as the experts whose job is to transmit a body of knowledge, typically through a lecture. Students are there to absorb content. If they fail, it's their fault.

The lecture hall expresses that dynamic physically. Seats—sometimes hundreds of them—are arranged in raked rows facing a spot for the professor who, like the featured act in a show, is the only one in the room doing anything worth paying attention to.

After years of exhortations for faculty members to become guides on the side instead of sages on stage, those assumptions are shifting, and they carry consequences that could be significant for professors and students.

"Nationally, we're seeing more of a move to student-centered teaching," said Kevin Eagan, an assistant professor in residence at the University of California at Los Angeles. He is also interim managing director of the Higher Education Research Institute, which produces a triennial faculty survey that was released on Thursday.

Mr. Eagan and his fellow researchers see in that survey's results widespread evidence of faculty members' using teaching methods that demand more of students than the traditional lecture often does: More faculty members are using class discussions, relying on student inquiry to guide learning, and assigning group projects.

Among the 16,000 professors at 269 four-year institutions who were surveyed, 83 percent reported using class discussions in their teaching, compared with 70 percent 25 years ago. More than a quarter said they incorporated student-selected topics in their courses, which triples the rate

of those who did so in 1989. Faculty members' use of group projects and cooperative learning doubled during that period, to 46 percent and 61 percent, respectively.

Mr. Eagan attributed the steady pace of change to increased attention from agencies like the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, which are requiring grantees to adopt teaching methods that have been demonstrated to bolster student learning.

Generational factors are also at play, and Mr. Eagan predicted that a true paradigm shift might not hit until 2020. Senior faculty members were more likely than their junior peers to report lecturing extensively. Conversely, less-experienced professors tended to use methods that the researchers identified as student-centered.

"In another six years, when today's assistant professors are promoted," he said, "maybe that will be the tipping point."

Learner-Centered Teaching

But it may still be too soon to declare that change has taken hold as widely as the survey suggests, said Maryellen Weimer, a professor emerita of teaching and learning at Pennsylvania State University.

While she thinks there has been a shift in faculty members' methods and attitudes, she cautioned that professors tend to respond optimistically to surveys about their teaching. "There's a bit of tendency to report what they think they should be doing rather than what they're actually doing," she said.

Several researchers are seeking to document more rigorously what actually occurs in the classroom, rather than depending on student or faculty accounts.

Ms. Weimer, who writes the *Teaching Professor* blog, prefers to use the term "learner-centered" instead of student-centered when she advocates for shifting the classroom focus away from professors; the latter term often sparks resistance among faculty members who worry about coddling students. But the opposite, she and Mr. Eagan said, is often true. The

intent of less-traditional methods is to place more responsibility for learning on students, not less.

That shift also requires faculty members to hold their students accountable while not succumbing to a different kind of temptation: washing their hands of responsibility when students fail. The UCLA study found that nearly 90 percent of faculty members believed that success in courses was primarily up to students and that all students had the potential to excel.

Conceiving of a classroom as being learner-centered has the potential to do more than simply shift teaching methods, said Ms. Weimer. "Learner-centered teaching is something a bit more radical," she said. "It goes to the power dynamic in the classroom."

Shifting that dynamic means that students gain more control over what they learn. Most faculty members, however well-intentioned, still put themselves at the center, Ms. Weimer said. She uses a simple test to help faculty members judge whom their course is truly serving: She asks professors to observe whether they or their students are working harder during class.

It's often the professor, she said. "In a learner-centered class they're working equally hard."

Traveling on a Path

To some teaching experts, the shift in power dynamics may have a more-enduring effect on professors than whether they use any particular pedagogical method. Seeing students as partners in the process of learning often carries with it an awareness that faculty members must adjust their teaching, and must do so continuously, said Catharine H. Beyer, a research scientist for the assessment of student learning at the University of Washington.

Ms. Beyer has studied how and why professors change their teaching. In her book *Inside the Undergraduate Teaching Experience* she found that faculty members often change because of feedback from their students.

They get the sense that the students aren't quite grasping what's being taught.

Once the faculty members also shifted their views about the nature of their students, one-time changes became a continuous effort of modification and improvement. In particular, she said, faculty members started describing their students as traveling along a learning path instead of being passive recipients of knowledge.

"The two things seemed to happen at the same time," she said. "Faculty were unhappy with what they were seeing, and they talked about this idea that their students are learning and are on this path."

Once those two dynamics came together, she said, a realization often struck.

"Once I understand that you're along this path to learning," said Ms. Beyer, "I see that I as a faculty member have a responsibility to help."

Dan Berrett is a senior reporter at The Chronicle of Higher Education.