Student-Centered Lecturing

For courses where exposition of texts is a priority, I often assign teams of three students to begin a class by lecturing. Students first must decide among themselves how best to achieve coverage of the assigned reading, roughly dividing responsibilities for beginning, middle, and end. They negotiate about how they will accomplish this by phone or, more frequently, e-mail. From their section of the text, students select what they regard to be the major point. They then formulate a question about their section that they each put on the board before class starts. That way, everyone can see how much overlapping or interconnection there may be between three distinctive points in the total reading assignment. Class begins with students trying to get the class to answer their questions, giving their own answers, and explaining why they thought the questions were significant in terms of the assigned reading as a whole.

As for evaluation, I let students know in writing that 25 percent of their final grade will be based on individual performance in "student-led discussion." (I avoid calling it lecturing to forestall complaints that I am having students "do my job.") I also include a description of the grading criteria that cover how they approach the material (thoughtful questions evoking answers that are neither self-evident nor obscurely personal in interpretation) and both quality and quantity of the class response generated by each question. This way, even a student who is verbally ineffective (and I do sit in the last row, prompting clarification from those I cannot hear or understand) can still receive credit for the class response generated by the question written on the board.

How often I use this format depends on how well a specific group of students interacts in discussion and on how much and what sort of material I wish to cover. For an average class size of around 25, using teams of three students will enable you to include the entire class at least once while leaving open additional class periods to use for study questions and response papers written out by everyone prior to a class, or for in-class summaries of concepts and materials already discussed. Beginning a class with certain students being responsible for conducting a brief lecture-discussion of their own does have advantages. It allows the class to see what their peers consider to be significant in the text before a teacher tells them. It also enables me to find out immediately what gaps need to be filled in or what misunderstandings need to be cleared up. I can either address the class directly myself after the students have finished or handle problems of communication more indirectly by raising questions of my own during the student-led discussion. I also copy down my student-lecturers' questions and take notes on the class's answers for testing purposes later. Including material from the student lecture-discussion exchanges on the examinations sends a message that class discussion does matter. Examination questions and grades will be derived not only from materials that an authority figure has designated but also from ideas that students themselves are regularly generating about those materials.

From "The Teaching Professor", by Alan S. Loxterman, University of Richmond