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Increasing Engagement through Oral Exams

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The context: I use short oral exams in required undergraduate core courses of thirty-five to forty students, where students are often taking the course to fulfill school requirements rather than out of personal interest.

The pedagogical purposes: In large required courses, students often attempt to disengage and “hide” amongst their peers. In response, about one-third of the way into the semester, I give an oral exam. Oral exams offer struggling students an early intervention long before they would seek it out themselves. For average students, using the course material in conversation brings a tremendous confidence boost. And for superior students, individualized exams allow the instructor to probe deeper and challenge them to think at even higher levels, thus preventing boredom. In all three cases, students return to class with a new level of engagement. This invariably leads to a marked increase in the level of classroom discussion, which, in turn, snowballs into greater pedagogical success throughout the rest of the semester.

Description of the strategy: I schedule students for individual fifteen-minute exams throughout a given day. I begin each exam session with a “short answer” question that can be answered in three to five sentences (e.g. Explain Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean). Then I either use the student’s answer as a prompt for further discussion (e.g. How does Thomas Aquinas’s virtue theory build upon Aristotle’s?) or I ask another question from my list. I prepare six to ten questions, but will typically only get to three or four. With experience, however, this is more than enough to evaluate comprehension of the material.

Why it is effective: Oral exams offer four distinct advantages over written exams or essays:

- (1) Verbal conversation raises the accountability level. It is easier to leave a written question blank than to sit in silence when asked a verbal question. Conversely, those who succeed –and most do – feel a deeper attachment to the material that pays off in greater engagement.
- (2) Oral exams test comprehension not memorization. Written exams only offer one iteration of dialogue, but verbal dialogue reveals the depths of student comprehension.
- (3) Exams can be tailored to the individual. The instructor can rephrase questions and offer gentle nudges to help them recognize the knowledge they do have, discover the holes that need further attention, or probe further to build confidence and pose new challenges.
- (4) Where most exams are purely evaluative, oral exams are also instructive. Instructors can offer instant feedback and engage in direct dialogue regarding the specific questions and struggles of each individual student.