

The Beginner's Guide to Understanding Rigor

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Rigor is creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels (Blackburn, 2008).

When I am in schools working with teachers, I'm often asked why I care about rigor. They are also quick to tell me they care about rigor because they are told they have to. My response is simple. There are other reasons, such as the clear research base that shows our students need more rigor, the new Common Core Standards that require more rigor, or the number of students who graduate from high school ill-prepared for college or the workforce.

But my most important reason is this: rigor is not about giving students more to do, or punishing them with more homework. Rigor is about helping students learn at higher levels, and that's why I became a teacher.



Defining Rigor

My definition of rigor has a sharp focus on instruction: creating an environment in which:

1. each student is expected to learn at high levels,
2. each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and
3. each student demonstrates learning at high levels.

Notice we are looking at the environment you create. The tri-fold approach to rigor is not limited to the curriculum students are expected to learn. It is more than a specific lesson or instructional strategy. It is deeper than what a student says or does in response to a lesson. True rigor is the result of weaving together all elements of schooling to raise students to higher levels of learning. Let's take a deeper look at the three aspects of the definition.

Expecting Students to Learn at High Levels



Rigor is *creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels.*

Having high expectations starts with the decision that every student possesses the potential to be his or her best, no matter what.

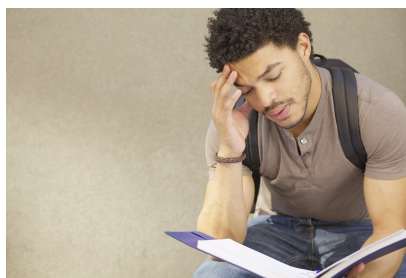
As you design lessons that incorporate more rigorous opportunities for learning, you will want to consider the questions that are embedded in the instruction. Higher-level questioning is an integral part of a

rigorous classroom. Look for open-ended questions, ones that are at the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (analysis, synthesis).

It is also important to look at how teachers respond to student questions. When I visit schools, it is not uncommon to see teachers who ask higher-level questions. But I then see some of the same teachers accept low-level responses from students. In rigorous classrooms teachers push students to respond at high levels. They ask extending questions. If a student does not know the answer, the teacher continues to probe and guide the student to an appropriate answer, rather than moving on to the next student.

Supporting Students to Learn at High Levels

High expectations are important but the most rigorous schools assure that *each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels*, which is the second part of our definition. It is essential that teachers design lessons that move students to more challenging work while simultaneously providing ongoing scaffolding to support students' learning as they move to those higher levels.



Providing additional scaffolding throughout lessons is one of the most important ways to support students. This can occur in a variety of ways, but it requires that teachers ask themselves during every step of their lesson, "What extra support might my students need?"

Ensuring Students Demonstrate Learning at High Levels



The third component of a rigorous classroom provides *each student with opportunities to demonstrate learning at high levels*. What I've learned is that if we want students to show us they understand what they learned at a high level, we also need to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate they have truly mastered that learning. One way to accomplish that is through increased student engagement.

Options include requiring all students to respond either through pair-share, thumbs up or down, writing an answer on small whiteboards and sharing their response, or responding on a handheld computer that tallies responses. Such activities hold each student accountable for demonstrating their understanding.

For More Information and Examples, find my books at www.eyoneducation.com. *Rigor Made Easy* and *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word* provide classroom-based ideas; *Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way* and *Rigor in Your School: A Toolkit for Principals* provide school-based strategies.

Note: You'll find additional articles, templates, and activities at my website www.barbarablackburnonline.com and my blog at <http://rigorineducation.blogspot.com>. You can also follow me @BarbBlackburn on Twitter or connect with me via LinkedIn.