Rigorous Assessments: The Key to Student Achievement Barbara R. Blackburn

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Rigor is a key component of effective instruction and assessment. Too often, we think that our instruction and assessment is rigorous, but they are not. Our assumptions about rigor, as well as our practices, make a difference in what we expect from students. In *Rigor is Not a Four-Letter Word*, I define rigor as "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.

Although each of these are important to improving student learning, our focus in this paper is on the third component: student demonstration of learning. Quality assignments must be rigorous, which includes questions, tasks, and other assessment that address higher level questioning and skills. For example, in a math classroom, we often think that, after students complete a variety of word problems, we can increase the rigor by asking them to create their own word problem. It may be a bit more challenging, but that is still an application activity, which is a lower level (2) on Webb's Depth of Knowledge. In order to reach a level 3 (considered rigorous), students would need to recognize and explain misconceptions. For example, students could review three math word problems that have a solution. They must identify which one or ones are incorrect, solve them correctly, explain why the first solution was incorrect, and why their solution is correct.

Formative Assessment

There are nine characteristics of effective formative assessment.

Effective FORMATIVE Assessment Focus is improving teaching and learning Ownership of assessment shared by teacher and students Requires feedback to move learning forward Meta-cognition and self-assessment encouraged Activates students to be peer-assessors Takes place during instruction Identifies where a student is and helps them move forward Variety of frequent assessments Examples of goals and grading criteria provided

instruction and positively impact student learning.

Examples of Formative Assessments

Checklists

Checklists are a strategy that can be used as a part of teacher observation. Checklists can be simple yes/no tallies, or they can be open-ended for teachers to add notes.

Characteristic	Notes
Student demonstrates	
problem-solving ability.	
Student demonstrates	
persistence while solving	
problems.	
Student reflects on his/her	
thinking.	
Student shows applications	
of learning to real-life	

Sample Mathematics Checklist

You've Got Mail

Edutopia (<u>http://www.edutopia.org/resource/checking-understanding-</u> <u>download</u>) recommends using "You've Got Mail". As the author describes it, "Each student writes a question about a topic on the front of an envelope; the answer is included inside. Questions are then "mailed" around the room. Each learner writes his or her answer on a slip of scratch paper and confirms its correctness by reading the "official answer" before she places his or her own response in the envelope. After several series of mailings and a class discussion about the subject, the envelopes are deposited in the teacher's letterbox."

Summative Assessments

Summative assessments are typically used at the end of a chapter, unit, or topical study to assess students' overall understanding. They also form the basis for grades, particularly those used to compute a final grade for the report card. Although they can be used for diagnostic information, they differ from formative assessments in that their focus is different.

Examples of Summative Assessments

Matching Tests

At times, matching test can become a guessing game. A more rigorous approach is an expanded matching format that creates three columns which must be matched. In the example below, you'll also notice there are more choices than items, which requires students to narrow down the answer. To push advanced students to an even higher level, ask them to create a fourth column, in which they create their own category and choices to match.

Person	Contribution	Time	
1. Fannie Lou Hamer	A. U.S. Civil Rights activist and	g. 1800's	
2. Shirley Chisolm	wife of Martin Luther King	h. 1910's	
3. Marie Curie	Jr.	i. 1920's	
4. Alice Paul	B. Ran for state senate on the	j. 1950's	
	platform of increasing	k. 1960's	
	minority employment	l. 1970's	
	C. First African-American		
	congressman (woman)		
	D. Discovered the elements		
	radium and polonium.		

Women's Historical Contributions

Ε.	Formed the Congressional	
	Union (later named the	
	National Women's Party) to	
	raise public awareness for	
	women's rights as a part of	
	the Women's Suffragist	
	Movement.	
F.	Known as "Moses" and lead	
	many slaves to freedom	
	along the "Underground	
	Railroad".	

Short Answer/Essay Tests

We frequently use short answer and essay questions to assess students' understanding. Once again, there are less rigorous, and more rigorous ways to ask questions. Look at the examples of short answer questions below.

Less Rigorous Example	More Rigorous Example
What are two ways in which the vast desert	Which of the two deserts, the Gobi or the
regions of Southwest and Central Asia affect	Karakum, is easier for surviving for those who
the lives of the people who live there?	might live there and why?

A Final Note

Although rigor should be integrated throughout all aspects of the teaching and learning process, assessments measure whether or not students are able to understand and apply content at a rigorous level. It is critical that teachers assess the level of rigor, and improve tasks, assignments, and other assessments to ensure they are rigorous.

For more information, check out Barbara' book, *Rigor and Assessment in the Classroom*, at <u>https://www.routledge.com/collections/10881</u>. Barbara also regularly works with schools and districts for on-site professional development, Skype sessions, webinars, expert review of teachers' assessments, leadership training, and Train-the-Trainer models. You may contact her via her website: <u>www.barbarablackburnonline.com</u>.