

Rigor: Myths or Reality?
Barbara R. Blackburn, author of
Rigor is NOT a 4 Letter Word

Instructional rigor is one of the most discussed topics in education today. But what is rigor? Is it assigning more homework? Perhaps it is giving students less time to complete their work. There is much debate over what rigor is and is not. Let's look at seven myths, then a concrete definition of the actual meaning.



Myth One: Lots of homework is a sign of rigor.

For many people the best indicator of rigor is the amount of homework required of students. Some teachers pride themselves on the amount of homework expected of their students, and there are parents who judge teachers by homework quantity. Realistically, all homework is not equally useful. Some of it is just busywork, assigned by teachers because principals or parents expect it. For some students, doing more homework in terms of quantity leads to burnout. When that occurs, students are less likely to complete homework, and may be discouraged about any learning activity.

Myth Two: Rigor means doing more.

“Doing more” often means doing more low-level activities, frequently repetitions of things already learned. Such narrow and rigid approaches to learning do not define a rigorous classroom. Students learn in many different ways. Just as instruction must vary to meet the individual needs of students, so must homework. Rigorous and challenging learning experiences will vary with the student. Their design will vary; as will their duration. Ultimately, it is the quality of the assignment that makes a difference in terms of rigor.

Myth Three: Rigor is not for everyone.

Some teachers think the only way to assure success for everyone is to lower standards and lessen rigor. This may mask a hidden belief that some students can't really learn at high levels. You may have heard of

the Pygmalion Effect--students live up to or down to our expectations of them. Each student can complete rigorous work at high levels, whether they are advanced or a student with special needs. Does the end result look different for those two students? Yes, but I know from my own experience as a teacher of struggling students reading far below their grade level that any teacher can be rigorous, and any student can reach higher levels with the right support.

Myth Four: Providing support means lessening rigor.

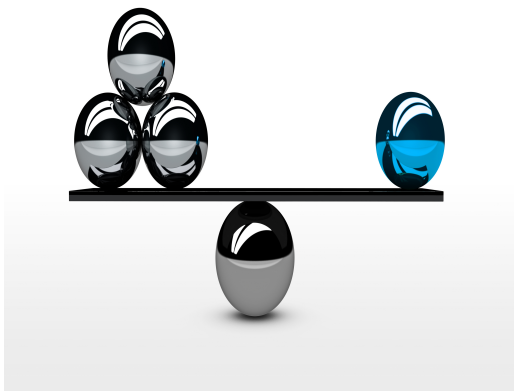
In America, we believe in rugged individualism. We are to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and do things on our own. . Working in teams or accepting help is often seen as a sign of weakness. Supporting students so that they can learn at high levels is central to the definition of rigor. As teachers design lessons moving students toward more challenging work they must provide scaffolding to support them as they learn.

Myth Five: Resources equal rigor.

Recently, I've heard a common refrain. "If we buy this program, or textbook, or technology, then we would be rigorous." The right resources can certainly help increase the rigor in your classroom. However, raising the level of rigor for your students is not dependent on the resources you have. Think about the resources you have now. How can you use them more effectively? Do you use a textbook that includes true-false tests? Often, they are not rigorous because students can guess the answer. However, add one step for more rigor. Ask students to rewrite all false answers into true statements, and it requires students to demonstrate true understanding. It's not the resources; it's how you use them that make a difference.

Myth Six: Standards alone take care of rigor.

Standards alone, even if they are rigorous, do not guarantee rigor in the classroom. The Common Core State Standards and other state standards are designed to increase the level of rigor in classrooms across the nation. However, if implemented without high levels of questioning or applications, the standards themselves are weakened. Your instructional practices, or how you implement standards, are just as critical as the curriculum.



Myth Seven: Rigor is just one more thing to do.

Rigor is not another thing to add to your plate. Instead, rigor is increasing the level of expectation of what you are already doing. For example, if you are teaching vocabulary, instead of asking students to write their own definition of the word, ask them to write a riddle. It's the same end result, but at higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

A Final Note

Despite its reputation, the word rigor does not have to be a negative in your classroom. True instructional 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 (Williamson and Blackburn, 2011)."

Sources

Blackburn, B. (2014). *Rigor in Your Classroom: A Toolkit for Teachers*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Blackburn, B. (2014). *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bloom B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*. New York: David McKay Co Inc.

Williamson, R. & Blackburn, B. (2011). *Rigor in Your School: A Toolkit for Leaders*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Note: I regularly collaborate with schools and districts for professional development. If you are interested, my email address is bcbgroup@gmail.com and my phone number is (609) 474-4677. You'll find additional articles, templates, and activities at my website www.barbarablackburnonline.com. If you would like information on any of my books, visit

<https://www.routledge.com/collections/10881>. You can also follow me

@BarbBlackburn on Twitter or connect with me via LinkedIn.

©Barbara R. Blackburn, www.barbarablackburnonline.com

Permission granted to reproduce with copyright information.