

Five Strategies for Increasing the Rigor in Your Classroom

By Barbara R. Blackburn

Raising the level of rigor in your classroom does not have to be difficult or a separate lesson. Rather, using creative and engaging instructional strategies that push students to higher levels of thinking can occur as a regular part of your instruction.

Increasing Rigor Through Riddles

First, let's look at a way to increase the rigor of vocabulary. Usually, we ask students to demonstrate their understanding of a word or concept by restating the definition in their own words or by using it in a sentence. Oftentimes, students simply memorize the definition long enough to complete the activity and take a test, rather than truly understanding the word or concept.



To increase the rigor, ask students to write a riddle about the word or concept. In addition to knowing what something means, they must turn that information into clues so that other students can guess the answer.

Prices go up.

Your wallet is thinner.

You pay twice as much

To provide family dinner.

Answer: Inflation

Increasing Rigor Through Guessing Games

When we start a lesson, we typically tell students what we will learn about that day. We are assuming they do not know anything yet, so we do all the talking. That's not very rigorous. We can turn that around and make all our introductions more about problem-solving and discovery in a simple way.

Three Alike is a game in which the teacher provides three examples to the students, and then asks the group to guess what he or she will be teaching about today. Rather than saying, "I'm going to be teaching about negative integers today," the teacher says, "Notice I have three numbers on the screen (-5, -14, -25). What do they have in common?" At least one student in the room probably knows the answer. Then you can build off that information as the lesson continues.



Once students are adept at *Three Alike*, you can increase the rigor again by playing the *Red Herring Game*. In this game, you provide four examples. Students must identify the one that does not belong and justify their answer. For example, "Which of these does not belong: Texas, Maryland, California, Nevada?" The answer is Nevada, because it does not have a coastline, which then leads to a discussion of geographic features.

Once students are familiar with both games, you can shift the ownership to them. They come up with the examples, and their classmates must guess the answers.

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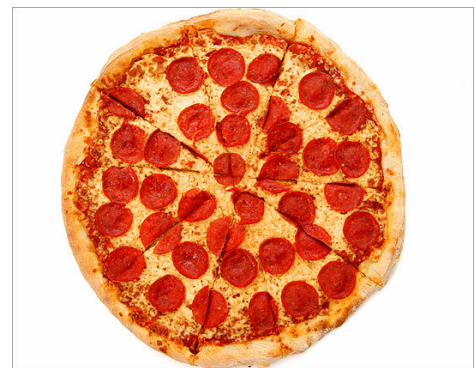
Increasing Rigor By Identifying Information

A third way to increase rigor is to add complexity to student identification of information. A kindergarten teacher shared her strategy with me. Rather than showing students a picture and asking them to describe it, she put the picture inside a file folder. On the front of the file folder, she cut out two eyes and a smile. Students had to identify as much as possible, just by looking at the partial picture. They also had to make inferences. It was more challenging than just a basic description.

Another alternative with older students builds on the *Red Herring* concept we discussed. Create a fake webpage on a topic, one which includes at least two errors. Students explore the webpage, as well as any other needed sources to determine the errors. They then correct them. Once again, rather than simply identifying basic information, they must dig deep enough to clarify right and wrong information.

Increasing Rigor in Reviewing Information

I used a pizza wheel during class to review chunks of material students are assigned to read prior to or during class. Each student writes a fact he or she learned in one of the pizza slices. Then, working in small groups, students rotate their papers to the next group member, who also writes a fact, one that is not already written on a slice of pizza. This continues around the circle until each



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pizza is full. As an alternative, students can write examples of evidence that supports an opinion or perspective. Students then discuss the material, using the pizza wheels as a prompt. Although you can measure students' understanding in an oral discussion, asking each student to write ensures that all students are involved in the lesson and provides an opportunity for every student to respond. Asking them to write facts that are different from the others on the pizza wheel also encourages depth.

Increasing Rigor Through Various Points of View

Finally, it's important to look at a situation through a variety of perspectives. When I was a classroom teacher, I used six-sided cubes to encourage thinking about an issue. Each side of the cube had a prompt, such as "apply it," "analyze it," etc. It was effective, but not for every assignment. It also didn't encourage group problem-solving.

Another option is the use of Thinking Hats. With this activity, students are placed in groups of six, and each one is assigned a role, or hat. Notice from the descriptions below the perspective or assignment for each student.

Thinking Hats

The White Hat calls for information known or needed. "The facts, just the facts."

The Yellow Hat symbolizes brightness and optimism. Under this hat you explore the positives and probe for value and benefit.

The Black Hat is judgment—the devil's advocate or why something may

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not work. Spot the difficulties and dangers— where things might go wrong. Probably the most powerful and useful of the hats but a problem if overused. ***I use purple if black creates a negative perception.*

The Red Hat signifies feelings, hunches and intuition. When using this hat you can express emotions and feelings and share fears, likes, dislikes, loves, and hates.

The Green Hat focuses on creativity—the possibilities, alternatives, and new ideas. It's an opportunity to express new concepts and new perceptions.

The Blue Hat is used to manage the thinking process. It's the control mechanism that ensures the Six Thinking Hats® guidelines are observed.

Source: <http://www.debonogroup.com/6hats.htm>

Imagine using this when analyzing an issue in a social studies class, such as whether supporters of a terrorist group should be able to use social media to promote their agenda. The white hat student points out the facts of the issue, such as the first amendment. The yellow hat looks for the positive aspects in the issues, or the benefits.



Black, or purple, plays the devil's advocate. What are the

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difficulties? Where might something go wrong with this issue? How might the use of social media promote their agenda and damage the United States? The red hat focuses on emotions, both positive and negative. What emotions drive the argument over this issue? Green looks at the creative nature of the issue, with possibilities, solutions, and new ideas. Finally, the blue hat is the manager of the process, ensuring that all perspectives are addressed.

Think about how much more depth of discussion and analysis takes place when looking at the issue from all perspectives. You have raised the rigor of the assignment and engaged students at a higher level.

Conclusion

Increasing rigor in the classroom is not necessarily time-consuming or challenging. There are simple strategies that teachers can use to raise the level of rigor in any grade level or subject area

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.