

The Learning Network

A Newsletter for Washington State High Schools that Receive Gates Reinvention Grants

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Rigor with a Human Face

Rigor is an educational buzzword these days. Everyone has an idea of what it means, what we need to do to get it, and how we'll know when we have it.

We've worked with schools over the past three years on the concept of rigor, using two basic sources for our discussions. One is a slender book called *Teaching What Matters Most*, an ASCD publication by Richard Strong, Harvey Silver, and Matthew Perini. Rigor is one of the things that "matters most," and the authors argue that rigor derives primarily from the quality of the content we ask students to engage with. In this formulation, rigorous work has four distinct qualities: it is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and emotionally and personally challenging. Teachers have found this book accessible, friendly, and enormously helpful in formulating their approach to rigor.

We've also used the construct of "authentic intellectual work," developed by Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage at the University of Wisconsin in the 1990s. They define authentic intellectual work as having three components: construction of knowledge,

disciplined inquiry (which includes building on a prior knowledge base, promoting in-depth understanding, and providing opportunities for elaborated communication by students), and value beyond school. Although the Newmann definition is not as widely used, it provides—for some—the conceptual framework needed to help build rigorous learning opportunities for students.

After three years, we still don't have a definition that works for everyone. What we *do* know, however, is that rigor is no longer defined as the number of students a teacher fails in class. We know also that teachers, individually and collectively, are deepening their own understandings of rigor.

The articles in this month's *TLN* provide a human face for rigor. Two teachers describe how they approach rigor using definitions they and their colleagues constructed to suit their context and aims. Two groups of students describe rigor in their new small schools. And a school coach shares her thoughts on what teachers can do to support kids doing rigorous academic work.

~ Rick Lear, Director

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Rigor Requires a Transformative Experience

By Josh Searle, humanities teacher at Ocean Research College Academy (ORCA).

Rigor is an awkward word to describe an academic pursuit. In Latin, it means cold, chilliness and/or hardness, severity, stern-

ness. These are not the adjectives I care to parade to parents and community members alike (not to mention my students). Yet the term rigor persists, perhaps as a not-so-subtle reference to the golden years of education when reading, writing, and 'rithmetic ruled the little red schoolhouse... a time when students learned and teachers taught, and no self-respecting adult took guff from anyone else.

The "golden years" is a popular misconception, yet it persists because it suggests a predictable outcome, an objectively measured result, a business model bottom line. In other words, separate the warmth and unpredictable passions of our students in the question for consistent academic rigor. Fortunately, the learning I have witnessed at ORCA is anything but cold and severe. Yet it is rigorous.

Transforming the concept of rigor

Educators must transform the popular conception of the term rigor. To accomplish this task, I return to the roots of learning: creativity, curiosity, reflection, and ultimately transformation.

The concept I call academic rigor contains all four of these traits and speaks to all disciplines. Science requires curiosity. History demands reflection. Math and English beg equally for creativity. However, without transformation, creativity is an erupting model volcano that sits in the trash after a science fair,



Left to right: ORCA students Seth Kuhlman, Michael Rommen, Tricia Beba, and Emily Lynch discuss their writing with humanities teacher Josh Searle.

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a poster tacked on a wall somewhere, a journal entry about whose friend did what to whom.

The difference then, between projects and assignments that are just projects and assignments and projects that are rigorous is *transformation*. Students must be pushed to the extent that they, at some point, doubt their understanding. Students must be prodded to the extent that they, at some point, worry they won't make it.

Encouraging academic risk

Doubt and potential failure are red flags to parents, teachers, and administrators alike. An advocate of doubt and potential failure sounds like a cold, severe, harsh (all synonyms for rigorous) teacher. But I argue there is no way for students to change state without adding energy and that requires academic risk.

A test every week as the primary mode of assessment does not encourage academic risk. A final paper every two or four weeks that represents a significant portion of a final grade does not encourage academic risk. Academic risk requires an opportunity to make mistakes and reflect on them. It requires an opportunity to freely experiment.

That is why a school must support course structures designed to push and prod students to transformation. In my classroom, a pure outcomes assessment model and a portfolio assessment

tool create an environment filled with time for academic risks, for creativity and curiosity and reflection. These models set students up for transformation.

Deciding your core outcomes

Coincidentally, these models make me a better teacher. They push me to decide, ahead of time, my core outcomes for each course. It may seem counterintuitive, but I learned this process while working with student IEPs. The various accommoda-

In their own words

ORCA students speak out on rigor

A group of students describes the academic rigor in humanities teacher Josh Searle's classes at Ocean Research College Academy (ORCA). ORCA is a two-year program at Everett Community College that allows students to combine their last two years of high school with a community college degree.

- *Tricia Beba*: "I like being graded on outcomes, because it's about my really understanding."
- *Seth Kuhlman*: "[We have] lots more independence, lots more accountability [but] we get a lot more out of it. It teaches us more skills. We leave with a lot more."
- *Kim Beckman*: "You get to go deeper into text and have lots of active discussion. It's tied to real life."
- *Michael Rommen*: "[Regular] high school just taught us to get by. Here I'm trying to do my best."

And when you have a better performance, you feel better about yourself."

- *Dowdy Gilles*: "It's not just busy work. And I've learned one of the hughest lessons of my life: you have to work for everything."
- *Kelliann Farmer*: "I've learned that when I get a project to just take one piece—one little aspect—at a time."
- *Emily Lynch*: "They make us look at things in a different way, deeper. It's cool, but it's crazily intense."

tions forced me to strip my courses down to their core goals, core outcomes, and then create a scale appropriate to each student. My goal was to see each student pushed to his or her own limit, to experience a transformation. That's my goal for ORCA students, too.

I tell students at the beginning of each course exactly what I would like to see from them by the end of the class. I tell them the pieces I will offer in class, and then I turn the

learning over to them.

Rigor as transformative is a topic the founding faculty of ORCA discussed at length. On a practical level, the traditional "rigor" of college work helps us demand more from our students. But rigor is not about more work. It is about transformative, meaningful work.

Recognizing rigor

How do I recognize it? I see tremendous background work put into a project, but not because a student was required to

have seven sources and so many pages of double-spaced text. I see thoughtful reflection that demonstrates an awareness of intellectual growth and an understanding of the intellectual process. I see unpredictable passion from students translated into creativity, curiosity, and reflection.

When I talk with my colleagues about rigor, I have to turn to student work. As a young teacher, I simply didn't know what students were capable of creating. Contemporary high schools successfully convince teachers to reduce education to a series of controlled and mostly predictable exercises. I understand why large systems need that control—I am not that far away from the comprehensive high school to have forgotten the realities of that context.

However, my time with students at ORCA has given me a glimpse of what is possible. When a student tells me my class was the most difficult and interesting experience he or she has encountered, yet proudly discusses how he or she grew during the experience, I have witnessed rigor.

“... rigor is not about more work. It is about transformative, meaningful work.”

JOSH SEARLE, HUMANITIES TEACHER,
ORCA

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Exploring Rigor at the Academy of Citizenship and Empowerment

Teachers and students at the Academy of Citizenship and Empowerment (ACE) have been talking about—and practicing—academic rigor. (ACE is one of the three new small schools on the Tyee campus in the Highline School District.) Because the staff believes that “it is through rigorous academics that we will help promote socially responsible citizenry,” knowing just what “rigorous” looks like and how to support students in the process is a priority. On the following page, ACE language arts teacher Carrie Howell answers some questions about the topic.

Recently, a small group of students talked to *The Learning Network* about what rigor looks and feels like at ACE. They started with words like “frustrating, stressful, hard, tiring, a relief when it’s done.” But they quickly moved to the reasons they believe it’s important and necessary—and the kind of learning they really want.

Senior Joel Luna describes rigor as “something challenging that I apply, that involves mind, body and soul, that tests my limits.” And he adds, “It’s beneficial to life.”

Tiffany Burger also sees the relevance of the rigorous work she’s doing at ACE. She believes that having to revise a paper many times—with help from the teacher and other students—will be helpful in college because “it helps us know how to do it right. If I do something rigorous, I’ll remember it later on.” She says she loves being an ACE student because “they make me work and think at a higher level.”

Sophomore Alejandra Juarez says that in spite of the stress that rigorous work can bring, “when you’re done, you have more confidence, you believe more in yourself.”

Describing a writing project, senior Amy Williams talks about the English teachers getting together to get a topic across. “Sometimes they bombard us,” she says, using a word that might sound nega-



Left to right: Students Amy Williams, Tiffany Burger, Kristin Dennis, Sergio Valdes-Reynoso, Alejandra Juarez, and Joel Luna talk about rigor at ACE.

tive if she didn’t end by saying, “Clearly, in the end it was a good experience.”

For senior Sergio Valdes-Reynoso, the key to accomplishing rigorous work has been the support he gets from teachers and students. “The teachers are always there,” he says. And he finds that ACE’s practice of putting student work—and not just that final draft—up on the walls

around school “inspires and motivates me.”

Senior Kristin Dennis says that with the rigorous work required in ACE, “students are more focused. They know what they need to do.” She adds that because her grades have improved since coming to ACE, “I’m heading to college.”

ACE Student Conclave Celebrates Student Voice

Because another ACE goal is to be student-centered, the school held what they called a student conclave in March that allowed students to voice their opinions and engage in a variety of activities. The conclave began with the student body gathering in the Tyee gym.

According to senior Tiffany Burger, a small moment in the gym illustrated how things have changed. “In the first part of the assembly, we did a turn-and-talk. Then, when the teachers asked us to come back together, we did right away. At [the old] Tyee, kids would have kept talking,” she explains.

When pressed as to why that might have been, senior Sergio Valdes-Reynoso says, “Because we didn’t have as much respect last year.” He thinks respect has grown because teachers and students know each other better in a small school.

After the conclave’s opening gathering, students dispersed to their advisories to engage in activities such as completing “This I Believe” statements, discussing what a music program for the school might look like, and what courses should be offered. They also completed a “How are things going at ACE?” survey and plotted their findings on large charts in the gym.



Carrie Howell, language arts teacher at the Academy of Citizenship and Empowerment (ACE), answers a few questions about rigor.

What is your definition of rigorous learning?

Rigorous learning is creative, explorative, risky. When we are learning at

a rigorous level, we take chances with our thinking, and we leave what we know to be true and enter into a realm of new intangible possibilities.

Rigorous learning forces students to think at those higher cognitive levels (analysis, evaluation, synthesis). It stretches them beyond what they are comfortable with. And while it may be confusing or stressful at first, with the right supports, it's incredibly rewarding and satisfying.

What are you looking for in kids' work that helps you know that you are providing rigorous learning?

I am looking for students to pause—literally—in their work. This pause, this moment of thought before writing, reading, or other tasks, shows me that students are not just regurgitating rote facts. It means that they have to create ideas, to formulate thinking on the spot.

I am listening for a buzz—that excited “I’m thinking that…” or “I noticed that… and I think it means…” I encourage students to “try on” their ideas through talk and so this kind of healthy buzz lets me know students are engaged in rigorous work.

Regarding assessed “work,” I should see heavily annotated texts, copious amounts of pre-writing, questions written everywhere (in books, notebooks), and polished final essays—with at least four prior drafts to show revision. I believe much of what we “see” as rigor happens in the process and that, in the end, we get better essays and speeches, but that it is in the process that we see rigorous learning applied.

What teacher practices do you find most necessary for providing this kind of learning for your students?

I feel that providing multiple opportunities for meaningful interaction with peers of all different learning styles is key, because in seeing how others process we are often able to expand our understanding of a concept.

So I like having kids work within a mini-lesson for direct instruction. There, we share a common text and we talk about our analysis of that text using protocols such as turn-and-talks and group charting. Students learn a process for analysis and then

they practice this process in small groups or independently during work time. This helps because we are able to apply high-level strategies (tracking symbolism, for example) to a variety of level texts because groups are reading different level-appropriate texts.

I find that the teacher practice that most helps with rigor is daily assessment—not formal grading, but authentic understanding of my students’ work. In seeing what my students can do each day, I am able to build in the supports I need for the next day in order to challenge their thinking further.

How do ACE teachers work together to provide rigor?

As a literacy department, we frequently work together on providing rigor in our classes. Our embedded professional development this year has allowed us opportunities to work in each other’s classrooms for blocks of time, usually three days in a row. As a recent residency teacher, I had my four colleagues and an outside consultant in my classroom working with me on my goal of teaching my senior language arts class the skill of revision.

The experience was personally very rigorous for me—I learned much from my peers—but it also helped to “up” the level of thinking overall for my students. By working [together] so closely, we are helping each other with specific skills and therefore are able to impart more rigorous concepts to our students. I know for a fact that the level of thinking my current seniors in a mainstream language arts class are doing this year far exceeds that of the seniors I taught AP literature to for many years. My ACE students know how to take ideas to a deep level, to explore and take chances with their writing and thinking. This is rigor.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Reading the Water: Coaching Schools Through Their Improvement Efforts

This new study uses a kayaking metaphor, “reading the water,” to describe different ways in which school coaches approach their work. Written by Small Schools Coaches Collaborative (SSCC) coach Liz Marzolf, with SSP associate director Mary Beth Lambert, the study has two purposes: to understand what influences and guides school-change coaching practice from the perspective of coaches employed by the SSCC; and to understand what and how these coaches contribute to their school’s improvement work from their perspective and that of those who are coached.

The study includes analysis from extensive interviews with six SSCC coaches who described their work and from observations of that work. Other SSCC coaches participated in a focus group. Also, numerous artifacts—including coaches’ professional development plans and SSCC meeting minutes—were reviewed.

Reading the Water is available for download from the Small Schools Project website, www.smallschoolsproject.org, in the Resources and Publications section.

RIGOROUS LEARNING

Preparing Our Students and Ourselves for the Challenge



Kathy Squires, coach with the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative, talks about the skills students need to engage in rigorous academic work.

As we explore the literature on rigorous teaching and learning, we may feel tempted to immediately “dive in” to more rigorous instruction. After all, if research is correct—if rigorous instruction creates more confident, creative, and competent students—then why not immediately begin weaving into our instruction complex problems, provocative assignments, and difficult inquiry-based projects? Right?

Maybe. Or maybe we should move more slowly—more deliberately. Maybe we should ask ourselves whether we have prepared our students and ourselves for

the conditions that invariably accompany rigorous learning.

I believe it is important to remember that rigorous instruction demands a preliminary set of skills and dispositions that must be taught and/or uncovered in our students and ourselves. For example, complex problems usually do not have readily apparent solutions. They require students to persist, tolerating the discomfort that often accompanies the condition of disequilibrium.

We all have experienced the discomfort of facing difficult learning. Some of us only have to look to the last time we tried to follow directions to put together a “partially assembled” item from the hardware store, or tried to convince a teenager to take our advice about studies, romance, or driving.

Rigorous learning often invites us to face the limits of our own knowledge and competence. We feel vulnerable—as though we are balancing on a very tall, very narrow beam high above our own comfort zone. Let’s face it: rigor feels risky.

When we ask students to face content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and challenging, we are asking them to do

the same—to climb above their comfort and safety in order to stretch their own thinking. Good teachers recognize their obligation to offer students the skills and dispositions that help them balance above their own discomfort in order to engage rigorous content.

But we may be wondering how best to provide a safety net so that kids venture onto that precarious beam of discomfort which comes with rigorous content. How do we make kids feel safe enough to take risks? How do we encourage students to endure disequilibrium?

To answer these questions, perhaps we need only look at our own needs when confronted with ambiguous or complex problems. What helps us to face tough challenges? Reflecting on your own experiences may offer the insights you need to build a rigor-ready community of learners.

In the meantime, I offer my own answers to the question of what we can do to develop the skills, learning dispositions and environment that supports rigorous instruction and learning. Perhaps my answers may agree with the answers you discover from your own reflection.

1 Building authentic support for students

Our own experience tells us that when we face difficult learning, we often feel the need for support from others. We can provide that support for our students by building authentic community in our classrooms. We start with an intentional focus on respect for each other, on team-building experiences that bond students to teacher and one another, and on cooperative learning activities designed to build positive interdependence among students.

We can make a firm commitment to build relationships with each student. We can model the compassion and tenacious forgiveness that we want to see in our students. We can use teaching techniques like Circle of Trust, Class Meeting, and social skill development—designed to teach the interpersonal skills that help students feel safe enough to walk above their comfort zone. The bottom line is that rigorous learning requires relationship.

2 Teaching students how to deal with unsuccessful attempts

We can also teach students that initial disappointments and unsuccessful attempts are not failures, but windows into their own thinking and problem solving. We can celebrate un-

successful attempts, practice techniques for persisting in the face of difficulty, and map out thinking strategies. We can teach our students tenacity by sharing with them stories and examples of the struggles of others.

In fact, we can apprentice our students by modeling for them the strategies we use to negotiate difficult content and risky learning. We can let ourselves be vulnerable, let our students see how we cope with our own frustrations and unsuccessful attempts, giving them permission to explore their own learning styles and coping techniques. More importantly, rigorous learning affords us the opportunity to teach students that each unsuccessful attempt leads us one step closer to better, deeper, more powerful thinking. And that realization leads to more resilient learners.

3 Allowing students to struggle

Finally, we can prepare ourselves by recognizing and learning to accept our own disequilibrium. Rigorous instruction gets its traction when students are invited, even expected, to struggle with contexts and unclear problems and to construct their own knowledge.

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This knowledge construction, however, demands that teachers allow students the time and learning environment in which to do this difficult work. Often, our tendency is to rush in and “save” our students. When confronted with their frustration, we feel a sense of frustration ourselves. We worry whether we are wasting time, whether there isn’t a more efficient way to “teach” the material, whether kids will feel too defeated to persist. It is tough to witness our students struggling with their own disequilibrium.

But when we step in immediately with the answers or when we immediately direct our students’ thinking to solutions, we send them the subtle message that we believe they have neither the capacity nor skill necessary to work toward solutions or handle their own frustration. According to researcher J. Brophy, we rob them of the opportunity to develop their own sense of *motivated* learning, “the motivation to acquire skills and knowledge, rather than merely complete activities.” Students’ sense of self efficacy improves as they confront and negotiate rigorous

content. Not only do they learn the material, but they also come to believe in their own power as a learner.

This is not to say that we leave our children to flounder alone without our support. None of us would observe children wincing in frustration at difficult problems, notice the teacher behind the desk correcting papers, and conclude, “Now there’s good rigorous instruction!” There is a great distance between “dishing out” answers and abandoning students to their own devices.

As students experience rigorous learning, they need to know that their teacher is truly present, ready to offer support, ready to ask the *right* questions. When we ask students good questions, we offer them a window into their own thinking, we encourage them to explore their own resources, and we give them permission to verbalize their frustration. In short, we offer students a safety net. They are comforted, knowing that as they balance at the edge of their own competence, their teacher stands close, telling them “Yes, this learning *is* hard—*and* I believe you can do it!”

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