

What Does Rigor Mean and Why Does It Matter?

Regular use of rigorous texts and content at all grade levels is important for five reasons:

1. *Rigorous reading and content demand attention.* Simplistic textbooks and content that has been “dumbed down,” require little thought or attention, they do little to help students enhance their capacities in either attention or critical thinking.
2. *Rigorous reading and content help us to handle uncertainty.* Simplistic texts and ideas seduce us with seeming clarity. They hide complexities and obscure interrelationships.
3. *Rigorous content increases flexibility in thinking.* Making sense of difficult material teaches us to follow a train of thought, to come to terms with nuance and subtlety. With practice, we build complex intellectual schema that are broad, flexible, and adaptable to a rich variety of situations. Very simple schema (“survival of the fittest,” stereotypes, “I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like”) can easily become the unexamined core of thought and action. Students raised on bland and featureless texts and ideas are thus left without the resources they need to handle academic learning, or the surprises of a constantly changing world.
4. *Rigor develops perseverance, intellectual modesty, and tolerance.* Rigorous material rewards effort. The more we think about a rigorous text or concept, the deeper our thoughts become and the more we discover about the conditions of our own lives. The difficulties we confront remind us how hard it is to fully understand the positions of others, and how likely we are to misunderstand their ideas by imposing our own understanding on them. In this way rigor develops not just cognitive understanding but character as well, teaching us to preserve when meaning is not obvious, and to respect the complexity and rationality of others’ thoughts.
5. *Rigor creates self-confidence.* How many of our students feel condescended to by the texts and ideas that comprise their curriculum? How much secret condescension underlies the idea that the next activity will be fun or easy? How much better is it to tell students that these ideas are difficult, that they will challenge their intellect? If they succeed, they will bring new confidence to the next task; if they temporarily fail, they will retain pride because the challenge they faced was a worthy one.

(over)

Discussion Question:

For three of the five reasons, provide a concrete example of your own experiences (as a learner or teacher).