

What Rigor Is Not

- As you approach the work of teaching in a rigorous manner, it is helpful to remember what rigor is not:
- *Rigor is not a special program or curriculum for select students.* The students in the opening vignettes are not part of programs for the gifted. Nor are they students in special magnet schools. They are ordinary students attending traditional public schools where standardized tests and state-run curricula are the rule of the day.
- *Rigor is not about severity or hardship.* The classrooms we have looked into are both warm and challenging.
- *Rigor is not about back-to-basics.* It is not an attempt to roll back education to some prior ideal state, or to find a curriculum that is somehow more fundamental or natural.
- *Rigor is not about higher-order thinking.* The examples are concerned with the content students were learning, not on how they were asked to think about it.
- *Rigor is neither a conservative nor a liberal agenda that privileges the ideas of one civilization over another.* No culture has any prior or superior claim or rigor; the students in our vignettes examined content from a rich variety of cultures.
- *Finally—and most important—rigor is not a measure of the quantity of content to be covered.* Rather, rigor is a measure of that content's quality.

So What Is Rigor

Now that we've settled the background—what you think about rigor and what rigor is not—here's our definition:

Rigor is the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is *complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging.*

This definition has three characteristics that may strike some readers as peculiar:

- First, the definition describes rigor as a *curriculum goal*. Most definitions define rigor simply as difficulty. By making it a goal, we are asserting that the ability to manage difficult content is a fundamental skill all students need, in school and out.
- Second, the definition requires that students regularly work with difficult texts and ideas. In focusing on the role of content, we are supporting David Perkins' assertion in *Smart Schools: Better Thinking and Learning For Every Child* (1992) that the most important decision we make is not *how* to teach, but *what* to teach. In fact, the decision to withhold rigor from some students is one of the most important reasons why schools fail. All students need schools to provide both rigorous content and direct instruction in the skills needed to manage that content (e.g., note making, summarizing, glossing a text).
- Third, the definition points out the different ways in which content can become rigorous.
- Some contents, like molecular biology or economics, are *complex*, composed of interacting and overlapping ideas (think cellular respiration, the structure of an ecosystem, or the causes of depressions or recessions)
- Others are *provocative*, conceptually challenging, dealing with dilemmas, engaging students in identifying problems, conducting inquiry, taking positions (think of human cloning or the themes of Richard Wright's *Native Son* or Katherine Peterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*).
- Still others, like modern poetry, primary documents, and statistics, are *ambiguous*, packed with multiple meanings that must be examined and sorted into patterns of significance (e.g. Dickinson's "The Soul Selects her Own Society," or A.A. Milne's *The House at Pooh Corner*, or a database describing U.S. immigration patterns from 1875 to 1920).
- Finally, some content is *personally or emotionally challenging* (the novels of Toni Morrison or Lois Lowry, the facts of Shay's Rebellion, or the Trail of Tears). How might they personally challenge students and their sense of how the world works?

The diversity of ways that content can become difficult implies that using one or two strategies for instruction or assessment will not be sufficient to help students learn to manage rigor. Teachers will need a repertoire of strategies keyed to the different ways content can be difficult.

* From *Teaching What Matters Most: Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement* by Richard W. Strong, Harvey F. Silver and Matthew J. Perini, ASCD, 2001