Sandwich Seminars

If you would like to schedule a Sandwich Seminar, please call Marcia O’Loughlin at (607) 753-2202.

Note: Sandwich Seminars are held on Wednesdays 12:30-1:30 p.m., and Thursdays noon-1 p.m. in Brockway Hall Jacobus Lounge unless otherwise noted. For the most up-to-date listing of Sandwich Seminars, please check [http://www.cortland.edu/bulletin/](http://www.cortland.edu/bulletin/).

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Rigor: It’s All the Rage, but What Does it Mean?

*Rigor: It’s All the Rage, but What Does it Mean? Understanding and Reporting on Academic Rigor: A Hechinger Institute Primer for Journalists, (2009), 1-5. (Reprinted with permission)*

By Jacobs, J. and Colvin, R.L.
Remember the three Rs? Get ready to add a fourth: rigor. It's the buzzword in education. From presidents to principals, billionaires to school board members, governors to teachers, everybody seems to be promising rigor, demanding rigor, or deploiring the lack of rigor in American schools. And journalists, more often than not, are simply repeating their words.

“It is time to expect more from our students,” President Barack Obama said in March 2009, adding to the chorus. “It is time to prepare every child, everywhere in America, to out-compete any worker, anywhere in the world. It is time to give all Americans a complete and competitive education from the cradle up through a career.”

But translating the rhetoric about rigor into classroom reality will not be easy, and it will mean that journalists need to know more about the origins of the new push for rigor. The tension between ideals of academic excellence and universal access to education has been an enduring theme in American public education all the way back to Horace Mann and the “common school” movement in the early 19th century. Generations of educators and politicians have struggled to reconcile high standards with the laudable goal of helping all students achieve. The crusade grew more intense in the late 1980s, when states began upping their graduation requirements after warnings that a “rising tide of mediocrity” in America’s schools threatened to destroy the nation’s economy.

Ever since, the idea that with the right support all students can master rigorous content has dominated public policy discussions and put a new spotlight on the idea of rigor. Political and business leaders are turning up the pressure on schools in response to weak U.S. performance on international tests, rising college completion rates in many countries, the digital revolution, increased economic competition and the deregulation of economies in India and China. (...)

Rigorous schools are touted as a potent weapon in the fight against industrial decline. Today, more than 40 percent of all manufacturing jobs require a postsecondary degree or certificate, and that percentage is rising. In addition to computer skills, entry-level machinists are expected to know algebra and geometry. Even an auto mechanic needs college-level skills to read a factory manual and analyze diagnostic data.

Ninety percent of jobs in the fastest-growing sectors of the economy will require a postsecondary education in the future. Demographers, economists, business leaders and education policy experts believe the U.S. is not producing enough well-qualified college graduates to fill those jobs. The summary report for a 2008 summit on academic rigor concluded that the United States is “a nation in the midst of an educational crisis that threatens to undermine our position in the world.” The price tag for that decline is huge. In April 2009, the management consultants McKinsey & Co. calculated that if U.S. student achievement had been comparable to that of Finland or South Korea in recent years, the size of the economy in 2008 would have been $1.3 trillion to $2.3 trillion greater.

The nonprofit world has embraced the push for greater rigor as well. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (which sponsored this primer) has spent $2 billion in recent years to raise college-ready high school graduation rates, in part by promoting greater classroom rigor. “Like many others, I have deep misgivings about the state of education in the United States,” former Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates told a congressional committee in 2008. “Too many of our students fail to graduate from high school with the basic skills they will need to succeed in the 21st-century economy, much less prepared for the rigors of college and career...Our record on high school math and science education is particularly troubling.”

States are responding to this pressure by beginning to require students to take algebra, geometry and laboratory science in order to graduate from high school. In 2009, five states said explicitly that those classes had to be rigorous — although they didn’t define the term. By 2015, policies in 17 states will call for rigor. The State Scholars Initiative, a program that started in Longview, Texas, in 1989, recommends that high school students take 16 year-long courses in English, math, social studies, science and foreign language. Students in 24 states who take and pass those courses are eligible for a federal scholarship. Advanced Placement classes, which once catered only to the most elite students, are now ubiquitous and the de facto college-prep curriculum in many urban high schools. Most states also now let high school students take community college classes for credit.

But saying a program or curriculum is rigorous does not make it so. The quality of these efforts varies widely. The “R” word has become a marketing tool for preschools, summer camps and even after-school programs, which now promise rigor as they once boasted of boosting kids’ self-esteem. Equestrian programs are described as rigorous and so are state academic standards and assessments. Four Alabama college students designed an independent study course in winter 2008 that involved eating barbecue in as many states as possible and writing about their meals. Asked by a reporter to respond to faculty skepticism about such student-designed courses, an accreditation agency official defended them as rigorous because students sign a contract to complete a learning plan.

The disconnect between rigor and results shows up starkly when high school students matriculate to college. High school graduates in the 2000’s have taken far more lab science, algebra, geometry and English classes than students did when the 1983 “Nation at Risk” report was issued. But the content taught in such classes often is watered down, despite state academic standards and testing programs. The ACT testing organization reported in 2008 that more than three-quarters of students who took and passed a core college-prep curriculum were nonetheless unprepared to do college-level work. Nearly half of ACT-tested 2005 high school graduates who earned a grade of A or B in high school Algebra II were not ready for college math, and more than half of those who earned a grade of A or B in high school physics were not ready for college science. Thirty percent of four-year college students and 60 percent of community college students require remedial math or English, estimates Michael Kirst, an emeritus Stanford University education and business
Lessons the becomes 'Let’s give more rigor with pain, rigid thinking, and harshness. “Too often, rigor becomes ‘Let’s give more homework,’ ” said Dick Flanary of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. “Lessons must be ‘rigorous’ if they make kids suffer.” Diane Ravitch, the education historian, associates the word rigor with “rigor mortis,” and fears the curriculum becomes narrow, rigid and deadly dull as teachers attempt to cover more topics. A former teacher, in response to President Obama’s remarks about raising the bar academically, wrote a letter to The New York Times urging him to stop talking about “achievement’ and ‘rigor,’ which have no connection to the inquisitiveness, determination, creative thinking and perseverance students need for genuine lifelong learning.”

In theory, one teacher wrote recently on an education blog, rigor means “developing students into not merely passive learners, but active thinkers and doers.” But in practice, the teacher wrote, “rigor has become a convenient buzzword for holding all students accountable for the same level of learning, even though students learn at different paces, have different abilities, often come from disengaged families, and high-level material is simply beyond their development level . . . Rigor, in my school district, has come to be a substitute for common sense and teaching expertise.” In the name of rigor for all, complained a physics teacher, his International Baccalaureate class now mixes calculus students and kids who barely passed basic algebra. (…)

WHAT IS RIGOR?
Academic rigor is determined not just by what is taught, but how it is taught, but how it is taught and how it is assessed, according to Barbara Blackburn, who teaches at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, and who helps teachers and school districts raise the level of rigor in their classrooms. A demanding curriculum isn’t so demanding if it’s taught in a way that students can’t learn it or if, on tests, students aren’t really expected to know it. So, journalists should ask about all three components of rigor — content, pedagogy and assessments.

A rigorous curriculum is “focused, coherent, and appropriately challenging,” said William Schmidt, a Michigan State professor who studies the educational practices of countries that surpass the United States on international tests. In order to achieve that goal, the Montgomery County, Md., school district analyzed the content of high school AP classes and then figured out what students would have to learn starting in preschool in order to do well in those classes. Now, said Superintendent Jerry D. Weast, his schools meet his definition of rigor by “giving students a curriculum that will prepare them to succeed in college or the world of work.”

But curriculum design is only part of what defines rigor. What actually happens in classrooms is hugely important, too. Carol Jago, author of With Rigor for All (Boynton/Cook 2000) and president-elect of the National Council of Teachers of English, said “more is more” in terms of the number of books students should be required to read. “In academically rigorous classrooms, students read at least one book every two to three weeks – ideally more.”

Journalists should also recognize that many educators equate rigor with pain, rigid thinking, and harshness. “Too often, rigor becomes ‘Let’s give more homework,’” said Dick Flanary of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. “Lessons must be ‘rigorous’ if they make kids suffer.” Diane Ravitch, the education historian, associates the word rigor with “rigor mortis,” and fears the curriculum becomes narrow, rigid and deadly dull as teachers attempt to cover more topics. A former teacher, in response to President Obama’s remarks about raising the bar academically, wrote a letter to The New York Times urging him to stop talking about “achievement’ and ‘rigor,’ which have no connection to the inquisitiveness, determination, creative thinking and perseverance students need for genuine lifelong learning.”

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THE DEBATE OVER 21ST-CENTURY SKILLS
(…) The idea behind the concept of 21st-century skills is that what students learn may not be as important as knowing how to solve new problems, using so-called “critical thinking skills” – another trendy phrase whose meaning is anything but self-evident. Reporters should question the meaning of all these terms. A leader in the skills movement is Tony Wagner, co-director of Harvard’s Change Leadership Group, who believes that students spend too much time learning facts they could look up online, and not enough time developing analytical skills. “My view,” Wagner has written, “is that we should describe the skills that students will be expected to master – rather than just the content they will memorize – in every discipline, for every grade level. In the 21st century, where information is constantly changing and readily available on any PC, competencies matter far more than content coverage.

At the other extreme is E.D. Hirsch, the author of the 1987 bestseller Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know. Hirsch is a leading proponent of the view that students actually need to learn more content. He writes that, “when members of the public hear words like ‘rigor’ or ‘standards,’ they think, ‘Aha, that means in fourth grade every kid will have to learn what feudalism is’ . . . But when you look at the ‘rigorous standards’ made by the states, you find the appearance of rigor: ‘Construct time lines with evenly spaced intervals for years, decades and centuries to show the order of significant events.’ (Ohio).” There’s no content, Hirsch complains.

This debate between knowledge and skills has raged for centuries. But research into learning seems to confirm that students learn best when they are taught content and basic processes at the same time they learn to think and solve problems. “Knowledge and thinking must be intimately
joined,” said University of Pittsburgh’s Lauren Resnick, a leading cognitive science expert.

The social research group MDRC defines academic rigor as “a demanding yet accessible curriculum that engenders critical-thinking skills as well as content knowledge.” Students should “raise questions, think, reason, solve problems and reflect,” said Beverly L. Hall of Atlanta, the 2009 National Superintendent of the Year. In addition to gaining knowledge about a subject, students “should be asked to comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize, evaluate — using that knowledge,” according to Education Trust, a Washington-based nonprofit devoted to closing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps.

THE TEACHER’S VIEW

Whatever the definition, making classrooms more intellectually rigorous is no small challenge. A 2005 evaluation of the Gates Foundation’s high school-related grants looked at whether teachers’ assignments in schools receiving grant money were becoming more rigorous. It found that English assignments were more rigorous than those in nearby schools but that math assignments were less so. The “quality of student work in all of the schools ... studied is alarmingly low,” the researchers wrote.

“People don’t know what it means,” said Barbara Blackburn. “The teachers I work with are being told they’re supposed to include rigor. It’s certainly the flavor of the month. But teachers all say everyone is telling me what to do but they can’t tell me how to do it.”

Blackburn published a book in 2008 called *Rigor Is NOT a Four-Letter Word* to help teachers get past their skepticism and learn how to make their lessons more rigorous. “There’s so much theory out there, but teachers are going to say, ‘Tell me how I can do this in the classroom tomorrow that is not going to cost a lot of money and is easy to do,’” Blackburn said.

No matter how demanding a state’s standards, nothing will change for students unless teachers change their lessons. To see if this is occurring, Blackburn suggests that journalists pay attention to what she does on her own classroom visits.

- What kinds of questions is the teacher asking? True or false? Just recalling facts? Or are students asked to recall something they already know and use it to solve a new problem?
- Are all the students engaged and thinking, or only those who answer a question?
- Are students given time to think through answers? If they don’t have the answer immediately, does the teacher move on to someone else?
- Are students talking and sharing information appropriately, or is there total silence? “If a classroom is silent for a long time, I start wondering,” she said.

In rigorous classrooms, Blackburn said, teachers create “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.” Journalists should be equally rigorous in their own reporting on this issue.