



3 steps to increase the rigor of your assessments

Ask the right questions to determine true learning

By Barbara R. Blackburn

Rigor is increasingly a concern in our schools. We continue to see evidence that our students in all grades are not working at a level that is challenging enough to prepare them for college and careers.

However, we often misunderstand the definition of rigor. Rigor requires creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so they can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels. The level of challenge in our assessments—which allows students to demonstrate learning at high levels—is crucial. To provide rigorous assignments for our students, we need to assess our level of rigor, revise tasks to raise the rigor and adjust.

Assess current level of rigor

The first step is to assess the current level of an assessment. Too often, teachers simply use their best judgement as to whether an assignment or task is rigorous. And most of our assessments are not written to require a rigorous demonstration of learning. It's important to use a set of specific criteria to assess rigor accurately. The sample criteria table incorporates Webb's Depth of Knowledge and other descriptors of rigor.

When I work with teachers, there

Sample criteria	
Less rigorous	Rigorous
<p>Are students ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... applying information and/or interpreting standard information from a table, figure or graphic? ... interpreting, predicting or inferring? ... identifying main ideas or central themes? ... creating diagrams to explain concepts? ... determining cause and effect or specifying fact and opinion? ... explaining an answer using basic information or explaining the steps followed? ... locating information to support explicit central ideas? 	<p>Are students ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... demonstrating higher-order thinking? ... recognizing and explaining misconceptions? ... determining credibility, biases and/or prejudices, and justifying their conclusions? ... going beyond the text information, while demonstrating they understand the text? ... defending their work or justifying answers or solutions? ... identifying questions and designing investigations for a scientific problem?

are particular descriptors in the table that are less rigorous, but that teachers consider rigorous. For example, teachers commonly consider application, interpretation and inference to be rigorous. Although they are more rigorous than basic recall, they are simply not at a truly rigorous level.

Another common classroom strategy is for students to create a diagram to explain what they have learned. Although an effective part of building

understanding, it should be exactly that: a step that builds toward rigorous learning.

Let's determine the rigor of a sample question: "What is the theme of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*? Make sure to use details from the text to support this choice."

In this case, students are identifying a central theme and explaining an answer using basic information. Therefore, it is not a rigorous question. ►

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Revise to raise the rigor

Our next step is to revise the question to incorporate the criteria of rigor: “*Goldilocks and the Three Bears* was written nearly 200 years ago. Justify whether this theme applies today. Provide an example from modern life to validate your answer.”

Notice the differences. Students must demonstrate they understand the text, and move beyond the story to incorporate information and examples from real life in a different time period.

As this example shows, simply revising and building on the existing assignment is a good way to increase rigor.

Implement and adjust

The third step is to implement the assessment or task. For students to be successful, the teacher needs to step back and plan instruction so their students are prepared for the assessment. For example, in a math class, it is more rigorous for students to identify and explain misconceptions. If we only solve equations or word problems, students are not necessarily equipped to work with misconceptions.

It is helpful to use a pattern assessment to determine any adjustments. Ask students to complete a quick self-reflection at the end of the assignment:

1. I know that I did well on this assignment.
2. I did my best and I hope I did a good job.
3. I think I did well, but I’m not sure I understood everything I needed to do.
4. I understood the question, but I don’t think I did my best.
5. I didn’t understand the question.

When teachers complete a pattern analysis on student responses, they may determine that the task is acceptable (based on the first two responses), that students may not have mastered the content or were not prepared appropriately (based on responses 3 and 4), or that prompts were unclear (response

Reinforcing rigor	
Less rigorous assignment	More rigorous assignment
<p>Math: Solve the equation. (all grade levels)</p>	<p>Given three examples of equations that are solved, and identify the one that is incorrect, solve it correctly, and explain why it was not correct.</p>
<p>Art: Choose a partner. Analyze their art work and explain why you like it, or dislike it. (upper elementary, middle school and high school)</p>	<p>Students move through an art gallery of work created by their classmates. Each student chooses one piece of art and writes a short critique. The critique must include the student’s opinion of the artwork, support of the opinion based on the lesson taught by the teacher and the student’s own experiences, and offer recommendations for improvement.</p>
<p>Social studies: Compare and describe the perspectives of Josef Stalin, Harry S. Truman, Sir Winston Churchill and Eleanor Roosevelt regarding World War II. (high school)</p>	<p>Imagine a dinner party with esteemed guests such as Stalin, Truman, Churchill and Eleanor Roosevelt. Using your knowledge of the Yalta, Potsdam and Tehran conferences in the 1940s, write a script in which these historical figures converse about their different views of what the world would look like after World War II.</p>

5). Based on the analysis, teachers can revise this assessment, and more effectively prepare future tasks.

Increasing the rigor of tasks, assignments and assessments is a key aspect of increasing the overall rigor of classroom instruction. By assessing the level of rigor, revising the assignment to incorporate more rigorous work, and adjust-

ing the tasks, students will demonstrate understanding at a higher level. **DA**

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