

RIGOR PART 2

EXTRACTS FROM BLACKBURN CHAPTER 3:

RAISE THE LEVEL OF CONTENT

The first way to enhance rigor in your classroom is to raise the level of content you teach. Many students perceive lower level classes as simply “teaching nothing over and over again”. A truly rigorous classroom challenges students with new content.

There are 5 strategies that can help you raise the level of content in your class:

- Valuing depth
- Increasing text difficulty
- Creating connections
- Reviewing, not repeating
- Raising level of student ownership

VALUING DEPTH

In our culture, we are often bombarded with the message that more is better. We can find ourselves so focused on covering material that we only skim the surface; therefore, our students often have lots of information in their short-term memory rather than truly learning and applying it in the future.

I worked with a school district that encouraged summer reading. Students read one book over the summer and then gave a brief summary of the book during the first week of school. As you might imagine, the quality of the presentations varied tremendously. Some students were creative and provided great detail about their books, whilst others stated surface material that was available from the Internet.

As an alternative, one teacher required her students to create book webs. In addition to the presentations, each student drew a web connecting their book to their classmates’ books. It was their responsibility to talk to each other and discover ways the books were related. In addition to shifting responsibility for learning to the students, the structure of the assignment forced students to move beyond the basic summary information to look for deeper connections among the various books.

Tonya Woodell points out that rigor is applicable in all subjects. “As a beginning band teacher, the musical standards would allow all my students to play all grade 1 pieces. The grading scale of music is set from 1 to 6. Grade 6 is usually played by very good high school bands and colleges. Although I could allow my students to play only grade 1 music, I expected them to be able to play grade 2 and 3 pieces. And they are able to do it!

In choir, I could allow them to simply sing “crowd pleasing” songs. However, I expected my students to sing at least one foreign language piece a semester. I also expect that they sing in three-part harmony when unison or two-part would be acceptable.”

Another way to value depth is through your vocabulary instruction. My students were often overwhelmed with content-specific vocabulary. The traditional model of vocabulary instruction promotes memorization but doesn’t encourage a true understanding of concepts. The functional concept of depth is important here. Choose your words carefully.

So, rather than expecting students to learn 10-20 words each week, take time to teach critical concepts. Robert Marzano states that of the wealth of vocabulary words embedded for each subject, some are critically important, some are useful but not critical, and others are interesting but not very useful. That is a helpful way to consider our vocabulary. Prioritize the terms and/or concepts that are critical for students to understand your content.

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Critically Important	Useful but nor Critical	Interesting but Not Very Helpful

The same is true with curriculum standards. You are likely to have a wide range of standards you are expected to teach. Take your curriculum outcomes and turn them into questions. What one question would you want each student to answer if they learned what they needed from your lesson? In other words, if you move past the educational language and extra information, what is the core thing your students should be able to know or do. What is your focus question?

Increasing Text Difficulty

One of the major areas for increasing the difficulty level of content is through the text used during teaching. Often we use books or other materials that are not challenging for students. It seems there are two extremes: Some students only read books that are too easy for them; others struggle with text that is too difficult. It's important for students to read a book or article they can read quickly and easily; those opportunities build self-confidence, provide enjoyable experiences, and may increase student motivation. But if that's all students read, they never learn how to deal with challenging materials.

To increase rigor related to text selection, it is valuable first to simply look at whether or not your students are reading texts that challenge them. You're looking for a balance: Material should be difficult enough that students are learning something new, but not so hard they give up.

As we look at how to incorporate this in your class, let me caution you. Looking at a text should never be a limiting factor for your students. Students always need the opportunity to read texts of their choice. And there are some books that have a lower level on a readability scale, but the content is more difficult, perhaps due to the concepts described or the use of figurative language. I am saying that all students need to select opportunities to read material that is appropriately rigorous. Remember, we are talking about depth, not length and we don't want students to feel like they are being punished.

There are 5 considerations for Text Selection

1. Is the content of the text pertinent to my standards or objectives?
2. Is the content of the text appropriate to the purpose of the assignment (independent reading, research, partner reading etc)?
3. Is the content of the text appropriate to the age or developmental level of my students?
4. Is the content of the text appropriately challenging for growth (not too hard, yet not too easy)?
5. Is this the only opportunity my students will be given to read, or are they allowed choices at other times?

An example of the way I selected texts for rigor is in the teaching of a lesson on tsunamis. First, I might use the textbook section with the entire class. Next, students read a variety of follow-up articles on tsunamis based on their reading level. I could do this individually, but I could also place students in small groups based on their reading levels. Students then "teach" their articles to the rest of the class. Your culminating whole group discussion on tsunamis will be richer based on the expanded lesson.

Another way is to customise assignments based on students' reading levels is through limited choice. Rather than allowing students to have total choice on their selection, require students to choose a book within their reading range. They can still have choice, but one that is more rigorous.

A third way to increase text difficulty is to pair texts. A common activity in classrooms is to read a fiction story or novel. To increase the rigor of that activity, add a follow-up activity, comparing a fictional text to nonfiction information. For example, after reading the fictional book, "The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963" by Christopher Paul Curtis, students read nonfiction Wikipedia articles and/or magazine articles to compare the story to Birmingham, Alabama during the Civil Rights period. You could add another step by reading current newspaper and magazine articles to compare it to Birmingham today, detailing the changes that have (or have not) occurred.

Or, after reading the classic novel, "The Sea Wolf" by Jack London, students can read articles about schooners and the sealing industry. Instead of simply reading and discussing the story, students are required to use research skills, cite sources, and compare and contrast information from a variety of sources. The new activity requires all students to think at higher levels.

Reviewing Not Repeating

On one of my school, evaluation visits, a young girl stopped me in the hall. After I explained my purpose she asked if I could tell her teachers something. I agreed, and she said, "Do you think you could tell them that they teach a lot of things we already know? We did most of this last year." Her point was that we spend too much time reviewing content that students don't understand. However, if a student doesn't understand what a fraction is by the time they are in high school, completing pages of practice problems most likely won't help.

I struggled with that too. I had students who simply didn't understand basic concepts, so I tried to teach them again. My students still didn't learn. Repeating the same information over and over doesn't work. A more effective strategy is shifting to a more difficult authentic purpose for using basic knowledge and then answering questions to help students complete the assignment. Sometimes, the more rigorous and authentic activity is easier for students, simply because it makes greater sense to them.

For example, I told my students they had create a classified ad to sell a product of their choice, such as a video game. I gave them envelopes with free words, but if they needed different words they had to buy them with credits that were included. The word cards contained adjectives, adverbs – everything but nouns. One group tried to write using only free words, and quickly discovered that it didn't work. At some time you have to tell what you are selling! It was a great lesson on the purpose of nouns that was much more effective than a standard review.

Another example comes when it was evident that my students didn't know how to compare and contrast information. I created a folder game. Each group was given a folder with a picture from a magazine posted on the front. The actual article was glued inside. Students were directed to look at the picture without opening the folder. Then, students write as many words as possible about the picture, each one on a small post-it note. Next students talked to each other using all their words to write sentences about the picture. If you wanted to stop at a basic activity, students could individually write a descriptive paragraph about the picture. For students who don't know how to begin, they have the group sentences to start them off.

However, this activity is more rigorous if we move to the next step. Students open the folder and read the accompanying article. By comparing their sentences with the actual article, students must use analytical skills. Students use an assessment scale to determine how well their work measures up and can revise their sentences if needed. Sharing their responses incorporates elements of comparison and contrast, and typically leads to a rich discussion of how a picture doesn't always tell the full story.

At times the best help comes from another student rather than the teacher. That is why I incorporate group activities throughout my instruction.

Conclusion

Raising the level of content in your classroom does not mean throwing away the curriculum standards or frequently used texts. When we focus on depth, vary our text offerings, create interdisciplinary lessons and projects, and ensure our content is challenging, our students will rise to meet our expectations.

