

# A New Definition of Rigor

MAY 7, 2015

Brian Sztabnik

You would think that it would be more prevalent than it is. But it appears only four times in the Common Core State Standards. Why has a word that is mentioned so little caused such dread, anxiety, and confusion among teachers?

I'm talking about **rigor**.

## ***When We Say Rigor, What Do We Mean?***

Comb through all 66 pages of the ELA standards, and you will find it hiding amid larger conversations about analyzing author's choice, evaluating sources, and writing arguments. Look in the math standards, and you will not find it at all.

Yet rigor is all the buzz:

- "Our lesson must be more rigorous."
- "We must increase the rigor of our assessments."
- "Does this book possess the necessary rigor for that grade level?"

These are all things that I have heard at conferences, in faculty meetings, and through conversations with colleagues. It is a term used often, but I am still not sure if it has been clearly defined.

Some mistakenly assume that rigor means making things more difficult. Others believe it means piling on the work. A few say that they can't define rigor, but they know it when they see it.

If teachers are to achieve rigor, we must aspire to something more specific. Too bad the dictionary is of little help:

### ***Rigor***

1. (a) *Harsh inflexibility in opinion, temper, or judgment: severity.* (b) *The quality of being unyielding or inflexible.* (c) *An act or instance of strictness, severity, or cruelty.*
2. *A tremor caused by a chill.*
3. *A condition that makes life difficult, challenging, or uncomfortable.*
4. *Strict precision or exactness.*

It is this understanding that has led to the push-down and pile-on syndrome. College-level books are now being taught in high schools. Middle school students are tackling works and ideas once assigned to high school students. Now, 20 minutes of homework for elementary kids has become two hours of cruelty.

Rigor is not defined by the text -- **it comes from what students do**. It is not standard across a curriculum -- it is individual to each student's needs. **It is not quantified by how much gets crammed into a school day -- it is measured in depth of understanding.**

**Rigor is a result, not a cause.**

## ***Rigor and David Foster Wallace***

For proof, we need look no further than the great 20th-century novelist, David Foster Wallace. In 1994, he taught English 102 (Literary Analysis: Prose Fiction) at Illinois State University. His syllabus does not feature the heavyweights of literature that are recommended by the Common Core. No *Hamlet*. No *Crime and Punishment*. No *Canterbury Tales*.

Instead, his required texts were Mary Higgins Clark's *Where Are the Children?*, Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs*, Stephen King's *Carrie*, and Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, among others. Interesting that a writer known for being a little pretentious might have known a thing or two about rigor. In the syllabus, Foster-Wallace writes:

*Don't let any lightweightish-looking qualities of the texts delude you into thinking this will be a blow-off-type class. These "popular" texts will end up being harder than more conventionally "literary" works to unpack and read critically.*

There it is. Rigor is the result of work that challenges students' thinking in new and interesting ways. It occurs when they are encouraged toward a sophisticated understanding of fundamental ideas and are driven by curiosity to discover what they don't know.

Foster-Wallace makes a point in his syllabus to say that his course will not be what many would expect: "heavy-duty lit-crit or Literary Theory." Instead, he has the broader and more practical aim to develop students that can. . .

*. . . read fiction more deeply, to come up with more interesting insights on how pieces of fiction work, to have informed intelligent reasons for liking or disliking a piece of fiction, and to write -- clearly, persuasively, and above all interestingly -- about stuff you've read.*

Let us aspire to something greater than making difficult work for our students. Let's take them to that intersection of encouragement and engagement, where they confront ideas and problems that are meaningful. Let's stretch their thinking. Let's unleash their sophistication. And let's foster a love of deep knowledge.

Sztabnik, B. (2015, May 7). A New Definition of Rigor. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/a-new-definition-of-rigor-brian-sztabnik> on Nov. 7, 2017.