

## How do you identify rigor in the classroom?

Authors: Rick Jenkins, Jeff Goldhorn, Mike Webb

The 2011-2012 school year will be remembered as “the STAAR year,” the year that the era of the “T-Tests” (TABS, TEAMS, TAAS, TAKS) came to an end and made way for a new era in Texas public school high-stakes testing and accountability – The “S-Test,” or STAAR – the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness. This transition to STAAR has created a lot of angst and anxiety. There has been endless conversation focused on the “R-word” – RIGOR. People are growing tired of this conversation because it is an abstract idea to many. As a result, *rigor* is becoming a bad word to some. Teachers, principals, instructional coaches, assistant superintendents and superintendents all want to know the answer to the *Rigor* question – *How do you identify rigor in the classroom?*

The first step in this process is defining the word in a way that connects with educators at all levels. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2011) rigor is: 1. strictness, severity, or harshness; 2. the full or extreme severity of laws, rules, etc.; 4. a severe or harsh act, circumstance, etc.; or 5. scrupulous or inflexible accuracy or adherence: the logical rigor of mathematics. These definitions are not likely to inspire us as educators.

Let’s try another... Richard W. Strong authored a popular definition of rigor when he said that “Rigor is the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging” (Strong, 2001). This definition only describes rigor as a curriculum goal. A more pressing need for education in Texas today is to define rigor as it applies to classroom teaching. Such a definition must give guidance to teachers looking to increase the level of rigor in their classrooms and to administrators trying to evaluate and promote rigor across their campus.

The fact of the matter is that teaching with rigor is hard to define. In her book, *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word*, Barbara Blackburn (2008) states that “Rigor is creating 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.” This definition is useful, but it lacks guidance and detail towards implementation. A more useful definition might be “To teach with rigor is to teach *accurately* and *completely*.” This definition can provide guidance to both teacher and administrator.

In order to teach accurately, a teacher must have knowledge of both content and pedagogy. Teachers must teach their content without error and have content knowledge that is deeper than that which they teach. Teaching accurately also implies a use of pedagogy that ensures students learn content for understanding. Content knowledge without pedagogy leads to superficial and short-term learning. Pedagogy without content knowledge can result in student misconceptions and misunderstandings.

To teach completely, teaching must be at the correct depth and complexity as determined by standards, which, in the case of Texas, are the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Teachers must ensure that they address each student expectation in their content in-depth. The specificity implied by a student expectation can be difficult to determine, but must be investigated to ensure student readiness for future learning. Teaching to the implied complexity is critical to student success on increasingly “rigorous” state assessments.

Dr. Robert Talbert, professor of mathematics at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, has an interesting take on rigor (2009). “For me, ‘rigor’ in the context of intellectual work refers to thoroughness, carefulness, and right understanding of the material being learned. Rigor is to academic work what careful practice and nuanced performance is to musical performance, and what intense and committed play is to athletic performance. When we talk about a ‘rigorous course’ in something, it’s a course that examines details, insists on diligent and scrupulous study and performance, and doesn’t settle for a mild or informal contact with the key ideas.”

*How do you identify rigor in the classroom?* Through observation, evaluation, and conversation, you determine to what level individuals are teaching accurately and completely. Rigor is evidenced through the observation of a number of essential components of rigor: content acquisition, critical thinking, relevance, integration, application of concepts, long term retention, and student ownership of the learning. It is through this holistic view and continued dialogue that teachers and administrators can collaboratively define rigor in each unique classroom.