R I G O R
unveiled

A Video-Enhanced Flipbook to Promote Teacher Expertise in Relationship Building, Instruction, Goals, Organization, and Relevance

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Introduction

Although the term *rigor* is attached to many dimensions of teaching and learning, educators often struggle with how to define it in observable and actionable ways. Many will offer that they "know it when they see it," yet have trouble explaining it in ways that shed light on the path to improved rigor in classrooms. We've witnessed spurious claims of rigorous teaching: **rubrics** with words like "exceeds expectations," homework assignments that require hours of student time outside of school, and classrooms that assign "hard books." At its worst, we have unfortunately heard a few teachers brag that a high failure rate in their class equates to evidence of their "rigorous teaching." Let's start by dismantling these misconceptions.

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Table 1   Misconceptions About Rigor

#	Misconceptions About Rigor
1	"*Exceeds Expectations" grading scales equate to rigor.* If we know what the goal is, and the student hits the target, how do we define what is above and beyond? Increasing the difficulty or reducing the likelihood of accuracy does not equate to the level of complexity. In Olympic archery, the target is a 12-centimeter bullseye struck from 70 meters away. That's the goal. Changing the distance or the size of the target changes the goal itself. And making the goal more difficult to attain risks decoupling the learning goal from the standard (Guskey et al., 2024).
2	*Hours of homework equate to rigor*. The ability to self-direct learning and study is of value, to be sure, especially for middle and high school students. However, time-measured homework doesn't correlate to rigor. Several high-achieving countries, as measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have vastly different time expectations for homework. Highly rated countries like Finland average less than three hours per week; the United States averages six hours per week; China averages nearly 13 hours per week. It's not time that predicts the relative rigor—it is how the time is spent.
3	*Hard books equate to rigor.* Difficulty and complexity are two different constructs. Difficulty is a measure of effort; complexity is a measure of thinking actions (Webb, 1997). The children's book *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964) is quite complex in a high school English unit about feminist theory in literature yet has a readability level associated with second grade. Complexity provides a far better picture of what is rigorous curriculum, not difficulty.
4	*Student failure is evidence of rigor.* Nope. Not even close. However, high failure rates might be good evidence of unresponsive teaching.

What Do We Mean by Rigor?

Rigor in teaching and learning means

- challenging students with high expectations;
- engaging them in deep and meaningful learning experiences; and
- supporting them to achieve their full potential.

There's a deep research base related to each of these characteristics.

High-expectations teaching. Rigor involves setting high standards for all students. The high expectations held by teachers for students include not only mastering basic skills but also developing their higher-order thinking skills like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Opportunities to learn are evidenced in material ways. It isn't sufficient to say we have high expectations; instead, they are telegraphed through the many actions we take, the decisions we make, and the language we use. Rubie-Davies's (2014) seminal research on high-expectations teaching clearly outlines the behaviors of these teachers. The result? Students in high-expectations classrooms make notable achievement gains.

Learning at deep and transfer levels. Rigor goes beyond memorization and rote learning. Rigor means that learning extends beyond the surface, or foundational, level. **Surface learning** is important, but it's not sufficient to claim that the experiences are rigorous (Fisher et al., 2016). Rigor requires students to understand concepts deeply and make connections between ideas (deep learning). Deep learning indicates that knowledge has been consolidated. Transfer learning requires students to apply knowledge in new and/or problem-solving situations (Perkins & Salomon, 2012). Learning at the deep and transfer levels of learning is long-lasting.

Cognitively challenging experiences aligned to content standards. Rigorous learning includes tasks that are challenging and thought-provoking. Crucially, they are in alignment with the standards that delineate courses and grade levels. The **Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework** outlines four dimensions of cognitive challenge, designed for use by educators and test developers to match tasks with standards (Webb, 2002).

> **Robyn Jackson (2024) asserts that high expectations done right leave people feeling inspired and empowered.**
> **High expectations done wrong just leave people feeling pressured and paralyzed.**

Overall, the progression of task complexity addressed these questions (Francis, 2017):

- **DOK-1:** Recall and reproduce data, definitions, details, facts, information, and procedures (knowledge acquisition).
- **DOK-2:** Use academic concepts and cognitive skills to answer questions, address problems, accomplish tasks, and analyze texts and topics (knowledge application).
- **DOK-3:** Think strategically and reasonably about how and why concepts, ideas, operations, and procedures can be used to attain and explain answers, conclusions, decisions, outcomes, reasons, and results (knowledge analysis).
- **DOK-4:** Think extensively about what else can be done, how else learning can be used, and how the student could personally use what they have learned in different academic and real-world contexts (knowledge augmentation).

Taken together, students should experience a range of tasks that move them from knowledge building to thinking critically, solving problems creatively, and engaging in sustained inquiry.

Active engagement. Rigor involves students actively driving their learning (Fisher et al., 2024). Students should be asking questions, discussing ideas with peers, and reflecting on their learning. This active engagement helps deepen their understanding and keeps

them motivated. Intentional efforts by educators to foster emotional and cognitive engagement as part of a cohesive educational program through goal setting, achievement orientation, and mindsets has proven effective (Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016).

Support and **scaffolding**. To ensure all students can meet high expectations, rigorous teaching includes providing the necessary support and scaffolding. This means breaking down complex tasks into manageable parts, offering guidance, and providing feedback that helps students improve their learning. The true power in scaffolding is the ability to optimize challenge such that students are prompted to extend what they know in new ways.

Assessment for learning. Rigorous teaching uses assessments not just to measure learning but to inform instruction and provide feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Assessments are used formatively such that teachers understand where students are struggling and adjust their teaching to meet students' needs. Assessments are also used summatively to gauge proficiency.

Relevance *and world connections.* Rigor is also about making learning relevant to students' lives and the world around them. When students see the connection between what they are learning and their own experiences or future goals, they are more motivated to engage deeply with the material. Relevance includes personal association, personal usefulness, and personal identification (Priniski et al., 2018).

We believe that rigor in action is multidimensional. Investment in one of the previously listed aspects of rigor while neglecting another will have a detrimental effect on any attempt to create and maintain a rigorous learning environment. Having said that, as school leaders and educators we understand the very real and practical challenges of attending to each of these factors simultaneously. We developed this video-enhanced tool to be used flexibly, yet purposefully, by individual teachers, teacher teams, and school leaders as they

collaborate on elevating learning in their classrooms and schools. The conversations resulting from the focus on each aspect are intended to foster professional collaboration and collective teacher efficacy (CTE), the shared belief among a group of educators that through their combined efforts they can positively influence student outcomes and achieve significant educational goals. Among the more than 300 influences on student achievement, CTE has the highest potential of all for accelerating student learning (Hattie, 2023). Because CTE is the ultimate outcome, this tool should not be used as a means for evaluating teachers, principals, or schools.

The RIGOR Walk

The core of this flipbook is driven by the *RIGOR Walk* (Fisher et al., 2024), a process for centering reflection, collaboration, and continuous improvement (see Figure 1). A RIGOR Walk is a structured process in which educators, including teachers, teams, and administrators, observe classroom instruction to gather insights into teaching practices and student learning. The purpose of a RIGOR Walk is to foster professional learning through collaborative observation and reflection. During these walks, observers focus on one of five specific components, designed to capture the evidence-based research on characteristics of rigor in instruction, curriculum, and **classroom climate**.

Table 2   RIGOR Components

R	Relationships
I	Instruction
G	Goals
O	Organization
R	Relevance

Each component features five illuminative indicators to further define its aspects. Your team may identify additional indicators for a given dimension. *The goal is not to evaluate individual teachers but to identify effective practices*, share successes, and discuss areas for growth. This process contributes to a school culture of continuous learning and collective responsibility for student achievement.

Figure 1   RIGOR Walk

Relationships	Instruction	Goals	Organization	Relevance
Students' names are used in positive and productive ways.	Evidence of student learning is used to inform instruction.	Learning goals are aligned with grade-level expectations.	The physical environment is accessible for all students.	The learning process incorporates meaningful tasks that embed learning inside and outside the classroom.
Proximity is used to foster connections with students and ensure their learning.	Students interact with peers in meaningful discussions using academic language to complete tasks.	The level of knowledge expected of the learning goal aligns with the standard.	The physical environment is rich and recent.	Students describe the value of what they are learning and how they are learning it.
Students' interactions with peers are respectful and productive.	Scaffolds are strategically used to support learning, invite productive struggle, and ensure productive success.	Students can describe or demonstrate what successful learning looks like.	Grouping patterns are used flexibly to promote learning.	Students' lived experiences, as well as those from backgrounds different from their own, are incorporated into learning experiences, making lessons culturally relevant and inclusive.
Academic risk-taking is encouraged and celebrated.	Lessons include input based on student learning needs.	Students regularly self-assess their learning and revise their actions based on the results.	Student behavior is proactively managed, monitored, and addressed through productive procedures and interventions.	Artifacts and materials reflect the unique identities and interests of students.
Student ideas are valued and explored as bridges to learning.	Students practice and apply what they have learned to familiar and new situations.	Students seek feedback, are provided with actionable ideas, and follow through with next steps.	The flow and pace of the lesson is aligned with the learning goals.	Learning activates students' prior knowledge and experiences and fosters connections to new or more complex content.

This guide was developed for teachers and teams to use as they work to improve the learning outcomes for students. As such, we hope that educators consider each of these factors and identify their strengths. And we hope they focus on areas in which change can be made to ensure rigor. Importantly, simply making things hard for students does not mean that it's a rigorous learning environment. Instead, intentional teacher actions with support for students to accomplish greatness results in rigor.

We hope that team members will visit each other's classrooms and provide peer support for increasing rigor. A suggested protocol you can use or adapt is the *capacity-building RIGOR Walk* (Fisher et al., 2019). You will find a protocol for the RIGOR Walk on page 141 at the back of this flipbook. These walks can be used both within and across professional learning community teams. The purpose of a capacity-building RIGOR Walk is to accurately gauge current capacities to make decisions about future efforts. Therefore, RIGOR Walks are scheduled in advance with volunteer teachers. These volunteer teachers open their classrooms for short, scheduled observations (seven minutes) with a predetermined area of focus that is known by the volunteer teachers themselves. There is no point in "catching" people unaware. This undermines the entire point, which is to ascertain the current capacity of a school regarding a specific dimension of the RIGOR framework.

A person designated by the team hosts the capacity-building RIGOR Walk (e.g., instructional coach, classroom teacher, school leader). Observers are divided into three teams (A, B, and C) and have a specific task to conduct in each classroom: *What is the teacher saying and doing? What are students saying and doing? How does the environment support the learning?* The observers debrief after three classroom visits, and the discussion is confined to patterns gleaned; it is not about individual classrooms or teachers. The composition of the team rotates so that observers have the experience of collecting data across all three sources (teacher, students, and environment.) A team debrief of the experience is conducted at the end to draw conclusions about implementation and next steps.

How to Use the RIGOR Unveiled Flipbook

We have packaged this work as a unique tool to be used by individual teachers, teams, instructional coaches, and school leaders to stimulate deep discussion and action. The flipbook can stand in the center of a table as an interactive, visual way for teams to engage in pre- and postvisit debriefings of each other's classrooms. The five components of the RIGOR Walk are separated by tabs, with each of the five indicators of the component given two pages for all to see and consult.

Figure 2 How to Use the Flipbook, Page 1

A. The first page is intended for the previsit and provides an overview of the indicator (*What It Is, Where It Came From*, and *Why It Matters*).

B. The page features a short video *Spotlight* discussion from one of the authors to provide further explanation and elaboration. These can be used in advance of the team meeting or during the meeting when further clarification is needed.

C. Teams can use the *Spot It Happening* feature to calibrate their observations during the RIGOR Walk.

Relationship 1. Students' names are used in positive and productive ways.

(A)

What It Is

Students' names are an important part of their **identity**. Students expect their teachers to know their names and correctly pronounce them. Unfortunately, students often report that their teachers do not know their names. **Positive, growth-producing relationships** begin when we know each other's names and use them in positive, productive ways. Students should not hear their names only as a correction when they have done something wrong. Instead, they should hear their names when they enter the classroom and regularly during instruction.

(B) qrs.ly/6xg1oj2

(A)

Where It Came From

Knowing and using student names is one aspect of an inclusive approach to teaching. Greeting students at the door is one way that teachers can use student names. In addition to fostering a sense of **belonging**, greeting students at the door increased **engagement** by 20 percentage points and decreased problematic behavior by 9 percentage points (Cook et al., 2018). In addition, students need to hear their names throughout the lesson to as invitations into discussions, when receiving **feedback**, and in interactions with the teacher (O'Brien et al., 2014).

(A)

Why It Matters

Knowing and using students' names is crucial in building a positive **classroom climate**. It fosters a sense of belonging and respect, making students feel valued and recognized as individuals. This simple act can significantly enhance student engagement, participation, and overall classroom dynamics, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive learning atmosphere.

Guiding Question: Is the positive use of student names and greetings a habit among adults beyond the first week of the school year or semester? **(C)**

Spot It Happening

❑ Observe the start of classes. Do teachers greet students by name as they enter? Do teachers greet students if they arrive late?

❑ Note the use students' names during the lesson. Are they pronounced correctly? Which names are said more often? Are there students whose names are never used?

❑ Ask students if they believe that their teacher knows their names.

❑ Are names used for correction of problematic behavior? If so, are those students' names also used in productive, positive ways?

❑ Are student names displayed in the classroom? If so, where and how?

Figure 3 How to Use the Flipbook, Page 2

The second page is for the debriefing done during the postvisit.

D. The first column provides a **self-reflection** tool to further calibrate the observations.

E. Use the next column to summarize evidence.

F. Finally, the Next Steps feature offers the opportunity to identify future actions.

Relationship 1. Students' names are used in positive and productive ways.

My Rating		My Evidence	My Next Steps
4	All students are greeted by name upon arrival and most of their names are used throughout the lesson. The reactions of students when they hear their names suggests the teacher has a strong relationship with students.		
3	All students are greeted by name upon arrival. Many students hear their names in positive ways throughout the lesson. Students generally report that the teacher knows their names.		
2	Students are greeted at the beginning of class, but not by name. A small group of students have their names used during the lesson.		
1	Students are not greeted when they arrive. Student names are not used during the lesson. Names are used to address problematic behavior.		

The flipbook should also be used by every individual on the RIGOR Walk to further right-size the observation process through expert noticing. A marked difference between novice noticers and expert noticers is the ability to sift information in fast-paced environments to notice what is relevant and significant, while screening out extraneous information (Ericsson & Pool, 2016). As one example, an expert in the field of architecture is likely to notice the relevant technical information related to a house's structure and question whether the deck railing is safe; the novice touring the same house might overlook that detail entirely while being enamored with the deck furniture. The *Spot It Happening* feature is intended to refocus team members during their observations to foster expert noticing while screening out what is not relevant to the observation. And if you don't like to write in your flipbook, you can use sticky notes to record evidence.

There is one other feature of the flipbook that can support your team's expertise. A Video Glossary of Terms is provided at a separate tab for you to use as needed. Each video features an instructional coach explaining the bolded technical terminology used throughout.

If you or team members aren't familiar with the nuances of **Academic Risk-Taking** (ART) or **success criteria**, for instance, they are by your side to furnish a brief explanation and an example or two from classrooms.

Continuous investment in our teaching practice is not just a professional responsibility but a deeply rewarding journey that enriches our lives and the lives of our students. As educators, we have the profound privilege of shaping young minds and fostering a love of learning. By committing to continuous improvement, we embrace the opportunity to refine our skills, explore new strategies, and reflect on our experiences. This ongoing growth not only enhances our effectiveness in the classroom but also reignites our passion for teaching. Together, let's celebrate the victories, learn from challenges, and support each other in this shared mission. The joy and fulfillment we derive from seeing young people thrive and succeed are the greatest moral rewards we can achieve. Let's embark on this path with enthusiasm and a shared commitment to strengthening our own practices while supporting each other in growth-producing ways.