Truth be told, “Academic Rigor” doesn’t have all that many supporters in academia. At best the concept fosters mixed feelings, especially in younger faculty; at worst, outright avoidance. Of course “rigor” as a concept gets lip service in catalogs and course descriptions, but as an applied value it’s hard to come by, at least from what I’ve observed. Why is this?

First, “rigor” (and its cousins “strictness, severity, and austerity”) sounds old-fashioned and formal, and we live in modern, informal times. Men rarely wear full-dress suits, ties, and hats (other than baseball) except at the most solemn occasions such as large weddings, state funerals and memorial services, and “black tie” events such as fund-raising balls. All other occasions, from travel to teaching to dinners at up-scale restaurants, require little more than cleanliness and shoes. I’ve seen men and women in jeans and T-shirts on vacation sit down to linen tablecloths and serious silverware in high-end restaurants with no misgivings.

Second, anyone who harbors a secret fear that they don’t know what they’re talking about fears rigor. Give them a break, give them a hint, give them multiple choice tests and they’re fine. Make them find answers on their own, ask them to produce without notes, and they cringe. They feel unprepared, even humiliated by having to think on the spot. The most feared member of any Master’s or Doctoral dissertation is the (usually older, long-established) professor known for rigorous application of high standards.

Third, faculty feel consistent pressure to be liked, and that means letting students slide by with multiple excuses, finding extra credit projects for missed assignments, allowing them to miss many classes with no penalty, dropping assignments if they complain about too much work and lowering the number and difficulty of reading assignments. All of these contribute to a professor’s reputation for being difficult, possibly leading to low student scores on evaluations, thereby leading to questions about merit pay, promotions,
even tenure, for untenured faculty. This assertion, though difficulty to prove, comes up often in discussions of “rigor” in university teaching.

Finally, and most importantly, “rigor” seems like another term for inflexible, or unyielding, and as such quickly becomes outmoded and out of touch. Of course, there’s the commonly associated term mortis, meaning “rigor mortis,” the rigidity of organs or tissue “that prevents response to stimuli” also known as death. No one wants to be associated with that. And it’s true that culture and technology change so quickly that simply keeping up with daily communications requires enormously complex electronic machinery that changes radically every few years. Besides, standards no longer exist in the subject itself but between the subject and the eye of the beholder. All meaning is co-created, as we all mostly agree. We live in a postmodern age, after all.

Yet none of these common objections strikes me as substantial; rather, they’re excuses to avoid what we all know needs to be done, namely, learning and teaching a subject so well that it’s more than just a passing memory dump. Some studies have shown that when students leave most classes, and even when they receive the highest grade in a class, they don’t retain much. As Lee Shulman has pointed out, three words characterize far too many students’ learning after they leave a class: amnesia, fantasia, and inertia. (“Taking Learning Seriously.” Change, July/Aug 1999, 10-17). Amnesia, meaning loss of memory of the material once learned, fantasia, meaning made-up material that’s only marginally related to what was actually taught, and inertia, meaning an inability to apply the material to situations or contexts not directly covered in a lecture or textbook.

In this essay I will focus on two terms that describe the heart of any rigorous teaching or learning, and that need to be embraced by anyone concerned with improving the quality and value of education: consistency and standards.

Consistency first. With few exceptions, “consistency” is highly valued. We value students and teachers who consistently contribute good work, who can be counted upon to do what they say, and to say what they do, transparently and to high standards.
However, as an aside, we need to remember two canonical writers who didn’t support consistency as a positive value: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. They dismissed consistency with memorable quotes: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines” (*Self-Reliance*).

Walt Whitman, Emerson’s literary colleague in nineteenth century America, attacked consistency with this: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.”

Whitman and Emerson notwithstanding, I intend to show that there is a wise consistency in teaching that is no “hobgoblin”, and offer it, along with interactively established standards, as two cornerstones of rigorous teaching.

Why do consistency and standards sit at the heart of a rigorous approach to teaching? Quite simply, because it’s impossible to challenge students without setting standards to which they must aspire, and it’s impossible to meet those standards if they keep shifting.

Years ago I attended an obedience training school with my chocolate Labrador retriever Pandora. After the six-session course, I approached the trainer and asked how Pandora was doing. “She’s doing fine. It’s you that needs more training.” Taken aback, I asked what he meant. “Don’t worry, you’re like most dog owners. Your heart’s in the right place, but you don’t understand consistency. If you don’t show Pandora exactly what you want, in the same way every time, she can’t learn. No matter how hard she wants to, or tries.” He was right. I would use different commands, spoken differently every time for everything I wanted her to do. She would look at me quizzically, I swear, and try something of which I would either disapprove or approve, randomly. She wasn’t making much progress in spite of a Labrador brain that functioned as well or better than a chimpanzee’s, according to recent research on animal intelligence. I took this wise dog trainer’s comment to heart and settled on a few simple commands, spoken the same way, and the results astonished both me and Pandora. After just a few repetitions to “stay,”
“stop,” “come,” and “drop it,” Pandora obeyed unhesitatingly, and thereafter behaved exactly as expected, as long as I gave those commands consistently in the same tone.

Now I’m not suggesting that training dogs is like teaching college students; however, I do suggest that rigor in the classroom amounts to interactively establishing what is expected, explaining how to complete what’s expected, and applying those standards consistently all semester. Easy to say, hard to do. I have to say that I’m talking about an ideal which is seldom completely realized, but the closer I come, the better I feel about my teaching and students’ learning.

Before I illustrate with examples, let me mention the “interactive” aspect of setting standards. I believe that a teacher owes his students a good hearing, both from past evaluations and conversations and discussions about their current needs. From these inputs, appropriate standards can be set that are both realistic and relevant to current student needs. I certainly don’t mean just turning standards over to students, nor do I mean the dreaded “dumbing down” that seems so much a part of current conversations about education and culture. However, I also don’t mean setting arbitrarily “high” standards based on what we learned in graduate school, or by imitating our favorite difficult professors. In other words, we must avoid the twin pitfalls of trying to please students too much, and basing standards on some imagined idea of “difficulty,” the drill-sergeant mentality that students hate and fear.

Ideally we set standards based on what’s appropriate and necessary for the subject and for what students likely know when they enter a class. This comes from listening to and talking to students, and reading their behavior, as well as their comments on evaluations from past classes. This is a definite challenge. Let me offer some examples. In my “Film and Literature” class for the past several years, I have asked students to write 1-3 page reflections on novels, films, or both. At the beginning I discovered that some would do all of them without complaint, some would do a few, and a few would do none. At first, I thought this was because the reflections weren’t graded, just commented upon and handed back with a check mark. Their behavior was sending a message: more incentive
needed. So I began grading all reflections with a +, 0, and -, meaning very good to not so hot. I explained that all of the reflections score together (10-12 per semester) would add a +, nothing at all, or a - to their final course grade.

This helped; the good students never missed a reflection, and were happy earning an occasional + for their effort, plus comments. However, the poorer students, by which I mean the overly busy or uninterested students, still didn’t bother to do them. Another message. So I mentioned that a minus is at least a grade – a “not done” shows no effort and would have a much worse effect on their grade. The result: Students at least began turning something in, and mostly without complaint, since they knew that each reflection counts for something, though not nearly as much as the tests or course papers.

In this case, I feel as though I set a reasonable standard for helping them prepare for class discussions, and gave them some incentive to do it, and they quickly understood the difference between a +, 0, and – reflection after I showed a few examples that came in. They also understood that not doing a reflection is a real problem. I try to apply these standards consistently all semester, and students seem able to find their voice by the third or fourth reflection.

Another example is the tests I have come to prefer for their rigor. For years I used machine-scored tests in nearly all my courses except the graduate seminars. However, I learned that students would stay up all night studying from a study guide I provided, memorize a few terms and ideas, and in fact pass the test with a fairly high grade. All to the good, except when I repeated a few of the same questions on the next test, they usually had forgotten the answers altogether, and complained that I hadn’t covered them in the study guide. Of course I hadn’t mentioned those questions because I assumed that they had learned the concepts and wouldn’t mind being tested on them again. More messages from their behavior, and occasionally, their comments.

I realized that Schulman’s assertion about students not really learning a subject, even though they pass courses with high grades was probably correct. Students who cram one
night for multiple choice tests promptly forget the material as soon as they pass the test. So I devised what I now see as a remedy: In all of my classes, I now hand out 12-15 essay questions a week before the test dates, both midterm and final. Students then have in hand all the possible questions that I will ask. They’re allowed to bring the test sheet to class with all the notes they can write on the test sheet only – one page. No other notes are allowed, nor any books.

When they come to class for the test, they will have prepared to answer all 12-15 questions. I then ask them to answer three (which I select at random before the test) sometimes giving a choice between a couple of questions. Because they have no idea which questions I will ask, many of them literally cover the sheet with tiny notes for each question – a useful learning experience in itself. I have found that they collaborate on this preparation, which is fine, and in general study for hours more for this kind of test than the machine-scored tests. This means that their answers are more individualized, and they seem far more engaged with the material because they had to formulate answers that I grade using these announced standards: clarity, accurateness, completeness, and originality, roughly in that order.

Reading their answers, I get a clear sense of what students know, and when I go over them using sample answers in class, I usually choose a few to illustrate the best-written answers. This also allows me to get useful feedback in preparing for the next version of the test; their questions reveal weaknesses in my own presentations. To my surprise, grading three questions for each student does not take nearly the time that I feared it would. I usually can immediately spot the students who don’t know the material, or who didn’t study; their answers seem formulaic and stilted from the first sentence. Some hardly even bother answering, knowing they don’t know what they’re talking about.

Admittedly, grading these three-answer essay tests is more labor-intensive than machine-scored tests, and requires several breaks, since a fair reading requires examining all of the same questions together before moving on to the next. Yet the outcome is worth it: More
student learning because of more consistent coverage of most major concepts discussed in class, and higher standards of both expression and knowledge.

Students understand from the beginning of the course that they will have to generate essay answers to questions that cover nearly all the material we discuss, and they understand that they must write with clarity, accuracy, completeness, and originality to receive a high grade. To date, I have heard no complaints from students about this approach to testing; in fact, several have said that they prefer these tests to the standard machine-scored variety. Indeed, I have not heard students complain about rigor when it’s applied with clear standards that grow out of their needs and that are appropriate to the subject. They do complain about clear standards and lack of rigor in applying them. If faculty tried to remember their own best and worst professors, consulting their fondest and most unpleasant memories, they would find the same problem: lack of consistently applied standards, or lack of clear standards altogether from the worst, and from the best professors, clearly explained and applied standards which offered consistent but reasonable challenges.

I will be the first to admit that a rigorous approach to classroom teaching might include many other traits and activities – passion and intelligence, articulate and dramatic lectures, memorable connections, winnowing the chaff and wheat in a subject – but these arise more from special professorial talents and individual preferences. In contrast, all of us can develop more rigorous teaching by consistently developing and applying standards that we know are appropriate for both our subjects and our students.

To paraphrase Emerson, A wise consistency is the hallmark of great professors.

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