

Meeting Students Where They Are: Defining and Designing Responsive Rigor



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What Does It Mean to Meet Students Where They Are?

“At the heart of a mature competency-based learning system lies a fundamental commitment to meet all students where they are. To many practitioners, this sounds equal parts right and radical. Right, because nothing in our lived experience suggests that learners are best served when they are advanced through a system that turns a blind eye to their unmet needs. Radical, because we know it requires that we begin with a commitment to know our students in profound ways – academically, cognitively, culturally, emotionally, linguistically, physically, behaviorally – and not where a grade-based standard or a district-mandated course sequence suggests they should be.

Meeting all students where they are is a commitment that requires that we reconfigure our old systems and practices and paradigms; that we place the individual learner at the center of the learning process; and that the learning process – what actually happens cognitively, neurologically, and developmentally as children learn – be placed at the center of the pedagogical model.”

[-Rudenshteyn, A., Schaefer, S. and Bacallao, D., Meeting Students Where They Are, 2017](#)

What Does It Mean to Be a Responsive Educator?

Jamboard: What is a responsive educator?

Responsive educators

- recognize that our beliefs about our students inform our expectations of them
- leverage students' talents, interests, and lived experiences in the development of learning opportunities
- acknowledge that how we teach is more important than what we teach
- capitalize on the social, emotional, and physical domains to improve cognitive development and student achievement
- individualize content, learning experiences, instructional methods, and assessment techniques to meet student needs
- scaffold throughout the learning process
- use assessment as a learning tool (both for students and ourselves)
- provide flexible pathways for students to demonstrate competency

How Do We Define Academic Rigor?

Jamboard: How do YOU define academic rigor?

Refers to a standard of excellence

Achieving a standard of excellence requires three major components:

1. Setting clear standards for students
2. Equipping students to meet standards through instruction
3. Designing pathways for students to demonstrate competency through assessment

We Must Be Careful...

... not to confuse these meanings of rigor with our application of academic rigor - that is NOT meeting students where they are.

How Might We Define Responsive Rigor?

Jamboard: How would YOU define responsive rigor?

Synthesizing what we have discussed about academic rigor and responsive teaching, responsive rigor could be defined as:

1. Setting clear, appropriate, measurable learning outcomes for students
2. Equipping students to meet our learning outcomes through effective instructional methods with scaffolding and flexible opportunities to practice and receive feedback
3. Designing meaningful, attainable, and flexible/creative pathways for students to demonstrate competency on all learning outcomes

Responsive rigor is a primary shift away from rigid content-based standards and traditional practices towards an intentional move to student-centered learning outcomes and practices with flexible course/assignment design.

It is NOT lower the bar. It is meeting students where they are by re-examining what we are teaching and how we are teaching and scaffolding students through the process.

How Can We Design Our Courses With Responsive Rigor?

Responsive rigor begins with giving honor to and leveraging the strengths, talents, interests, and lived experiences of our students to create a safe, engaging, and social learning environment for everyone.

It involves intentional transparency about all course and assignment design decisions at every point in the semester.

It demands that we reflect deeply on exactly what it is that we want students to gain from our courses and determine how they can reasonably demonstrate competency on those outcomes.

It asks us to be open to the possibility that what we have designed for a course, learning experience, or assignment/assessment that might not be hitting the intended target.

It gives us permission to shift gears and be flexible in meeting student needs while also maintaining professional integrity.

It requires us to abandon rigidity, stop persisting with practices that do not lead to the best outcomes for students (e.g., content, teaching methods, assignments, grading practices), and actively seek professional learning if we need it.

One Last Jam

Jamboard: What else do you want to explore about responsive rigor? What questions do you have? Comments? Any epiphany moments? Rotten tomatoes?