

The Rigor and Relevance Circle

This activity is an excellent tool for engaging a school staff in a conversation about powerful teaching and learning. In addition, it also can be used with educators visiting your school as a way to display the good things going on in your classrooms.

Maria beams with pride as she shows her group the writing portfolio she assembled in her English class last semester. "Putting together the portfolio really made me think hard about all the writing I've done in English and how I've improved my papers. I want to be a newspaper reporter some day, and I'll probably have to show my writing in a job interview."

In another part of the room, 7 teachers huddle around a TV monitor while Kai shows a documentary video he produced for his history class. When it ends, one teacher asks, "How would you compare the work you did on the video to the other assignments you did in history class?" "Well," he replies, "I sure worked harder on this. I got pretty wrapped up in finding out about what happened in our town during the war. I probably spent over 20 hours doing the video."

Purpose

The "rigor and relevance circle" is designed to:

- Help show adults what type of rigorous and relevant student work is produced at a given school.
- Help adults understand the type of work that students find challenging and engaging.
- Help teachers understand the common elements of rigorous and relevant work as a first step in learning how to design activities that challenge and engage learners.
- Give students an opportunity to use their meta-cognitive skills as they reflect on their schoolwork.
- Give students an opportunity to make an informal oral presentation to a real audience of adults.

Procedures

1. Introduce the activity and create groups. Generally 3-5 adults are paired with 2-3 student presenters.
2. Once in groups, students begin by showing and explaining a piece of schoolwork that they have recently completed that provides evidence of academic rigor or academic achievement, and has personal meaning to the student and/or the larger community.
3. Students should be prepared to explain what they learned, why the piece mattered to them, how the learning was unique or different from other learning experiences in school, and how the work meets the criteria.
4. Adults should listen carefully for:
 - What the students were asked to know and understand.
 - What the students were asked to produce.
 - What skills the students employed in their academic pursuit.
5. As the students present, adults are invited to ask questions and give the students feedback on what they learned from them.
6. After a period of time in small groups, hold a large group discussion to share and explore the insights and implications of the activity.

Implementation Tips

- Student selection is key. Be sure to include students who differ in terms of age, sex, ability level, ethnicity, and academic interests so that a broad spectrum of experience is displayed.
- Prepare students for the sharing activity by having them complete a writing exercise that asks them to reflect on a piece of schoolwork that they found rigorous and relevant. Students can also practice their sharing by presenting to each other.
- Be sure to set questioning guidelines with the adult audience when introducing the activity. Make sure that the student work stays at the center of the conversation.
- For an alternative format, have a panel of 5-8 students present their work to an audience of adults. A question and answer session can follow the panelist presentations.