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Stifling Education – Second Draft

In American education today, the word *rigor* is used frequently to mean a classroom that provides the strongest possible education for its students by upholding a strenuous pedagogy. However, the word’s origins are quite different and not educationally appropriate.

ETYMOLOGY

According to the Oxford English Dictionary Database, the word *rigor* originally came from the classical Latin *rigor*, which means unbending quality, stiffness, or unyielding hardness. It moved into Old French, retaining the same meanings. From there it segued into Middle French and the closely related Anglo-Norman, still preserving the definitions related to inflexible severity.

One significant aspect of the word’s etymology comes from the change in spelling as the word has moved through British and American English. From the Oxford Dictionaries blog, the spelling differences are explained by the British’s decision to maintain spellings of words they take from other languages. This explains why the British have spelled *rigour* with an additional “u”. The British are maintaining the spelling related to the French origins of the word. When *rigor* is used as a noun though, in medical terminology (rigor mortis), it usually has a distinct pronunciation.

MEANINGS

*Rigor* means the “rigidity of action, interpretation, etc.” (OED). There are a number of related definitions for the word that are some variation on rigid or inflexible qualities. Some definitions go so far as to use words like harshness, severity, or cruelty. This leads to a negative connotation that seems at odds with the idea of *rigor* in education.

### This word also is used as a medical and legal term. *Rigor Mortis*, a medical term, means the “stiffening of a dead body that typically begins (in humans) within a few hours after death and lasts for several days” (OED). The *rigor of the law*, meaning “the law interpreted in its strict sense,” is rarely used in modern English courtrooms (OED). In medical and legal jargon, *rigor* continues to relate to stiffness or inflexibility. There is little doubt of what those terms mean in the phrases identified because of the serious quality of the ideas being described.

USES

One of the earliest uses of the word *rigor* appears in Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Franklin’s Tale.” It has had minimal changes throughout its years of use. In 1394, when Chaucer wrote “Thynges that rigour [v.rr. Rigor, rigoure] sholde neuere atteyne,” he seems to be using *rigor* to suggest an inflexible quality that is not helpful (OED). The word continues on through multiple authors’ hands until modern day, when the *New Yorker* used the word to express the “rigors of public appearances” (OED). It is fitting that a word regarding inflexibility should remain inflexible in it’s uses through the years.

MISCONCEPTIONS

Current educational discussions press teachers and administrators to raise the rigor in the classroom. While the phrase contains appealing alliteration, the actual definition of rigor does not appear to be a quality interested parties would want to see in the classroom. Inflexibility, stiffness, and cruelity are at odds with student-centered learning and creative projects. A quick Google search returns academic articles that state “true 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” (Blackburn). This redefines rigor as an academically challenging course.

A clinically detached or matter-of-fact word originally, interested parties are attempting to use *rigor* to convey an impassioned obedience tone. In fifty years, will the Oxford English Dictionary have accepted this new meaning?

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9 December 2014

Stifling Education – Third Draft

As I scroll through articles and videos on my Facebook news feed, I cannot avoid seeing the words education and rigor splashed copiously throughout. Granted, I am an English teacher, with many teacher friends, yet rigor is a term even education outsiders have heard as the cure-all for public education. One particular post from an outspoken teacher friend catches my eye, and I click to read more closely. Her post is all about the actual meaning of the word rigor...I hear one of my favorite lines from the Princess Bride: “I do not think you know what that word means!” So the search is on for a better understanding of the word that has overcome my profession and attempted to seep into my classroom.

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A clinically detached or matter-of-fact word originally, now interested parties are attempting to use *rigor* to convey an impassioned tone of obedience. In fifty years, will the Oxford English Dictionary have accepted this new meaning?

Works Cited

Blackburn, B.R., Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, 2008. Print.