

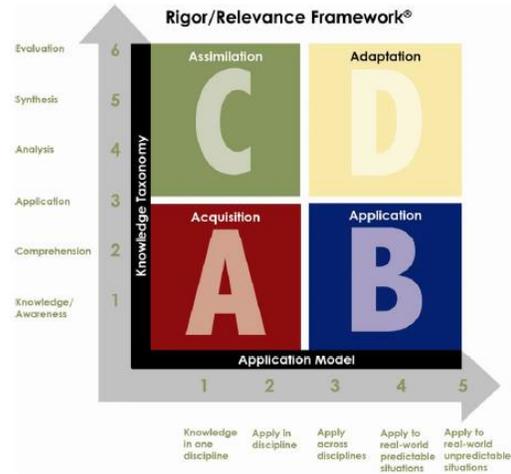
If Not Common Core, Then What? Rigor and Relevance: The Foundation of Effective Instruction by Bill Daggett

Far more critical than the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is the question of how to successfully prepare students for the wide array of challenges they will face in their lives and careers. Standards may describe *what* students are to be able to do, but they will not teach them *how* to think. Rigorous and relevant instructional approaches, those which develop complex and flexible thinking skills, will prepare students to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world and careers that may not even exist yet.

Years before the Common Core State Standards appeared on the scene, I was championing the need for higher expectations and student-centered learning. In 1991, shortly after I founded the International Center for Leadership in Education, I established its mission: rigor and relevance for *all* students. Over the years, as we studied hundreds of rapidly improving schools, it became apparent that using the key instructional guideposts of rigor and relevance to drive change in schools can make a profound difference in student learning. This is still the case for schools today who are struggling to adjust to the challenges associated with new standards.

RIGOR AND RELEVANCE

In our evolving landscape, clarity of purpose and a focus on core principles of authentic and application-based learning are more important than ever. We need to challenge students to think at high levels of complexity, and learning must be structured in a way that makes it meaningful. While research shows the overwhelming advantage of active learning over traditional, lecture-based approaches (Freeman, et al, 2014), many schools and teachers struggle to change their practices. The Rigor/Relevance Framework®, created by the International Center for Leadership in Education, can serve as a powerful catalyst for pushing teacher practice and raising the level of student thinking.



The Rigor/Relevance Framework is a timeless approach to looking at college and career-ready standards and assessments such as the CCSS. In simplest terms, it illustrates the relationship between complexity of thinking and flexibility of application.

The framework has four quadrants that progress to increasing levels of depth:

- **QUADRANT A — Acquisition**
Students gather and store bits of knowledge and information. Students are primarily expected to remember or understand this acquired knowledge.
- **QUADRANT B — Application**
Students use acquired knowledge to solve problems, design solutions, and complete work. The highest level of application is to apply appropriate knowledge to new and unpredictable situations.
- **QUADRANT C — Assimilation**
Students extend and refine their acquired knowledge to automatically and routinely analyze and solve problems as well as create unique solutions.
- **QUADRANT D — Adaptation**
Students have the competence to think in complex

ways and apply knowledge and skills they have acquired. Even when confronted with perplexing unknowns, students are able to use extensive knowledge and skills to create solutions and take action that further develops their skills and knowledge.

With its simple, straightforward structure, the framework can serve as a tool for planning, developing, and reflecting, while incorporating the CCSS. It offers a common language with which to present a student-centered curriculum that prepares learners to succeed in the real world, deal with unpredictable situations we know they will encounter, and create effective new assessments.

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

The future our students face is uncertain. Technological innovation, economic globalization, and environmental and political challenges require that students think, learn, and collaborate in flexible and creative ways. Now more than ever, students need learning environments that teach them how to access resources, work collaboratively, think critically, and solve problems (as described by Quadrant D)—real, timeless skills coveted by employers in the ever changing workplace.

The world in which students will live and work is changing rapidly, but our educational system is not keeping up. The statistics on graduation from four-year colleges show that we need to do better. In 2011, the six-year completion rate for full-time students who entered in 2005 was 59%. At two-year schools, the three-year completion rate was 31% (US Department of Education, 2013). Moreover, employers continue to provide feedback that college graduates are not ready for the workforce (Fischer, 2013). It may be easy to pin the onus on higher education, but we must face the facts that we are not preparing our students to succeed in the world beyond high school. Most students today are *not* graduating from high school “college and career ready.”

FOCUSING ON WHAT AND HOW TO TEACH

The recent move to higher standards guided by the Common Core State Standards and new assessments was designed to address this challenge. However, these very changes have become a source of contention for educators, districts, and even states. The rush to implement higher standards without adequate support, time, or professional development has made it difficult for educators to effectively use them to raise the bar for students.

What we teach students matters. However, it’s impossible to prepare students for a complex world without also rethinking *how* we teach. Effective implementation of higher standards—and true preparation for an uncertain future—requires that schools shift from teacher-centered, lecture-based models to student-centered active models of learning. This is no small task, but our future demands it. Fortunately, the Rigor/Relevance Framework explained above effectively supports this shift.

HOLDING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

New learning standards and an evolving world require students to think, problem solve, and communicate in more complex ways than ever before—key skills that are of the utmost importance to today’s employers. The Rigor/Relevance Framework guides schools, teachers, and communities to help students meet these high expectations through meaningful, student-centered learning experiences and authentic problem-solving. The standards—and the broader goal of true college and career readiness—help define our goals. The Rigor/Relevance Framework provides the guidance to achieve them.

For more information, visit www.LeaderEd.com.

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About the Author

Bill Daggett is the Founder and Chairman of the International Center for Leadership in Education.