

Rigorous, Relevant, and Real Content for Middle School

What does rigorous, relevant, and real content look like for middle school learners?

Effective curriculum for middle school students has traits that cut across all content areas. It stresses deep understanding of content that is challenging, important, and engaging. It connects your students' pre-existing knowledge, their lives, and the world around them. And, it aligns with district, state, and national standards. Students take ownership of their learning, see its purpose, and apply it to new contexts. As their teacher, you give them opportunities to apply content to real-world problems, and you guide them in making connections between content areas.

How does rigorous, relevant, and real content affect teaching?

- Rigorous content creates an academic environment that benefits all students. Teachers recognize that students typically respond positively to ideas and tasks that challenge them.
- Relevant content sparks students' interest and spurs them to grow as learners. Teachers connect their lessons to students' lives outside of the classroom.
- Real content connects topics within and across content areas. With today's focus on standards, teachers stress key curricular links as they teach content-specific material.

What would these strategies look like in your middle school classroom?

Teachers can incorporate rigorous, relevant, and real content into every lesson. Consider the examples below, where students tackle challenging curriculum that connects to their lives and the world.

Example: English Language Arts

Your students have just finished reading "The Giver" by Lois Lowry. One of the novel's more challenging themes is the issue of freedom vs. security. To make it more relevant and real, you pose the question, "Should students at our school be able to leave campus at lunchtime?" Then you divide the class in half, assigning each a position, pro or con. For homework, students need to come up with five points to support their position. In class the next day, you hold a debate. Students share their points and respond to those offered by the other side. At the end of class, you ask students to write a journal entry comparing the real-world ideas raised in the debate to those in the novel.

Example: Math

Your students are working on linear functions. To make the concept more concrete, you ask them to solve a problem near to their hearts: choosing a cell phone plan. You offer data about the monthly base rate and costs per minute of two calling plans. Then you ask them to make a table, graph the two plans, and answer a series of questions about them. Finally, you ask each student to choose the best value, given his or her actual monthly cell phone usage, and to write a proposal for his or her family about which cell phone plan to choose and why.

Example: Science

Your students are studying the vital role that wetlands play in wildlife habitat, floodwater storage, and aquifer recharge. You ask them to research the wetlands around the school as a potential site to build a skateboard park. You pose the question, "Where should the city planners build this park and why?" Students work in teams to collect data. They measure runoff volume and rain, test the soil, and observe people patterns at various spots near the school grounds. Based on their data, students write up recommendations and present a final proposal to the city planners.

Can rigorous, relevant, and real content work in a standards-based environment?

The national standards in English language arts, math, and science all advocate rigorous, relevant, and real content. Here's what these standards have to say:

English Language Arts

The National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) *Standards for the English Language Arts* (1996) call for students to:

- Read a wide range of texts to build an understanding of themselves and of the world, and to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace.
- Read literature from many time periods in many genres to building an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
- Adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems.

Math

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' (NCTM) *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* (2000) state that mathematics content should:

- Engage students in tasks that are based on: sound and significant mathematics; students' understandings, interests, and experiences; and the range of ways that diverse students learn mathematics.
- Engage students' intellect and develop their mathematical understanding and skills.
- Stimulate students to make connections and develop a coherent framework for mathematical ideas.
- Help students use mathematics as a way to understand the world around them by: understanding and applying mathematical concepts; investigating, exploring, and discovering structures and relationships; demonstrating flexibility and perseverance in solving problems; creating and using mathematical models; formulating problems of their own; and justifying and communicating their conclusions.

Science

The National Committee on Science Education Standards and Assessment and the National Research Council's *National Science Education Standards* (1996) state that science teachers should:

- Select science content and adapt and design curricula to meet the interests, knowledge, understanding, abilities, and experiences of students.
- Develop communities of science learners that reflect the intellectual rigor of scientific inquiry and the attitudes and social values conducive to science learning.
- Enable students to have a significant voice in decisions about the content and context of their work and require students to take responsibility for the learning of all members of the community.

Questions about rigorous, relevant, and real content

- How do the materials and activities that I use in my classroom stress rigorous content?
- How do I help students assess what they know about the content of a new lesson?
- How do I design or adapt lessons so that they are relevant to the lives of my middle school students?

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