

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Getting Students to Think for Themselves

University Park Campus School, Massachusetts • March 2010

Topic: Helping Students Navigate the Path to College

Practice: Prepare Students Academically

Highlights

- This English teacher at University Park Campus School (UPCS) discusses the ways that the school incorporates rigor into its lessons. Several of the specific strategies he describes include:
 - designing lessons that require students to think critically and engage in thoughtful discussions with their peers ,
 - getting feedback from UPCS alumni about the ways that the rigor in the curriculum can be increased to further prepare students for college, and
 - consulting research to determine strategies for increasing rigor in the classroom.
- The piece includes footage from one of Mr. Weyler's classes to illustrate the strategies that he discusses.

About the Site

University Park Campus School

Worcester, MA

Demographics

40% Hispanic

32% White

21% Asian

7% Black

78% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

10% English Language Learners

12% Special Education

University Park Campus School prepares all of its students, most of whom will be first-generation college-goers, to succeed in college by doing the following:

- Offering a rigorous, all-honors academic curriculum that starts in grade 7 and focuses on deep thinking and active engagement;
- Collecting and reviewing a range of assessment data to make student- and school-level decisions;
- Implementing a college-going culture and providing supports to help students go to and succeed in college; and
- Providing direct assistance to students and their families in applying, being accepted, and transitioning to college.

Full Transcript

My name is Pete Weyler, and I am a ninth- and eleventh-grade English teacher, and I also have a section of TV studio.

I try to ensure rigor in the classroom by thinking back to my own college career and thinking about what we talked about in my classes, what my professors expected, the ways that I was expected to write. And I tailor my assignments to that. I want them to write a thesis essay that is like the thesis essays that my professors expected. I expect them to do it in a little less sophisticated fashion, and I build that backwards into ninth grade so that my expectations in ninth grade are for the same kind of thing, just not quite developed to the level of sophistication. And every year at University Park we expect them to increase in sophistication. So as sophomores, they are expected to write more sophisticated essays as juniors, as seniors, so that when they are headed off to college, they are already writing in the ways that they need to write in college.

One of the key ways we develop rigor in our classrooms is that we show students the original material, the original problems, and ask them to think about it. We expect them to be historians, we expect them to be mathematicians, we expect them to be literary critics. So rather than just feeding them a theorem or feeding them a literary interpretation, we give them the original material and we ask them to generate a

theorem, we ask them to generate some literary criticism, we ask them to judge, interpret history based on original documents.

Student, speaking to class: So the criticism. There is a lot of controversy on Millay. Some people like her, some people don't like her; some people like the way she writes, some people don't. Some people find it boring, which I'm sure some of you will. Some find it interesting. Diane P. Freedman said that "Millay's poems make visible through the theater of the personal how identity functions in culturally determined ways." So first of all, that just explained how her poem explains who we are in society based on the culture.

Weyler: In the ninth grade, I am asking students what they think of the literature. We are reading this literature, and instead of presenting some sort of interpretation that I have come to over the years or that I have been presented in my past, I am letting them know on the first day that I expect them to think about this material. I know that the history teachers do the same with original documents. It's not just reading what historians have come to believe about these documents. They are given the documents and they are asked on the first day, "What do you see here? What do you notice? What meaning can you make out of this? What sense does it make?" And then once the responses come, we are not giving the students feedback as much as asking other students to give each other feedback: "What do you think about what she just said? Does that make sense to you? Does anybody have a different opinion?" And what evolves then is a classroom conversation that begins when they first get here and is reinforced in every class.

Weyler, to class: Should we be calling her a modern poet? Should I even allow somebody next year to research Edna St. Vincent Millay as a modern American poet, or is she just an example of an anachronism, somebody who is in a different time and a throwback?

Student: I don't think necessarily the way you write the poem should categorize you as modern or not, it's more what you write about. And since she just used iambic pentameter and wrote the poetry—it's just the issues she wrote about is what we should focus on.

Weyler, to class: Like?

Student: Like, in the 1920s and how love and women and all that stuff . . . war.

Student B: She wrote about nature, and Frost wrote about nature a lot, and Frost is a modern poet.

Weyler, to class: Although, so did our transcendentalist poets, right? And they are from the 19th century.

Weyler: In the eleventh grade, I am going to give them Hemingway and Faulkner, and we are going to lay them side by side. And I am not going to give them a lecture on the style of Hemingway and Faulkner. I certainly could; I have read plenty and could give a pretty good lecture, I think, on the differences between their styles. But that would be my learning, not theirs. Instead, they read Hemingway, they read Faulkner. And then we hold them side by side and I ask them, "What are the differences between these styles?"

We ensure rigor by taking a look at what the alumni have to tell us after they have been in college for one

or two years. We have a very active outreach to current college student alumni of UPCS asking them, “What were you well prepared for, and what did you feel surprised by? What do you feel like you should have been better prepared for?” And then we come back in our faculty meetings, and we have very frank discussions about what we need to do to better prepare them.

We ensure rigor in the classroom by looking at current research. There is some research out there that suggests that there isn’t enough literary criticism that is encountered by students in high school, and that certainly is something that I lacked in my own high school preparation. So we work that back in.