Rigor in the Classroom – 7 Strategies for Success

Guided Reading / By Anna DiGilio

"Why did the chicken cross the road?" That's one of the first jokes children learn; and I love seeing the twinkle in a child's eye as they tell it for the first time. And it's not just the chicken joke; there are a thousand other knock-knock jokes based on the premise that *some questions have obvious answers*. But in a classroom where instructors **teach with rigor** and **promote rigorous learning,** the questions go much deeper. Yes, learning should be fun; but it's also serious business! So here's the question we'll consider in this post: "What are some of the best strategies teachers can use to **incorporate rigor in the classroom**?"

1. Rigor Requires That You Ask Good Questions of the Students in Your Classroom



I love this humorous twist to the old chicken joke: "*I dream of a world where chickens can cross the road without having their motives questioned.*" ;)

Regardless of those poor chickens, we know that questions can be good things, teacher peeps! It's our job to teach with rigor; and one of the best ways to do that is to **ask questions that require our students to think**. As we teach Guided Reading, it's essential for us to craft questions that will engage students in **higher-level thinking**.

Of course the process of inquiry helps us check for understanding; but it also helps us teach and generate new understanding. It's more than just hoping for right answers. We need to **model the skill of questioning**, asking questions that will cause our students to think deeply. The problems we pose and the questions we ask should require students to be engaged and active in the learning process. It takes some intentional effort on our part and theirs.

2. To Promote Rigor in the Classroom, Teach Your Students to Craft Good Questions



"Why did the teacher ask the question?" It's no joke, my teacher friend; and the answer is more than just "To find out what the student knew." Teaching with rigor involves creating an atmosphere and an environment that promotes deep thinking and engaged learning. It involves teaching our students the skill of asking and answering questions that will help them **make meaning** as they read.

Effective literacy instruction involves so much more than just stuffing our students' heads full of facts! It's important for us to guide them in the process of learning and discovery. More than any other literacy skill we teach, our students will benefit from learning the art of asking questions. It will help them develop the ability to **analyze** and **reason** through the texts they read and the problems they'll encounter in life. In addition to teaching your students to read, teach them to pause and ask thoughtful questions of the texts they encounter. As you do, you'll help change them from students who are **learning to read** into students who are **reading to learn**.

3. When You Teach With Rigor in the Classroom, Vocabulary Matters



Whether you're crafting a question for class discussion or having a casual conversation with an individual student, choose your words carefully. Use **higher-level vocabulary** that challenges your students and encourages them to think critically. The questions you pose shouldn't be so complicated that your students are unable to understand what you're asking; but you shouldn't talk down to them, either. Introduce new, higher-level vocabulary throughout the day as

you teach. Incorporate **Tier-3 academic language** into your daily instruction as well as in one-to-one conversations with students. Provide brief **explanations** to help your kiddos understand the meaning of unfamiliar words.
Strrrrretch your students'minds by exposing them to **rich vocabulary** and insightful conversations. As a result, you'll build their word knowledge and help prepare them to tackle more rigorous texts.

4. To Promote Rigor in the Classroom, Raise the Bar



Although lower-order questions may be effective in helping students memorize content, we should also expose them to **higher-level questions** that require them to think deeply. Teach them to analyze and evaluate the texts they read, answering more than just the Who/What/When/Where questions. Teach your students to **think critically** and to provide textual evidence for the answers they give. Intentionally teach the concept of **metacognition,** and encourage students to remember that **"Reading is Thinking**." Lead your students to **think about the text**, critiquing and analyzing the structure and the writer's choice of words; then help them learn how to **think beyond the text** by making inferences, synthesizing and making connections. Click here for my post on teaching Reading Comprehension Strategies for Fluent Readers.
Ask **probing questions** that will guide your students in their evaluation of the stories they read. In a rigorous classroom environment, your goal should not be to solve problems for your students; your goal should be to teach them how to use their own minds to think creatively and solve problems independently.

5. For Rigor in Classroom Discussions, Incorporate the Appropriate Wait Time

Rigor does not equal rushed. Give those chickens time to cross!

During discussion times, allow your students the time to think about their answer. Especially where higher-order questions are involved, add an extra 3 to 4 seconds of **wait time** to encourage student participation, since it gives them time to carefully consider the question and think through their response.
After you've asked a question, pause and repeat it to give your kiddos some extra think-time. It's important to teach with rigor; but **don't rush the process.** A well-thought-out answer from an engaged learner is worth the wait.

6. Scaffold Students to Help Them Progress – For Real Rigor in the Classroom, Challenge Those Chickens!

To promote rigor in your classroom, challenge and **scaffold individual students**. As you help a student tackle new skills and strategies with your **support** and **guidance**, they'll eventually accomplish the tasks **individually**, without your support and scaffolding.
The challenge for you as the instructor is to recognize and identify what Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) referred to as the **"Zone of Proximal Development"** for each student. The Zone of Proximal Development refers to the difference between what a learner can do independently without help and what he or she is capable of doing with coaching, support and scaffolding. When you work with an individual student, your goal should be to work within this zone as you introduce new skills, strategies or knowledge.
Identify and recognize an individual student's **abilities**, and provide appropriate **challenges** to move them forward within their zone of proximal development. **Model** the skill or concept, allow the student

to **practice** (which may involve some struggle), and then work collaboratively with them by advising and **coaching** them through the process. Ask **questions** to help guide the student, and provide **prompts** to help them master the skill. Then give them plenty of **encouragement and praise** when they reach their goal!

7. To Promote Rigor in the Classroom, Incorporate Rigorous Texts



You can incorporate mentor texts in classroom read-alouds, but how do you ensure that your students are encountering quality, **rigorous texts** in your Guided Reading small groups and in independent reading on a daily basis? You've got to give those chickens something to chew on!