22 Ways to Add Rigor to Your Classroom

By: Jacqui Murray

Let's start by clearing up a misconception: **Rigor isn't unfriendly**. Adding it to your class doesn't mean you become boring, a techie, or an overseer of a fun-free zone.

In fact, done right, **rigor** fills your class with **Wow!**, those epiphanies that bring a smile to student faces and a sense of well-being to their school day.

Rigor provides positive experiences, is an emotional high, and engenders a pervasive sense of accomplishment students will carry for years--and use as a template for future events.

Rigor is **NOT** lots of homework, projects, resources, or rules. When those four nouns are used to define rigor, the teacher is flailing, thinking quantity is quality. Rigor is not about adding a column of data or remembering the main characters in a Shakespeare play. It's seeing how knowledge connects to life, to circumstances, and to daily problems.

Simply put, adding rigor creates an environment where students are:

- **Expected to learn** at high levels.
- **Supported so they can learn** at high levels.
- **Cheered on as they demonstrate learning** at high levels.

It also helps students understand how to live life using brainpower as the engine. Sure, it will ask them to collect evidence and draw conclusions with which their peers may find disagreement. But it will insist they defend a position or adjust it to reflect new information, and it will often move them outside their comfort zone. It will also prepare them to solve the problems they will face in the future.

How do you as a teacher add rigor? Here are some ideas from my PLN colleagues:

1. Make it easy to **decode word**s by adding an online dictionary or a backchannel that students can access with unknown words.
2. Build **grit** in students. Let them know they are capable, competent, that thinking hard does not mean they didn't understand. It means they want to understand.
3. **Expect inquiry**. Be prepared. Make time for it.
4. When you **ask a question, pause**. Let students think before answering. This wait time isn't delaying your lesson. In a rigorous classroom, it *is* the lesson.
5. **Expect rigor** -- don't allow students to be satisfied with a superficial answer. Build habits that look for understanding.
6. **Face unknown questions with a smile**. Make the classroom a safe, non-judgmental learning environment where students can practice their critical thinking skills.
7. Require students do projects with a **high degree of precision and skill.**
8. Make it normal to **invent solutions** that haven't been thought of before, but satisfy requirements.
9. Expect students to **doublecheck both the approach and result** (according to **Grant Wiggins** -- great article).
0. Create an environment conducive to **personal growth.** Know what that means for each student.
1. Focus on **exceptional expectations**.
2. As students participate in class conversations, expect them to **use academic and domain-specific vocabulary**. If they use words like “something,” “you know,” “that,” or “like,” prod them to come up with specifics. *Like what? No I don't know.* This immerses them in learning, discovering, and thinking critically.
3. As students answer questions, expect **evidence to support their answer**. This can come from personal experience, but more often will find relevance from learning resources.
4. **Listen to student answers.** Pay attention. Challenge them to be thorough.
5. **Don't draw conclusions for students**. Present them with evidence. See where it takes them.
6. Expect students to **build on classmate comments** and understand their perspectives.
7. **Support students** so they can reach high expectations. If they are thinking outside the box, don't pull them back in. Ask questions: *Is this approach going to meet expectations, solve problems, achieve desired results?* If it is, let them do it!
8. Provide a way for each student to **demonstrate learning** even if it isn't a way you've thought of. Applaud them if they devise an approach that works for them.
9. **Differentiate for student needs.** If you have a project that seems to fit everyone, it doesn't. How do I know that? Because no project does.
0. **Expect students to analyze data during reading**. Ask why -- determine if the author provided proof or simply made a statement -- and know the difference.
1. **Expect problem solving.** Don't jump in to solve problems. Provide students with strategies they can use and let them try them.
2. **Remind students that “easy” occurs through hard work**. Discuss this -- how they excelled at soccer, piano, or the violin through tenacity and drive. Have students share their experiences.

For more on higher-order thinking, check out **NWEA's education blog**. As I researched this post, I kept running across **Barbara Blackburn's** name. You might want to check her out for more in-depth materials.

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