

"Five ways in which high-quality literacy instruction can increase student interest in our content areas"

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Each year, on the day after Labor Day, the invasion begins. We stand in the hall next to our classrooms at the sound of the warning bell, and feel the adrenaline rush through our veins as we hear the sound of excited chatter of our new students. It continues to pulse through as we go through a checklist in our heads -- are the seating charts finished? Is the bulletin board bright and colorful enough? Will our students actually get something out of our classes this year? I know on that first day I think about the successes I have had, and I also reflect back on things I'd like to change. I would like to fix those days when I felt like I would get more response out of a jello mold than my students. In my first sentence I referred to the arrival of the kids as an invasion, and what I meant by that was it was an invasion of student robots. They come in each day to sit at their desks or lab tables, and proceed to meticulously take the notes that I give them, or do the lab activity that I give them, or work on a project that I give them. Yes, it is very teacher-driven, so, what happens when they actually have to...wait for it...READ something? If our students are only doing enough class work to just get by, the likelihood that much of what they are reading from a disciplinary text is being absorbed into their eternal long term memories is, well, not very likely.

When I compare the good days, with the not so good days, I can think of one major difference between the two -- student engagement with our discipline's content. Now, I believe in miracles; however, we all know that our content is not going to be inserted magically into our students' brains without a little (or a lot) of work first. In the end, I believe it all comes down to the foundation of literacy, and in order to begin construction on this understructure, high-quality literacy instruction is the key. We all know that there are insane amounts of resources available to us as educators to use for content instruction; how do we best make use of these strategies to increase content knowledge and student engagement? Below are five ways in which we can utilize high-quality literacy schooling in our classrooms that will not only benefit our students, but it can also benefit as us educators:

1. Before assigning chapter reading, know your audience. Remember that you most likely have a diverse amount of prior knowledge sitting in the chairs before you. Making assumptions that everyone knows certain vocabulary, or facts, can leave struggling students in the dust. Using review and preview activities such as front loading (asking questions, sharing knowledge with other students) can help to bridge the gaps in academic knowledge.

2. Take the time to learn as much as you can about your students, including their interests. The rapport we build with our classes plays a crucial part of student engagement with our content. Becoming aware of their reader profiles (like the vampire book lovers, the mystery crew, or the non-fiction gurus), for example, can allow for student-teacher connections that just cannot be reproduced otherwise.

3. Initiate a classroom environment that is rich in conversation, relevant conversation. The more your students talk to one another about what they have read, the more likely they are to retain and comprehend the content at hand. Have them share idea with a partner, and then after a

conversation and swapping of notes, get them up in front of the class to share their findings. Each student will have a slightly different perspective of a particular passage that just may enlighten others in the class, especially when you take the different age groups into consideration.

4. **Talk less, model more.** Let's say you have a personal trainer, and while you are running at a pace that majorly exceeds your level of comfort, this personal trainer proceeds to sit down to watch you, all while sipping on a refreshing mango carrot smoothie. That just might make someone lose his or her motivation to work. My students would feel the same way if I assigned them a chapter to read out of the text, and they looked up to find me playing on my phone. Model the behaviors you expect of your students -- read along with them, you might even notice details that you didn't before.

5. **Hold your students accountable.** This is a broad statement, but it can be narrowed down to a literacy focus. Using new vocabulary often will increase retention amongst our students. Don't settle (and don't let your students settle) for avoidance of new word pronunciation, for using the vocabulary incorrectly, or for the "shoulder shrug," indicating they don't know, don't care, or a little bit of both. All of our students have opinions, and the ability to succeed; however, when it comes to reading and comprehending text, some students just need us to hold them to it.

For other resources for high-quality literacy instruction, try these links!

Early Beginnings: Early Literacy Knowledge and Instruction:

<http://www.edpubs.gov/document/ed004585p.pdf?ck=24>

The Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction:

<https://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200303/Essentials.pdf>

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