Rigorous Content Focus

Rigorous Content Focus

- Contextually appropriate and relevant based on subject area as well as school/system goals
- Content modeling
- Meaningful expert scaffolding and moderation
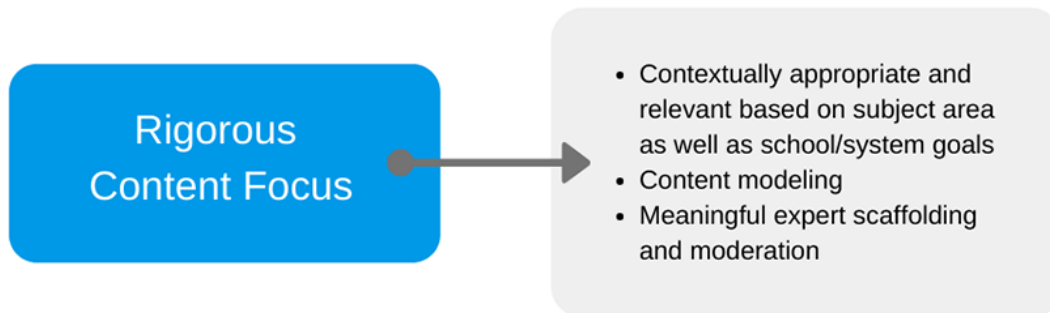
Rigorous lessons. Rigorous assessment. Rigorous learning experiences. The term "rigor" is commonly used in the field of education—but it isn't always used in proper context. A prevalent assumption is that rigor equates to making things more difficult for a learner. But rigor actually refers to making things *appropriately challenging* for a learner. For teachers, this means offering content-specific models and practices for their classroom.

Rigorous lessons should encourage learners to question their assumptions and preconceptions, rather than simply memorize presented information.

Rigorous assessment should push learners to think critically, for example, by analyzing and interpreting multiple pieces of information at once to formulate connections and arrive at a conclusion.

Rigorous learning environments should stimulate learners by offering clear and actionable ways to apply new concepts, while supporting them in their efforts.

Key to providing a rigorous learning experience in asynchronous platforms is ensuring that content is both contextually relevant to the learner while also offering learners a roadmap on how to appropriately engage with it.

Learners motivated to master a new set of skills or competencies might complete a series of micro-credentials through, for example, BloomBoard or Digital Promise's Micro-credential Platform. Learners can choose micro-credentials that are of interest to them, reporting that they are able to work on passion projects and skill-up in a variety of topic areas, such as tackling chronic absenteeism.

Some micro-credentials can be grouped together to form pathways that support professional growth and career advancement. In the world of micro-credentials, this is referred to as

"stacking." How micro-credentials are sequenced within a pathway demonstrates how a learner should appropriately engage with the content. In other words, a learner must demonstrate mastery in one skill or competency before starting the next. For example, to master performance-based assessment design, learners must understand how to create rubrics before designing assessments that complement the rubrics. As one content provider put it, a "stack" is like a topic-based book and each micro-credential is a chapter in that book; you have to read each chapter in sequence.
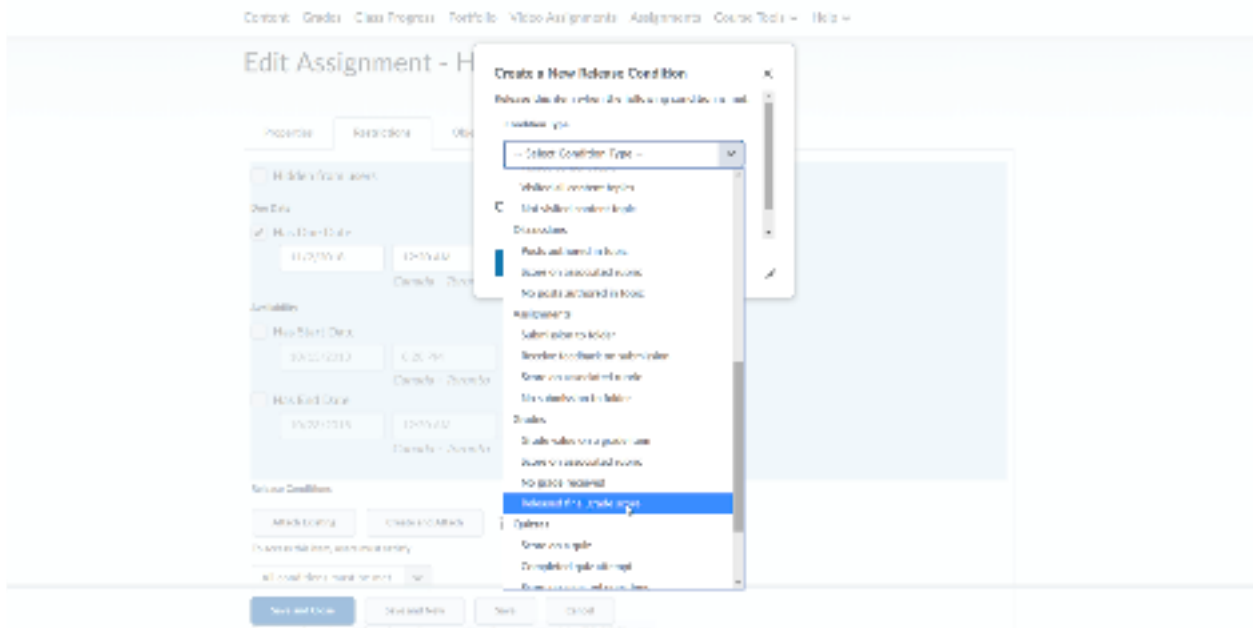

An example of a micro-credential pathway in BloomBoard (Source: BloomBoard)

Learners can also be guided in how to appropriately engage with content through automated platform mechanisms. Brightspace and edX, for example, provide the functionality to "unlock" content to ensure that learners follow a particular sequence; these release conditions are set by course designers. That means learners are unable to move onto the next piece of content unless they've met certain conditions, such as submitting an assignment, achieving a passing grade on a quiz or replying to a discussion thread.

The course designers who set these release conditions see the value: It helps learners understand one complex concept before moving onto the next and continually brings them back to the learning experience.

Different types of release conditions on the Brightspace platform (Source: D2L)

In addition to relevant content and mechanisms for how to engage with content, learners should be able to see how to apply learning to their own environments. That is, they should be able to see examples of strategies in action, which are applicable to their immediate context. This could be as simple as reading about example strategies. For example, a learner engaged in a micro-credential on BloomBoard could access embedded resources that highlight practical strategies. Or a learner using Neuroteach Global could open the field guide that accompanies each micro-course. Learners who have accessed these texts claim that they're able to take the example strategies and put them into practice the very same day. In one conversation, a learner actually printed out the example strategies and posted them on her classroom walls.

Neuroteach Global provides a downloadable field guide that contains practical strategies. (Source: Neuroteach Global)

Platforms with rigorous content focus stimulate and challenge learners, and thus, prevent learners from becoming frustrated and disengaging with the learning experience.