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Experimenting with Digital Badges in an Online Graduate Education Course

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Introduction

In 2011, U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan endorsed digital badges as growing phenomena in the K-12 and higher education reform movement (Grant, 2014a; Tally, 2012; United States Department of Education, 2011). As an innovative technology, digital badges can be used to recognize accomplishments and achievements and may have a solid place in education because of the immediate feedback for graded and non-graded skills and competencies (Foster, 2014). As a disruptive technology, digital badges may emerge as motivational tools for 21st century learners because of inherent elements that are reminiscent of social media and gamification; two growing trends in today's society (Johnson et al., 2013).

Using badges in an online course can conceivably refresh distance teaching and learning for both the instructor and the student. According to Glover and Latif (2013), badges can be used for a number of purposes, for example, recognizing the completion of massive open online courses (MOOC), certifying informal learning experiences, and acknowledging the development of skills that are applicable to the workplace. Despite the educative aspect, digital badges also allow teachers to recognize and reward students for demonstrating higher order thinking, collaboration, and effective communication (Fontichiaro & Elkordy, 2014).

In October 2014, the Badge Alliance distributed a survey to collect data about the impact and value of digital badges in higher education. The 55 participants included faculty, instructional technologists, curriculum designers, administrators, and academic support staff from North America, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. Based on the findings, one can infer that more institutions will be designing and implementing badging systems in the near future (O'Shaughnessy, 2011). However, concerns still exist about the extent to which badges impact learning outcomes, students' motivation, and overall achievement (Grant, 2014b).

Value of Digital Badges

Digital badges can highlight a learner's range of skills and competencies based on formal or informal learning experiences (United States Department of Education, 2011). At the K-12 level, teachers are using digital badges to acknowledge students' skills, interests, and achievements in a way that differs from standardized tests (Stansbury, 2013). According to Finkelstein, Knight, Manning, and the American Institute for Research (2013), digital badges recognize and certify the knowledge and skills that adult learners master through varying life and work experiences.

Therefore, “badges could play an important role in competency-based postsecondary education” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013, p. 6). Competency-based education and the assessment and recognition of prior learning may eventually become a standard part of higher education since the United States Department of Education is permitting 40 colleges to experiment with this emerging educational model (Fain, 2015).

In the world outside of higher education, a badge can provide authentic evidence for employers and “can present a well-rounded picture of knowledge and competencies that resumes and degrees do not reflect” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013, p. 8). The University of Southern California (USC) encourages community building by awarding badges to students who participate in the community-centered Joint Educational Project (JEP). Students involved in JEP activities may earn college credits and/or digital badges for engaging with the local community partners, schools, or health care facilities in curriculum-based activities (USC, 2015). In addition, *Connecting with USC Scholars* is a USC initiative where the public has the opportunity to earn badges by viewing the video-biographies of the nine USC “stellar” faculty members, observing micro-lessons taught by these faculty members, and completing associated activities. The project was initiated to encourage the public to learn about USC academic disciplines, interact with faculty, and access open content while earning digital badges (USC, 2015).

Performance tests are quickly becoming a major part of the assessment landscape in higher education. This is particularly true across the nation in the area of teacher education and certification (NEA, 2010). Prospective teachers are not only required to complete traditional assessments that give them an opportunity to recall what they know about teaching and learning, but now they are also expected to demonstrate how they would respond to the authentic situations that occur in a live classroom setting (Sawchuck, 2013). In 2012, SUNY Empire State College announced an initiative to “create another level of accredited validation of teaching abilities that have been demonstrated inside or outside of the classroom environment” (Mahar, 2012, para. 1). To address this initiative, the School of Graduate Studies proposed a digital badge system for the “recognition of quality teacher practices, projects, skills, and experiences” (Mahar, 2012, para. 1). The use of badges to identify the milestones future teachers need to reach and track progress towards meeting goals may help candidates meet the larger learning objectives of classroom performance. The question that remains is whether other schools of education and certification bodies will recognize badges as a credential of informal learning and skill acquisition (Glover & Latif, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

From a theoretical perspective, digital badges can promote self-regulation and self-efficacy in learners (Randall, Harrison, & West, 2013). The feedback that students receive once they earn a badge confirms their ability to accomplish a set goal or milestone and may act as a motivating factor to spark increased performance. Achievement of badges can motivate learners to also set goals and monitor their own learning as they complete parts of an assignment, fulfill prerequisites, or develop specific skills or complete performance tasks (Fontichiaro & Elkordy, 2014).

The motivational aspect of badges can arguably be seen as extrinsic because the badge holder receives a visible “reward” for an accomplishment. However, Pink (2009) proposes that motivation, or drive, is intrinsic and largely dependent on three elements: Autonomy, mastery and purpose. Autonomy is an innate human drive to be self-directed and to have some control over one’s own work. Mastering a task provides motivation to improve or to move on to more complex tasks. Work that has a purpose creates motivation to persist (Pink, 2009). Badges have the potential to allow learners to develop skills and competencies in the order that they choose to do so. Learners experience incremental advancement by receiving tangible incentives for each task completed, thus, actualizing both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational drives.

Implementing a digital badging system

As faculty and instructional technologists experiment with the various emerging technologies, they are sharing the findings about the implementation process. For instance, a research study took place at the City University of London to examine the feasibility of implementing Open Badges as a means of supplementing formal courses and qualifications (Glover & Latif, 2013). The positive responses from focus group interviews with staff and students led to a recommendation for a pilot implementation at the City University of London and Sheffield Hallam University. Schools in the United States, including Arizona State University, Colorado State University, Madison Tech Area College, Penn State, Purdue, Texas A&M, and University of Michigan have also implemented badging systems to recognize skill-based, formal, and informal learning experiences (Badges Alliance, n.d.).

A digital badging system may be easier to implement than anticipated because several web-based platforms, including Mozilla Open Badges, Credly, Moodle, and Blackboard Learn, already exist for creating, storing, and displaying badges. Awarding digital badges through course management systems can provide students with instant feedback on learning tasks and can create a consistent way for students to meet mini-goals and visualize learning progress (Randall, Harrison, & West, 2013).

Responses from an informal survey distributed in a Spring 2015 online graduate education course at a New York-based college confirm the different perspectives people have about badging systems. The course was delivered using the Blackboard Learn (Bb) course management system and students had the opportunity to earn a maximum of eight badges (Bb Achievements). The instructor’s purpose for experimenting with the Achievement tool was to model and highlight the effectiveness of reward and incentive systems as an instructional strategy. When the student teachers completed select tasks and met the specified criteria, they earned a badge. Twenty-six students (87% of the class) earned the first badge within the first week of the course. The *Great Start* badge was associated with two criteria: Students’ completing the course diagnostic assessment and interacting with each other in an introductory discussion. Subsequent badges had criteria based on students’ earning a grade of 80% or more on the major course assignments and discussion group participation. Timeliness, level of participation, and quality of work were other factors that impacted whether students received a badge or not.

At the midpoint of the course, the instructor distributed an anonymous survey to gauge the graduate students’ reactions to the badge system. As reflected in other pilot studies, the 15

survey respondents had varying opinions about the value of badges in the teaching and learning process (Glover & Latif, 2013). Although some graduate students valued and appreciated the immediate and tangible feedback, others found the idea of badges or achievements as somewhat infantile. A sample of the responses is as follows:

1. *“I was very happy! I thought it was very nice to get some recognition for completing a task/assignment, and it kept me motivated. It was very positive and I appreciated it.”*
2. *“I do not see much value, I think the grade and the instructor's feedback is the end desired result.”*
3. *“I think it's a motivation for students to be recognized for their hard work, and it's also something they can put on their resume, which to me is the most incentivizing.”*
4. *“Have the badges attached to some other incentive that will drive the graduate student to a higher desire to earn them. This system of badges as the incentive itself is rather elementary.”*
5. *“I think both are equally important, as they both reflect the amount of work and effort I have put into an assignment or discussion board. The badges keep me motivated to continue working as they function as a milestone of sorts, whereas the grades/grading rubrics show me what I have done well and where I need to improve.”*

Conclusion

The context of 21st century education has shifted from the ‘one room schoolhouse’ of yesteryear to the World Wide Web of today. Consequently, there are new methods of designing instruction, assessing learning, and recognizing achievement. The digital badge is an innovative way to visually communicate learners’ accomplishments. More and more faculty, especially those who teach in a distance learning format, are experimenting with badging systems.

In 2012, Blackboard Learn hired a research firm to survey faculty in an effort to determine the extent to which digital tools were used in the college learning environment. The study found that with proper training and support, “instructors are progressively moving towards greater adoption of digital content” (p. 2). Furthermore, instructors preferred targeted training that was relevant to their discipline and specific to the courses they teach. Since instructor’s technical skills varied, they appeared more interested in best practices and receiving formal mentoring geared towards their individual needs (Blackboard, 2012). The implications for college administrators are to offer ongoing professional development opportunities and ensure that faculty are trained to utilize the available course tools to enhance student performance.

Areas for Further Study

Competency-based and performance-based learning experiences are becoming a new model for education across all disciplines (Fain, 2015). According to Arne Duncan, badges personalize the learning experience and “empower students and even teachers to play an even stronger role in their own learning and development” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, para. 18).

In a “technology-enabled, information-rich, and deeply connected” global environment, learning is non-linear and “badges can help speed the shift from credentials that simply measure seat time to ones that actually measure competency” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, para. 13-14).

Even more, diverse learners, including students with special needs and emergent bilinguals may benefit from the use of digital badges to measure their accomplishments.

The implementation and use of incentive systems, such as Bb Achievements allow faculty to monitor and assess student performance in online courses. Although students may appreciate the instant gratification of the badge or achievement, some continue to question its value as a credential, especially when pursuing advanced studies or applying for employment. As the dialogue continues about competency-based and project-based learning initiatives, students, faculty, and employers may begin to view badges on par with the course grade as acceptable evidence of knowledge and skill acquisition.

Further studies may focus on the use of badges for competency-based and performance-based curriculum, particularly for student with diverse learning needs. Additional implications are to explore how badges can be used more effectively with adult learners and ways to make badges more transparent and transferable as a valid credential are additional areas for study.

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