Digital Badges: A Conversation on the Teaching and Learning Implications for Higher Education

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Abstract: In today’s era of high unemployment, there is a disconnect between the skills of the unemployed and the skills required for unfilled jobs, resulting in lost job opportunities. In higher education, the ability to show valid and reliable student assessment is critical for program success and accreditation. Digital Badges could potentially revolutionize higher education instructional practices, assessment, and student portfolios, bridging the gap between institutional credentialing and potential employers. The session will include a brief overview of digital badging that includes a breakdown of an idealized badging structure, the potential pros and cons of digital badging, the current status of badging in higher education, methods for incorporating a badging initiative, and the relevant literature for acquiring additional information. The main portion of the session will be a group “think” on the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats that digital badging affords for teaching and learning in higher education. Participants will leave the session with a firm understanding of how badges may transform current teaching, learning, and assessment practices, and methods they might employ to begin their own badging initiative.

Literature Review

Digital badges hold both great promises and threats for higher education. They can enhance their affiliates’ digital identities, enable global perspectives, foster improved instructional design, facilitate better instructional management, define skills and professional development, promote institutions, and establish new business and monetization models (Bixler & Layng, 2013; Duncan, 2011). They can help employers locate ideal candidates for a position. At the same time, they threaten traditional models of assessment and the accreditations of assessed individuals and programs that follow (Olneck, 2012). Badges force us to examine our current assessment and credentialing structures (Olneck, 2012). Traditionally, a university degree is seen as the source of authority and competence. If an individual acquires a suite of badges from various external sources, they can become evidence of competence in a given area or discipline. When prospective employers begin to accept suites of badges as truthful evidence of competence in a discipline, the traditional university degree begins to lose value (Carey, 2012).

While the very nature of “pure” badge design seems to demand validity, reliability, and credibility, many questions in these areas remain open (Casilli, 2012). Indeed, the entire research base for digital badging is in its infancy. For example, champions of digital badges extoll their motivational benefits, but it is unclear if badges are seen by all as motivational. Motivational studies by Deci (1972) indicate that external rewards can be demotivating over time. If badges are viewed as a reward and not as a symbolized recognition of achievement, their motivational benefits are suspect.

As over 100 organizations have or are implementing the use of badges and badging systems (Badges/Issuers, n.d.), policy and administrative infrastructures needed to support a badging system are becoming increasingly important. The technological infrastructure needed to support a badging system is complex but obtainable. The policy decisions surrounding badging and the changes badging brings to assessment and accreditation are far more complex, and will require time to plan for and implement (Hickey, 2012).

Goals and Objectives

Upon completion of the session, participants will be able to:

- List common teams and concepts related to digital badging.
- List the common strengths, opportunities, threats, and weaknesses related to digital badging.
- Reflect upon their curricula/program/organization in terms of implementing digital badging initiatives.
Description of Topic to be Discussed

A digital badge is a clickable graphic that contains an online record of 1) an achievement, 2) the work required for the achievement, 3) evidence of such work, and 4) information about the organization, individual, or entity that issued the badge. Mozilla has created an Open Badges Infrastructure (OBI) standard that includes a display platform called the Badge Backpack so that badge earners will have a free, hosted, public location for management and display of their digital badges. Thus, badges earned by individuals from disparate organizations that use custom badging platforms may be aggregated in one location for others to view (Bixler & Layng, 2013). Digital badges can be used, among other things, to depict course completion, establish micro-credentials, represent honors, show event participation, and demonstrate community membership.

Facilitation Techniques

This session will begin with a brief presentation on digital badging concepts and terminology, followed by an open discussion with the audience. The open discussion will center on the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats that digital badging affords for teaching and learning in higher education. “What if” implementation scenarios will be examined in this light; i.e., “How might one approach administration about implementing a badging initiative?” It is anticipated that the participants will come to understand (1) that digital badges transcend any specific discipline and are a universal game changer in the areas of higher education assessment, accreditation, and student portfolios, and (2) methods they might employ to begin their own badging initiative.

References


