Badges for Learning: Dartmouth University

CASE STUDY: Curate, Credential and Carry Forward Digital Learning Evidence: tiny.cc/cccdle

Context: The course is highly interdisciplinary and multimodal (LMS assignments, lectures, student-designed classroom sessions, software skills training, digital scholarship projects). We initially decided to experiment with badging to track the portion of the course focused on digital scholarship skills. We introduced badging to students as part of the syllabus. For all of their digital scholarship assignments, they could receive both a grade and a badge. Each assignment would earn a 'progress badge', and completion of an entire training sequence or practice sequence would earn a 'completion badge'. We solicited multimodal feedback from learners, only to find that learners responded more favorably to the idea of tracking and organising their learning than in the potential for sharing badges. Put another way, they were much more interested in badges as learning support, not badges as outward-facing credentials. So, for the second iteration of the same course, we dramatically escalated the focus on metacognitive development (learning about how we learn). Going all-badge empowered us to communicate the learning process to learners more effectively. They needed to always be able to answer the questions 'Why am I doing this?' and 'What did I learn?' At the same time, we wanted to give leaners more ownership of their learning trajectory. So, building on our first iteration of badging, we decided to escalate the use of badging to every part of the course to help address these challenges.

[1] What are we doing?

At Dartmouth we use badges to communicate skills that are learned and demonstrated in classrooms but are not always apparent from traditional records like transcripts or course descriptions. There is no master badging scheme, and badges are not meant to compete with traditional credentials. Badge ecosystems only exist within a specific class or program. We involve learning designers, educational technologists, traditional educators, and learners in badge development and deployment. We have found that few people or organisations recognise, much less accept, digital badges beyond the issuing institution. For us the greatest benefits of implementing badging are in communicating the objectives and purposes of class assignments and activities to learners. We know from multimodal feedback (surveys, open-ended responses, self-assessment videos) that our learners find badging extremely valuable for understanding how and why they are learning.

[2] How are you doing it?

Our badging has proceeding opportunistically with curricular and co-curricular pilot projects that are built from the bottom up on the faculty-student relationship rather than top-down institutional imperatives. The Science and Religion in American Media class, which incorporates learning objectives around media analysis, digital scholarship, critical engagement, and cooperative leadership in addition to topical course objectives, is our most extensive badge ecosystem. For this class we started by holding several design meetings with instructional designers, media librarians, and faculty to build the course around achievable and demonstrable learning objectives. So, course design first, then badges. We initially piloted two tracks of badges (media analysis, digital scholarship) within the course as an optional supplement to grades. In terms of technology, we evaluated many systems but settled on Credly for ease of use. We collected open-ended survey feedback from students, and interviewed several students on video, to assess the effectiveness of badging from the learner perspective. Based on that feedback, in the second iteration of the course, we felt comfortable enough with the process to rebuild the entire course around badging. Learners could earn x badges out of y possible badges to build their grades. Badges were grouped into skill categories, where completion of individual assignments earns 'challenge badges' and completion of all challenges in a category earns a 'skill badge' for that category. The entire system was visible from day one. To support the increased scale and to make badging progress more visible to students, we used BadgeOS, with culminating 'skill badges' being Open Badges that are shareable via Credly integration. Our multimodal feedback from

learners on using a flexible badge-based system, rather than the traditional high-stakes testing or idiosyncratically-graded papers, has been overwhelmingly positive.

[3] Who is involved?
At Dartmouth College our badging community is largely informal. While we have formal structures for spinning up badge projects, our bottom-up approach to demand means that many people implement badging for different reasons. So our stakeholders are, first and foremost, learners whose experience can be improved through badging, but also faculty, instructional designers, technologists, librarians, and administrators who maintain interests in current and potential badging projects. We sustain this community through regular informal communication and through occasional collaborative sharing sessions where we all sit down and talk through current and future projects as a group.

[4] Why are you doing it?
We often say that the most valuable things about badges are the conversations that badges start. It's really that simple. Badging helps clarify design around learning objectives, raises important questions about whether we are helping students learn, and gives us a way to communicate otherwise invisible intellectual structures to students so that they can organize their learning accordingly. Badging makes learning visible, and increases our ability to communicate about learning. Both of those outcomes are really important to us.

[5] What are the challenges?
Our biggest challenge has been 'badging without credentialing'. We do not see ourselves as providing alternative credentials so much as we see badges as effective means of communicating important information about learning. Our experience has been that this communication is most powerful when directed toward the learner, rather than to employers or other educational institutions. Our feedback from students is that Open Badges are interesting and might be useful in the future, but that there is little demand for alternative credentials when their main credential (an Ivy League degree) already communicates a great deal of useful information to future employers, institutions, and colleagues. Given that information, we would add more peer-generated and peer-designed badges into the Science and Religion in American Media class. The current system provides a path for peer nomination for several pre-defined badges, but we would like to add a pathway for entirely learner-generated badges. Those are less sensible in a standardised, outward-facing, credentialing system, but more sensible in a learner-focused, metacognition-building, class badging system.

[6] Where is it heading?
We can offer three suggestions for others attempting to do class-level badging:

1. Start with the problem that you are trying to solve. It's fun to draw badge designs, but if you're not solving an existing problem by using badges, then why are you bothering with badges at all?
2. Build feedback mechanisms into your badge system at every possible level. If your class is multimodal, then your feedback should also be multimodal. One thing that we have done is to make giving feedback at least one step in every single badge sequence, progression, or category in an ecosystem. In Science and Religion in American Media, you cannot earn a culminating skill badge in any category without providing at least two different kinds of feedback, generally open-ended survey questions and one minute self-assessment videos.
3. Always build to the actual student in the class, not to the imagined student in your head. One way to do this is to record a baseline at the very beginning of any badge implementation. Figure out where you and your learners are starting, then compare the later feedback to that initial baseline.

Resources: A course badging case study ' Inside Higher Ed; Three student voices on digital badging' (Vimeo);
Badging economies in the classroom: a course badging workshop' Google Docs (link to video/text resources)
The value problem in digital badging Inside Higher Ed
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