



Going Digital With Badges

Badges offer educators and students new ways to demonstrate and reward achievement.

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When people hear the word “badges,” they often think about organizations like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. A scout who accomplishes a certain set of activities receives a badge that both documents and standardizes the achievement. Any scout or leader—even those in different packs or troops—would know what the scout had accomplished just by looking at the badge.

Digital badges are different in that they are electronic and can be earned by anyone at any age. They are the same in that they are used to reward accomplishments and demonstrate a set of shared metrics. According to a 2013 report from the Alliance for Excellent Education, these

badges act as symbols, tokens, or icons that students earn as a way to showcase their learning.

Unlike a standardized test, digital and traditional badges reward a specific set of competencies. Imagine, for instance, two students who receive an A in algebra. Although they might share the same conceptual metric, their skillsets and understandings might be completely different based on their teacher, school, and curriculum. As described in the 2014 *Tech & Learning* article, “There’s a Badge For That,” a badge sets out to certify more specific results, such as a level of understanding in the programming language Python.

Digital badges first gained attention in non-traditional learning environments. 2008 saw



the rise and proliferation of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), culminating in what some people, including Laura Pappano writing for *The New York Times*, called the “Year of the MOOC” in 2012. These courses, on a variety of topics, provide free entry for any student worldwide. Some students choose to pay to earn college credit for these courses, but instructors also needed a way to identify and reward all

enrollees who had completed some or all of the course. Enter the digital badge.

Given the relative newness of the concept, school administrators may be reticent to dive headfirst into digital badge implementation, particularly those who work in low-tech schools or those who are used to the physical display of badges or ribbons. However, there are key reasons this concept is worthy of review by elementary principals.



1 Students are already engaged in opportunities for badges in their daily lives.

Pew Research Center, for example, has documented the continued rise of gaming and mobile apps in the lives of learners. In many games and apps, learners document accomplishments with badges they earn and can share with others. Digital badges are becoming a known commodity, and this trend has been promoted by community organizations such as Mouse, a youth development organization that provides students with technology experience through mentoring, internships, and workshops. Students earn badges by completing projects such as game design and electronics and coding programs. Young children can also earn badges through online platforms, such as DIY, a community for students to create, design, make and share their work.

2 Educators and administrators can use digital badges to rethink assessment.

Student evaluations contribute to how students perceive themselves as learners. In "Are Badges Useful in Education," published in a 2013 issue of *Educational Technology Research Development*, researchers Samuel Abramovich, Christian Schunn, and Ross Mitsuo Higashi found that digital badges both support students as they set goals and increase their motivation in reaching goals.

3 Educators can use badges to shape learning.

In school, badges have been commonly used to demonstrate students' learning and understanding of a topic. Principals can help teachers think about how students can create their own badges as a part of the learning process. Inquiry-based learning and project-based learning may provide opportunities for students to map out together how they will show their learning and how the digital badge will represent it. They take ownership of their education as they co-create the assessment and the resulting badge.

Getting Involved

As the 2014 *Tech & Learning* article states, "In the world of digital badges, there are those who create badges, those who attempt to achieve badges, those who recognize badges and those who seek to know people who have obtained certain badges." Here are two primary ways for elementary principals to get involved.

The first way to get involved is to earn and to implement the earning of badges. People often attempt to integrate innovative tools they them-

Digital badges can help the entire learning community motivate and reward students for accomplishments beyond grades or test scores.

selves have not experienced. A 2010 report done in conjunction with Michigan Virtual University on virtual schooling found that there were teachers who were being asked to teach in online or in blended courses who had never been a learner in such situations. So, elementary principals should first earn their own badge before implementing a badge system.

Begin by making sure you have a place to store your badges, often referred to as a backpack. If your institution or school district doesn't have one, you can create your own at <http://backpack.openbadges.org>. Once you have created your backpack, earn your first badge.

This process will help you learn more about who recognizes and offers badges and the types of badges that exist. It will also prepare you for finding relevant badges for students and teachers to earn.

There are a massive number of badges worldwide, and using a shared badge is part of the global micro-credentialing goal of digital badges. So you don't have to start from scratch. However, there may be a specific badge you would like to develop. Plus, creating badges can help teachers rethink assessment, and the creation process can help students learn.

Administrators can help students and teachers think through four important questions in the creation process:

■ **What are you assessing?** The first and most important step in implementing digital badges is having a clear idea about what is being assessed. Badges are meaningful when recipients know their objectives. Recipients should have a clear understanding of both how the digital badge aligns to particular standards and the expectations involved. Learners should know the criteria and work samples that must be produced in order to earn the badge. Rubrics should be provided at the start

Teachers Need Badges, Too

Teachers should be familiar with the badge concept before they are encouraged to incorporate badges in the classroom. Establish a plan to help teachers gain familiarity.

1. Leadership by example can go a long way in demonstrating the value of badges. Principals should earn badges and share those badges with teachers.
2. Leaders can create a badge or a short series of badges for teachers that are connected to professional development or school goals.
3. Create a badge series for students that recognizes timely submission of paperwork, attendance, or homework so teachers can see the motivation and pride students have in achieving badges.
4. Create a teacher badge recognizing those who have successfully incorporated badges in their classrooms.
5. With significant planning, a building- or district-level badge system can be designed for new teachers or employees. For example, consider what badges a new second-grade teacher could earn in his or her first semester. What about a new member of the janitorial staff, or a new member of the leadership team?

Many popular learning management system (LMS) platforms have built-in modules for badge creation and dissemination. If you are considering a new LMS for your school, be sure to ask potential providers about their capacity to incorporate badges for both teachers and students.

to help guide their work. It is also important to consider whether the digital badges will stand alone or build on one another. If implementing a series of badges, it is important to consider how each badge will serve as an incentive to earn the next badge.

■ **Is the badge optional or mandatory?** A teacher using a badge to replace a traditional assessment would have different requirements and outcomes than one offering an optional badge as part of an inquiry-based project. Teachers must also consider if badges will be tied to grades or will count only toward extra credit. There are also decisions to be made about who will manage and monitor who earns badges and who will promote the concept of badges in the classroom or school.

■ **How will you design the badge?** It is important to note that badges are typically designed with a visual image and include metadata, which are the name, description, criteria, evidence and tags. The design is crucial, as a badge serves as a visual representation of learning. Some teachers, students and administrators use their own tools, such as Photoshop, but there are free online support tools available, too, such as www.openbadges.me

■ **How will you host the badge?** Schools often use learning management systems (LMS). Many of these have digital badges built into the platform. Other schools share digital badges

through shared drives or applications. Some schools have begun using established online badging communities such as Credly or Class-Badges. Both sites allow students to create profiles where they can share their badges. Partnering with an existing community can serve as a way to explore digital badges without having to do the technical work.

Badges can be an important way for schools to rethink assessment. Through both creation and earning, badges can help students learn and meaningfully document that learning. They can also help the entire learning community find ways to motivate and reward students for accomplishments beyond grades or test scores. In doing so, elementary schools will nurture the development of lifelong learning habits and begin to prepare students for the innovative assessment and credentialing techniques they may experience later. □

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