DIGITAL DISTINCTION

BADGES ADD A NEW DIMENSION TO ADULT LEARNING

By Kellie Ady, Keli Kinsella, and Amber Paynter

As a part of a professional learning team, we are constantly looking for new approaches and designs that promote deeper adult learning. If we really want teachers to be motivated to change behaviors and aspirations, we need to tap into what motivates adults to learn. According to Daniel H. Pink's *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us,* these motivators are autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Pink, 2011). And this is where digital badges come in.

Badges aren't exactly new. Perhaps best known from organizations like the Scouts, badges can be physical representations of things accomplished or they can be digital icons associated with particular skills or tasks. Apps like Lose It! or Fitbit (programs designed to motivate users for health and weight loss) use digital badges to mark milestones for people with personal goals. As an article in *Edu-*

cause Review reports, "Higher education institutions and other organizations interested in supporting learning are experimenting with digital badges to guide, motivate, document, and validate formal and informal learning" (Diaz, 2013). The article defines digital badges as "symbols that represent discrete academic achievements or valued skills not represented by course outcomes or a degree. These smaller achievements can represent incremental learning and progress toward more significant goals." In other words, badges tap into intrinsic motivation as they can reflect autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

So why digital badges? While the Scouts rely on items that can be sewn onto a sash or vest, digital badges can be attached to someone's digital or online profile. Like a physical patch, these badges can be viewed publicly and represent achievements for specific endeavors. Unlike stickers, which can be more generic and not necessarily a learner's goal, badges can be attained by choice (autonomy), are a direct reflection of specific tasks (mastery), and can help guide one toward a larger goal (purpose). And from what we've seen, using digital badges adds a new dimension to adult learning.

CREATE A LEARNING DESIGN

Our efforts to implement digital badges began with a small group of educators from one high school and two coaches from the Office of Instructional Technology in the Cherry Creek School District in Colorado. While planning the 2014-15 school year, we brainstormed creative solutions for ongoing and meaningful professional learning based on identified needs at the school level. We wanted to create a system that would allow for personalization, and, to appeal to the intrinsic motivation that autonomy provides, we needed to give teachers choice of time, location, and focus areas. We chose a blended learning model to provide that autonomy. Teachers would have flexibility in choosing when they worked and which topic to pursue for their professional growth.

This blended learning model provided opportunities for face-to-face learning as well as independent online work. While blended learning provides autonomy, we were also cognizant of the need to recognize and celebrate incremental steps toward teachers' professional goals in that push to mastery. A digital badge system for the professional learning strands creates a consistent and intentional structure for both publicly recognizing the work teachers are doing and supporting a culture and climate of celebration. This system also focuses learning on mastery of content in smaller steps — which led us to rethink our learning design.

To scaffold learning and embed badges, all courses are structured in a similar way. Each course is broken into tiers or levels (exploration, application, and integration), and those levels are broken down into smaller chunks or modules. The exploration level provides a base level understanding of concepts and potential tools (e.g. blended learning models and learning management), the application level encourages reflection on how these concepts and tools impact student achievement when used in the classroom (e.g. using digital assessments both formatively and summatively), and the integration level is built to encourage new ways to build on the application level (e.g. online portfolios, flipped instruction, and differentiation). These levels use a common color-coding system across all courses to help readily identify content and badges associated with those levels.

In this model, teachers are free to explore multiple pathways based on their professional goals or interests, which means they can explore multiple topics at differing levels or dive into a particular strand for advanced learning. The flexibility of going into different courses or levels necessitates the common course structure and helps teachers recognize the purpose in each module or level. And while graduate credit is an option for participants, we use digital badges to recognize successful implementation of incremental learning in the classroom for each level.

THE LEARNING PROCESSES

As a teacher, the process to earn a badge involves two aspects: personalized learning coursework and application of that learning for student achievement. As facilitators of our section, we model effective pedagogy in blended learning environments and incorporate both professional learning and educator effectiveness standards. As part of our learning design, we created, curated, and aligned digital resources in each discrete module to build knowledge and skills. Teachers can experience the learning in the same way a student would before implementing or trying it out with their own students.

Implementation into classroom practice takes the form of an assignment, but participants can decide the best way to capture and share their learning and evidence of mastery. Sometimes this evidence is a screencast, in which teachers record themselves talking through a process. Sometimes the evidence is a collection of screenshots with accompanying commentary. Reflection is an integral part of this process as participants include their thoughts on how their work impacted student engagement and achievement. For level 2, for example, the alignment and mastery module requires teachers to align an online learning element to standards and then assess it digitally. After assessing, teachers then look at the resulting data and reflect on what the data reveal about both the learners and the use of blended instruction. This assignment is then incorporated into the process of earning a badge.

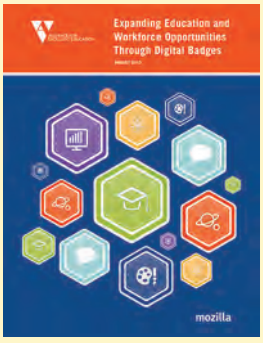
FACILITATOR PROCEDURES AND WORKFLOW

Managing multiple levels with multiple participants in multiple blended learning courses (without due dates) can get pretty messy. One of the most successful structures we established is the use of a Google form. Once teachers provide evidence of mastery, they use the form to request a badge. Once we receive their request, we make sure that all components are complete before awarding the badge in Schoology, a learning management system that allows users to create, manage, and share content and resources. Participants receive a congratulatory email telling them that the badge is on their profile. While our district uses the Schoology platform **(www.schoology.com)**, digital badges exist in other learning management systems and can also be awarded through website services such Credly **(https://credly.com)** and Mozilla Open Badges **(http://openbadges.org).**

All course facilitators have access to the results from the form, and this is used not only to communicate with each other about participant progress in varied levels, but it also offers useful feedback about participants' successes and struggles.

LEARN MORE ABOUT DIGITAL BADGES

Expanding Education and Workforce Opportunities Through Digital Badges
Alliance for Excellent Education & Mozilla, August 2013



Digital badges offer students the opportunity to pave their own learning pathways and allow employers to verify necessary workforce skills, according to this report from the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Mozilla Foundation. The report defines digital badges as "credentials that represent skills, interests, and achievements earned by an individual through specific projects, programs, courses, or other activities." A credible badge stores information online through a digital hyperlink about the associated skills, as well as what projects and tasks the badge holder completed to obtain it. This report explores digital badges and how they can be used to improve student learning and outcomes, as well as expand vocational and interest-based skills for learners of all age.

http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/expanding-education-and-workforce-opportunities-through-digital-badges

Our section also uses this form as a management tool to keep tabs on which badges are awarded. We mark when someone earns a badge or make a notation about why a badge hasn't been awarded (such as when submissions were incomplete). This works so well that other course facilitators adopted the practice.

REFLECTIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Revisiting Pink's ideas about how autonomy, mastery, and purpose play a significant role in motivation, using digital badges in a blended model is one way to incorporate those aspects into professional learning. We receive feedback each time a badge is requested, and there are repeated comments about how teachers "liked the flexibility and the convenience." Built into the structure is choice — choice in how to show evidence of mastery, which levels or modules to complete, and when to complete work. In the application level for the blended learning strand, for example, a teacher can opt to submit evidence of student work, videos, or lesson or unit plans to receive that level's badge and then either continue on to the integration level or pursue a level in a different strand, like text complexity.

As facilitators, we feel that autonomy is critical, but a structure that includes established target dates for submitting work is also necessary, especially for those using this for their professional evaluation process. Because we gave teachers the option to tie this work into professional goals for our district, submissions came in waves based on dates defined by our district's due dates for goals.

This sometimes made it difficult to give timely and effective feedback. Gathering work and managing feedback can be a challenge for any teacher, whether in the classroom or in professional learning, but being able to anticipate crunch times could have helped us facilitate our workflows more efficiently.

While our goal is to impact student achievement by helping teachers master aspects of the digital learning environment, each course's badge levels and embedded modules lead teachers through exploration, application, and integration. This helps us frame how each level's content differs, and it also helps teachers clearly see what will be mastered in that level. Participants, in providing evidence of mastery of each level, have evidence of that achievement with the earned badges.

Our team provided help for teachers in a twice-monthly drop-in format. During these face-to-face meetings, teachers showed noticeably increased interest, engagement, and perseverance once we implemented the badge-based system. We often heard teachers express excitement about being "so close to earning a badge."

One of our takeaways about this tiered approach is the need to be clear about what constitutes mastery. Focused conversations about what constitutes mastery at the exploration level versus the integration level would yield more clarity and consistency across courses. While our system requires completion of components, it could be improved by attaching a framework for defining mastery and purpose.

CONNECT TEACHING AND LEARNING

According to Daniel Pink, "Purpose is the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves" (Pink, 2011). As educators, we do what we do because we believe in learning and we believe in kids. The badge-based professional learning approach ties in more traditional motivators like graduate credit for horizontal advancement and the professional goal-setting process for annual evaluation. However, built into the course is a focus on how what is learned extends to teaching and learning.

Another way this approach supports a larger purpose is by building a culture of celebration and recognition. As the year progressed, we publicly recognized departments for completing levels and introduced an element of competition by celebrating teams that were first to complete a level successfully. This encouraged participants to feel as if they were part of a larger push to improve instruction across the school.

As we consider how we might adjust this approach in the future, we realize that we need to connect purpose to student data. Our questions about impact in the classroom were anecdotal in nature, which tells part of the story, but using student data in the reflections might help us connect professional learning to student achievement.

As part of our learning design, we created, curated, and aligned digital resources in each discrete module to build knowledge and skills. Teachers can experience the learning in the same way a student would before implementing or trying it out with their own students.

REFERENCES

Pink, D.H. (2011). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us.* New York, NY: Penguin.

Diaz, V. (2013, July 1). Digital badges for professional development. *Educause Review.* Available at www.educause.edu/ero/article/digital-badges-professional-development.

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