

Open badges: a visual method of recognising achievement and increasing learner motivation

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Viewpoint

Open Badges: A Visual Method of Recognising Achievement and Increasing Learner Motivation

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Abstract

Ian Glover, who is based within the Technology-Enhanced Learning Team at Sheffield Hallam University, offers some brief thoughts on the use of Open Badges in recognising achievement and enhancing learner motivation in higher education. The use of Open Badges ties-in with employability, but more importantly may offer an innovative way to engage students in their learning.

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I have recently joined Sheffield Hallam University and one of my final pieces of work at my old institution was to investigate the use of Open Badges to recognise student achievement and skills development. This was a small study to gather the staff and student perceptions of Open Badges in order to establish whether there was sufficient interest and potential to start a pilot project. The early findings of this research were positive, with staff and students from across the institution agreeing that there is potential for Open Badges within a university context. The growing interest in Open Badges shows that there is a clear niche within education that this technology could fill, in fact Open Badges have [recently been identified](#) as an educational technology with significant potential to ‘disrupt’ formal education.

In essence, an Open Badge is an image file; however, it contains information about who earned it, what they had to do, when it was issued, and who issued it. This badge is then added to a ‘backpack’ (portfolio, effectively) and can be added to custom clusters for sharing with different groups, e.g. a different cluster for different employers related the experience required, a cluster for friends who share a particular hobby, etc. An optional feature of the badges is that they can contain a link to the evidence for meeting the criteria, such as an assignment stored in an online portfolio or a blog post. All of this means that the badge can provide a visual record of a learner's achievement and development combined with the required proof.

The concept combines the sew-on badges recognising skills and participation from the Scout Association with the digital achievement badges from computer games and online services/mobile apps, such as FourSquare. These different sources, with their different focuses, show that badges can serve multiple purposes. On the one hand, they can be used to recognise/represent and validate achievement and learning; and on the other hand, they can be used as a method of motivating learners to undertake optional activities that they might not otherwise – most people have a strong instinct to collect things, especially if it is possible to show off your collection to other people! The key innovation of Open Badges is that, unlike previous uses of badges, it allows badges from different sources to be collected together and mixed to create custom profiles, so badges from formal learning could be combined with ones from sports teams or

voluntary work. This allows learners to create a richer picture of their interests and experience, and make it available to others through the VLE, Facebook, blogs, LinkedIn, etc.

Open Badges were developed by the Mozilla Foundation (creators of one of the major web browsers, Firefox), in association with the MacArthur Foundation, to provide a method of recognising informal and lifelong learning. However, there is huge potential for the use of Open Badges in formal education, such as:

- surfacing skills acquired during studies, especially where they may not be obvious from a transcript;
- recognising exceptional work;
- encouraging reading around a topic;
- providing clear targets for learners to aim at, e.g. bronze, silver and gold levels;
- creating a visual layer over a portfolio of reflective practice;
- validating personal development from co-curricular activity, such as through involvement with the Students' Union.

The main barrier to wide adoption of Open Badges is that they may not appear credible to third-parties, such as employers and professional bodies. However, the credibility of a badge is founded on that of the organisation that issued it. This is effectively the same situation as we currently have with certificates for training and experience, so the challenge is not insurmountable. The key to widespread acceptance and recognition will be the use of Open Badges by major organisations and professional bodies, and this has already begun with household names such as Disney-Pixar, NASA and the Open University beginning to issue badges to staff and learners.

Ultimately, Open Badges will succeed or fail based on how desirable learners and employers find the badges being issued. A motivating effect on learners will be obtained if the badges are suitably desirable and attainable, yet challenging; similarly, employers will find badges desirable if they can provide greater insight into the skills of their applicants. The criteria used for issuing a badge will have a significant impact on this desirability and it is vital that a planned approach is taken from the outset.

Personally, I agree with the argument that Open Badges could be a significant disruptive technology, and I'm really pleased that everyone at Sheffield Hallam that I've spoken to about them has immediately seen this same potential. They are a recent innovation of an old idea and there are lots of organisations waiting to see what happens. It is going to be interesting to see where this technology takes us, but even more interesting to be at the forefront, and that is a very realistic proposition for Sheffield Hallam University.

Further Reading

The following list provides a starting point for reading further about Open Badges:

- Innovating Pedagogy 2012 (pp. 16-18) -
http://www.open.ac.uk/personalpages/mike.sharpley/Reports/Innovating_Pedagogy_report_July_2012.pdf
- Four Innovation Trends to Watch in 2013 -
<http://blogs.hbr.org/schrage/2012/12/four-innovation-trends-to-watc.html>
- The Disruption Higher Ed Doesn't See Coming (and how it could respond, even lead, but probably won't) -
<http://www.edtechpost.ca/wordpress/2013/02/20/badges/>
- Digital badges show students' skills along with degree -
<http://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/releases/2012/Q3/digital-badges-show-students-skills-along-with-degree.html>