

Emily Ford

To badge or not to badge?

From “yes” to “never again”

Several years ago I embarked on an experiment with public health faculty using digital badges to certify students’ information literacy skills development in their courses. Our project, Digital Badges for Creativity and Critical Thinking, aimed to strengthen students’ critical thinking skills in three undergraduate classes. Additionally, we viewed badges as a way to clearly communicate to students learning outcomes, certify the skills they gained, and to provide students with language to discuss and promote their skills to future employers.

This opinion essay does not present badging best practices or a discussion of badging procedures.¹ Rather, it presents my personal, theoretical views as to why I will not use badges again. Reflecting over the past three years, I have realized that our use of badges re-created and reinforced traditional powers structures in the classroom. I now view badges as a symptom of a systemic and insidious problem in higher education: neoliberalism.

During our project, we gathered student responses to a pre- and post-survey regarding the badge curriculum. Additionally, one course continued to use the badge curriculum without the use of badges, and these students completed the same pre- and post-survey (excluding any mention of badges). Survey results implied that students whose class used badges felt that communicating their acquired skills to others was much more important than students who engaged in the same curriculum without badges.² Although this

seems to be a positive result, it indicates that badges reinforced box-like thinking. In other words: did students want to communicate the value of skills certified with badges because we were talking about them so much? Were students thinking critically at all, or were they just going along for the badging ride, believing what their professors and librarian were telling them?

Moreover, the majority of students seemed to miss the point that the badges curriculum aspired to help them develop critical thinking, rather than presenting hoops through which they needed to jump in order to get a good grade in their class, and to move them toward graduation and getting a job. We thought badges would help students aspire to our goals, but they were more concerned with doing everything they needed to get a good letter grade, rather than developing critical thinking skills.

In neoliberal views, education does not serve to further the public good, and it certainly isn’t a practice of freedom, as approached by feminist educator and scholar bell hooks.³ Instead, it is part of a larger capitalist economy in which workers serve to further financial gains.

This problem is not isolated to badges. Badges are part of a greater tension between

Emily Ford is assistant professor, urban and public affairs librarian at Portland State University’s Branford Price Millar Library, email: forder@pdx.edu

idealistic (and potentially paternalistic) views of education—where education transforms and empowers students to achieve freedom and participate in civic life—and meeting students' needs: getting a job, supporting a family, or making a good grade to advance to the next course. Badges commodify students' skills. Students become workers whose skills and abilities are bought and sold on the open employment market.

This is not the only reason I remain skeptical of badges. According to hooks, "We are not all equals in the classroom. Teachers have more power than students. And in dominator culture it is easy for teachers to misuse that power."⁴ Our use of badges mirrored dominator culture, which valued college graduates merely to participate in a capitalist workforce economy. We misused our power and reinforced a hierarchical and oppressive approach to education. While badges were not the problem itself, they served to reinforce the greater neoliberal tensions at play in higher education.

Too, competency or skills-based education can serve to oppress students, keeping them from liberatory knowledge, or from discovering the unknowable. This can also be called esoteric knowledge, which is theoretical, conceptual, and transcendent.⁵ Leesa Wheelahan argues that competency or skills-based education can also serve to keep learners from transcending social structures of power and class and disempowers students.⁶

Learning outcomes are important for my daily work as an educator, and competencies are a facet of public health education accreditation. For educators there must be a balance between learning outcomes, assessment, and the point at which they cause harm. How can we use and reinforce learning outcomes with this in mind? How could we use and interrogate badges in the classroom so that students viewed them with a critical eye rather than steps to neoliberal "success"?

As an educator my mission has always been to help students develop critical thinking skills, to help liberate them into different ways of knowing, and to provide a public good. When I realized that my work with badges was

antithetical to my mission, I was saddened and dismayed. Based in my experience, my answer to the question, "To badge or not to badge?" is "Never again." Not until I can do two things: reconcile the tension between my paternalistic aims as an educator with students' self-stated needs for success and use badges in a way that allows students to gain necessary skills as well as critically evaluate badges within a neoliberal higher education system at the same time. Only then will I badge again.

Notes

1. Learn more details about the project on the project web page at <https://www.pdx.edu/oai/provosts-challenge-projects-139>, or read our article "Badge it! Using Digital Badges to Certify Information Literacy Skills within Disciplinary Curriculum" (http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/liw_portland/Presentations/Publications/12/) published in *Reference Services Review*.

2. For more on these survey results, see *To Badge or Not? Towards and Intersection of Neoliberalism and Information Literacy Instruction*, presented at the 2016 Workshop for Instruction in Library Use, at <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/58233/items/1.0304650>.

3. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

4. bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 114.

5. Leesa Wheelahan, "How Competency-based Training Locks the Working Class out of Powerful Knowledge: A Modified Bernsteinian Analysis," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 28, no. 5 (September 2007): 637–51. doi:10.1080/01425690701505540.

6. Leesa Wheelahan, "The Appropriation of Constructivism by Instrumentalism: The Case of Competency-Based Training," in *Why Knowledge Matters in Curriculum: A Social Realist Argument. New Studies in Critical Realism and Education* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 126–44. 