Open Badges: exploring the potential and practicalities of a new way of recognising skills in higher education

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Abstract

This case study reports an ongoing project at the University of Sussex seeking to introduce the idea of Open Badges to the institution while exploring some of the practical issues and limiting factors associated with this method of recognising learning. The focus is on piloting Open Badges in workshops and events for staff in order to develop understanding of the advantages and challenges of this form of micro-credentialing. It is hoped that the knowledge gained from this project can be used to identify and support appropriate future staff and student-facing badging initiatives. The project aims to:

- Develop understanding of Open Badges and their potential in higher education amongst professional service colleagues and academics.
- Evaluate tools and processes.
- Build capacity to support future projects.

The project has begun to meet its aims, there is now an operational badging scheme for Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) staff development workshops; colleagues in student-facing professional services have developed their knowledge and understanding of Open Badges and been supported in the development of plans for badging learner skills and there is increased awareness of Open Badges amongst teaching staff who have attended 'badged' workshops.

Keywords: Open Badges; digital badges; staff development; technology enhanced learning; skills.

Open Badges

Badges, which have long been symbols of achievement and learning, have been reimagined for the digital age. Mozilla define Open Badges and clarify the distinction between digital and Open Badges as follows:

> A digital badge is an online representation of a skill you've earned. Open Badges take that concept one step further, and allows [sic] you to verify your skills, interests and achievements through credible organizations and attaches that information to the badge image file, hard-coding the metadata for future access and review. Because the system is based on an open standard, earners can combine multiple badges from different issuers to tell the complete story of their achievements — both online and off. Badges can be displayed wherever earners want them on the web, and share them for employment, education or lifelong learning. (Mozilla, 2014)

These features of Open Badges make them particularly suitable for accrediting skills and learning which are important on a CV but might not be recognised within formal CPD accreditation or the curriculum. The fact that Open Badges can be issued by anyone, however, raises concerns about their credibility and reliability. If Open Badges are to realise their potential as an alternative form of accreditation then careful consideration needs to be given to establishing and maintaining standards.

The Open Badges project

Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) initiated an Open Badges pilot project in February 2014 with a view to introducing the concept of micro-credentialing to the institution; to explore potential contexts within which badges might be used and evaluate some of the practicalities relating to their design, creation and issue.

The online resources provided by Mozilla (http://openbadges.org/) provided an international context and framed the initial thinking for the project. Jisc (2014) and specifically the Regional Support Centre for Scotland, provided some really useful literature, for example reports of Suzanne Scott's work with Open Badges at Borders College, offered several points of similarity to the Sussex project. Scott's experiences of

introducing Open Badges for staff CPD activities (Scott, 2013; 2014) served as a valuable example of exploring the advantages and challenges of badging staff development.

The TEL project commenced with a meeting to bring together TEL staff and professional services colleagues, who work with students on study skills; information skills; personal development planning and employability, to facilitate consideration of the potential applications of Open Badges for learner development in these areas, to share experience and to establish outcomes for the various stages of the project. The project focussed on staff as this enabled TEL to take forward its plans quickly and learn from the various pilots outlined here before planning student-focused badging projects.

The Open Education Week (OEW 2014) Badge

The first Open Badges were created for Open Education Week (OEW) at Sussex in March 2014. The only criterion for receiving a badge was attendance (physical or online) at one of the events. The organisers were aware of the risk of devaluing badges by awarding them just for turning up but decided that it was worth doing for a number of reasons:

- To link the concept of Open Badges to the wider Open Education agenda.
- To raise awareness of Open Badges amongst participants at the OEW events.
- To provide a low-stakes pilot of creating, claiming and issuing badges.

When choosing a badge issuing system it was important to find one that would create truly Open Badges and not just digital images of badges that were either locked into a particular platform or lacked the metadata to make them meaningful. After comparing a few options Credly.com was chosen because it provided badge issuers with:

- Free, easy to use badge design, creation and issuing tools.
- The ability to add criteria and evidence as metadata.

Badge earners could:

- Collect badges from multiple email addresses.
- Share and embed badges across a range of online spaces.
- Organise, categorise, hide or display badges within Credly.
- Transfer badges to a Mozilla Backpack.

The main disadvantage of using Credly was that people earning badges had to register for a Credly account in order to receive their badge. This was a potential hurdle to people completing the badge claiming process but TEL found that sending an email just before issuing the badge, explaining the process and the advantages of a free Credly account, largely overcame this issue.

Claiming of badges was handled manually by means of a Google Form which was emailed to participants and publicised on event materials. The form required claimants to provide their name, email address and indicate from a drop-down list which event(s) they had attended. This worked well as it was easy for TEL to see who wanted a badge and cross-reference applications against event attendance lists.

This first pilot showed a good level of interest in the badges. The focal point of Sussex's OEW activities was a Higher Education Academy sponsored event which attracted 32 participants, 22 of whom claimed badges.

To support TEL's ongoing work in this area a dedicated set of webpages were created (see http://www.sussex.ac.uk/tel/help/badges) which outlined what Open Badges were, why staff might want to collect them and how they could earn and display them. In addition Open Badges resources were collected and shared with colleagues in a Flipboard magazine (see http://flip.it/CXvfb).

TEL Staff Development Badges

The OEW badges pilot enabled TEL to experiment with badge design, claiming and issuing but it was never the intention to continue issuing badges merely for attending events. If Open Badges are to gain traction in higher education they need to be assessed against clear criteria and have meaningful evidence included in their metadata.

The team progressed to developing a set of badges with value that could be earned by teaching staff attending some TEL staff development workshops. These badges serve several purposes, they:

- Offer staff an open, transferrable, displayable record of their TEL development activities (these are recorded on an internal Staff Development record but this is only accessible within the institution).
- Raise awareness of Open Badges.
- May encourage, through gamification, increased uptake of TEL staff development opportunities.

Initially five basic badges were planned with a TEL Champion badge offered to anyone who earned all five. Four existing workshops were brought into the scheme and one session, run by colleagues in the library, was added. The badges were:

- Study Direct badge (Study Direct is the Moodle-based virtual learning environment (VLE)).
- Quizzes badge.
- Reading Lists badge.
- Lecture Capture badge.
- SMARTboard badge.

These sessions were well suited to badging as they were interactive and participants produced evidence of their learning during the workshop which could be used as evidence to demonstrate they had met the criteria. There was a tight alignment between learning

outcomes, what was done in the session and the assessment for the badge. For example, in relation to the Study Direct badge, the website stated:

> To earn this badge you need to attend the Introduction to using Study Direct in your teaching workshop; upload 3 different types of resources to a Study Direct (Moodle) site and create at least one activity or block in Study Direct. You can use the 'sandbox' site used in the workshop as evidence for this badge. (www.sussex.ac.uk/tel/help/badges/obtel/obcri)

The badge criteria assessed the learning outcomes for the workshop which were themselves designed to represent a realistic and meaningful learning goal in terms of an entry-level use of the VLE. Participants could claim their badge via a Google Form. A member of TEL would examine the site and, assuming that the criteria had been met, would create the screenshot, showing the required elements, to attach to the badge.

Figure 1. Example of screenshot evidence for Study Direct badge.
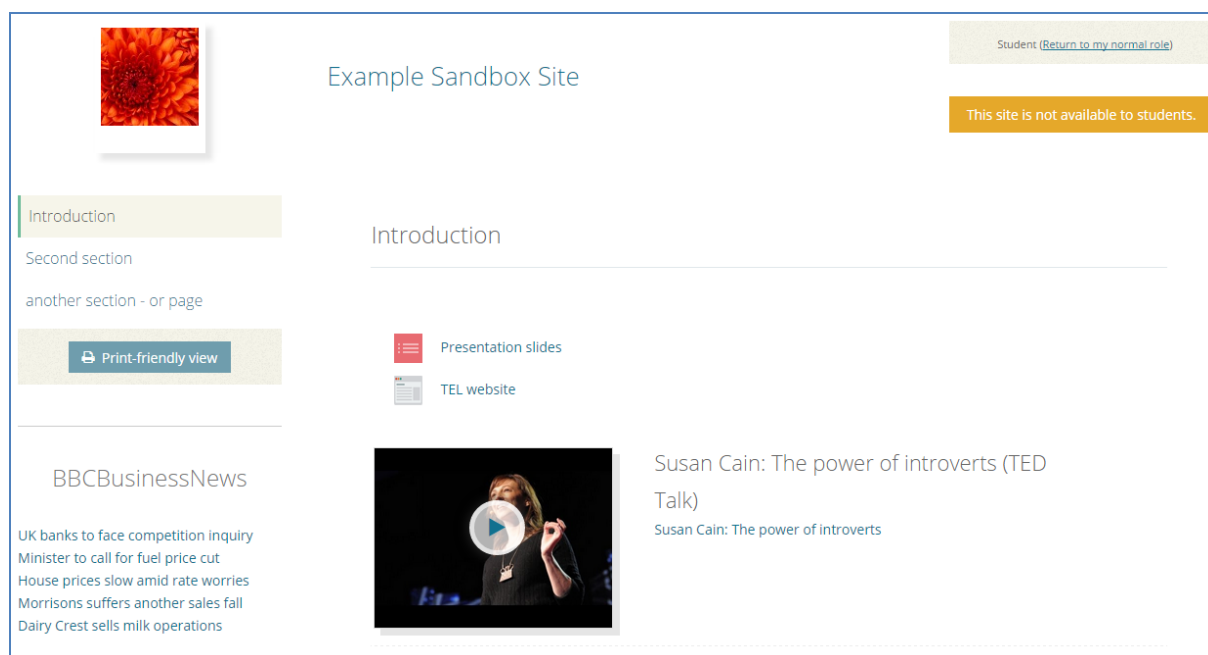
The TEL badges pilot began in late Spring 2014 so, at the time of writing, has been available to only a small number of staff. To date 13 badges have been issued from a potential 21 participants. Three people attended more than one workshop and claimed badges for each, suggesting that they see value in collecting them. No one who came to multiple workshops stopped claiming badges after the first.

Badging 10 Days of Twitter

The use of Open Badges was extended in June 2014 when TEL ran the '10 Days of Twitter' CPD course (created by Dr Helen Webster, http://10daysoftwitter.wordpress.com/) for teaching staff. Three badges were devised, marking significant stages in the development of participants' Twitter skills. Each badge required evidence of activity and achievement. TEL wished to encourage participants to apply for the badges so the application process was as simple as possible – usually just an email or a tweet – and TEL took on the task of collecting the evidence, thus ensuring that the correct evidence was obtained. However if there had been large numbers of badge applications the workload would have been significant.

About 50 members of staff signed up for 10 Days of Twitter, half of whom progressed to a Twitter profile and started to tweet, but not everyone wanted a badge. Altogether five 'Hatched' badges, four 'Flying' badges and one 'Soaring' badge were issued.

Implications and next steps

The Open Badges project is still in its infancy but has already fulfilled many of its aims: introducing the idea of badging to the institution while exploring some of the practical issues and limiting factors.

Members of the project team and colleagues working with students on developing academic and employability skills have together developed a better understanding of how Open Badges might work in their contexts. This has paved the way for possible future use of Open Badges for learner development workshops around information literacy; employability and leadership skills; the Researcher Development Framework etc. One example could be to offer interactive digital skills workshops to students using the badging model adopted for the TEL workshops. Clear criteria could be established and Open Badges awarded which embed the criteria and evidence based on work begun during the workshops. Another possibility would be to use Open Badges to recognise and reward student involvement in projects within the institution, as London School of Economics have done with their Student Ambassadors for Digital Literacy (SADL) project (http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsesadl/). TEL now has the capacity and knowledge to advise and

support colleagues wishing to take forward such badging pilots with students, based on experience of managing badged workshops for staff.

As more TEL workshops are run and badges are issued, plans are being made to undertake a more rigorous evaluation of the project and to assess the extent to which it has achieved its broader aim of raising awareness of Open Badges. The question of whether use of badges can motivate participation in staff development workshops will also be considered.

TEL are also looking forward to exploring the potential of Mozilla's Badgekit when it is released. If it can offer badge design, creation and issuing tools to match (or improve upon) those provided by Credly then it may be a more desirable option.

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