

Policy Brief on Digital Badges

Giovanna DiPasquale

How can educators today prepare students for tomorrow if traditional methods are no longer working? It is a widely held belief that traditional assessments simply test a student's ability to take tests. Research into the achievement gaps between and within subgroups finds that traditional methods of teaching and assessment unfairly disadvantage specific students. Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) reported that "students draw life-shaping conclusions about themselves as learners on the basis of the information we provide to them as a result of their teachers' classroom assessments [and] as evidence accumulates over time, they decide if they are capable of succeeding or not" (p. 11). Stiggins and Chappuis urged educators to spark confidence in students to succeed and to redefine assessment processes.

Internationally known scholar and author Dr. Yong Zhao (2014) argued that a traditional education "[prepares] our students for an economy that no longer exists" (para. 4). This claim is supported by analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's report which showed that bachelor-degree holders are increasingly unemployed or working low-wage jobs which do not require degrees (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014). Zhao (2014) asked us to reconsider the value of skills, knowledge, and talent.

Twenty-first century workers will need creativity, critical thinking skills, and enterprising competencies in order to be competitive in our technology driven, global economy; but how are these measured in the school systems of today? How can educators successfully prepare students for this dynamic future? One strategy is to modify and individualize traditional assessment methods through the use of digital badges.

What are Digital Badges?

Digital badges are electronic representations of learning and skills mastery (Ferdig & Pytash, 2014; Grant, 2014). Like achievements or badges in video games, digital badges are earned by "accomplishing a skill or acquiring knowledge after completing an activity" (Ferdig & Pytash, 2014, para. 1). Attached to the badge are data, including the specific means of earning a badge and the learning it represents. Badges can be stored in a digital portfolio or online profile which highlights the skills of an individual. Across the literature on digital badges, the idea behind their creation seems to be acknowledging that learning can (and does) take place outside of the classroom and in a variety of situations. How, then, will educators bring this concept into the classroom to change the face of education?

Two Main Uses

There are two main uses for digital badges in education: (a) qualifying and exhibiting skills teachers gain through professional development; and (b) individualizing student instruction and assessment. This brief specifically focuses on the

latter. Being applied in an entirely new way, digital badges have a very short history in education. In order for teachers to incorporate digital badges, they will need to be introduced slowly. Teachers can use badge creation sites such as Credly.com and award recognition for specific skill of content mastery. Teachers can also utilize existing badges like the ones found at SmithsonianQuests.org or KhanAcademy.org to supplement traditional pedagogies.

Unlike the endorsements on LinkedIn or the bullets added to resumes, digital badges offer legitimate, verifiable information about the individual. Before they become accepted and acknowledged, however, there will need to be widespread use and cooperative agreement about what each badge represents. A level 1 Composition badge earned in one teacher's third grade classroom may have little meaning to the student's fourth grade teacher, for example. In order to challenge standardized tests, the criteria required to earn a digital badge will need to be selected carefully. Teachers will need to work together across grades and districts to determine what alternative forms of assessment will ascertain skills or content mastery. They will also need to consider which non-traditional skills should be included. Multiple, differentiated options will need to be provided to students, but each should be equally well suited to demonstrate learning. The more widely digital badges are used, the more beneficial and genuine this type of assessment will become.

Motivation

Digital badges provide a non-

traditional means of measuring proficiency and can motivate learners by allowing students to choose projects which appeal to their own interests and work at their own pace. Alexander Halavais, associate professor in Arizona State University's School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, cautioned against allowing digital badges to become extrinsic motivators (as cited in Waters, 2013). Halavais reported that if students work toward a badge simply to earn the badge itself, the benefits will no longer be positive. However, the freedom to self-select interest-based assignments may give students the opportunity to find material that will intrinsically motivate them to work harder toward a goal. Teachers can then align traditional content within the framework of student-selected materials. In the same way that students may increase reading enjoyment and improve reading skill by self-selecting books, students may also improve any number of skills if projects and assessments can be self-selected through the use of a digital badging system.

Conclusion

If digital badges can help students prepare for the future by targeting non-traditional skills and allowing for individualized assessment, exploration of their use should begin immediately. At the very least, digital badges represent thinking in the right direction as they are a means of allowing teachers to gauge and develop the much-needed skills of entrepreneurial and creative thinking. Educators and school boards need to have conversations

today about the integration of alternative, individualized forms of assessments into the classroom to address these twenty-first century aptitudes. The world will not change for our students unless our students are prepared to change the world.

References

- Abel, J., Deitz, R., & Su, Y. (2014). Are recent college graduates finding good jobs? *Current Issues in Economics and Finance*, 20(1), 1. Retrieved from http://www.ny.frb.org/research/current_issues/ci20-1.pdf
- Ferdig, R., & Pytash, K. (2014, March). There's a badge for that. *Tech & Learning*, 34(8), 23. Retrieved from <http://www.techlearning.com/features/0039/theres-a-badge-for-that/54727>
- Grant, S. (2014). Badges: Show what you know. *Young Adult Library Services*, 12(2), 28-32.
- Reid, A., & Paster, D. (2013). Digital badges in the classroom. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/10/11/how-use-digital-badges-help-your-classroom-teaching-essay>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2013). Toward a social psychology of assimilation: Self-determination theory in cognitive development and education. In B. W. Sokol, F. M. E. Grouzet, & U. Muller (Eds.), *Self-regulation and autonomy: Social and developmental dimensions of human conduct* (pp. 191-207). New York: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/cbo9781139152198.014
- Stiggins, R., & Chappuis, J. (2005). Using student-involved classroom assessment to close achievement gaps. *Theory Into Practice*, 44(1), 11-18. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip4401_3
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). *Educational Attainment*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/>
- Waters, J. K. (2013, May). Digital Badges. *T.H.E. Journal*, 40(5), 14-19. Retrieved from <http://online.qmags.com/TJL0513/default.aspx?pg=14&mode=1#pg14&mode1>
- Zhao, Y. (2014). College ready vs. out-of-basement ready: Shifting the education paradigm. Retrieved from <http://zhaolearning.com/2014/07/02/college-ready-vs-out-of-basement-ready-shifting-the-education-paradigm/>

Giovanna DiPasquale holds a B.A. in Fine Arts and is an elementary education masters student in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the College of William & Mary. She is currently student teaching at D.J. Montague Elementary School in Williamsburg, Virginia.