OPEN BADGES - A NEW WAY OF RECOGNIZING AND VALIDATING INFORMAL LEARNING IN LAHTI UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Jenni Meriläinen

Lahti University of Applied Sciences (FINLAND)

Abstract

This paper describes piloting Open Badges in Lahti University of Applied Sciences (LUAS) as a new way of acknowledging learning and skills of students and staff members and supplementing the existing credentialing system. A digital badge is an online representation of skills, abilities or achievements. Open Badge is an open standard developed by the Mozilla Foundation to recognize, validate and demonstrate learning, especially informal learning. An open badge is a digital image with linked metadata. Open badges are digital credentials, created and issued by organizations such as schools, vocational organizations, companies and employers for their students, members, staff, clients or partners. In this paper, the experiences gained from piloting open badges in LUAS are described along with implications for further development and design of open badges.

Keywords: Open Badge, digital badges, learning, technology, educational technology.

1 OPEN BADGES AS TOOLS FOR ACKNOWLEDGING LEARNING AND SKILLS

While traditional certificates produced by formal education are important, there is a growing need to recognize learning taking place in informal and non-traditional environments. Open badges can be seen as a response to this need as well as a phenomenon related to broader changes that have been made possible by the technical capabilities of digital technologies. [1]

A digital badge is an online representation of skills, abilities or achievements. Open Badge is a new standard developed by the Mozilla foundation. Open badges give individuals, employers and educators a framework to represent the full range of skills they earn in different areas of life. Open badges are not limited to educational institutions: also other organizations and individuals can issue open badges. Increasingly diverse types of organizations are issuing open badges, including community organizations, museums and libraries in addition to traditional institutions of higher learning. [2], [3]

The Mozilla Foundation created the Open Badges Infrastructure for issuing and managing digital badges with embedded metadata. Thus open badges have the potential to be evidence-based and verified digital representations of skills and achievements. The Open Badges Infrastructure is an open and free credential-issuing platform that acts as a validator between issuers and earners. Mozilla’s Open Badge Infrastructure provides metadata that details the issuer’s information, criteria for earning the badge, and if desired, a URL to evidence of the earner’s mastery in addition to a digital image. This metadata is sent to the recipient with the digital image as well as stored on the issuer’s servers. This way, the Open Badges Infrastructure provides a level of security and reliability that mere digital images do not. Open badges can contain specific claims about learning, detailed evidence supporting those claims, and links to additional claims and evidence. [4]

Earners can decide for themselves whether to accept the open badge and manage the open badges they receive. The free Mozilla Backpack can be used to collect, manage and display open badges. A badge holder can display any badge from the backpack in any online location, such as a website, social media, or employment site. A prospective employer, client, or other interested party can view the metadata, which certifies the authenticity of the badge and which can provide additional details of the skills that the badge represents. [4], [5] One of the benefits of open badges is portability, which has the potential to increase the visibility of the earners’ skills in a web environment to potential employers, clients, and interested parties

Open badges can take on a number of meanings depending on their implementation and function. In educational context badges are discussed as a motivator for behaviour (related to gamification, the
use of game design elements in non-game contexts) as a pedagogical tool (promoting particular teaching and learning activities) and as an alternative or supplement to traditional credentials such as diplomas. The open badge concept is complex and the idea of badges as a pedagogical tool and badges as credentials may in fact be specialized instantiations of badges as a motivator of some type of behaviour. Badges can encourage extrinsically or intrinsically motivated behaviours and may be interpreted differently by different learners. The process of earning a badge is a form of feedback and well-designed badges can serve as signifiers of what knowledge and skills are valued, guideposts to help learners plan and chart a path, and as status mechanisms in the learning process. [1] Theoretical constructs such as self-regulated learning, student autonomy, and student intrinsic motivation would suggest potential benefits provided by the additional choices and performance feedback offered by a badging system [6].

Using open badges allows educational institutions to recognize achievements that were previously outside the scope of their formal credentialing schemes. Open badges can complement an existing credential structure by recognizing learning that students develop through connecting experiences in formal courses, internships, projects, work experience, and personal pursuits. Open badges can be used as a tool to help students describe, visualize and illustrate their learning and skills. Open badges can also offer more flexible ways to respond to the needs of a quickly changing working life compared to traditional credentials.

Open badges have the potential to signal finer-grained skills, knowledge or dispositions. One feature of a formal credential such as a diploma is the extent to which the credential signals an abstract notion of knowledge and skills. The degree cannot communicate with certainty the specific skills a person has. [7] The potential advantages of open badges include providing credentialing which might reflect a finer-grained and nuanced reflection of a person’s skills or experience. Rather than guessing a person’s skills from a single credential, stakeholders can gather a nuanced picture of a person’s skills through a collection of smaller credentials. [1] Learning is valued in new and diverse ways that move beyond standardized measures that do not capture the full richness of learning activities and achievement.

2 PILOTING OPEN BADGES IN LAHTI UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Lahti University of Applied Sciences (LUAS) began piloting open badges in autumn 2014.

2.1 Open Badges for Students

LUAS has employed open badges as a way recognizing student achievements in a more nuanced way and to signal finer-grained skills, knowledge or dispositions. Open badges have been utilized mostly as a supplement to existing credential structure and to some extent also to promote particular learning and as a motivator for behaviour.

Students have been actively involved in designing the open badge concept. A graphic design student has designed the templates for the digital images. Students studying in student-driven projects in LUAS M.Idea media center have been involved in the design process. A group of IT students made requirement specification for an open badge management system and compared different options for open badge management systems based on Mozilla’s Open Badges Infrastructure. By involving students in the design process, we aim to create student ownership of the open badge concept as a new way of recognizing and validating learning and skills.

When comparing options for an open badge management system based on Mozilla's Open Badge Infrastructure, LUAS chose to utilize the Open Badge Factory developed by Discendum Oy [8] for the piloting of open badges.

![Career Planning Open Badge](image)

**Career Planning**
The student has developed job search skills and gained knowledge of Finnish working life.

[show criteria]

Figure 1: Career Planning Open Badge.
The first Open Badge issued by LUAS is the ‘Career Planning’ –badge (Fig. 1) issued to 14 international students who participated in the mentoring programme developed in Get employed! -project. Get employed! -project aimed at supporting the employability of international degree students studying at LUAS. The students developed valuable competence which otherwise did not fit clearly into existing studies or credentialing schemes. The open badge presented a possibility to recognize and validate this learning. The programme consisted of a kick-off event, five mentoring sessions with a company mentor, closing event, and exercises related to mentoring themes. The mentoring programme developed the student’s competence in job search, knowledge of Finnish working life and professional networks and communication competence with work life mentors. The student’s understanding of his/her own strengths and development needs increased in relation to career aims in Finland. During the mentoring programme, the students were informed about being awarded the open badge as acknowledgement of the skills they had developed. The Career Planning badge was issued at the end of December 2014. By January 21st 2015, 5 students (out of 14) had accepted the badge. Possibly more detailed information and follow-ups are required to increase awareness of open badges and to make the new concept of open badges feasible to students.

During spring 2015, IT teachers are designing a set of open badges to represent students’ project skills acquired in IT projects. Students need to perform different roles in the IT projects they complete during their study modules in order to acquire the skills needed in working life as IT professionals in project organisations. Mastering these different roles would be certified and made visible with open badges. Different roles constitute lower level badges that when grouped together qualify for a higher-level badge which certifies that the student has the skills and understanding of different roles needed to successfully manage IT projects. To start designing these badges, the teachers have listed different roles a student would have to be able to perform when working in IT projects.

2.2 Open Badges for Staff

LUAS is also piloting open badges as a way of recognizing and validating staff competence in strategically important areas of expertise and new, innovative initiatives. Teachers who have created Creative Commons -licensed open learning material and participated in coaching about Creative Commons licensing are awarded an open badge for developing open educational materials and familiarizing themselves with Creative Commons.

Open badges can be used to encourage pedagogical innovations and to promote skills and competencies valuable for the organization. Some areas of expertise being considered for badging are project skills, different pedagogical competences and competence in the pedagogical use of ICT. Open badges would be awarded for staff members who display exceptional skills or abilities in strategically important areas of expertise. The focus on exceptional skills could be one way to try to avoid badge inflation, in which open badges would lose their meaning and value in the eyes of stakeholders. Open badges could serve as a way of promoting and making staff competence, professional development and informal learning visible. Open badges could act as an incentive for teachers to develop their expertise in areas important to the institution.

3 CONCLUSIONS

The informality of the student’s learning acknowledged with open badges in this pilot could be contested, as the instances piloted so far have included some conditions structured by representatives of the school, even if not always directly embedded in formal credential structures. Informal learning is more evident in the case of the workplace learning and abilities of LUAS teachers recognized with open badges.

An open badge management system requires the input from staff members who act as creators and issuers of open badges. Costs of implementing a badging system include not only the maintenance and administration of the open badge management system, but also time spent evaluating the quality of the learning and work qualifying for a badge. LUAS is also developing an open badge strategy to build guiding principles for open badge creation and issuing in order to create a meaningful, consistent and sustainable badge system. LUAS strives to achieve consistency in badging and to avoid badge inflation. How to design strategies, principles and technical systems that encourage open badge production that furthers relevant learning goals? What will it take for open badges to gain credibility and status as credentials among learners, employers and other stakeholders? As badges carry their brand and are publicly visible, these credentials provide an opportunity for branding the university. Maintaining the credibility of the brand is an issue that needs to be considered.
Follow-up on the recipients of open badges is needed to examine the processes through which badges become used as credentials, how learners and other stakeholders experience badges and how badges influence their learning process. What processes, social interactions and cultural developments need to occur before badges are linked to economic and social returns? At what point do badges, which in their current use largely reflect informal learning experiences, become formalized and institutionalized? [1] Research is needed to determine whether badges help students make their learning and skills visible and to determine what employers’ perceptions of badges are and whether badges positively benefit job applicants.

REFERENCES


