SoTL
Snapshot

A synopsis of a scholarship of teaching and learning journal article

Considerations for using digital badges to increase motivation for students to acquire new skills

What is this Research About?

Digital badges (or microcredentials) can document a student's new skillset (e.g., communication skills, leadership behaviors and critical thinking aptitudes) and progress towards gaining new knowledge. Badges can provide an alternative or a supplement to traditional academic transcripts which typically focus on grades so that potential employers have insight into students' skills beyond content mastery. For students, badges can increase their motivation, particularly when they can decide which badges they want to acquire. This process provides them with autonomy over their learning objectives, which can support their motivation in acquiring new skills. Yet, badges are relatively new in higher education. The purpose of this study was to explore how digital badges can be implemented in university/higher education classrooms.

What did the Researchers Do?

The researchers conducted interviews with higher education instructors who have implemented digital badging in their classrooms. Open-ended questions were created and presented to instructors to explore how badging programs are implemented. Specifically, researchers were interested in learning more about:

1. the standardization process of badges. What are the processes that exist for digital badges, and how are badges evaluated?
2. factors that might contribute to student motivation when using badges; What motivates students to use participation-based badges and/or proficiency-based badges?
3. user perceptions of badging programs. Without a standardized currency, do badges add value to the learner's experience?
4. any other considerations to badge development that experts might have, including innovative use of badges in the higher education field.

What did the Researchers Find?

Researchers noted that there is a lack of standardization and evaluation process with digital badges, which make the use of badges challenging. This lack of standardization limits the understanding of what a badge is and how it can be used in various study fields. For organizations, the implementation system and standardization process are important. The interview participants also reported that skill-based badges have the most impact on students' motivation compared to badges given for participation. Motivation can be even higher if the badges match the learners' goals (e.g., gain professional competencies, gain leadership skills valued by potential employers) to attain credentials. They also reported that students valued the ability to transfer badges, especially in competency-based programs (e.g., badges for skills such as communication skills, leadership abilities, professional judgment). Finally, the researchers found that the greatest barrier to badges is the faculty buy-in, as the workload to implement badges can be high.

How to Implement this Research in Your Classroom

This research examined faculty experiences with implementing digital badges in their classrooms. The researchers made the following recommendations based on their findings:

- Standardization in badging can help maximize the buy in and value for users.
- Align badges with learner goals such as developing professional competencies and orient them to skill-based tasks rather than participatory activities to maximize motivation. First, identify student needs and learning goals, so that badges ensure the attainment of the desired skills.
- Be intentional in the design of badges so that they are context-specific and align with the bigger goals and learning objectives of the institution. Be clear about the currency in the badges so students know badges and skills gained are transferable beyond the classroom.
- To alleviate workload in badge implementation, consider starting small so that instructors can master the complex system of digital badges without being overwhelmed.

Citation

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