

**DEMONSTRATING**  
**STUDENT**  
**MASTERY**

with Digital Badges  
and Portfolios

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# Introduction

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Schools are being asked to become more personalized and more standardized—simultaneously. To respond, some schools set up one initiative to focus on achievement and then another initiative to get to know students individually. All too often, these initiatives end up competing for time or even conflicting with each other. This book outlines how it’s possible to do both. Students *can* meet standards while, at the same time, show who they are as individuals. And they can do this through the use of digital badges and digital portfolios.

## **A Few Quick Definitions**

*Digital badges* are a visual way of representing accomplishments. This book focuses on badges that are earned by students (although the same process can be applied to badges earned by teachers).

Typically, a school can start defining badges by examining what every student should know and be able to do. Students can earn badges in all areas of school life: academic areas (writing, mathematics, the arts, world languages), extracurricular activities (community service, athletics, theater), and other areas (habits of mind, work habits).

Students earn badges by completing requirements; for example, a student can earn a writing badge by submitting examples of different genres of writing (persuasive writing, fiction, narrative, etc.). The “digital” part of the badge means that the information about the badge is stored online.

*Digital portfolios* are an online collection of student work that demonstrates the student's accomplishments as a learner. Students submit work to their portfolio online; the work can take many forms (classroom assignments, projects, reading logs, after-school activities) and can be in any format (word-processed documents, spreadsheets, audio, video, images, websites, podcasts).

To be more than just an electronic file cabinet, digital portfolios need to be used as a form of assessment and reflection. Students can collect, select, and present the work in the portfolio as evidence that they have met the badge requirements. Teachers can then use online tools to approve the student submission and verify that the student has met the criteria to earn the badge.

Digital portfolios can be structured in many ways. In this book, a portfolio is a collection of badges. In turn, each badge contains student evidence and teachers' verification.

*Mastery* refers to students achieving a certain level of accomplishment before moving on to the next unit or course. *Competencies* are the set of skills, knowledge, and habits that we expect students to master. For the purposes of what you're about to read, *competencies*, *proficiencies*, *expectations*, and *standards* are essentially interchangeable. Mastery learning (also known as competency-based or proficiency-based learning) is a model of schooling that focuses on students achieving the necessary competencies at their own pace.

Taken together, digital badges and portfolios provide a means for both personalizing and mastering the competencies. A student portfolio can consist of two sets of badges: the *required* badges, representing the competencies expected of all students, and the *personal* badges, representing the student's areas of interest. The specific evidence in the portfolio and the combination of badges that the student earns give a richer picture of that student's achievement. In the final view, a portfolio shows how the student has met the competencies—and it also shows who the student is as a learner.

## **A Roadmap for Readers**

Think of this book as a guide through the stages of the implementation process. The chapters are organized in the order in which most schools get started. You can think of these stages as a rough guide to your first year of implementation. Each chapter addresses one or more *essential questions* to help you frame the conversation at your school.

## Overview

**Setting the vision: What does mastery look like? What can portfolios tell us about students as learners and as individuals?** Chapter 1 explores the various ways digital portfolios and badges are being used to both demonstrate student achievement and provide personalized feedback. The schools that have had the most success with implementing and sustaining portfolios are the ones that have a clearly defined purpose. If you are wondering whether portfolios are worth the effort, this chapter provides reasons that educators have found most compelling.

## Before the School Year Begins

**Defining badges: What do we want our students to know and be able to do?** At the beginning, schools need to define the badges and expectations. What is our vision of what we want students to know and be able to do? What will that look like? Contradictory as it sounds, we begin by thinking about the end. Creating a common vision of what we expect for each student—and articulating that vision as a set of badges—is a driving force for the rest of the work. Chapter 2 discusses this at greater length.

## The Beginning of the School Year

**Aligning assessments: How do students earn the badges? What goes into the portfolio? How do we create portfolio-worthy tasks?** With the school's vision in mind, teachers need to consider what opportunities students will have to earn these badges. This process can build on what teachers are already doing and open a conversation about what teachers want students to carry away from their classes. As teachers think about their current assignments, many schools use this as an opportunity to design some new assessments. Perhaps there hasn't been as much emphasis on group work in one grade level; this could be the catalyst to try something new. It's also the opportunity to open things up to students. What might they consider their best work? What might they do outside school? Where are the opportunities for personalization, and what do we do about standardized testing? These questions are the focus of Chapter 3.

## Throughout the School Year

**Feedback, rubrics, and assessment: How do we decide what's good—or, at least, good enough?** As the school year progresses, there's a regular

cycle of interaction. At certain points of the year, students work on their projects or assignments. This is where they're creating the elements for their portfolios. Students may need varying levels of guidance in this creation, but in the end, we should see the student work that shows the student's current level of achievement.

Teachers, in turn, provide feedback to the students by assessing the work. Chapter 4 examines how common rubrics can help ensure a level of “standards without standardization.” That is, schools can set things up so there is a common understanding of what work is considered “good enough.” The development of rubrics and a calibration protocol are crucial for ensuring a fair assessment. When done well, it can actually allow for greater possibilities; if students come up with their own ideas and projects that they want to submit to the portfolio, the common rubrics make it possible to assess the work and ensure a similar level of quality, whether the work was done in or out of school.

## **The End of the School Year**

**Tours: How do students present their best work?** Toward the end of the year (or term), students will present their portfolios. They can do a tour of their portfolios; that is, they can curate the elements within the portfolio and determine which pieces are the best ones to present; then they can captivate their audience by showing how they're meeting standards—while showing who they are as individuals. The tours are an opportunity to look at the body of work; as such, they enable students and teachers to consider patterns of strength or weakness. The tours are also a chance to put the work in context. Is it clear how each individual assignment or student project links to the larger vision? These tours will be the focus of Chapter 5.

## **Reflecting on the Year and Moving Forward**

**School culture: How do we make sure the portfolios are valued? How do we build on what we already have? What else has to change?** School leaders often ask how to get buy-in. Whether that buy-in is from teachers, students, parents, or other community members, the champions of the cause want to know how to move from “initiative” to a routine part of school life. The fact is, portfolios can build on your school's current best practices, the most meaningful assignments that your teachers give *now*, and the interactions that your students find most supportive.

The potential of digital badges and portfolios is to provide a deeper conversation. To determine what will be valuable, the portfolios have to provide new information or insights. At the end of your first cycle, teachers and students might note that there are things they want to describe about their work that currently aren't in the portfolio or aren't represented by a badge. This is a good thing. The process of revising to reflect what the community finds truly important is what gives an initiative staying power. Chapter 6 discusses this effect on school culture.

### **Resources That Can Help**

Your school doesn't need to start from scratch. Many schools have worked on digital portfolios and badges over the years. At the very end of the book, the Appendix contains an array of supporting documents organized into two broad categories for easy reference: (1) sample badge lists and (2) badge tour templates and rubrics. These documents can help guide your thinking as you begin to create your own materials that will work best for your school community.