



Reward Learning with Badges

Spark Student Achievement

Brad Flickinger

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CHAPTER ONE

Inspiration for the Badge System

OF COURSE, I AM well aware that I am not the first educator to have the epiphany that things need to change. Educators are innovators, and the past decade has seen many promising ideas for rethinking education. My system stands on the shoulders of several different theories, methods, and movements, and as you read about my badge system, you may recognize some elements and practices. Just in case you aren't familiar with any of these terms (and also so you know that I didn't just pull my crazy ideas out of thin air), I'll give a very brief summary of some of my sources of inspiration. My badge system arose amidst this "perfect storm" of ideas.

Influential Books

Literacy Is Not Enough: 21st Century Fluencies for the Digital Age

When Andrew Churches, Ian Jukes, and Lee Crockett published this book in 2011, I had already embarked on the creation of my badge program. Nonetheless, their work had a major impact on my teaching. First, we seemed to be on the same page about the way education needed to go. Second, they did an excellent job of articulating the exact ways and reasons that education needs to change. While technology is mentioned often, the authors focus heavily on the ways students need to think to be successful in the digital age. The ideas of flexibility, creativity, problem solving, and collaboration are touched on repeatedly, which gave me encouragement that I was on the right track. It also frequently put into words frustrations and the goals that I was grappling with that were sometimes difficult to articulate.

Flip Your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day

Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams certainly appealed to teachers with the promising subtitle to their 2012 book. What teacher doesn't wish to reach every student in every class every day? With the recognition that information is easily accessible outside of the classroom, they proposed that the classroom should no longer be the place where knowledge is acquired. Instead, students could be introduced to concepts, lessons, and facts on their own, through video tutorials. Students could watch the videos at home—as quickly or slowly as they wanted, with as many pauses and replays as necessary. They realized

that the part of the learning process that the teacher was most needed for was when students began trying to use the knowledge in practice problems or experiments.

The classroom, then, could become the place where students analyzed, used, tested, played with, and reacted to the information they had learned. Instead of giving information in the classroom and asking students to practice it outside of class, students could come to class with the basic facts in place and delve into higher-order thinking and processing with their teachers and peers. So, instead of functioning as fact dispensers, teachers and students get to share in the more dynamic aspects of learning, which is a win on both of their parts. Practitioners of this system report enjoying far more interaction with their students, fewer classroom management issues, more engaged students, and more success in individualizing education. The original authors later implemented a mastery approach to their flipped classroom model, in which students can navigate the flipped classroom model at their own pace. With the flipped model of instruction being so very untraditional, it is sometimes hard to then try and assign traditional letter grades to the learning that is occurring, which is why some have called my badges the perfect assessment tool for the flipped classroom model.

Learning Models and Approaches

What if, instead of working toward a test or a report, students were working on something authentic and meaningful? In project-based learning, students are challenged to solve real-world problems with projects that have authentic audiences. This type of learning, when well executed, helps students

see the relevance of their studies and connects them to their communities and worlds. No longer is education a result of secretive transactions of manufactured assignments between teachers and students. Instead, students are challenged to gain knowledge for the purpose of solving a meaningful problem. In addition, instead of passively responding to the questions that a teacher poses, students in project-based learning are helping to formulate the questions. I love the independence, meaning, and authenticity of the project-based approach, and I strove to incorporate all of these elements into my badge system.

Challenge-Based Learning

Even the tech company Apple has weighed in with a fresh approach to education with a strategy called Challenge-Based Learning. This approach shares a great deal with the general concept of problem-based learning, but, unsurprisingly, it is much more tied to technology. In their classroom guide to Challenge-Based Learning, they reiterate the problem at hand like this: “Today’s students are presented with content-centric assignments that meet standards but lack a real-world context and opportunities for education” (Apple Inc., 2010). In response, they propose that students’ learning mirror the modern workplace, as they work collaboratively to address real-world problems using technology. After being exposed to a real and current issue facing their community, such as an environmental threat or a social problem, students are challenged to formulate a meaningful response with guidance from their teacher. It was important when designing my badges system that I include a challenge for each badge, something that the students will find interesting enough for them to be motivated to pursue.

Gamification

If you've ever watched the focus and dedication of a young person playing a video game that they are invested in, you've probably wished you could capture just a fraction of that focus and attention. As the Education Lab at MIT observed, "Game players regularly exhibit persistence, risk taking, attention to detail, and problem solving, all behaviors that would ideally be regularly demonstrated in school" (Klopfer, Osterweil, & Salen, 2009). Out of desire to connect these traits to education, it has been proposed that education itself be "gamified." Gamification has been around as a concept for a long time, but the word was not largely used until in 2002, when Nick Pelling, a computer game developer, started giving it some traction.

When I first heard this term, I panicked, thinking that people wanted to turn my classroom into a video game, but I soon found out that this was not the case. Gamification, as applied to education, applies video-game design concepts to educational concepts. Some of the most commonly applied concepts include the idea of charting progress via levels, points, and achievements, as video games commonly do. Instead of completing a unit, students can "level up" and unlock new achievements. A course takes on the feeling of a unified quest, and each new skill they learn is both earning them points and moving them toward completion of their larger mission.

It is important to note that in my system the badge should only be part of the motivation. As in game play, a badge is just a marker—a way to keep track of where you've been and to show others your skill level. You don't play a video game just to get a badge—you play because you enjoy the game, and the badges and points are rewards along a journey. With each badge earned, your body gets a shot of dopamine (the reward

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hormone), which keeps you coming back for more. Badges are a way to literally keep score. For a badge to have true value, it needs to be hard to earn. There is a fine balance between not hard enough and too hard, something that took a little testing with my students. While it is true that my level 1 badges are relatively easy—students get a taste of early success—the higher-level badges get harder as they progress. This gives my badges “street-cred” among students. When my students see that a peer has the filmmaking badge (level 4), they know how hard that badge is to get, so there is some respect given to the badge earner.



Figure 1.1 Students display badges they have earned on their backpacks

The Hacker Mindset

While not its own educational philosophy, the “hacker mindset” is important for teachers to understand, and it too has its origins in video games. Students who think like a hacker are the ones who look for shortcuts, ways to improve,