



Digital Badges in Expanded Learning

Case Study #3: Digital Badges for the Youth Institute Alumni and Youth Participants

By Sam Piha



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Background

If the growing afterschool movement is to prosper, these programs must be recognized as important places of learning. The use and awarding of digital badges to recognize the learning that takes place within these programs represents an excellent strategy to accomplish this.

Digital badges can be used to recognize exemplar programs, staff trainers, program staff who have completed professional development sessions, or youth who have acquired new knowledge and skills through participation in afterschool activities. When we use the term “afterschool” or “expanded learning programs (ELPs)”, we are referring to those youth programs that take place after the school day, during the summer months, and can be based in a school or broader community. These programs are primarily informal learning settings.

The Center for Digital Badges (CDB) and our partners believe that by using digital badges to acknowledge the learning of staff and youth participants, these programs will benefit in the following ways:

- Because program leaders must think through and explicitly state what learning will go on in specific program activities or clubs that is being recognized by a digital badge, this specificity raises the bar for learning accountability.
- The awarding of digital badges defines the learning that goes on in programs for outsiders, which is vital if afterschool programs are to be recognized as important places of learning. These badges are important, visible evidence that afterschool programs take learning seriously.
- The adult program staff members often acquire important knowledge and skills through professional development and years of experience. Youth acquire valuable skills and knowledge through their participation in specific afterschool activities. Both deserve an artifact that documents their learning and—importantly—can be shared with peers, future employers, and those allowing admittance to higher education.

Overview

This case study focuses on the use of digital badges by the Youth Institute (YI) to acknowledge the learning of their program alumni and newer youth participants. The Youth Institute is a year-round program that uses technology as an integral mechanism for promoting positive youth development and developing pathways to post secondary education and career readiness of low-income, culturally diverse urban high school youth. The goals of the YI include:

- To improve academic achievement and stimulate interest in post-secondary education among low-income, culturally-diverse, urban high school youth.
- To improve the technology, career, leadership and decision-making skills of these youth to promote readiness for post secondary education or career entry after graduation.
- To promote bonding to pro-social adults and community attachment among urban youth to ensure that they remain engaged in their schools and communities.

The project is divided into two components, the Summer Youth Institute (SYI) and the Year Round After School Youth Institute (AYI). Every summer 85 incoming youth and 15 alumni (graduates of the summer program) participate in a full-time (35 hours per week), eight-week summer program. The YI targets youth for recruitment from referrals by high school counselors, other youth serving agencies and youth themselves. Youth are chosen based on the risk factors they face which might influence high school completion. The factors may include neighborhood violence, poverty, family conflict/poor family management, poor academic performance or lack of commitment to school, and involvement with antisocial peers. Youth are selected to ensure ethnic and gender diversity.

The Year Round After School Youth Institute (AYI) operates 30 hours a week. Every day over 80 youth come to the AYI to enhance their technology skills, get help with homework and college applications, do service learning projects, and socialize in a safe and supportive place. Staff provides academic and emotional support, Internet access and assistance to complete school assignments.

Design and Development

Youth Institute leaders decided to initially focus their digital badge system on their summer program. They later asked CDB to create badges for their year-round program alumni activities.

“We saw digital badges as a perfect opportunity for our youth to be recognized for their knowledge and expertise in digital media and to provide mastery of skills in a workforce setting. We attended a MacArthur Foundation convening a couple years ago in Pittsburg and everyone was talking about ‘Digital Badges’. We attended a few workshops on digital badges and saw the benefits of this concept.” – Les Peters, Executive Director, Youth Institute

Implementation

The CDB provided assistance to YI in moving through the following steps:

Ask “why” We assisted YI by offering an orientation to ensure that the leadership had a common understanding of what digital badges are and the benefits that they provide to those who receive them. These information resources were gathered from a variety of sources and included original documents authored by the CDB¹. Because mounting a digital badge system takes a fair amount of work, it is important that everyone knows and agrees why a

digital badge system would benefit the program. Are the badges intended to acknowledge learning, motivate recipients, or other reasons?

Determine which activities will be included in the first round of awarding digital badges and the specifics (learning goals, criteria, and evidence)

We consulted with YI’s leaders on which activities warranted the awarding of a digital badge. It is vital that organization and program leaders think through the learning goals (knowledge and skills that will be acquired).

CDB consulted with YI leaders on this process and provided planning toolsⁱⁱ to develop the needed criteria and evidence that was required for each badge. To assist in this process, the CDB adapted planning tools based on our conversations with representatives from Mozilla.

“The learning activities for the YI digital badges follow our existing core curriculum for the summer and year-round programing. We wanted our first phase of the badge system to be implemented fairly quickly, so that we could share it with our YI Replication sites throughout the country. We didn’t want to reinvent the wheel; our core curriculum was developed with the objectives of it being project-based, hands-on and to mirror a traditional academic curriculum model. Every activity in the summer and year-round is product-based; the youth need to show expertise of a subject matter by completing the project. Our program and curriculum model blend perfectly with the badge system.”

– Les Peters, Executive Director, Youth Institute

YI leaders decided to develop a two-tiered digital badge system to recognize the learning of program alumni participants and new participants. For a look at an example of the badges for program alumni, see figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1



Alumni Participant Badges - Summer

For an example of new participant badges, see figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2



For an example of year-round alumni badges, see figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3



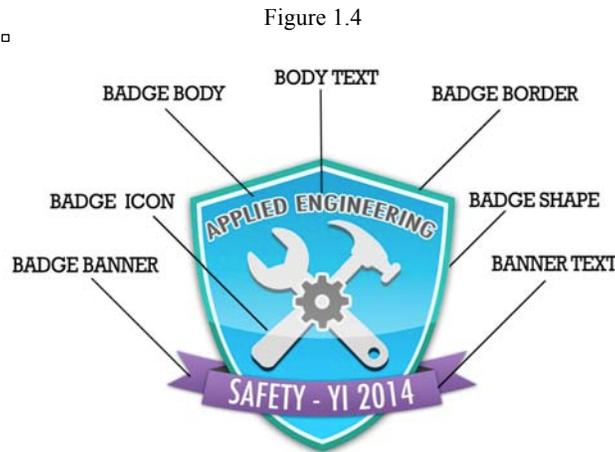
Determine how the badges will be managed and awarded CDB staff assisted YI in deciding how their digital badges would be managed and awarded, and who on their staff would be responsible to manage this digital badge system. The CDB raised funds to support YI’s work and trained their staff on how to use the badge management software to manage and issue badges. The CDB also conferred with YI leaders to ensure they were aware of federal and state legal issues regarding permission and confidentiality.

Determine who and how the badges will be created Badges can be designed by the client using existing badge design applicationsⁱⁱⁱ. YI leaders decided to have the CDB custom design their badges. The design of the badges was guided by a badge design rubric that the CDB provided.

“The design of the badges had to capture a sense of coolness. We chose a hierarchy system: New Class (summer 1st year) earn a circular shape badge, the Alumni (2nd year) have a shield shape badge and Year-round Alumni have a blue background with a shield shape badge. The badge system was created under the guidance of Temescal Associates. The icons used in the badges had to capture the essence of the YI activity and be appealing to the youth.”

– Les Peters, Executive Director, Youth Institute

See figure 1.4 for our badge component map that we provided to YI.



Deliver the digital badge to the recipient using the badge backpack from

Mozilla To enable people to collect their badges, the CDB designed a digital tutorial on how to create a Mozilla “badge backpack”^{iv} and retrieve their digital badge. This was then given to the YI leaders to distribute to their badge recipients.

“Initial response was, ‘cool, I earn a badge?’ We had to explain to them what a digital badge was and how they can earn a badge for gaining a level of expertise and knowledge. It’s a best practice in youth development to recognize, acknowledge and celebrate when young people master a skill. The badges give us another mechanism to showcase the skill sets the youth develop in the YI.”

– Les Peters, Executive Director, Youth Institute

How recipients can make use of the digital badges Once badge recipients have “pushed” their earned digital badges into their backpack, they can share their badges with others by using social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) or placing on their résumés or applications for higher education. We instructed YI staff on how to assist their badge recipients in this process. We also developed a digital tutorial for them to use with their awardees.

The CDB used several technologies in our digital badge work with YI. For the creation of the badges, we used PhotoShop. We researched several digital badge software applications focusing on short and long term cost, ease of use, and compliance with legal issues governing the sharing of data. We decided to use the ForAllRubrics^v application. As described above, we trained YI how to use the ForAllRubrics and the Mozilla digital badge backpack applications.

Evaluation and Benefits

The pilot project with YI did not include a formal evaluation. We did, however, ask YI leadership about what they saw as benefits of the digital badge system

“The benefits of digital badges for the Youth Institute are first for us to maintain relevance with the growing trends in youth development and workforce development. Secondly, it provides an opportunity for our youth to prove mastery of skills in a workforce environment. The third benefit of the digital badges system was the ability to showcase those badges when applying for art schools and universities. It allowed our youth to have a digital portfolio to present and showcase their samples of work. The digital badge system fit in our program design of the YI to have another mechanism to showcase their mastery of skills.

After the initial deployment of the badge system, a few YI Alumni have asked about what other badges are available to them. This tells me, they are interested in the concept and want to earn more badges. I am using anecdotal data to gauge the success of the badges project. I think in a couple years after our YI replication sites adopt the badges system, we would like to set up a formal assessment to get some data from around the country.” – Les Peters, Executive Director, Youth Institute

Conclusions

We asked the YI leadership to reflect on challenges they faced and advice for other program leaders considering mounting a digital badge system:

“Challenges that we encountered were fitting our curriculum model into the badge system. This challenge gave me the opportunity to reflect on our existing curriculum and update it. Learning the online badge system took some practice, but I understood it much better after I input the YI Alumni and learning activities to earn a badge. What surprised me the most was the software interface was so user friendly, after you learn where everything is located.

The advice I would like to share with other organizations is to find individuals who know how to implement the badges system successfully. Temescal Associates provided that expertise needed to establish a badge system that can be easily integrated into your existing programming. The assistance we received from Temescal Associates was excellent. Any questions we had was answered within 24 hours from the time of the phone call or email. I would not change anything at this time.” – Les Peters, Executive Director, Youth Institute

About the Center for Digital Badges (CDB) <http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/>

The mission of the Center for Digital Badges is to ensure that afterschool and summer youth initiatives and expanded learning programs (ELPs) have the capacity to recognize learning by youth and adults where it happens.

If ELPs, such as those found in afterschool initiatives and community-based organizations, are to prosper, they must be recognized as important places of learning. A growing number of programs and ELP systems are using digital badges to acknowledge the learning and capacity building by their youth participants and adult staff. However, finding information on resources and best practices is very difficult. To address this problem, Temescal Associates launched a *Center for Digital Badges (CDB)*.

The CBD is designed to:

- Advocate for the use of digital badges;
- Promote state and local policies and guidelines that are supportive of digital badges;
- Promote the recognition of others that digital badges are valuable evidence of learning;
- Serve as a clearinghouse to offer the most up-to-date information on best practices, and where they are being applied;
- Direct services to ELPs and trainers wishing to issue digital badges; and
- Contribute to national and global discussions on digital badges by participating in digital badge summits and working groups.

About Temescal Associates <http://temescalassociates.com/>

Temescal Associates is a private consulting firm and will serve as the primary consultant for this project. Temescal is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who are serious about improving the lives of young people. We serve our clients by offering gifted and highly experienced consultants who excel at eliciting the internal knowledge and wisdom of those they work with while introducing new knowledge and strategies that can transform the day-to-day practices that lead to improved youth outcomes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

Auburn University, Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES); “4-H Digital Badging Support”; [http://www.hastac.org/files/stagetwoproposal-au-1-17-2012final.pdf]; August 2014

Harvard Family Research Project; “Data Sharing Resources for Afterschool and Expanded Learning Programs and Systems”; [http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/data-sharing-resources-for-afterschool-and-expanded-learning-programs-and-systems]; August 2014

Carey, Kevin; “Show Me Your Badge”; [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/show-me-your-badge.html]; August 2014

Fleming, Nora; “R.I. Students Gaining ‘Badges’, Credits Outside School”; [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/02/06/20credits.h32.html]; August 2014

Fleming, Nora; “Chicago Launches Largest Citywide Summer Learning Effort”; [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/02/06/20credits.h32.html]; August 2014

Piha, Sam; “Briefing Paper: Steps in Implementing a Digital Badge System in Expanded Learning Youth Programs”; [http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Steps-in-Implementing-a-Digital-Badge-System.pdf]; March 2015

Piha, Sam; “Briefing Paper: Legal Issues in Awarding Digital Badges in Expanded Learning Youth Programs”; [http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Legal-Issues-and-Digital-Badges-Briefing-Paper.pdf]; March 2015

Piha, Sam; “Guide for Expanded Learning Youth Programs Interested in Awarding Digital Badges”; [http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Guide-for-Expanded-Learning-Youth-Programs-Interested-in-Awarding-Digital-Badges.pdf]; March 2015

Videos on the CDB Website [http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/other-resources/additional-videos/]

- “What is a Badge?”
- “Chicago Summer of Learning”
- “Digital Badges: Unlocking 10 Millions Better Futures”
- “Digital Badges & Mozilla’s Open Badge Backpack”
- “Digital Badges, a New Currency for Professional Credentials”
- “Global Gateway Digital Badging System”

Websites

- <http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/>
- <http://www.2mbetterfutures.org/about>
- <http://openbadges.org/>
- <https://www.openbadges.me/>
- <http://www.youtopia.com/info/>
- <https://www.forallrubrics.com/>
- <http://citiesoflearning.org/learn/>

Endnotes

ⁱ For original documents developed by the CDB: <http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/resources/cdb-articles/>

ⁱⁱ For more information on planning tools: <http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/> and <http://openbadges.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on Open Badges Designer: <https://www.openbadges.me/>

^{iv} For more information on Mozilla Badge Backpack: <https://backpack.openbadges.org/backpack/login>

^v For more information on ForAllRubrics: <https://www.forallrubrics.com/>