



Open badges

recognising learning through digital micro-credentials

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Potential impact	medium
Timescale	medium term
Keywords	open badges, certification, validation, meta-data, micro-credentials

What is it?

Open badges are a 21st-century solution to the shortcomings of paper certificates in the age of digital, online identity management. These small visual signifiers which carry hard-coded meta-data can be issued by anyone in order to recognise achievement or participation in formal or informal activities. They link back directly to the issuer, the criteria for award, and the evidence. The learner can collect and display their open badges online to reveal their journey and discover new opportunities. Open badges emerged from the Badges for Lifelong Learning Competition in 2011 funded by the MacArthur Foundation and administered by HASTAC in collaboration with the Mozilla Foundation (MacArthur Foundation, 2012). The aim was to provide a “powerful new tool for identifying and validating the rich array of people's skills, knowledge, accomplishments, and competencies [...to] inspire new pathways to learning and connect learners to opportunities, resources, and one another” (HASTAC, 2020, n.p.). The open badge infrastructure is based on an open source set of standards which have enabled the ‘baking’ of meta-data within a digital image through the use of an open badge platform. Open badge platforms are free to access, at least initially,

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offering educators the opportunity to create visual, shareable micro-credentials which recognise a learner’s journey.



Figure 1. Open Badges 2.0 by Visual Thinkery is licenced under CC-BY-ND

Example

Language acquisition is a complex, often lengthy journey. Much of our international communication today is mediated through technological environments such as messenger services, social media channels, and virtual rooms. Skills in computer-mediated communication can be acquired through engagement with virtual exchange, defined by the Erasmus Plus-funded **EVOLVE** project as:

“sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators” (<https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/>).

The deployment of open badges issued at specified points in a learning arc (Cross & Galley, 2012), can help build awareness of these steps to competence. In their investigation of the Clavier virtual exchange, Hauck and MacKinnon (2016) identified a framework for the design and implementation of open badges in virtual exchange activities. Including badges as part of course design offers an opportunity to critically review learning design assumptions and to communicate the intended learning outcomes to participants. Once awarded, badges are owned and managed by the learner who is able to include them in their own online presence.

Largely as a result of the research into Clavier's use of open badges in language learning through virtual exchange, open badges were implemented in The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative which began in 2018 with support from the European Commission (<https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual>). This multi-partner initiative aims to mainstream the use of virtual exchange in order to increase the number of young people who experience intercultural dialogue. The open badges provide a mechanism for raising awareness of online presence and communicating connections fostered between European, Middle Eastern, and North African regions. The role of the open badges was chiefly to act as signifiers of activity completion which could then be shared online to build and connect a network of expertise in virtual exchange. One of the partners, UNICollaboration, was responsible for the procurement and management of a suitable open badge platform for all activities using *Open Badge Factory*. UNICollaboration designs and delivers training in virtual exchange, known as Transnational Exchange Projects (TEPs), for practitioners in higher education institutions and for youth workers, providing professional development and building capacity for virtual exchange. UNICollaboration connects language educators who are already involved in virtual exchange with practitioners in other disciplines where their understanding of linguistic and intercultural issues may facilitate successful interactions across national and disciplinary boundaries, leading to groundbreaking new collaborations. To date the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative has issued about 12,000 open badges for activity completion and an ecosystem of meta- and micro – level skills is communicated on the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Youth hub.

Benefits

Open badge use is technically quite straightforward and helps learning designers draw attention to what they value. Reflecting on how and when a badge is awarded and setting criteria for that award are useful processes to incorporate into learning design. Deploying digital micro-credentials when the learning activity is delivered online furthers the acquisition of digital skills and creates the potential for learner curation of an online professional presence. Open badges are more secure than paper certificates as they carry data which tracks back to the issuer and the reason for issue and cannot easily be falsified. Use of open badges fits well with the creation and sharing of a reflective e-portfolio, encouraging engagement with deeper learning practice.

Potential issues

It is still quite early days for the use of open badges and therefore many may be unaware of their significance. This can be addressed with good communication around how to collect and display a badge. Designing for use of open badges may take time and experimentation, preferably in consultation with the badge recipients. However, adopting an inclusive approach to the implementation of badges does offer a real opportunity to reconnect learners to curriculum design and thus strengthen their engagement. An example of this could be the use of open badges aligned with UNESCO's sustainable development goals.

Looking to the future

Including open badges in learning design can bring an element of gamification to formal learning and, when shared and displayed, can help connect badge earners to new learning opportunities through display portals such as *Open Badge Passport*. There are examples of badge applications internationally such as the *Badgeons la Normandie* project, which increase access to learning across formal and informal settings. Such examples may be particularly relevant

to language learning given the reduction in access to language learning in formal education due to barriers of cost and time that many experience.

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Resources

- Badge wiki: a comprehensive collection of resources on open badges: https://badge.wiki/wiki/Main_Page
- Badgeons la Normandie project: <https://misterppqx.name/bln/le-projet-badgeons-la-normandie/>
- Erasmus Plus Virtual Exchange digital badges: <https://youtu.be/Hq5BE-hoEKA>
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- Open Badge Passport: <https://openbadgepassport.com/>
- Research into the use of open badges: a curation of publications: <https://badge.wiki/wiki/Research>
- What is an open badge?: <https://youtu.be/Xc4xDgNbl6Y>
- What is virtual exchange?: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_exchange
- Why badges?: https://badge.wiki/wiki/Why_Badges%3F



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