



Making Progress Visible with Digital Badges

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In recent years I've focused on making my classes more student-centred. This past year I experimented with the use of badges to support independent student learning.

It started for me at the BETT technology conference in January 2014 in a presentation by Doug Belshaw about the Open Badge project. He really piqued my interest. I envisaged an online system that uses badges – electronic icons - to track learning. Duolingo does this for its specific language lessons, but I wanted to build a framework general enough for any teacher in any subject. I pictured a system that allowed blended instruction, mixing online and face-to-face learning, while keeping track of individualized progress for students on multiple learning paths.

To tackle this ambitious project, I held true to my ethos of “think big, start small,” and I made sure to keep small truly small. Better to get started on a manageable scale than over-plan and not have time for all the details. I turned my goal of multiple learning paths into one learning path of different lengths, an element of differentiated learning. We could then differentiate by process, task and outcome, but I focused mostly on outcome, hoping to develop autonomously acting students who decided their own processes, tasks and outcomes - with a little help and guidance along the way.

I started by choosing a topic. This was difficult because we don't have specific learning objectives set out for any given area. I settled on probability, mostly because we were going to begin a unit at the point I was ready to start this project. I made a list of as many objectives as I thought the students could realistically achieve. There were a number of resources available, including for example the UK National curriculum, a syllabus from one of the leading international examination boards, and the US Common Core of the US. Still thinking big, but starting small, I picked the easiest option, which was to take the learning objectives provided by MyiMaths. I had then 16 objectives with about 4 weeks time.

What I needed next was a way to guide the learners through the content and keep track of what they were completing. This was also hard. I thought about a number of different platforms. I was already using edmodo, which is compatible with a badge system. I also explored systems compatible with Open Badges, because one of my goals was that the 'badges' be transferrable. I explored Badge the UK, Schoology and Credly, but they all had aspects that didn't quite fit what I was looking for. I wasn't quite ready in my own curriculum documentation, nor in my assessment and

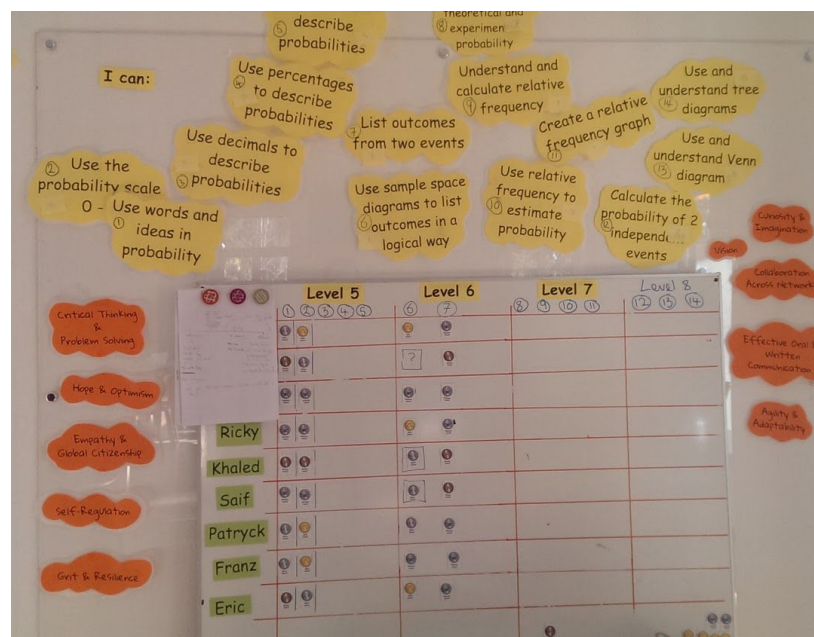
learning policies, to transfer it all online.

“Think big, start small and go smaller!”

By thinking big, I imagined a school-wide digital platform, keeping track of student progress across academics, activities, and pastoral life in our boarding school setting. The system could combine grades and merits. I also toyed with the idea of incorporating learning skills, but these would have to transcend topics and subjects.

However, I was working alone on badges, confined to my own classroom, so the idea that I could create a digital portfolio for students, aligned with our learner profiles and mission statements, which could be recognized school-wide, was far too grand at this stage. Think big, start small and go smaller!

I started with a physical badge board, something that is not uncommon in many classrooms. It was very visible and students could easily see their progress in relation to the whole class. But it wasn't very sustainable, I would soon run out of wall space if I were to continue with more



topics. Nor was I achieving the goal of recording learning so that students could carry it forward into the next year. Enter Youtopia.



www.youtopia.com

I was looking at different ways I could keep track of learning, assess, and collect formative feedback. Youtopia jumped out at me. It promised to be flexible enough to create my own awards and challenges, but it would also quantify the results in the form of reports. As I explored further, I found that it even had ready-made badge templates, something that was very time consuming on other platforms. All the features were there. I created an account and I began to explore.

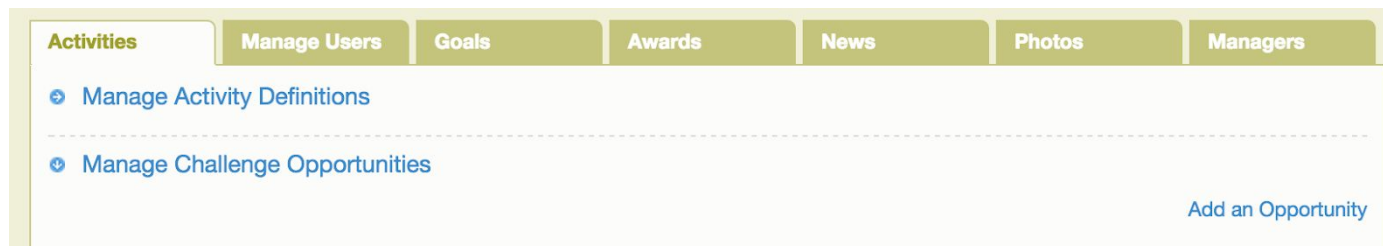
“Developing innovative, compassionate and responsible citizens of the world.”

Unfortunately the learning curve was steep and I wasn't able to roll it out for my class. Youtopia's Achilles heel is its complexity. It's a shame, really. If as an enthusiastic teacher-researcher I'm not able to handle the learning curve, how could the school expect any teacher to adopt a system like this?

I feel if Youtopia were to simplify to just a few features and clean up its user interface they would have a very good product indeed. The basic features:

- An institution wide user management system;
- Teacher and student accounts that look and behave differently with a very very simple student interface;
- A way to set a task or a challenge;
- A way to approve and add value to the task; and
- A way to track these tasks on teacher and student accounts.

I know that all that is there in Youtopia, somewhere - it's just too difficult to navigate and organise in its current format.



A screenshot from youtopia. At first look it is not easy to determine the meaning of activity definitions, challenge opportunities, awards and goals.

We have moved on to a model where the students are working on their own using www.myimaths.com. I have students learning 12 times tables and others solving systems of equations, it's a real mix. Using badges has been lost as I try to regroup and see how it might fit this type of class with no set of common learning objectives for the class.

It wasn't wasted effort, however. The students showed me that they enjoyed being given a learning path through objectives they could reach, they also showed me they were capable of being independent and working through a series of tasks at will (though I still gave them a specific levelled journey to stick to). They were happy to ask where to look, but also used myimaths.com to follow appropriate lessons. Any

failure lies with my lack of provision of clear learning paths, so that is where I will go next. Establishing my next objective is also not a trivial result of the research on badges.

So for now I will step back from digital badges in order to set out our learning objectives. It sounds a little obvious, perhaps, but setting out a path for students to discover mathematics will keep everyone on track. It will also help when I integrate other activities that focus more on problem solving and design.

Grading was also an issue. Badges only crudely map onto grades. So temporarily I will look at using our own grading structure with some modification, allowing students to revisit their work and ask to be assessed at any moment - something students have demonstrated a willingness to do in my experiment this year. Again, this all depends on me providing a minimum learning path with a set of clear objectives. Of course, this is all linked to having solid assessment and feedback policies at our school, but I'll save that for an entirely different article.

In summary, it seems that there is a place for badges, but we have some work to do before badges will be very useful. That means having a solid curriculum. It means having sound assessment and feedback policies that are designed to foster the desire in students to improve. Once a set of learning objectives are in place, we can cycle back to badges.

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