

Digital Badges in Expanded Learning

Case Study #1: Digital Badges for CalSAC Adult Trainers and Training 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”, 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

The focus of this case study is our pilot project with the California School-Age Consortium (CalSAC) in their mounting a digital badge system. This pilot enabled CalSAC to award badges to their trainers and the afterschool staff that participated in their professional development training and programs. The CDB subcontracted with Public Profitⁱ to assist us in this effort.

CalSAC is dedicated to support and advance the out-of-school time (OST) field by connecting professionals, enhancing competency, and building community. CalSAC provides training, leadership development and advocacy opportunities to staff serving children and youth. It offers free and low-cost training to afterschool staff in California through a network of trainers. These trainers are also professionals in the afterschool field in communities across the state.

“Given the breadth, scale and depth of training and leadership development opportunities that staff and programs access from CalSAC any given year, it seemed clear that there should be a way for them to capture the investment they’re making toward providing quality services for children and youth. To accomplish this, we designed digital badges to align with our established training and leadership programs. Developing the digital badge system helped us think through how we communicate our projects to a larger audience.”

- CalSAC Executive Director, Ruth Obel-Jorgensen

CalSAC chose to issue badges to trainers first, with the eventual goal of issuing badges to all staff from afterschool organizations who participate in trainings. They have begun this by issuing badges to staff who completed a year-long leadership fellowship.

Design and Implementation

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

Ask “why” We assisted CalSAC by offering an orientation to staff and offering pre-readingsⁱⁱ to ensure that everyone 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 CDBⁱⁱⁱ. The reader can access an agenda from our early meetings with CalSAC staff^{iv}. 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 CalSAC’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). According to Obel-Jorgensen, “One of the important considerations in the design of the badge system was establishing criteria for the badges that were easy enough to achieve and that would not intimidate participants, but challenging enough to carry weight.”

CDB consulted with CalSAC leaders on this process and provided planning tools^v 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.

CalSAC leaders decided to develop a multi-tiered digital badge system. It includes the recognition of staff serving as CalSAC trainers according to their length of service, level of activity and leadership roles they have fulfilled. These roles include serving as a mentor, leading a training of trainers institute, and contributing to curriculum development. For a look at an example of these trainer badges, see figure 1.1.



Figure 1.1

A second tier recognizes trainees who have participated in long-term, more extensive projects. These projects go deeper to develop the capacity of the participants and the agencies they work for. They are referred to as “capacity” badges. For instance, the capacity badge entitled *Leadership Development Institute* is awarded “when a participant completes a year-long cohort-based fellowship for emerging leaders of color focused on creating more responsive programs and policies for OST and early education programs.”^{vi} For an example of capacity badges, see figure 1.2.



Figure 1.2

Training participants can also receive a badge for building their competency to work with children and youth. This “competency” badge is awarded on completion of a certain number of hours in training sessions. For instance, the competency badge entitled *Working with Children and Youth* “requires participating in 8 or more hours of training in CalSAC’s Working with Children and Youth series.”^{vii} For an example of competency badges, see figure 1.3.



Figure 1.3

Determine how the badges will be managed and awarded CDB staff assisted CalSAC 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 CalSAC's work and trained their staff on how to use the badge management software to manage and issue badges. The CDB also conferred with CalSAC leaders to ensure they were aware of federal and state legal issues regarding permission and confidentiality. Obel-Jorgensen stated, "The badge system hosting was a big part of our consideration since we would have to tell our constituents how to use it, and we wanted a system that was easy to use".

Determine who and how the badges will be created Badges can be designed by the client using existing badge design applications^{viii}. CalSAC leaders decided to have the CDB custom design their badges. CalSAC viewed this option as a way to further align badging initiatives. In the words of Obel-Jorgensen, "In the graphic design, it was important to maintain CalSAC branding, as well as design elements that corresponded to the badge titles." This was guided by a badge design rubric that the CDB provided. See figure 1.4 for our badge component map that we provided to CalSAC.

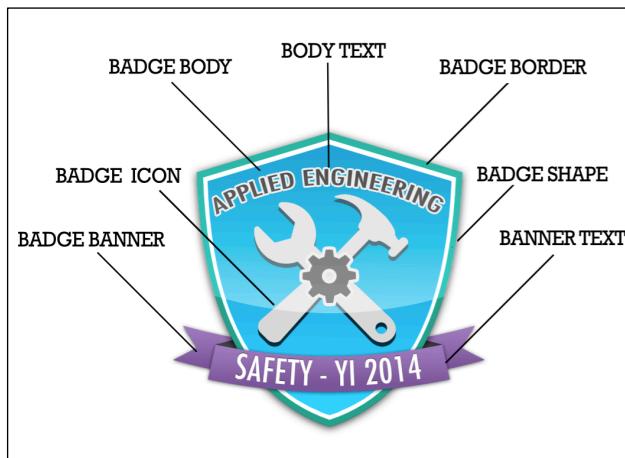


Figure 1.4

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"^{ix} and retrieve their digital badge. This was then given to the CalSAC leaders to distribute to their badge recipients.

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 CalSAC 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 CalSAC. 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^x application. As described above, we trained CalSAC how to use the ForAllRubrics and the Mozilla digital badge backpack applications.

Evaluation

The pilot project with CalSAC did not include a formal evaluation.

“We utilized anecdotal evidence and a formal review of the badge user database. We gauged the success of the badge project by the amount of users who have accessed the ForAllRubrics system to retrieve their badge and the amount of outward recognition of the digital badges.

There was an initial excitement about the idea and implementation of a digital badging system. However, there continues to be a lack of buy-in or full understanding of the badge ecosystem.” - CalSAC Executive Director, Ruth Obel-Jorgensen

Conclusions

The use of digital badges is new to the afterschool community. In order for a badging initiative to be successful, stakeholders must understand the value of digital badges and how they can be used. To accomplish this, these messages have to be heavily reinforced. Obel-Jorgensen agreed, “One of the challenges is communicating about badges and getting buy-in. We held a webinar, sent emails and created user guides. The process of accepting the badges and then sharing them remain a challenge for recipients.”

“The support provided by CDB was essential. However, it will be important for CalSAC and the CDB to increase the marketing and messaging to badge awardees, as well as the leaders of the afterschool community and individual youth programs. We need to raise awareness of digital badges and make the case for their value. This also means ensuring that there is alignment and connection with other badge initiatives statewide and nationally. Finally, support with securing funding for ongoing development and management will also be important for programs to sustain their badging initiatives.” - CalSAC Executive Director, Ruth Obel-Jorgensen

For program leaders planning to initiate a badging system, Obel-Jorgensen advised that the planning phase is really the most important, and that taking the time to get as many details on paper ahead of badge creation really helps move things along. “You won’t always have the answers, but dive in anyway. This is something new, so mistakes are part of the process. You’ll need tracking systems and a marketing plan.”

The CDB will endeavor to address these challenges through our continued development of materials and tools. We will also form a work group consisting of other organizations in California interested in working together to raise awareness of digital badges, align our collective work, and connect with other badge initiatives.

For a full description of their digital badge offerings, you can view it on their website: https://calsac.org/projects/digital_badges. (See figure 1.5 for a partial view of their badges.)

TRAINING PARTICIPANT BADGES

Capacity badges are designed to recognize training participants who have participated in long-term projects. These projects go deeper to develop the capacity of the participants and the agencies they work for.

Badge	Name	Description	Criteria
	Capacity: English Learner Training and Professional Development Program	Attended training on how to serve English Learners in OST programs.	Out-of-school time staff members are awarded this badge for completing a professional development sequence focused on how out-of-school time programs can best support English Learner youth. This includes attending three 4-hour trainings on the following topics: Knowing English Learners; English Language Development, Academic Support, and Linkage to the School Day; and Healthy Cultural Identities and Engaging Families and Communities.
	Capacity: Leadership Development Institute	Completed a year-long cohort-based fellowship for emerging leaders of color focused on creating more responsive programs and policies for OST and early education programs.	Out-of-school time staff members are awarded this badge for successful completion of the Leadership Development Institute, which prepares emerging leaders of color to lead successful, equity focused organizations and includes the following: 1) participation in LDI monthly development gatherings; 2) completing periodic assignments to connect lessons to work and life; 3) setting organizational and individual goals; 4) investing time and effort in a diverse peer learning community by actively contributing knowledge, skills and insights; 5) developing a portfolio including a presentation and reflection paper at the completion of the fellowship.
	Capacity: Gender Equity in Afterschool Computer Science	Received training on ICT4me curriculum and conducted ICT4me curriculum with children and youth.	Out-of-school time staff members are awarded this badge for successful completion of the GEACS training series, which builds the capacity of staff to implement ICT4me, an afterschool and summer youth-based curriculum for middle schoolers to develop information and computer technology (ICT) fluency, interest in mathematics, and knowledge of ICT careers.

Figure 1.5

About the Center for Digital Badges (CDB)

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

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 more information about Public Profit: <http://publicprofit.net/>

ⁱⁱ The CDB provided CalSAC with information from Mozilla Open Badges: <http://openbadges.org/>

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

^{iv} For a meeting agenda developed by Public Profit: <http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CalSAC-Badge-Mtg-Agenda-Sample.pdf>

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

^{vi} For more information on CalSAC's badges: https://calsac.org/projects/digital_badges

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} For more information on Open Badges Designer: <https://www.openbadges.me/>

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

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