

The Introduction of Badges at the Epstein Jewish Day School
Report by Global Kids to the Covenant Foundation (January, 2011/2)
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1) IN THEIR OWN WORDS: AN OVERVIEW

Last week Global Kids staff met with eleven students at the Epstein Middle School, in Atlanta. We were there to learn how this Jewish day-school is implementing the digital badging system we co-developed with them last spring and summer. We asked the students to explain the system to us as if we knew nothing about it.

“We choose a topic, we choose a skill,” shared the students, “from Collaboration Badge, Information Literacy Badge, Acceptance Badge, and Empowered Learner Badge. With each of these badges we go through different stages and work on doing it.”

Their explanations demonstrated their understanding that badges support personalized and self-directed learning:

“With badges you can do any one you want.”

“You try to complete the badges in the time that you want..”

“You can take as much time as you need to work on it.”

“You can put as much effort in as you want.”

“You always have to try to keep up [grades]... but with badges it is optional.”

Speaking of grades, how are badges any different? “This is kinda extra credit stuff,” they explained. “It is for your own good and your own future. It just makes you better.” Better in what way? “Maybe a better job, maybe teachers will respect you more, maybe they will like your strengths and you will get put into your strengths more than your weaknesses.” And it is fun, like a game. A “dream come true.”

These eleven students each earned the “recognize it” achievement within either the Collaboration, Information Literacy Badge, or Acceptance Badge. Should they continue, they may set their sights on the “talk about it” or “do it” achievement. While far from a requirement, they each decided to do something new to earn their achievement, rather than apply with something they have done elsewhere in their lives (e.g. from collaborating on a sports team). And they each had very different reasons for pursuing their badge:

“I am in the Collaboration Badge because I wanted to work on how well I work with other people in groups and on projects.”

“I am doing Acceptance Badge. And so there is a lot of drama in this grade so I thought,

like, not a lot of people were being accepted and people who just, like, like the saying goes, “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” while people were doing it, which really wasn’t nice, so I was just saying I wanted to make a change.”

“I am doing the Acceptance Badge. I am doing it because people say to stand up for what you believe in and to accept people, but if you think about it not very many people actually do those things. So I wanted to let people know that even though it’s hard to be accepting sometimes, you have to.”

“I thought it would be fun because when you are older you have to collaborate with people in order to do something and if you don’t know how to do that you’re going to have a lot of trouble.”

“One of the reasons I signed up for the Acceptance Badges is because my family has a thing with peace, and accepting people. My Zayde, one of my grandfathers, was the head of the civil rights movement in Ithaca college, and my cousin started the Israel rally in Atlanta, and there’s other stuff. It’s one of my strengths and there are many projects I can do with it. But I want to explore how *I* feel about acceptance, not how my **family members** feel about acceptance.”

“I did the Brin Informational Literacy Badge because I really wanted to learn how computers work, and I wanted to earn power-ups, and this is going to go onto your permanent record so it’s going to help me get into a better college.”

They described the power-ups like a prize. You earn power-ups when you get a badge. “The first one is you can go to the computer lab during writing or technology and work on your badge during that time.” Who gets to decide, the student or the teacher? “We get to decide,” they all erupted. “And without supervision.”

At the end of the day, conferring upon students the ability to be autonomous reflects Epstein’s primary educational goal for the badges, to train them to become self-directed, lifelong learners. “It’s cool that we are the group that will be the first ones trying the badges out,” they told us.



2) IN MORE DETAIL

In the Spring of 2011, Global Kids began working with the Epstein School in Atlanta, totalling roughly 120 hours by the end of the calendar year. Over the course of two in-person trainings, one remote training, and numerous phone calls and email discussions, Global Kids introduced the school to the power, potential and perils of digital badging systems. Epstein identified nine subject areas to badge, and together we developed a strategy for running the badging system and rolling it out to the school in August, 2011.

The project was designed by Global Kids to mirror the effective processes found in digital games. The project's goal is to engage sixth graders in a program that stresses persistence, risk taking, research, and review.

Following several faculty meetings, the Badges Committee at Epstein linked Badges to positive Jewish role models: for each of the nine Badges, a Jewish role model was selected that exemplified the Badge to be earned. They also decided that, for this year, they would be focusing on only four of the Badges: Empowered Learner (Elana Kagen), Informational Literacy (Sergei Brin), Acceptance (Eli Weisel) and Collaboration (Ruth Messinger). Within each badge, students have the opportunity to recognize the essential qualities being modeled, talk about them, and then to create a project, thereby earning the Badge. A digital transcript will track the progress of each student. As with all digital games, Badges have "power ups" to both reward success and motivate students; the content of the power-ups are related to the content of the badge's skill. Participation in Badges is encourage for all but optional.

More specifically, the Epstein badging system includes a number of elements which use badges as the core organizing element:

- **Learning Badges:** The Learning Badges are discrete objects that represent the different Digital Media Learning Objectives and if the particular literacy has been demonstrated.
- **Digital Transcripts:** The digital transcripts are a visualization mechanism to signal learners on both the range of badges and their personal accomplishments to date.
- **A Badge Management System:** The badge management system is simply short-hand for describing how the badge ecology will be managed, all of the moving parts and systems described in this list, with the badge as the central unit passing through them all.
- **Badge Submission Process:** The process by which a student will request their work be reviewed in order to earn a particular badge.
- **Committees:** The Committees are to whom students will submit their work to earn their badges.
- **Learning Rubrics:** The learning rubrics will develop a matrix to guide the evaluation of a learner's relationship with the literacy.
- **A Back-end Infrastructure:** The badges and transcripts are administered through an online toolkit that will be adapted for the school from an existing template and then live on the school's own servers, behind their own firewalls.
- **Digital Portfolios:** While badges are conferred through the badge system, the portfolio is developed and curated by the individual learner.

3) The Learning Badges

below. At first, the Informational Literacy Badge became the Sergey Brin Informational Literacy Badge. It was immediately clear this was too long. We shortened it to the Brin, or the Brin Badge. We then realized that dropping the name of the learned skill accidentally eliminated an important value of badges: supporting students to develop meta-cognitive skills around what they were learning. Ultimately, the literacy was returned and part of the role models name was lost, e.g. the Brin Informational Literacy badge.

The second innovation was the creation of animated characters, based on the role models, to introduce each of the badges. For example, the Heschel Jewish Ethics Badge, pictured below, is a characterization of Abraham Heschel, who gives a brief overview of his life and how it was informed by Jewish ethics. The web-based program Voki was used to develop the animations. Many can be seen here: <http://tinyurl.com/epsteinvokis>.

The animations were used to launch the badging program to the sixth grade students. All were gathered for an assembly, where the badging system was introduced and each badge explained through its associated videos. The third innovation was then developed by the student body splitting into four groups, one for each badge. The groups researched the role model, the content behind the badge, then used the web site tagxedo to create visual representations of the badges. These digital posters were then printed and displayed all over the school to promote the badges.

5) IN THEIR OWN WORDS: THE OTHERS

At the first public recognition ceremony, in January 2012, 11 students received their badges, the first power up, and were applauded by their teachers and fellow peers. Most of the remaining students in the 6th grade, a class of 50 students, had not worked towards a badge. Last week, after meeting with the first class of badged students, we had the opportunity to meet with a half dozen other students, ones who had not expressed any interest in badges. We wanted to learn from them how they understood the badging systems and why they had chosen to opt-out.

Before long, it became clear that they had a good understanding of what the badges were, just not how to pursue them. More importantly, they all gave the same reason for opting-out: time. "It's pretty much about time for me," one student explained. "I have a lot of after school activities. I'd love to do badges. But then again I have to think about all the other priorities I have."

We explained that all of them were already involved with activities that were badge worthy - e.g. getting a collaboration badge for their team sports activities - and that they did not necessarily have to spend extra time working towards their badge (time is allotted during their weekly technology class). They did not seem persuaded.

She and others were of the opinion that those who are pursuing badges have less homework and, thus, more time on their hands. Afterwards, when we asked the school staff to help us identify patterns amongst the two groups, it was immediately apparent to them that the opt-out group were all honors students, who do indeed have additional homework, and the opt-in group were, as one staff said in reference to the very prominent badge recognition board, “not students who would have at the start of the year expected to see their photos on the walls.”

This led us to look further at the gap between the two groups. We had spent time with each group asking them about their relationship with the other. Two words were repeated in each session.

The first was “lazy.” The first group reported that some people think badges are a waste of time. In response, one student said, defensively: “When they are done with their homework, what else do they do, like watch TV. They can do a badge instead of watching TV. It’s called being lazy.” When the second group was asked what they wouldn’t want those with badges to say about them, one student said, “That we’re lazy and that we didn’t want to do the badges because we like to sit around and play video games... We have other things to do too, and if we had extra time we all, maybe, would try and do it.”

The second word was “jealous.” One student in the first group said, “I hope they don’t get jealous - that by next year I might have all the badges,” while another student reported that other students are jealous of their power-ups. One student in the second group responded, when asked how it felt to see their friends in the recognition ceremony, “Proud. Happy for our classmates, that they got the privilege to do it,” then added, after a pause, “Kinda jealous, that I might want to go up there and get recognized for my skills and what I’ve been able to do, to be able to have power-ups and not have to be supervised when I go to the computer lab.”

The badging system is designed to target all students, of all levels and abilities, but with each engages in their own ways. It is heartening to see how the badging system has supported the non-honor students to receive recognition for their abilities. But it is also disheartening that the current design might exacerbate intra-student tensions and cliques. This is certainly an issue to watch moving forward and will be discussed further below.



6) RECOMMENDATIONS

There are less than five months left in Epstein's current school year. Yet, quite a few things can be done to support the current best practices while strengthening the overall system.

a) Convert to a unified technology solution

The current tools underlying Epstein's badging system are functioning properly but are perhaps too convoluted for occasional use. The spreadsheet tracking students progress is different from the rubric form, which is different from the online tool for processing the transcripts. In the next month we will seek to move Epstein onto a new, unified platform, one using the new Mozilla Open Badges Infrastructure.

b) Engaging the students through low hanging fruit

It seems that more students would pursue badges if they had a better understanding that they can bring in learning currently being pursued, in after school programs and from outside school. Rather than taking on a new task, they can use badges to gain recognition for their interest-driven activities.

c) Increase the number of badges or clarify the multiple paths to achieve them

Abstract language about literacies works for some students, but leaves others unable to see how it can meet their interests. The new, unified platform will allow for specific missions towards badges to be proposed, modelling different pathways. It will also allow the school to offer more badges without requiring additional resources to support them. Until then, promote the other five badges identified at the start of the year.

d) Clarify the power-ups

The power-ups are a clear motivator, of great interest to students in both groups. In fact, the second group reported that jealousy by the 8th graders, who can not take place in the badging system, might be a source of their teasing. Currently only a handful of power-ups have been defined. Add power-ups to all of the badges and make them known.

e) Make the “first step” crystal clear

On the badge recognition board, offer simple step-by-step instructions on how someone interested in badges can take the first step. Who should they speak with? What can they do on their own?

f) Keep doing everything that is working

This early phase of the Epstein badging system seems to be working quite well. A sizable number of innovators took the risk to try out something new. They have a good understanding of not just the content of the badges, but of how pursuing badges has significant educational value. Keep doing all of the things that have been working so well. Keep doing the recognition ceremonies. Keep teaching students about the badging system in the weekly technology class. Keep promotional material visible throughout the school. Encourage students' understanding that badging feels like a video game. Involve students in developing more aspects of the badging system.

g) Create badge icons

One immediate way to engage students and more than double the number of visible badges is to have them design the five remaining badge icons. The four featured badges came with pre-designed icons, but the remaining five were left intentionally blank so students could design them, or at least provide direction to Global Kids' artist to create them.

h) Coordinate the “Badger at Work” power-up with the teachers

The students all loved the power-up that allows them to leave class and work on their badges. However, it seems that a system might not be in place for a teacher to know how or when to say no, nor for the technology teacher to know how to integrate them into the computer lab if a class is going on.

i) Host some form of badging open house

Students from the second group suggested having a time when they could go to the teachers that are publicly associated with each badge. We don't know if an open house is the right option, but leveraging students' interest in their teachers strikes us as an excellent opportunity to engage the unengaged. Both groups spoke about how the badges provide them additional opportunities to interact with favorite teachers.

j) Display badge evidence

An important aspect of badges is the collecting and display of evidence behind the badge earned. As students produce their portfolios, this evidence will become more visible. Perhaps one of the badge boards can highlight one student's badge and evidence each month.



Note: This report is intended as no more than observations from a practitioner. A more formal evaluation is being prepared by an outside evaluator. For questions about this project, please contact info@globalkids.org.