

MOTIVATING AND ENGAGING STUDENTS: REFLECTIONS ON GAMIFYING ONLINE COURSES THROUGH A DIGITAL BADGING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflective critique was to explore faculty approaches to engage and motivate students while promoting community and building skills in the online classroom. One of the primary benefits of this critique is to bring focus to this often-overlooked aspect of gamification, students' unsolicited feedback addressing the feasibility of digital badges in the online classroom. This reflective critique was supported by the theoretical framework of Lev Vygotsky and the theory of social development. We focused explicitly on the constructs of digital badging and gamification. We analyzed unsolicited student comments, which were useful in revealing additional information about student perceptions of a digital badging program. The implications of this type of analysis have value in its ability to reveal patterns in previously unused data that can be used to reflect on classroom practices. Data analysis resulted in four themes addressing the digital badging program: (a) digital badges motivate students in the online classroom, (b) digital badges promote community in the online classroom, (b) digital badges reward student participation in the online classroom, and (c) digital badges encourage skill development in the online classroom. While there are challenges in creating a digital badging program, most notably time, positive student and instructor experiences encouraged us to move forward.

Keywords: *digital badges, social presence, motivation, participation, engagement, skill development, community, reflection, gamification, technology*

PURPOSE

This reflective practice is the overview of two online full-time faculty members at a private Christian university in the Southwest who have over 20 years of combined classroom experience in online higher education. Effective online instructors should strive to implement several strategies and techniques to create a rich online classroom experience. Due to the growth of online learning and the COVID-19 pandemic, many traditional educators have been attempting

to transfer their teaching skills into the domain of online instruction.

Enrollment in distance learning courses was on a steady incline prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to rise. Over twenty million students enrolled in at least one online class during 2018-19, and the proportion of higher education students taking online courses is at an all-time high (National Center of Education Statistics, 2018). Prior to COVID-19, online learning was trending to be the future of higher education in the

United States and perhaps the world. Seemingly, the future is now. Bialowas and Steimel (2019) surveyed 25,000 students worldwide and found that 77.8% have taken an online course. Cameron et al. (2021) state that 84% of American college and university students moved some or all of their courses online due to COVID-19. Several K-12 schools, usually labeled as charter schools, offer online learning opportunities. Some public school districts also offer online virtual school opportunities. According to Johnson et al. (2016), total enrollment in these online K-12 programs is over 1 million. While this may seem prevalent, these programs serve a relatively small percentage of the overall K-12 learning options nationwide. In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 forced school districts and traditional universities in the United States to shift to online learning. Most school districts, administrators, students, parents, and universities were ill-prepared to handle the complicated task of online learning.

Facing similar challenges as our students, we offer a diverse perspective in explaining and implementing online teaching practices. One author is a Full Professor in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, teaching online full-time to undergraduate students. He has been teaching full-time online for over 11 years and has taught traditional (in-person) classes as an adjunct. He has over 15 years of experience in higher education. The other author is an Assistant Professor in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, teaching undergraduate classes in the field of writing and critical thinking. He has been teaching at the university level for over 10 years. This author also has several years of experience in higher education academic counseling. Both faculty members utilized the same learning management system (LMS) to deliver their courses and teach the same course as part of their full-time online faculty role. With each author bringing diverse and personal experiences to the online full-time faculty role, a vibrant collaboration of ideas became present. Equipped with a desire to engage with students and create proximity and social presence in the online classroom, we were searching for ways to move beyond packaged online course creation.

BACKGROUND OF THE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Facilitating online courses may create a challenging classroom experience. There has been little

discussion regarding preparing instructors for teaching courses online (Paquette, 2016). Continued investment in online faculty is of the utmost importance to establish viable instructor-student outcomes. COVID-19 revealed the need for K-12 and higher education teachers to expand their teaching toolbox with more varied methods that include digital tools (Randall & Jaynes, 2022). Course design is a moderate factor regarding instructor presence and classroom cohesion. Instructors and instructors should consider how they perceive their personal presence and strategy implementation in the online classroom and whether their perceptions coincide with their actual behaviors (Richardson et al., 2016). Ninety-seven percent of Institutions reported assigning some faculty with no online teaching experience to teach one or more online classes (Seaman & Seaman, 2021). Many faculty members go into online teaching blind and with little preparation.

We were comfortable integrating technology in the online classroom but were aware that not all technology functions the same. The use of educational technology should complement the presentation of content in the online classroom but must be formed by appropriate design and intentional faculty focus (Ally, 2008; Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Phillips et al., 2012). The advancement of technology has provided faculty with technological innovations through Web 2.0 tools such as Remind, Zoom, Loom, and Flip (formerly Flipgrid). According to Saçak and Kavun (2020), these tools use a variety of communication modes, such as text, voice, and video to encourage communication in the online classroom. Flip, the inspiration for developing digital badges, has been shown to increase student confidence (McLain, 2018), develop social communities, and improve reflection and connectedness between students and faculty (Stoszkowski et al., 2020). The evolution of information and educational technology has led to increased research on the positive and negative impacts of digital technologies in the online classroom. Our quest to form lasting and engaging relationships with our students led to creating a digital badging program and, thus, this reflective practice article.

REFLECTIVE THEORY

Our reflective approach was theoretically aligned with Lev Vygotsky's social development

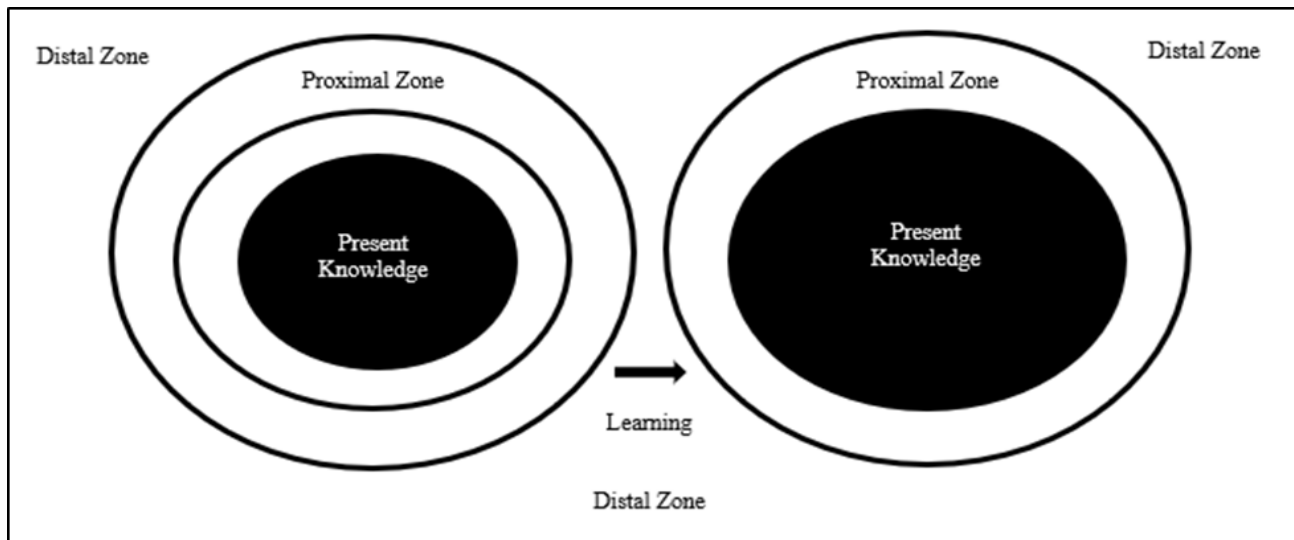


Figure 1. Zone of proximal development

theory. Social development theory is necessary for cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's social development theory provides a framework and perspective through which we can holistically examine classroom relationships centering on two guiding concepts: inner speech and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Inner speech showcases learners' need to collaborate moving from thought to speech. ZPD identifies the distance between what students may accomplish on their own and what they can accomplish with assistance (Kozulin, 1986). According to Oztok et al. (2013), inner speech helps students take the information they have learned, from their brains to a position of engagement and participation in the online classroom. ZPD extends the concept of inner speech and shows the potential knowledge a student can gain in a learning experience while being supported by faculty.

ZPD as a concept is often used as a pedagogical tool to support instructional strategies in the classroom. Yamagata-Lynch (2010) shared that the ZPD is a tool that reveals how interactions between individuals and their environments take place. The ZPD becomes the framework from which learners engage in and interact with peers, the classroom environment, and the instructor. The ZPD relates to a digital badging program because an increase in student-to-student and student-to-teacher connection can result in an increase in knowledge, engagement, and motivation. ZPD provides a two-way learning process where all participants learn

and engage through interactions (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003). Vygotsky's social learning theory addresses the importance of classroom relationships and the importance of imitation best used to capitalize on the role of a digital badging program in the online classroom.

PROBLEM

It was not known how online full-time faculty could effectively identify competence and mastery, recognize learner success, and increase interactions with learners in the online classroom. The online learning environment can be less forgiving than the traditional, in-person classroom. Thus, decisive use of technology in the online classroom becomes especially important. Cooper and Scriven (2017) share that improper use of technology may lead to issues in student retention and overall success. Although social media has improved digital communication literacy and has raised the attractiveness of online learning, many students in our online classrooms still struggle to make connections and lack motivation. Our students range from 18 to 80+ and come into the online classroom with various online learning and computer aptitude. To provide a bit more context, it is important to explain the structure of our online classroom that students and faculty participate in daily.

As full-time online faculty, we teach in a learning management system (LMS) that allows for information sharing and classroom connection. Typically, students encounter a course calendar, discussion forums, announcements, course

resources, quizzes, and assignments. The focus of this reflective practice lies in the discussion forum of the LMS. From our perspective, the discussion forum is the heart of the classroom. This is where the “magic” happens. Our discussion forums rely on two discussion questions each week and participation expectations throughout the week. Almost all the interaction in the discussion forum is through typed communication. Participation expectations within the discussion forum vary and depend on program level and faculty expectations. Online classrooms must go beyond the dependence on learning management systems as the sole means of technology integration to provide learners with access to tools that engage them and reward their personal activity (Duță, 2017).

We would often discuss the limitations of the online classroom discussion forum. We were well aware of its value and believed the discussion forum to be the heart of the classroom, but we wanted the conversations to be more dynamic. At times, it felt as if students were simply going through the motions; they became task completers. Students would either meet or not meet the participation expectations, but they rarely went over and above those prescribed expectations leading to little, real conversations in the classroom. As we reflected on this, we brainstormed ways that we could reward students for going above course expectations. We wanted to reward not just quantity but also the quality of engagement in the online classroom.

WORKING IDEAS

In an online classroom, there can be much to manage. In many instances, online courses are compressed. A course in a traditional in-person setting may be sixteen weeks long, while an online equivalent of said course may range from five to eight weeks. While the shortened timeline of an online course can be a benefit to the student who seeks to earn their degree quickly or who has multiple responsibilities beyond that of a student (i.e., a job, a family, etc.), they can create certain challenges when it comes to interaction and presence. With less time in the class, instructors must intentionally employ strategies to foster a community of inquiry and close the proximal gap between students and instructors.

An online instructor is at a disadvantage in the proximal gap that exists between them and the

student. In a traditional in-person class, an instructor may manipulate the seating arrangement or approach a student to offer additional acknowledgment. To do this, an instructor must seek opportunities to close the proximal gap and enhance their social presence within the classroom. This is a challenge in an online class; however, according to Manrique et al. (2015), social presence and establishing instructor-student relationships can be improved and enhanced through teaching methods.

In a shortened class, much of an instructor’s attention can be divided into several activities, such as engaging and facilitating class discussion, grading assignments, answering questions, and working with struggling students. These are important roles; however, these tasks can take up a great deal of time. These different activities can limit the time an instructor has to recognize and applaud students doing well in class. Students who do well in class often go above expectations in things such as class discussion, use strategies to help them prepare for quizzes, and are proactive in ensuring their summative assessments are in order. While challenging, celebrating students who exhibit positive and valuable behaviors can be rewarding because doing such motivates students, enhances community, and builds trust between students, their peers, and their instructor.

Several behaviors within the classroom do not get evaluated or recognized through formal assessment but contribute significantly to overall success. Engagement, thought-provoking discussion, and study habits are characteristics demonstrated by students that can easily be overlooked within the classroom setting despite their contributions to overall success. Participation in class material and activities can enhance the overall experience, build the community of inquiry, and lead to positive learning outcomes. In addition, students exceeding expectations when it comes to participation leads to a meaningful exchange between students. Going the extra mile, as it is often referred to, requires students to be intrinsically motivated. While important, not having an outlet to recognize this behavior can remove a significant opportunity for instructors wanting to highlight positive course behaviors.

Engagement in class is essential to the building of new knowledge and creating a true community of inquiry. While participation and engagement

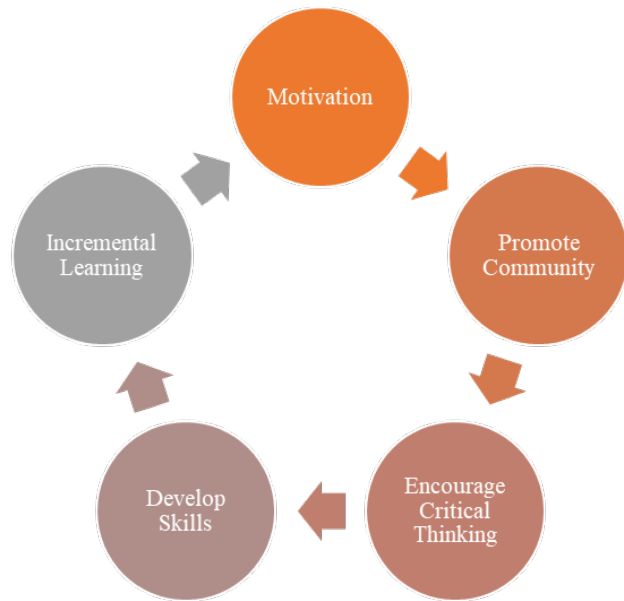
are assessed through participation and discussion grades, the students who exceed expectations in those areas have a significant impact on the overall environment of the class. In our case, there was no way to reward students who fostered an engaging thread of discussion with a thoughtful and informed response. In addition to this dilemma, there was no way to reward students who exceeded the minimum posting expectation, often leading to an engaging and lively discourse among peers. Identifying ways to celebrate this behavior is essential to keeping students engaged and motivated, as well as offering other students a model of what successful classroom habits may look like.

REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

In 2017, we sought to engage and motivate students through digital badges. We began incorporating badges into our online classes to address student motivation, promote community, encourage critical thinking, develop skills, and promote incremental learning. These are the five key concepts of a digital badging program. According to Iwata et al. (2017), online learners must be self-motivated and self-directed in order to be successful. The motivation critical to a student's success can be challenging to foster at times, leading to a lack of engagement within the class. This lack of engagement is seen through a decreased desire to participate with classmates and create new knowledge on a topic. Badges can affect behavior by motivating positive study habits and autonomous studying (Iwata et al., 2017). Badges provide learners with an opportunity to enhance their reputation within a learning community (Devedžić & Jovanović, 2015). The lack of interaction with classmates can significantly influence a student's success in a class.

We often struggled with the distance between student-to-student and student-to-instructor in online classes. Each of us concluded that we wanted to be in greater connection and community with our students and provide opportunities for them to be in community with each other. Learning communities are critical to the creation and generation of new knowledge. As stated by Alonso et al. (2015), the community within a classroom welcomes the student to be part of a dynamic process, allowing for the exchange of information and engagement within the learning process. These

Figure 2. Five Key Concepts of a Digital Badging Program



behaviors, however, can also lead to a great deal of frustration on the part of instructors because while they are necessary and important components for a strong community, they are not always easily tethered to deliverables within a course. This is where badges have shown to be useful. Our badging program provided opportunities to connect with students in a new and exciting way.

We would often bounce ideas off each other to come up with strategies on how to help students succeed in the online classroom. Much of the structure in our online classes focused on summative assessment. We were searching for ways to assess our students in a more formative way. Badges recognize higher-order thinking skills, teamwork, and the understanding of goals that do not translate directly to the course grade (Dyjur & Lindston, 2017). Sometimes grades can lack a focus on incremental student learning and attainment of desired learning outcomes, whereas badges allow faculty to focus on competencies, skills, and learner performance. This can be a great way to assess formative assessment/classroom assessment techniques (CATs). People perform better when they can see their progress, no matter how small, toward a goal is the idea behind incremental learning. These smaller achievements can help students progress toward more meaningful goals. Through the digital badging program, we discovered three key benefits. By implementing digital badges, we can

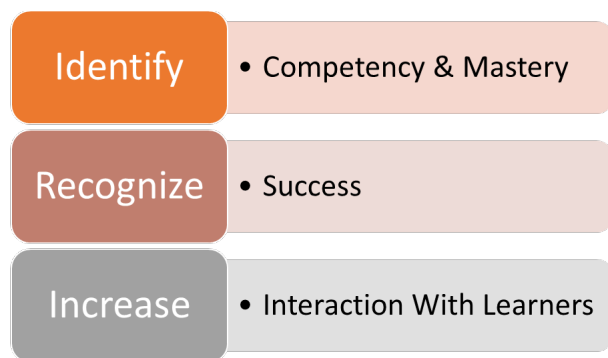


Figure 3. Three Benefits of a Digital Badging Program

identify competence and mastery, recognize success, and increase interaction with learners.

To enhance a student's understanding of a topic or objective or improve their performance on an assessment, students must partake in activities and demonstrate behaviors that do not tie directly to a grade. This lack of direct connection could manifest in a lack of engagement within a discussion forum. Students in our courses would eschew opportunities to engage with classmates as they could not see the value a topic discussion could have when it came time to complete a summative assessment. Furthermore, they would avoid opportunities to push themselves beyond a minimum requirement to generate knowledge through interaction with classmates. With other assessments, such as quizzes, students would avoid various preparatory steps leading up to them. This resulted in issues of lower scores and understanding of core course materials. Ultimately, the researchers realized that incorporating digital badges has helped address these problems. Badges have helped the researchers to engage students and motivate them to exhibit behaviors that, while not directly tied to a grade, contribute to sustained success in their program.

The digital badging program helped students, but it helped us as well. Looking back, we realized that at times we felt like our teaching could feel like factory work. Imagine, for example, each week, as a worker on the assembly line, another cog in the wheel coupled with a lack of emotional connection. The digital badging program brought back life and the emotional connection to the online classroom. Students were eager and excited to learn, and we were eager to reward their success. While creating

digital badging programs requires time and effort to start, it practically runs itself. Students participate in certain tasks; all we have to do is provide the badge throughout the week, and the students celebrate their success. It is really a win-win for all involved.

EVALUATION OF IDEAS

There are many perceptions of online education, what it is, and what students expect. Online education is mainly populated by adult students. Most adult students have roles beyond that of the student; they are employees, employers, spouses, partners, and parents in addition to being a student. They have specific goals and have identified concrete ways in which a degree will impact their lives, as opposed to more traditional students whose goals surrounding their degree are more abstract. One perception is that the students who comprise a large portion of the population of online learners may not be interested in concepts like gamification or are not concerned with their instructor's social presence. This is something that must be considered when implementing strategies that rely on gamification to enhance social presence within a classroom.

Online learners, many of whom are adults, are looking for specific things as part of their experience as a student. The father of the study of andragogy, Malcolm Knowles, explains that as educators we must consider the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual development of learners, among others, throughout a lifespan that explains the process of inquiry and highlights competencies necessary to engage in learning (Knowles, 1975). While adult learners desire development that spans their whole person, this does not mean they do not desire robust and dynamic interaction. As Kantar (2013) noted, the lack of human interaction in an online classroom can lead to a lack of motivation. As instructors, we must seek to engage with our students so that we may enhance their experience and foster a safe environment conducive to the community of inquiry and learning.

The desire of all students, traditional and non-traditional, informed our idea to explore the use of gamification in the form of digital badges in our course. According to Iwata et al. (2017), online learners are required to be self-motivated and self-directed in order to be successful. Offering badges

to recognize behaviors that, while not assessed directly, led to enhanced motivation in the development of skills that would benefit students and lead to positive academic outcomes within the class. Online learning requires students to be aware of their abilities to utilize tech in the online classroom, as there is no teacher present to physically walk them through the process. A badging system helps to raise a student's level of online technology self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) defines self-efficacy as an individual's understanding and belief in her/his personal abilities and that the most important thing is the student's perception of their technology skills. Student perception is important but should also be encouraged by online faculty. Students who exhibit positive academic behaviors can fall out of the focus of an online teacher. With limited time because of the compressed nature of online classes, opportunities to recognize students who are doing well can be minimal. Badges can encourage students who may not be reaching out because they do not need immediate help and ensure their success in class.

The benefits of gamification are supported in the literature as a way of engaging with students, enhancing motivation, and encouraging critical thought, which was the impetus behind implementing a digital badging program. Pintrich (2004) asserted that students can regulate their motivation and affect, which is a goal of gamification. Gamification provides faculty with an avenue to apply elements from games to non-games to make them more motivating and engaging. As Hakulinen et al. (2015) further state, gamification (through digital badges) can be beneficial when they encourage students to use good habits through voluntary challenges that are not explicitly tied to course grading. As indicated previously, the literature supported using digital badging to enhance student performance and experience within the classroom.

DECISION

Our desire to implement the badging program was based on over 20 years of combined online experience instruction. As previously discussed, time in online courses is compressed. With time spent grading, interacting with students' in-class discussions, and working with students struggling with content, every student may not receive adequate attention. To enhance our social presence in

the classroom, we implemented our digital badging program with students with whom we did not have as many touchpoints. The result of our efforts surprised us.

We were unsure of what the response from our students would be; however, it was overwhelmingly positive. The badges became a source of motivation and inspiration for learners. Students who did not receive badges were motivated to earn one in the coming weeks. In contrast, students who did receive them were inspired to keep up their efforts and continue to push themselves academically. This made for an enhanced experience for all students, as well as for us as instructors. We discovered a meaningful way to acknowledge their positive behaviors and offer these student examples for other learners to emulate. Providing examples of appropriate academic behavior for students who were their classmates and colleagues helped to foster the dynamic learning community we seek to achieve in every course we teach.

While the excitement generated from implementing a badging program was not entirely expected, the decision was made intentionally to enhance social presence and build a strong learning community within the online classroom. Relationships in an online classroom can foster positive academic outcomes and student satisfaction. The digital badging program offers an opportunity to build relationships with every student in the class and not simply focus on those who may be in need of help. As Alonso et al. (2015) explain that classroom communities provide students with an opportunity to be part of a dynamic process, allowing for the exchange of ideas and fostering knowledge creation. The benefits of learning communities are further supported by Tucker (2012), who explains that community learning encourages higher-order thinking.

The importance of establishing a strong learning community and understanding the critical nature of instructional intention were the other considerations when implementing our digital badging program. Instructor presence enables an online classroom to be successful and manageable. Looking for ways to engage with students and using methods of instruction and interaction that promote learning communities is necessary. The use of intention in teaching methods enhances class discussion and interaction (Kim, 2012). This

understanding of the role of intention contributed to the decision to introduce the digital badging program and can corroborate why the student reception of the program was met with strong positive feedback.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Reflective teaching requires educators and students to examine their personal perceptions of classroom activities. In the early years as faculty, we relied heavily on the LMS and the built-in curriculum of the course. While this may work for some, the process began to feel like education factory work. This was the moment we decided that we needed to dig into the research and discover online teaching best practices. Through this process, we found many theories, such as social presence theory, proximity, social learning, and gamification. Most of what we do in the online classroom revolves around these concepts. We found that developing a digital badging program in the online classroom encompasses all these practices.

While it was clear that, as faculty, we enjoyed creating badges and rewarding students, we still wondered how the students perceived a digital badging program. We found that in each class we introduced the digital badging program or rewarded badges, students responded with impressive feelings about the program or the specific badge. Through our research, we found that the use of unsolicited comments is an untapped data source. According to Maliski and Litwin (2007), analyzing unsolicited comments proved to be feasible and useful in revealing additional information about student perceptions. The implications of this type of analysis have value in its ability to reveal patterns in previously unused data that can be used to reflect on classroom practices.

The purpose of this reflective critique was to explore faculty approaches to engage and motivate students while promoting community in the online classroom. One of the primary benefits of this critique is to bring focus to this often-overlooked aspect of gamification: students' unsolicited feedback addressing the feasibility of digital badges in the online classroom. So, we asked ourselves: How do students perceive a digital badging program in the online classroom?

To answer this question, we reviewed unsolicited comments written in the discussion forum

over one year (2020). These student comments were in response to the Week 1 introduction to digital badges and comments to posts when students are awarded a badge. We read through all the comments for each course. We coded each comment, searching for the main idea expressed by each statement. We grouped the codes into categories and counted the number of participants writing the comments. They displayed graphically (n=242) participants/comments. Sixteen codes were derived and grouped, resulting in four categories. We explored the words and phrases for recurring patterns of meaning from the unsolicited comments of the digital badging program. Content analysis communicates meaning in qualitative research. Merriam (2014) identifies content analysis as the relevant characteristics that are determined through the construction of categories in the content. We used MAXQDA, a program for organizing data, to check and support the coding and theming throughout. Four themes emerged:

1. Digital badges motivate students in the online classroom.
2. Digital badges promote community in the online classroom.
3. Digital badges reward student participation in the online classroom.
4. Digital badges encourage skill development in the online classroom.

DIGITAL BADGES MOTIVATE STUDENTS IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

The "digital badges motivate students" theme was relevant to students' perception of a digital badging program. Several empirical studies (Harper & Milman, 2016; Liu et al., 2016; Penuel, 2006) have examined the role of technologies on learner achievement and motivation; however, such research has not concentrated on how technology impacts interactions between faculty and learners (Harper, 2018). Examples of participant responses that align with digital badges as a means to motivate students include the following codes: motivate, fun, incentive, and goal. One participant references "motivation" in their response to the introduction of the digital badging program. The participant shared: "I actually love this and thank you for doing this! This works as a perfect motiva-

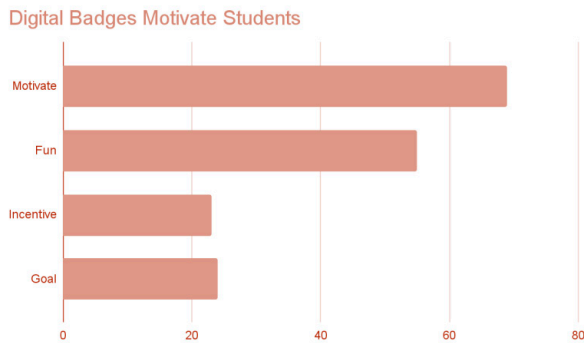


Figure 4. Digital Badges Motivate Students in the Online Classroom.

tion tool. Knowing I can earn a badge makes me feel important and pushes me to do more.”

DIGITAL BADGES PROMOTE COMMUNITY IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

The digital badges promote community and represent the student’s descriptions of a digital badging program. Community, also known as community cohesion or group cohesion, relates to the course community. Community involves sharing with the group and seeing the group as a cohesive whole. Community can include greetings, vocatives, and social sharing. Community also involves interactive responses such as invitation, approval, and advice (Whiteside, 2017). Examples of participant responses that align with digital badges to promote community include the following codes: encourage, engage, involved, community. Participants shared: “This is a great way to engage the class!” Another student shared: “Game on! I like how you are engaging the class with badges, reminder texts, and quizzes.”

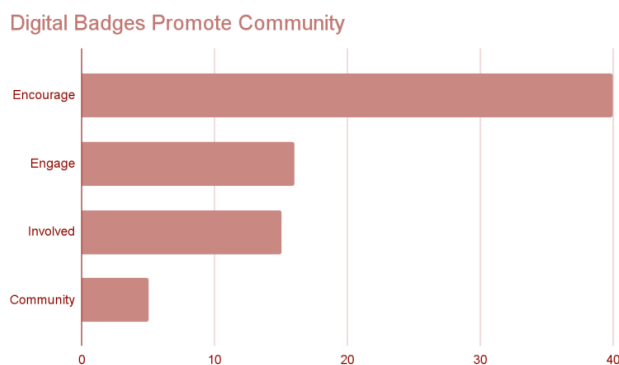


Figure 5. Digital Badges Promote Community

DIGITAL BADGES REWARD STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

The digital badges as a way to reward student participation were relevant to the student perceptions of a digital badging program. Often the focus of discussion forum research establishes student participation or active engagement. Dyer et al. (2018) state that active instructor participation in online discussion is one of the more effective ways to create proximity and social presence in the online classroom. Examples of participant responses that align with digital badges for rewarding student participation include the following codes: earn, achieve, participate, progress. A participant shared: “What a great way to encourage participation and implement the competitive edge to succeed.” Another student stated: “I feel that doing this gives us students something to look forward to and achieve.”

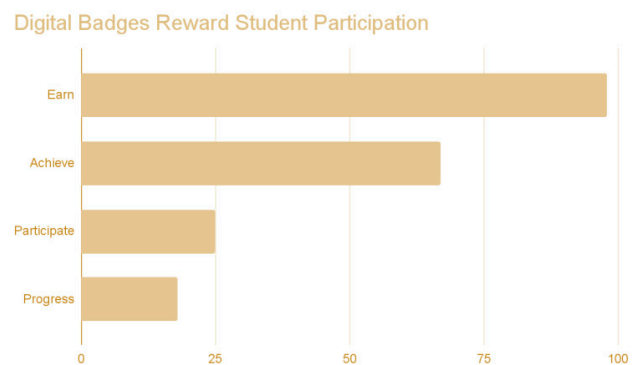


Figure 6. Digital Badges Reward Student Participation in the Online Classroom

DIGITAL BADGES ENCOURAGE SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

The digital badges encourage skill development and represent the students’ descriptions of a digital badging program. The skills-based definition of literacy will best define the definition of literacy for this study. Skills-based literacy focuses on the knowledge and skills an adult must possess to perform specific tasks (White & McCloskey, 2003). An important thought to consider to raise academic success in the online classroom is the level of students’ online technologies self-efficacy. Miltiadou and Yu (2000) define online technologies self-efficacy as suitable digital classroom compe-

tencies, synchronous and asynchronous cooperation. Examples of participant responses that align with digital badges to encourage skill development include the following codes: exceed, challenge, objective, and thinking. A student shared: “This is an awesome idea. It encourages students to try their best to exceed the objectives. I feel that doing this gives us students something to look forward to, a challenge.”

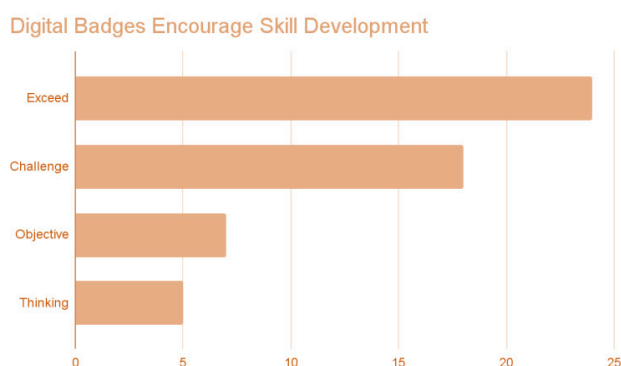


Figure 7. Digital Badges Encourage Skill Development in the Online Classroom.

The reflection demonstrates how implementing a digital badging program in online higher education courses can motivate students, promote community, reward student participation, and encourage student skill development. While creating a digital badging program requires instructors to be creative and intentional, the benefits far outweigh any obstacles. Time is of the essence in online learning for the student and the instructor. Chronemics can be described as the study of time and time management in nonverbal communication (Döring & Poschl, 2009). Although there can be time issues when creating a digital badging program, most of that time is spent on the front end of preparing materials. Once the details of a badging program are created, the implementation is quick and sustainable. All the students alluded to various perceptions of a digital badging program as we expected and alluded to in this reflective narrative. Vygotsky’s social learning theory addresses the importance of classroom relationships and the importance of imitation best used to capitalize on the role of a digital badging program in the online classroom. This was clearly perceived by the students based on the themes that evolved. The ZPD

relates to a digital badging program because an increase in student-to-student and student-to-teacher connection can result in an increase in knowledge, engagement, and motivation. ZPD provides a two-way learning process where all participants learn and engage through interactions (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003). The ZPD becomes the framework from which learners engage in and interact with peers, the classroom environment, and the instructor.

Throughout this experience we have thrived as online faculty through the creation of this digital badging program. While the use of badges may seem elementary, students seem to truly appreciate the experience and the idea of being rewarded for their participation in the classroom. The use of digital badges provided an opportunity for us to personalize the classroom. We were able to put our own spin on assessment focusing on formative and incremental learning rather than simply relying on the classes prescribed summative assessments.

We quickly realized that the digital badging program was a first for students. There was a slight learning curve for the students and us as faculty. There were no other instructors at our university with a digital badging program. To our knowledge, now five years later, we are still the only faculty to include digital badges in the online classroom. We have been able to share our ideas with other faculty, hoping to encourage the use of digital badges by sharing our experiences.

Future research could examine how instructors utilize a digital badging program to increase persistence toward graduation. Something we describe as a “badge to bachelors.” Furthermore, additional qualitative and quantitative studies could be conducted at universities in other locations to further study student and instructor perceptions of a digital badging program. Future studies could collect demographic data to expand on demographic factors such as age, gender, and race, which may influence student perceptions of a digital badging program.

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