

E-Learning Market Update (Mar 13)

Badge up - Why Open Badges are the future proof of learning

When the New York Times and Harvard Business Review are talking about a learning technology trend, you know it's got merit. We've written about them before, but we're just back from an event in Chicago that was focused on the future of badges and it's very much front of mind. Here's why Open Badges are one of the most disruptive learning technologies in trend right now.

You already know how they work

Were you a Boy Scout, or Girl Guide? (Let's say 'yes' for sake of narrative flow). So when you were ten, and you proved you could light a fire, or use a camera, you got a badge that showed you know. You sewed it on (if you had a sewing badge) and you literally wore your abilities on your sleeve.

Then you went to school, and university, and work. Things like CVs and degrees took the place of badges. But you know the truth - they don't really tell you as much as your camera badge. Your degree doesn't really tell anyone what actually learned in that class 12 years ago. Your job history doesn't really explain what you really did. CVs can be edited, polished, extended. They don't tell the whole story of what a person can really do. To put it in L&D terms – there's a weakness in how we show evidence of learning and competence. That impacts recruitment, how we identify and develop talent, succession planning – so you'd kind of like to have better information.

Enter Open Badges. You knew them when you were at the campfire. But now they live on your online profile, and show anyone exactly what you are capable of doing. The Mozilla Foundation (the nice people who brought you Firefox) kicked it off in 2011 when they founded the [Open Badges Project](#).

Sew them on in three steps

The Open Badges project allows all learning to be validated and verified through the issue of badges, and then collected and stored in a central location called the Mozilla backpack. There are three steps to the process:

Issuing badges

Using Mozilla's Open Badge Infrastructure (OBI), any institution, business or community can issue badges for the things they teach people, backed by their own seal of approval. The badge itself shows who issued it, when, and under what criteria. Clicking through on the badge shows the underlying data. This could be as granular as your test score and which questions you got wrong, or examples of assignments you completed to earn the badge. So it remains accurate and live – and it might have an expiry. Note it doesn't have to be from an educational institution. Employers can issue badges. Disney-Pixar for example. Would you rather a degree in animation from a university, or a badge from them? Or more to the point – what do you think your next employer would be more interested in? As Harvard Business Review put it: *"Badges — not digital diplomas — seem to be the best and likeliest bet on accreditation's future."* They named them one of the key innovations to watch in 2013.

Earning badges

You earn them by proving you can do things. Proof, as always, is in the eye of the beholder (or issuer). Evidence of achievement can be passing a simple quiz (like the Open Badge you can earn on, well, Open Badges from Mozilla), or it could be a complex assessment with submission of evidence or live observation, such as in an apprenticeships. It's likely to have lots of different elements. So you can see how a blended programme could contribute to multiple different badges as you advance and complete different tasks and prove competence. They can be used for different elements within a larger programme to help incentivise learners as they collect badges or to recognise a specific piece of learning say within an employment context.

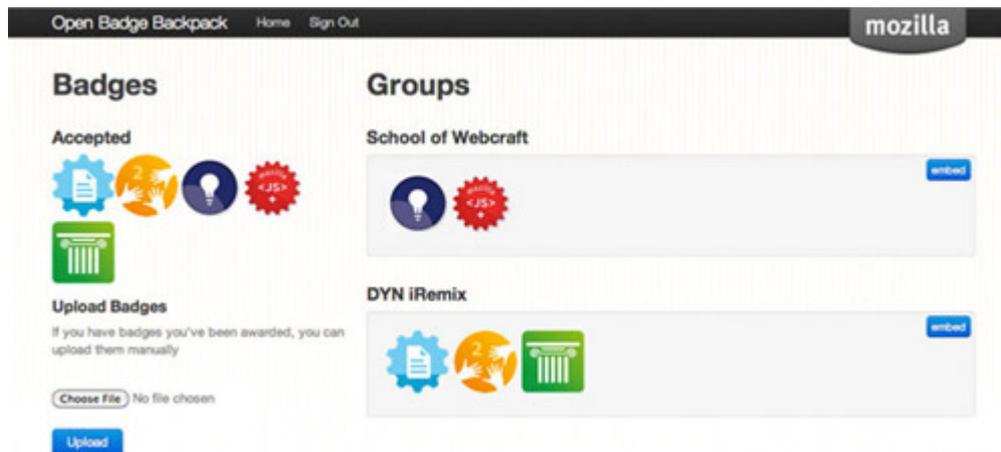


badges = visual representations
of a **skill** or **achievement**

Source: Mozilla Foundation

Displaying badges

When you earn a badge, it has to go somewhere. Hello, LMS...you've got a new purpose. [Totara LMS](#) for example (a custom distribution of Moodle, co-developed by Kineo) was awarded a grant by the Mozilla Foundation to create a component for Open Bages in the LMS. Once a learner has achieved the badge, they are notified and the badge appears in their My Badges area of their profile on the LMS. The learner can then decide to push the badge to their "backpack", a Mozilla open system that helps learners to manage all their badges from any source:



And from there you can put it pretty much anywhere (as long as there is a displayer API to support it): Your Facebook profile, your Twitter Feed, an e-Portfolio, on LinkedIn - wherever you want to display your whole story of achievements and abilities. Easier for employers to see what you can really do. So a learner can capture all of the evidence of what they have done from different sources such as a college or their employers, and display these as necessary on their CV (if you still use that kind of thing) or social media profile. Each badge when clicked will show all the issuing data and will link directly back to the awarding or issuing organisation – right down to your assignments. The badge can be validated and verified. It's the whole story of what you can do.

What's in it for employers?

Open Badges could be a game changer for how we use learning technology to share evidence of our abilities – both inside the organisation and outside.

That can change how accreditation works – and who gets to accredit. The recent [New York Times Article](#) put it, "digital badges are actually portals that lead to large amounts of information about what their bearers know and can do." This challenges the old model of printed diplomas and awards from

universities. They're costly and arguably could become 'old money'. As more and more organisations issue badges, a new currency for what really counts in, say, e-learning design, could emerge. Couple this with the explosion in MOOCs from previously closed-door establishments, and you have a new model for learning, assessment, and accreditation.

The benefits of going open are immense:

- **Extend the value of experiences for learners.** Badges allow your employees to demonstrate their learning in a valid and verifiable way, and to collect and share the badges as they want.
- **Incentivise learning.** Badges can incentivise learners to go that extra step to achieve their badge. There's always another level. Progression becomes real through the gameification element of badges– something we're working on with City & Guilds at the moment.
- **Promote your brand.** Badges can be shared across the entire ecosystem, carrying your brand and its values along with them. More people will recognise your investment in learning and the value of your learning. Your organisation's badge could be a challenger to an academic equivalent.
- **Build your community.** Each of your badges links back to you, regardless of where they are shared or used - so you develop a reputation as the issuer, along with the earners.

What about Project Tin Can?

Project Tin Can is a standard for capturing learning experience. So both Tin Can and Badges aim to provide better, less LMS-specific forms of evidence. There's a strong connection in aims. It's early days for making that connection a reality, but here's some thinking to consider:

Tin can will be the language used to tell the Learning Management System or Learning Record Store (LRS) that the learner has earned a badge or completed an activity. This then allows the issuer to create the badge on behalf of the learner.

A joined up version of the future might look like this:

- 'Badge size' pieces of learning can be accessed all over the place in marketplaces, much like ebooks. You might earn one for a webinar, a specific online task, or anything that constitutes evidence of ability
- The LMS might then contain only very job specific/commercially sensitive learning – stuff you might not really want or need to display
- Learners take control of their own learning records through their own backpacks (much like their music library or ebooks)- controlling their own experience
- Employers are allowed access to the learners' records and may hold duplicate records in their systems with powerful analytics and talent management capabilities

Time to act now

You need to think about how your L&D systems can support open badges – can you issue them, do you have the LMS mechanics to issue them, and can you enable people to earn them.

It took hundreds of years for the old model of academic degrees and diplomas to gain currency as awards – with all of their flaws and inefficiencies. Badges – online, universal, lower cost, more granular, open source – have the power to catch up very fast.

There's a new sheriff in town, and his badge is digital.