

## Using Badges in an Online Class: How Gamification Can Improve Student Learning

Several years ago, I learned about gamification and started thinking about how I could apply it to my online courses. I decided that using badges would be a good way to introduce these ideas into my classes and I began an experiment. As a result, I discovered several benefits to using badges that I would like to share with you.

Before I discuss the benefits, let me describe how I use badges. In each of the classes where I use them, I have 20 different badges that students can earn. Each badge is a micro-assignment that asks students to apply some concept or set of concepts we are covering in class. Students submit their responses, and if they meet the badge criteria, they earn it. When students earn a badge, the points are factored into their grades. They also receive a badge graphic uploaded to their own personal profile that only they can see. I use the badge graphics from <http://classbadges.com/>. Students also have the ability to earn an Open Badges (<http://openbadges.org/>) for the entire course, which they can display on their Open Badges profile.

If a student does not earn the badge, he or she is provided with detailed feedback and allowed to resubmit his or her response. Students can submit responses as many times as they want or need to in order to earn a badge. Students need to earn a minimum of 14 badges to earn a C in the course and 18 badges to earn an A.

There have been several student benefits I have observed in the classes where I use badges. I discuss four of them below.

### Autonomy

Many studies show that having a sense of autonomy leads to greater happiness in work, as well as better results. By using badges in my class, students experience autonomy in several ways. First, they can choose which badges they want to earn. There are no badges that are required for everyone. The result is that each student can “customize” the course to some extent and tailor the material to their own learning interests. Second, they are able to work at their own pace, since there is only one due date for all work to be completed—the end of the semester.

### Variety of Assessments

With so many different assignments, I can provide a great deal of variety in the work students do. Some

assignments call for students to write a response to a video they watch; others require that they provide a response to a case study. In my Introduction to Philosophy course, one badge assignment asks students to take a picture of a scene outside their windows and provide a philosophical analysis of it based on several theories of perception we discuss in the class. In my business ethics class, one badge assignment asks them to wear a nametag all day, every day, for an entire week and report on their results. (This particular assignment was inspired by Scott Ginsberg’s Nametag Manifesto.) But this is not simply variety for the sake of variety. The assignments are designed to help students see how the concepts we cover in the course can be applied in everyday life and often require an action to demonstrate this application.

### The Ability to Try Again

One thing that has always bothered me about traditional assessments is that once students receive a grade, we move on to new material whether or not they have mastered the previous material. However, in many cases, mastery of that previous material is necessary for further progress in the course. In other cases, the simple fact of failing one assignment takes away any motivation for further progress in the class. However, by using badges, it becomes easier for students to try again and again until they demonstrate mastery. While this is often done in classes with regular assignments like exams and papers, it is much more daunting to have to redo an entire paper than it is to resubmit a smaller badge assignment.

### A Greater Level of Feedback

Another important benefit for my students is the greater level of feedback they receive from me as a result of using badges. Students who do not succeed on their first submission receive my detailed feedback and often need to engage in a discussion to make progress. I believe that this discussion is an important component of the learning process, and one that seems to be facilitated by badges more than other assignments I have used previously. Since each assignment is short, it becomes easier to provide this detailed feedback than it would be to provide the same level of detail for a lengthy paper.

It is probably clear from this description that most, if not all of these benefits, are not intrinsic to using badges. They could be gleaned from a variety of other course activities. In my case, the discovery of gamification and the use of badges helped me easily bring these benefits to the class. I think my students enjoy the variety and

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they like seeing the badge graphics added to their individual profiles. It provides an extra little benefit that perhaps makes their experience in the class a little more memorable. In any case, as a result of using badges I have seen an increase in student engagement and achievement in my classes. For me, the badge method has been a success.

There are other aspects to gamification that I think can also be applied to in-person and online courses. Many of these are addressed in Jane McGonigal's newest book, *SuperBetter: A Revolutionary Approach to Getting Stronger, Happier, Braver, and More Resilient*. Her advice for becoming "gameful" has a lot of relevance for improving engagement in the classroom. Many of her tips amount to things we are all already doing in the classroom, but the key is how they are framed. If we frame our assignments as tests, exams, quizzes, or term papers, we can expect one result from students. However, what would happen if we reframed these assignments as "quests" or "challenges?" What if grading were keeping score in a "gameful" sense? What if group work was framed as engagement in a multi-player game? I think we would see some powerful results, both among students for whom gaming is already a familiar pastime and with students for whom college is an intimidating, boring, or uninspiring place to be.

The parallels between gaming and education can be found in other areas as well. Gaining mastery is a key component of most games, and players stay engaged because they are continuously trying to achieve a new level of mastery that is just a little out of their reach. It is this "just a little bit harder than they can do now" level of work that provides an important motivation. But again, we have to think about how we frame the challenges we present to students and we need to appeal to their intrinsic motivation. Gamers play their chosen game because they want to, not because they are required to. Yes, classes are required, but there is no reason to emphasize that fact when we present these "games" to students.

Imagine an entire degree program framed as a quest where a student slowly gains mastery to achieve newer levels of skills and rewards. Same degree, same content, but perhaps a whole new level of motivation, engagement, and interest for students. And, while entirely unintentional—it should be, otherwise it won't work as well—other benefits would include better retention rates, better pass rates, and better graduation rates.

Some schools in some parts of the world will instantly see the benefits of applying gamification in these ways. And in doing so, they will become "remarkable" institutions of learning. In a world where education could easily and very quickly be disrupted in major ways, being remarkable through gamification will help insulate such schools from the negative effects of disruption.

As you can see, gamification has a lot of potential to benefit our students in the classroom. For me, it all began with the simple act of reframing my assignments as badges. I'm not sure where my next steps will lead, but I am sure that my students will continue to have opportunities to stay engaged with the class material and enjoy the process of learning as a result.

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