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# Hot Neoliberal Commodities or Tools for Empowerment? A Badges Case Study and Conversation

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## Hot Neoliberal Commodities or Tools for Empowerment? A Badges Case Study and Conversation

*Emily Ford, Jost Lottes, Betty Izumi, and Dawn Richardson*

In the United States' political and economic climate, higher education has become less of a public good and more a means to an economic end. In other words, instead of college being where students go to learn to participate in democratic society, students attend college to get a degree and then a job that will allow them some personal economic success. Accrediting agencies in many disciplines are focused on competencies and skills, further solidifying and codifying competency-based approaches to education. This tension between neoliberalism—the commodification of education—and the historical purpose of education for the public good is felt by many educators. It affects how we approach students, how we develop curricula, and how we deliver those curricula.

Digital badges represent this same tension. They can be viewed as a kind of currency that perpetuates the marketization or commodification of students' skills. But they might also be used as a tool to empower students to dismantle systems that reinforce stark political and economic disparities. This chapter presents a case study and reflective conversation about planning for and implementing badges, while questioning neoliberal approaches to higher education today. First, we outline the background of our project, providing details about collaborative efforts in curriculum mapping and design. Next, we discuss the project implementation and its challenges. We end our chapter with the transcript of a discussion regarding the project itself, which highlights our collaborative work, our frustrations, our wins, and our thoughts on the role and power of badges in higher education today.

## DIGITAL BADGES FOR CREATIVITY AND CRITICAL THINKING

The student population at Portland State University (PSU)—an urban public access university in downtown Portland, Oregon—consists of a high percentage of first generation, non-white, nontraditional, and part-time or commuter students. Exemplary of this environment is the fact that in fall of 2016, 62 percent of PSU’s new undergraduate students transferred in from other colleges. Many PSU students work full-time and support families. Additionally, the university’s outreach efforts to Middle Eastern and South-east Asian countries have resulted in a visible Muslim student population. This diverse student population presents challenges to the university and in the classroom to reach students from a variety of backgrounds, ages, experiences, and knowledge. Teaching in such a diverse environment is quite rewarding yet poses many challenges. For one, it is hard to know students’ individual skill and ability levels. In any one class, students’ information literacy, digital literacy, and critical thinking skills can range from very basic to advanced. Digital badges are one way that teaching to this disparity could be addressed.

In 2012, the new PSU provost announced reTHINK PSU, a new internal grant-funded initiative, which aimed to support discovery and experimentation in learning by improving the affordability and flexibility of education, with a focus on projects utilizing innovative technological approaches and tools. It was around this same time that the librarian for the university’s College of Urban and Public Affairs, one of the authors, had been trying to better integrate information literacy instruction in public health courses. The Health Studies major was one of the university’s largest (and growing) undergraduate programs, and it was evident that students were lacking a clear understanding of information evaluation skills and concepts. The Association for Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH)—the accrediting body for undergraduate public health education—valued information literacy, and positive relationships between the librarian and the School of Community Health suggested potential for a collaboration to improve information literacy instruction in public health courses. Badges presented a potential mechanism to deliver, reinforce, and acknowledge information literacy skills, and this funding opportunity would provide the support and resources to develop a collaborative project with Community Health faculty. After garnering support from key stakeholders, the reTHINK PSU proposal was funded in full at \$20,000. The provost viewed the project as a “proof-of-concept” that could inform the university regarding badging in higher education. Digital Badges for Creativity and Critical Thinking was born.

## PLANNING FOR BADGES

The Urban and Public Affairs librarian formed a project team with three Community Health faculty members and one instructional designer, all of whom were dedicated to discovering and experimenting with badges. While the project was largely driven by interest in the technology, the project was in essence a curriculum mapping and instructional design project. Experimenting with badges and micro-certification was the icing on the proverbial cake. We were curious to see if badges would allow students to acknowledge and communicate their skills, and we were motivated by the ability to engage in curriculum mapping curriculum development and to improve existing courses.





In order to create a badge curriculum, we collaboratively reviewed learning outcomes in the three participating courses to identify commonalities and themes. This work built on an existing curricular mapping exercise of Community Health courses mapped to ASPPH Undergraduate Learning Outcomes (<http://www.aspph.org/educate/models/undergraduate-learning-outcomes/>). From there, the team mapped participating course outcomes to the Portland State University Library's learning outcomes and developed badges that aligned with each outcome. Next, for each course we outlined how students would achieve the outcomes, be assessed, and earn their badges. Although badges and their associated learning outcomes were the same for each course, each class used unique course assignments and activities via which students achieved these outcomes and earned badges. As an example, table 9.1 outlines the core badge curriculum as delivered in the Social Gerontology course.

The curriculum included two in-class library instruction sessions to support student success with research and writing assignments. In addition to core badges, which affiliated specified learning outcomes to course assignments, we used supplemental “fun” badges to acknowledge student achievements and dispositions (table 9.2). The supplemental badges were not included on a course syllabus but were a surprise to students receiving them.

The end result of our curricular design efforts and badge creation was a rich collaboration among members of the project team. During the fall quarter of 2013, the librarian and teaching faculty members worked to deliver the curriculum and award badges in each course, which are listed below:

- *Our Community Our Health (PHE 250)*: The required breadth course for Health Studies majors. This was a large lecture course of 120 students. Taught by Dawn Richardson.
- *Social Gerontology (PHE 354U)*: An elective course for general education and for Health Studies majors. A requirement for the aging specialization. This course had thirty-five students. Taught by Jost Lottes.

**Table 9.1. Core Badge Matrix: Social Gerontology**

| Badge   | What does the badge certify?   | What did students need to do?  |
|---|--|--|
|    | <p>Credly Crown: Earners of this badge have successfully created a Credly profile and are ready to accept badges they'll be earning throughout the term in their Community Health course.</p>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create an account in Credly</li> <li>• Complete and submit the Credly Account Creation form</li> </ul>                            |
|    | <p>Web Ninja: Earners have learned how to evaluate websites for currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose.</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passing grade on Website Evaluation assignment</li> </ul>   |
|   | <p>Source Sleuth: Earners can distinguish the characteristics of information sources produced for different audiences (scholarly, popular, professional, etc.) in order to select appropriate sources.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find three articles (professional/popular/in-between)</li> <li>• Passing grade on Policy Paper</li> </ul>                         |
|  | <p>Keyword Hacker: Earners can execute keyword searches and use basic Boolean search commands to retrieve results appropriate to the searcher's information needs.</p>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete a D2L quiz on search techniques</li> <li>• Successfully find a research article for Article Review assignment</li> </ul> |

**Table 9.2. Supplemental Badges**







| Badge   | What does the badge certify?  |
|---|---|
|    | <p>Problem Solver: The earner of this badge took initiative to creatively solve a problem for the class, specifically related to issues with course mechanics (D2L, submissions of quizzes &amp; papers, keeping on track, etc.).</p> |
|    | <p>Reflective Reader: Earners of this badge showed thoughtful reflection on assigned course readings</p>  |
|   | <p>Energizer: The earner of this badge thoughtfully contributed to a fantastic class discussion with a comment about the assigned reading. Their contribution helped to energize the class and stimulate engagement.</p>              |
|  | <p>Eloquent Emcee: Earners of this badge offered, without being asked, to stand up in front of classmates and share their knowledge.</p>  |

Table 9.2. (Continued)

|   |  |
|---|--|
|  | <p>Group Guru: Earners of this badge showed the ability to communicate effectively, remain organized, and contribute to a team's work.</p> |
|  | <p>Research Moxie: Earners of this badge showed moxie--energetic drive and engagement in their research.</p>                               |

- *Community Nutrition (PHE 327U)*: An elective course for general education and for Health Studies majors. This course had thirty-four students. Taught by Betty Izumi.

## IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES

In each course, information about badging and badges was presented in course syllabi as well as in Desire2Learn (D2L), the university's course management system. Each course included its own badge matrix (table 9.1, above) and an FAQ, and we outlined directions and instructional activities for badges in D2L.

The librarian, teaching faculty, and paid teaching assistants collaboratively managed the badges for each course. Because D2L did not support badges integration, the project utilized a paid Credly account to create and distribute badges. Teaching faculty and teaching assistants tracked student progress and achievements using shared spreadsheets as well as grade books in D2L. Teaching assistants used this information to award badges in Credly. The librarian served in a supportive badge management role, fielding student, faculty, and teaching assistant questions regarding the platform, workflows, and other issues. While this seemed straightforward, we quickly learned that it was not.

Our paid Credly account included the ability to upload spreadsheets to award batches of badges; however, this buggy feature often only processed partial data. As a result, some students who earned badges did not receive them. When this came to our attention, teaching assistants had to again cross reference student progress with badges successfully and unsuccessfully awarded in Credly. For students who should have received badges but did not, teaching assistants manually awarded them. Because using Credly was so unwieldy, both students and faculty considered it a large impediment to the project's success.

In addition to Credly's technological failures, using the platform introduced several other layers of complexity. Because we chose an external platform, students needed to set up personal accounts and profiles on Credly. Credly did not automatically send badges to the profiles of users who had earned them. Instead, students received a system-generated email notification of their award and needed to log in to Credly and accept them. For Portland State students, additional logistics such as remembering and maintaining usernames and passwords, receiving extra emails, and accepting badges added more to their already full school, work, and home lives. A minority of students also struggled with digital literacy skills. In addition to using basic computer skills, such as using a mouse and keyboard, the badges project required these students to use D2L, Credly, and the Internet, which exponentially amplified their confusion and frustration. In these cases, the librarian answered numerous email, phone, and in-person questions as well as providing consultative support to students who needed it. Finally, some students did not see the value in displaying their badges or did not fully understand how to use their badges once they had earned them. Although the librarian and teaching faculty introduced badges and continued the conversation about badges throughout the term, many students did not accept badges as valid or did not fully understand their value.

Despite the project's challenges, we were able to discover and experiment with the idea and actuality of badges. Despite badges being the most attractive portion of the project to funders, the success of the project has little to do with awarding 622 badges to students. We regard our greatest success as the deep collaboration among ourselves and the high-quality curriculum we developed. In fact, the curriculum, without badges, is still used in some courses, and some components of it have been adopted and re-used in criminology and criminal justice, public administration, and other disciplinary courses.

PSU has not yet moved forward with badging at an institutional level, but there continues to be some interest in badging as the university moves more and more classes online. To date there is no PSU-wide badge curriculum, and neither is there a library-wide badge curriculum. Instead of moving toward



badges wholesale, the university has put its resources behind the acquisition and support of an e-portfolio system, PebblePad. This system was selected, in part, because it does allow for badging. However, it is up to individual faculty members to create and use badges as they see fit. Additionally, the ongoing funding from the reTHINK PSU initiative funds the development of flexible, online degree programs. As such, faculty are re-structuring courses for online delivery. While this work requires and includes deep collaborations with the library and librarians, much of this work is done on a course-by-course, instructor-by-instructor scale rather than from a programmatic or general education scope. Finally, the nature of the PSU community and PSU's general education curriculum poses challenges to implementing badges. The large disparity in knowledge and skills of students, coupled with institutional policies dissuading prerequisite courses, means that providing appropriate curricular scaffolding is difficult.

## THE CONVERSATION

Four years after completing the Digital Badges for Creativity and Critical Thinking project, the project team gathered to record a discussion of our experience. Our discussion, reflected in the following transcript, surfaced many of our wins and challenges. We discussed positive and negative experiences with technological implementation, layout and presentation of badges, course content and course level, student feedback, and institutional buy-in. Additionally, we discussed issues in higher education such as defunding, neoliberalism, contingent faculty, and other institutional issues. Readers will notice our camaraderie and signs of our deep collaboration, which stemmed from working so closely together on this project. Our hope is that the discussion of our experience contributes to the body of qualitative knowledge about badging for information literacy and badging in higher education in general.

EMILY: *Why did you participate in the badges project?*

BETTY: Students are really lacking in library skills and information literacy skills. This seemed like a really fun way for them to practice and learn their skills. I felt like it could be easily integrated into my class, which emphasizes research.

DAWN: When you [Emily] had first talked to me about the project concept [five years ago], you said something about science literacy, and that's the part I latched on to. Then, as we went forward, I realized, "Oh—these are library skills." When you really looked at it, it was science literacy. Just noticing trends in my classes—this general anti-intellectualism, anti-science feeling among stu-

dents—I thought a lot of it seemed to stem from students not having the soft or hard skills to even engage with that material. It seemed perfect to integrate into a basic class like Our Community, Our Health. It seemed ideal, and it seemed fun.

JUST: Very similar reasons for me, actually. I had spent many, many terms wondering about the lack of information literacy skills, and it shocked me how all those students now have all this data at their fingertips and don't seem to be able to use it, more than prior generations. They are intimidated by it and don't know what to do with it. It was a great opportunity.

EMILY: For me it germinated from my past experiences. I knew that the community health discipline was pre-disposed to understand information literacy and noticed from working with students in Community Health that their skills were lacking. I felt like there was room for us to make improvement.

DAWN: Had it been a librarian I didn't know, or someone I had no interest in working with—

BETTY: Or not a librarian.

DAWN: —I don't know that I would have been as interested. Then, as you fleshed out the team in our department, I could really see how this could work in 200-, 300-, 400-level classes. There is something to be said for the collaboration aspect of it, in terms of our personalities and expertise.

EMILY: *In your experience, what worked, and what didn't?*

DAWN: I was a big fan of it. The hardest part was the application because of the platform [Credly]. It wasn't Credly per se that was the issue. Had it been more streamlined, had it been in D2L, or had there been some other way of doing it that was more intuitive for the students . . . Not to say Credly wasn't intuitive. It was just too bulky. Too much of a hard sell.

BETTY: I think that it needs to be more seamless if there are going to be electronic badges that are distributed, and I think that students would have prioritized it more or would have been more excited about it at all levels if it was institutionalized at PSU.

JUST: There was a little bit of resistance from students, because they said it's extra work. That's always something they don't like, of course. That's definitely one of the downsides, and I agree that the execution of Credly was just very cumbersome. But I think it was a great project. I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed working with you guys; I enjoyed redesigning the syllabus. That was one of the reasons I participated in this, because I had to do that anyway. Going through that process, and thinking about learning goals and how they can be meshed with information literacy goals, was a really good part of the experience. I still use a lot of these assignments in my classes to this day.

BETTY: What was successful is that the videos were developed and the assignments were developed. I think that it's most appropriate for freshmen. When

you're a senior and you're just learning how to give credit where credit is due, that's a problem. For my Freshman Inquiry class, we use the badges activities, but we don't distribute the badges. And I've shared—especially the professional,/popular,/in-between activity [part of the Source Sleuth badge]—with colleagues across the country, because not being able to recognize a professional source is such a serious issue.

JOST: That video [“Information Cycle”—part of the curriculum for the Source Sleuth badge] has something like 7,000 views, so others must be using it. It's a sign that students all over the country don't really know that skill and that faculty all over the country are struggling with these issues.

DAWN: All the tools were great, and I'd second what Jost said about the opportunity to revamp the class. That's also something that didn't work for me in the end, because that was the last time I taught the class. Depending on who you are and what classes you teach, you may not have ownership of the curriculum. Whoever is teaching it now is definitely not using any of those materials. It's unfortunate, because there is a lot of good stuff there that could have been built upon, but it didn't go anywhere. I don't teach another class that the badges material will fit for. I teach graduate and senior or 400-level classes.

EMILY: On the other hand, that points to issues in higher education in general. The division of labor—especially for lower-level courses, which are frequently relegated to contingent labor—introduces problems with consistency. The technology made it very, very challenging. Credly was our best option, because we didn't have a lot of money. If only we had a programmer, a server, et cetera.

BETTY: We still would have needed D2L to accept it.

EMILY: Exactly. Working with proprietary systems is not tenable. When our TA was trying to upload Excel spreadsheets to get them to award badges, it was missing rows of students, and then we'd have to go back in and double-check the spreadsheets against each other . . . There was just a lot of work.

BETTY: That was never going to be sustainable—having a TA award badges. It really needs to be, as soon as you finish a badge activity, a badge automatically appears, and it's on your e-portfolio.

JOST: In some cases, it was a week or two between turning in the assignment and receiving the badge. That doesn't work in terms of motivating them. It just feels like busywork at some point for them if they don't see the connection.

BETTY: A challenge at PSU—especially in the School of Community Health—is that our classes don't have prerequisites. When it comes to these badges, in my 300-level class, I had students who were freshmen all the way to seniors. The freshmen and sophomores, maybe juniors, could have benefitted from badges being required assignments. But that would mean that, for seniors and other students who already had these skills, it would be busywork. Several students who were really strong students academically—the type of students

who did everything assigned—did the badge activities even though they already knew the information. To them it was, “Why am I doing this? I don’t care about badges. I just want to do well and graduate.”

DAWN: I had the opposite experience. I remember hearing some of the negative feedback from some of the others [Betty, Jost, and Emily], but I didn’t get a lot of that. I heard a lot of positives. Students were upset about the Credly stuff, but, regarding the badges, feedback was generally positive. People were saying, “I never knew this was the skill until you told me. I knew I could do this, but it helps me articulate.” That’s partly a function of me having more students—nearly a hundred—which provides more opportunity for more people to say more things.

BETTY: What you just said about “I never knew this skill”—that’s really important. Students can now see it as a skill that they can put on their résumé.

EMILY: That’s really heartening for me to hear—who, over the years, has been not so happy with badges on a theoretical level. That was the point: Students could surface and acknowledge for themselves what they already knew or what they were learning. It provided a way for them to do that.

DAWN: The other negative thing I heard was that people felt like they were learning great stuff but nobody would care because it wasn’t an established thing. That isn’t that people think this is baby work or this is stupid; they saw value in it. Their frustration was that they couldn’t use that value; it didn’t have currency beyond the class. It tells me they actually saw the value but just weren’t able to spend it anywhere. And they were right; that’s an accurate, valid concern.

BETTY: I wonder if that could have been addressed in another badge, where they would have to translate their badges into employable skills.

EMILY: There’s only so much you can do in one class. This is co-curricular stuff.

BETTY: These types of skills are critical to learn as an undergraduate, so, in an ideal world, by the time students graduate, they would have all of these skills, and they would be able to articulate them as skills on their résumé, whether or not they have badges. Doing everything in one class is a lot because we have content to cover.

JOST: In an ideal world, we would have classes that build on each other, so students would earn different levels—like gold, silver, platinum versions of those badges.

BETTY: And in an ideal world, students would come with some base level of skill around information literacy. Freshmen are high school—plus three months, and in high school they’re learning rote memorization. They’re not learning how to articulate their opinions, and they’re not learning referencing and in-text

citation. I probably didn't learn it, either. It's a big leap.

EMILY: For librarians, what we see is a result of the state of libraries in public schools in Oregon, where budgets have been slashed and there are hardly school librarians any more. We are seeing the first waves of Common Core educated students come to public universities. These are perceptions that I have, but I don't have evidence to show that that's part of the problem. I would like to think that it used to be better, but I'm not sure.

BETTY: Even ten years ago, students didn't have as much access to this much information at their fingertips. The problem of fake news wasn't as rampant in the US. Now we're just talking about something so different.

DAWN: In sociology, too, it's pretty well documented that there's a very hard and fast anti-intellectual movement in the US. It's not just passive; it's very active, and it pushes back against these efforts. It pervades all levels of education, and it's bipartisan in some ways, too. That's a real structural factor that makes this hard—teaching people how to engage with information, how to engage with science, how to figure out what is a fact or not, and how to connect your thinking to a larger body of thought. “Alternative facts.” We joke about that, but there are people for whom that is very real and acceptable. I'm not talking about fringe groups, either.

EMILY: When you were talking about some students, Betty, opting not to do it, that was a little different in your class than in both Dawn's class and Jost's class, where badges were required and part of the grade or the assignment, so it was all seamlessly mapped.

JOST: We surveyed students before and after the course and gathered a lot of data showing that a lot of them thought they had certain skills but then they didn't actually have them. In my class, they had to do badges. If I had given them the chance to opt out, I don't know what they would have done. A lot of them probably would have said, “This is so easy. I can do it anyways. It's a waste of my time,” and we did get those sentiments from some people. They said “Oh, this is so high school” and “It's demeaning that you're making me do this.”

BETTY: I wonder what it would have been like if I had assigned points to badges. They were part of the class, they were required, but there were no points assigned to it, and I think when there are no points assigned to it, it's not really a requirement.

DAWN: In my class, the badges weren't presented as something distinct from the grade. It was so integrated that maybe that's why I didn't get the busywork comments. It might be because of the way it was presented in the syllabus and how we talked about it in class. It wasn't badges and grade; they were the same thing. I had students emailing me at the end of class that they'd already gotten grades and they wanted their badges.

BETTY: That's how I've done it in my freshman class this year. The activities are all online and facilitated by the student mentor. It's funny, though—they will do the badge activities, and then I notice a lot of errors in class on what they say is a professional source. They'll say the *New York Times* is a professional source, or CNN, and so we go over this again. Then I get comments from students: "Boy, it sure would have been nice if we learned about this before we had to turn in our draft." And I thought, "But you *did* learn it." I don't know where the breakdown was this year. But the way it was structured [for the badges project] was easy: you just click on the badge activities, there's the video, the quiz, and everything, and it's all there, and you get feedback. That didn't happen in the same way this year, because that kind of execution requires resources: you [Emily].

EMILY: That's what's interesting. I was present in each class at least twice when we did this. There were in-person instruction sessions. Plus, I was on the back end, providing feedback via D2L and tweaking quizzes. In Public Health—speak, the in-person instruction and online instruction were an intervention. We're looking at this as an intervention with outcomes.

DAWN: A senior in a 200-level class might have been more willing to engage in that kind of thing, whereas somebody in a 300-level class might not. They might have already had diminished expectations. So those factors could have impacted people's willingness and attitudes.

BETTY: It's their expectations about a class and about the class material. If I'm teaching a 300-level class, I tell my freshmen, "Look, you can take this class, but my expectations and the material are at a 300-level."

EMILY: *I hoped we could capture if there were any funny stories or anecdotes that we had. I think, Dawn, you got an unexpected badge from a student?*

DAWN: I got two. They went into Credly, and they created a badge. [One of them was the Crystal Clear badge: "This badge recognizes and applauds your repeat efforts to help students understand the purpose of badging."] It's interesting that they wanted to create their own badges and award them. I think it happened because you [Emily] came to class, and you were talking about the one that Jost had made for you. [Tonsillectomy Readiness badge: "Awarded for calmly facing impending tonsillectomy."] And I was like, "What?? I don't get badges!" And after that, the two students did it.

JOST: You came to my class and talked about that badge [Tonsillectomy], and I had two students complaining. In the survey they said, "Oh, this is just silly, this tonsillectomy badge thing. What a waste of our time."

EMILY: It could be a different kind of motivation, too. Although the research about badges is minimal, if we look at extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, some students might be motivated by fun, whereas others might be approaching education as a very serious endeavor. How do you even balance that in a classroom?

You have to balance motivation styles but also someone's personal circumstances that lead them into education, taking it very seriously. "I'm paying all this money. Why are you talking about badges for tonsillectomies?"

BETTY: On the one hand, the Girl Scout badge idea is really awesome; everybody can identify it. But I wonder if people also feel that it's not as serious, because it has that same look and feel in the doling-out of the badges. I think that you gave a new badge to one of my students, too: the Eloquent Emcee. In somebody's class students were giving each other badges, right?

EMILY: Dawn approached me and said, "Hey, I want to have a fun badge for group work," so that's how we thought about these other ones.

DAWN: They did end up in some groups, giving each other badges.

BETTY: That could help to build more social cohesion in the class.

DAWN: So much of it could be the content of the class. In my class, people don't come to it to leave with some hardcore content knowledge, and so the expectations they had of the class and of themselves, they felt freer to just do the fun stuff, because they knew that's kind of what the class was about. The way I describe that class is, "This is the sampler platter of public and community health. You're not going to leave here with depth, but you're going to leave here with a broad understanding, some connections in the field, and some idea of where to go next." Lower stakes, maybe. More fun.

BETTY: My class is an elective, so students who take it are more serious about the topic. Of course, there are students who take it for other reasons, but most students who take it are really interested in the depth.

EMILY: And Jost's class is in the middle, because it meets general education requirements, although it is required of certain concentration students in a major.

DAWN: We [Jost and Dawn] had a shared student. I remember her saying that she liked the badges because she got to see them slightly differently or how they built on each other. She was very positive about badges in class. In fact, it's like they were getting double rewards for the same work, which is how we pitched it.

EMILY: *If we could make badges work, in an ideal world, in an ideal Portland State, what would that look like?*

JOST: The first thing is that the technology needs to be in place. It needs to be simple for the students, and it needs to be simple for us. It also needs to have very quick turnarounds—not the way we collected, graded, and then matched badges to achievements; it has to be instantaneous. I think the most successful ones were those ad hoc, fun badges, and I think for motivation those can work really well. But, until the infrastructure is in place and integrated with D2L, it's an uphill battle to try to use badges in classes.

DAWN: It needs to be student-driven, community-driven, from the ground up.

For example, what is the platform? What should the badges look like? Should they be called *badges*? Then the process should be replicated on a somewhat consistent, timely basis so that students know that this comes from their ranks and it doesn't feel like it's this imposed or applied thing.

BETTY: It has to be institutionalized. It has to be seen as valuable by the PSU community. There also has to be currency; it has to mean something to people outside of the institution or these classes so students are developing badges and potential employers are participating in that process so that they can say, "Yes, that's a really valuable skill." We did have one for group work. That's a critical skill, right? Working together to figure out what makes sense for students and then what is desired by the employer.

JOST: What we need is the ability for students to take those badges with them and to show them and to have meaning. That is also connected to the fact that you need to do the work in order to get it. We were very generous. If we had been stricter, I would say no more than half of the students would have gotten that final badge [Master Information Analyzer]. That was the culminating badge; you had to do all the work in order to get it. We did end up giving it to probably 85 to 90 percent of students, so badges might have been less meaningful for that reason.

EMILY: *I have previously shared with you some of my concerns about having students become a commodity on a marketplace level. It's very disheartening to see—as public education has been defunded on a legislative level and in our current economic marketplace—that institutions are viewing student credit hours as money. A student is money for an institution. Generally, a student's aim is to get a job. Everything that they're doing in higher education is to participate in a capitalist economy, and thereby those students become products in and of themselves. In essence, this is neoliberalism, morphing higher education away from being a public good and instead becoming a financial and social commodity enabling people to participate in a capitalist economy. I am very conflicted; while surfacing learning outcomes and skills is very helpful, badges are also playing into this economy of selling one's skills in order to participate in capitalism. I would like to hear what you think about that kind of tension: Do badges amplify this capitalist paradigm? Do they further neoliberalism?*

BETTY: Is the concern that students who don't participate in badges or can't go to college don't have the badge?

EMILY: My concern is that it's no longer a public good to have an education; it's just a commodity—something that's going to be sold. As a result, we're taking away the value of an education as a public good and contributing to an economy full of worker bees.

DAWN: The commodification of not just higher education but of the people within higher education—the faculty—is a huge issue. Clearly this is a terrifying trend, particularly with MOOCs [massive open online courses] and online



courses. That said, the way badges can be done, going back to the ideal world, can be hugely empowering for students. And if done in the right way, whatever that would be deemed to be, could be a tool for students to counteract those systems. It doesn't necessarily have to be about getting the job and being in the system and participating as a capitalist cog. It can also be about critical thinking skills, and pushing back on the system, and engaging in ways that allow you to dismantle.

BETTY: You could get a badge for participating in policy making or engaging as a citizen.

DAWN: Or even using these badges in ways that then counteract the prevailing system. I don't think it's about the badges; I think it's about the application, because the arguments that are being made about badges can be made about grades; they can be made about résumés, CVs—any markers of achievement could have those same views attached to them. I think it's about the systems.

BETTY: I don't see badges as a problem, except for right now when I was saying that students who don't have access [to higher education] then don't have the skill as marked by a badge. It's more a problem in higher education. With or without badges, higher education is no longer a place to learn about yourself or to learn how to participate as a responsible person in our society. It's really about needing a degree because you need to get a job. And without this degree, studies have shown that your salary will be X dollars lower. And we live in a capitalist society.

DAWN: That doesn't mean we can't change it. People say, "Oh, we live in a capitalist society," but we don't have to. I personally believe that some of the skills that we're giving them are important skills that can dismantle systems—and not just economic systems but political systems. Obviously, there's been a ton written in the past six months about how we got to the current place we are politically and economically, and that's because people lack these very skills that were on our syllabi. Badging them could be a force for a lot of good.

EMILY: In my thinking about badges and this neoliberal problem, they could be used to dismantle systems in that way, but how? How would we map that out? When I have said, "I would never do this again *unless* . . ." my caveat is that I will not use badges again unless we can use badges themselves to help students think critically about a badging system, it's neoliberal implications, and higher education in general. I want badges to help students gain that disposition, but I don't know how to do that.

DAWN: That's a laudable goal for me, but I would do this again even without that. If all a student learns how to do is tell the difference between popular media and professional media, isn't that a win? Isn't part of the problem that people don't know how to interrogate information so that leads them down these paths that are not good? I agree it would be great to do that, but I don't know how we would do that in my class, for an education class or a social justice class—or

they're teaching a great class on campus now, Social Justice Pedagogy, that would be an ideal place to do that.

EMILY: It's separating out the digital object of a badge from the curriculum. You can teach those skills, such as information sources and formats, without having to have a digital object on top of it.

BETTY: I don't see how that badge activity would really drive change in terms of changing our capitalist system. I feel like that's our whole society. If it's about education and changing our society, that needs to happen way early on. By the time students are in college, they have been participating in this capitalist economy for twenty years. It's easy to be complaisant and just say, "Well, forget it; there's nothing I can do about it," but it's not just the Trump Administration. I mean, previous administrations, they were all capitalist; they all functioned in a capitalist economy. So what is the alternative?

JOST: I think it's more about whether badges contribute to turning our students into mindless worker bees. I do see that concern—by making them more marketable—because there is that push throughout the entire university. We've been talking about some of these things. What do employers want? Well, if you think of universities, the way they should be, or were at some point in time, students would go in, and they would learn how to be better people, make the world a better place. It's not something that we do anymore necessarily.

DAWN: It's like the difference between our education [at public universities] and a liberal arts education. But there are some small vestiges of liberal arts—private universities that are hanging on.

BETTY: I just don't see badges in and of themselves as being able to shift us more in that direction. Because we live in a capitalist society. And because of the way that our institution is funded.

DAWN: Emily is saying that the badges could shift us more toward capitalism; that's her concern. I'm not taking the counter; I'm saying that I don't think it's a done deal, that by badging we're moving further toward marketizing students. I think there are ways to do it that can help countervail that.

EMILY: To use the badge as critical inquiry.

BETTY: But to really counter those forces, it's more than badges.

