Successful use of Digital Badges to enhance engagement on UCT at NUI Galway

Background and context on use of digital badges: in brief

NUI Galway in partnership with UCD, UL and MIC are leading on a project for the Irish Higher Education sector on digital skills and digital badges (http://allaboardhe.org/), Funded by The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. The use of digital badges is gaining currency with an increasing number of companies and organisations (e.g. in Ireland, the Health & Safety Authority has been trialling them in their secondary school programmes, the OU has also started trialling them with their open online courses). Digital badges have potential for professional bodies which have CPD requirements, not only as a means of ascribing recognition of achievement but also in keeping training requirements up to date since badges can have an ‘expiry date’.

The NUIG team have prior experience of using badges for professional development and education. One significant example has been their use in a formal, credit-bearing module for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) (PhD students and similar, who contribute towards teaching and student learning support), the content of which is largely based on Epigeum’s University and College Teaching (UCT) programme. Initially, this module used a mixture of face-to-face and online learning, although the challenge of scheduling class time for such a diverse group of participants often proved problematic and required multiple presentations of the same session. The course has now evolved to being entirely online, even dropping a face-to-face induction meeting.

Programme context:

This programme has now been running in its current version for two years and in a previous blended model for two years prior to this. The experience gained has ensured that it is now fine-tuned to meet the needs of this particular cohort of participants and the end-of-module evaluations have been very positive indeed. From the perspective of the university it also provides a very flexible and efficient means of ensuring all such GTAs are able to avail themselves of high quality professional development in not just the specifics of their immediate training needs, but also providing a wider contextual understanding of key ideas in higher education course design, marking, feedback and engaging students.

Technical implementation:

The following points provide an insight into how the UCT programme has been successfully implemented and actively utilised.

- The module is divided into a number of sections (e.g. ‘Facilitating Learning: Key Skills & Techniques’ – using UCT courses ‘Making the most of discussion’ with some additional materials on lab demonstrating, ‘Marking and giving feedback’, ‘Understanding the principles of course design’, plus ‘Lecturing 1’ and ‘Lecturing 2’ as optional for those who are lecturing). There are some additional materials on how people learn which aim to dispel some myths and point to research. Completion of a set number of tasks is required for the award of the full 5 ECTS credit (10 CATS points in UK terms).
- This credit counts towards a minimum requirement for each Structured PhD student over the 4 years of their programme.
- Around 100 such students sign up each year for the module which is delivered via the university’s Blackboard VLE.
Incentives for participation:
For each section the student has to work through the Epigeum course (tracked using SCORM), pass the MCQ test, and respond to a number of key reflective questions (using the journal tool in Blackboard) which are extracted/adapted from some of the ‘Portfolio activities’ in the Epigeum materials and also include local context. When the student satisfactorily completes this they are awarded a digital badge for that topic.

Additional requirements are that the students undertake a peer observation of their teaching - they are observed and they reciprocate with a peer, both completing a pro-forma template and submitting this. This also yields a digital badge.

When a student has completed all components, they are awarded the academic credit for the module - it is done on a Pass/Fail basis, or more typically in practice Complete/Incomplete is the decision. The grading is based on a simple rubric so that the participants can get basic feedback to improve if they need to resubmit to meet the pass threshold for any component.

Key to Success:
The key to success is providing friendly emails of encouragement (but not overdoing it!) and similarly toned messages on the announcements page. (Things like “Some of you are a little confused about the Peer Observation requirement - don’t panic! It’s all very straightforward and those who have done it in the past have really appreciated its value. Drop us a note if you’ve any concerns. We’re happy to help/chat.”)

Student evaluations have been very positive and they have often commented on the friendliness and supportive nature of the tutor.

Accessibility:
The module is available over both semesters so students can take it at any time or at any pace. Some ‘follow along’ with a pacing suggested by the facilitators, based on friendly emails suggesting dates for submission of materials and working through the topics one by one.

Around 80 students complete in any given academic session; others would complete in the following year. Only one staff member runs the module, taking care to manage time, and using grading/rubric tools to as much effect as possible.

Feedback:
From feedback received the purely online method appears to be working well and students often comment on how interesting the experience was for them, not only in terms of the content covered but also the experience of being an online learner which gives them a clearer understanding of this mode of learning. The digital badges have been popular and many are keen to ensure that they complete the full suite of courses, encouraged by the display on Blackboard.

Availability:
The Epigeum materials are also available for self-study, but taking the credit-bearing course is a popular option.