Open Badges for Encouraging Class Representatives' Reflection and Achievement-Sharing: A Case Study

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Introduction

Mozilla's Open Badges constitute a new, free and increasingly effective way of recognising individuals' learning and development with digital badges that can be created using the Creative Commons copyright licence. After learning about their use in further education at the Borders College at the ALT Scotland 'Open Scotland' event in summer 2014 (Scott, 2014), Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) explored how they could use Open Badges to recognise the training, development, and achievements of Class Representatives whilst encouraging them to reflect on and share their work. EUSA partnered with the University of Edinburgh's Information Services division to explore how to implement Open Badges within their higher education institution. This case study describes how this new scheme was developed, how it was modified on the basis of students' feedback, and the initial impact of the Open Badge pilot at EUSA.

Developing a Framework of Open Badges

During semester one of the 2014-15 academic year, EUSA's Vice President Academic Affairs and staff worked to develop an initial framework of Open Badges. At a development event for Class Representatives, focusing on increasing awareness about students' digital footprints, EUSA presented its initial framework of badges, including bronze, silver, and gold levels, to gather feedback. Class Representatives were initially ambivalent about the impact that Open Badges could have for them, since they generally were not familiar with Open Badges, but some Class Representatives were interested in EUSA's pilot project of Open Badges as long as they were not presented in an overly hierarchical manner.

Working on the basis of students' feedback, EUSA developed in semester two a new framework of badges to recognise Class Representatives' work in three thematic categories, namely 'student development', 'research and communication' and 'student representation' (see Figure 1). Within each category, there are six badges designed to be accessible to undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research Class Representatives who study on campus or as online distance learning students. A Class Representative earning at least three badges in a category will be awarded with a thematic badge for that category; one earning all three thematic badges will gain the gold Class Representative badge in recognition of outstanding work and dedication. Student response was positive, revealing both interest in and motivation for earning the various badges and satisfaction that this model was less hierarchical than its predecessor; in addition (and clearly a potentially powerful benefit of the scheme), some Class Representatives felt that this model of badges clarified the different aspects of their role and what skills they could develop in it.

Implementing the Open Badge Scheme

EUSA staff worked with the University of Edinburgh's Information Services division to develop an implementation plan, using the University's virtual learning environment on Learn by Blackboard. They decided to integrate the Open Badge scheme within EUSA's Student

Figure 1. EUSA's Final Class Representative Open Badge Framework

Rep Forum on Learn so that Class Representatives could visit that closed digital space to find resources to support them in their role and also write short blog posts about their work. Students and staff felt it important that the Open Badges should have a design both attractive and also clear to students, staff, and potential employers; a student designer therefore designed shield-style Open Badges with different colours to indicate each thematic category and these were well received by Class Representatives.

To guide the students in writing their blog posts, EUSA wrote criteria stipulating how Class Representatives would need to document their work in order to earn each Open Badge (see Appendix: Table 1) and then set up the series of blogs within the Learn area. Unfortunately, however, the launch of the Open Badge scheme was delayed until the end of semester two of the 2014-15 academic year, because, when EUSA enrolled over 1,700 Class Representatives into its Student Rep Forum on Learn, the numbers were so large that it was obliged to manage them by splitting them into two forum areas, thus slowing down the system.

EUSA launched the Class Representative Open Badges via its website (EUSA, 2015), its Class Representative newsletters and social media. Once a Class Representative wrote a blog post, it was reviewed by EUSA's part-time Academic Representation Assistants (students employed part-time by the Students' Association) working within the Student Representation and Democracy team. They gave the authors feedback on their blog posts and graded them, using a binary grading system (1 for blog posts that met the Open Badge

criteria and 0 for those which didn't) that would then trigger the award of the corresponding Open Badge. In addition, EUSA manually updated the Learn grade centre, so that all 699 students who had attended Class Representative training would be given a training badge automatically.

Impact of the Open Badges for Class Representatives and EUSA

During the pilot launch of the Open Badges at the end of the 2014-15 academic year, thirteen Class Representatives reflected on and shared their work by writing forty-three blog posts and earned a total of thirty-nine badges. Those who were interested in the Open Badges usually wrote several blog posts to earn multiple badges, and some were particularly keen to show off their work to potential employers by exporting the badges to the Mozilla Backpack, which then enabled them to share the badges on LinkedIn. The badges most sought after by Class Representatives were the Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) Meeting badge (documenting academic issues and potential solutions they raised with staff), the Implementing Change badge, the Event badge and the Career Development badge. Since EUSA has the highest number of Class Representatives of all students' associations in Scotland (with 1,700 Class Representatives working across the University of Edinburgh's twenty-two Schools), there was a corresponding wealth of information in the blog posts of interest to EUSA about the local work of Class Representatives and the School-based issues they raised. A striking feature of these posts was the evidence of their authors' thoughtful critical reflection on their work in the role.

One first-year student highlighted her eagerness to become involved as a Class Representative and criticised the unwillingness of her peers to volunteer for the role (she herself had stepped up to be a representative for several of her courses in different Schools). She wrote: *'I think it is important that first years begin to voice their opinions right away as they have the longest time to see the changes and the difference that they make in the University. I was able to raise several areas of concern regarding my course.'* This student provided staff with feedback from her peers, suggesting how to make workshops more productive and how to time placement opportunities to fit in better with coursework and assessment during the semester. This first-year student was surprised to learn about wider subject area, School, College, and University processes and regulations that affect the amount of time needed to enact some student-suggested enhancements. She reflected: *'I learned that the course directors/lecturers are interested in what pupils say but that the system/department/higher authorities are to blame as they take so long to make changes... overall I learned that each school has its own way of receiving feedback – negotiating will have to be navigated – a skill that I am quickly learning.'*

Another student, studying psychology, accounted for her enthusiasm for the Class Representative role by referring to her sense of responsibility for improving the student experience. She wrote: *'I was determined to put myself forwards as a class representative in order to enhance the communication flow between students and staff.'* This student detailed all of her research and preparation ahead of SSLC meetings and all aspects of her courses that were working well or that could be improved; she also made suggestions as to how to enhance the curriculum and student support. She remarked: *'The staff present at the meetings were very helpful and responsive and... they have been working on changing the course structure for the following year!'* This student felt that she was able both to work well with staff who were receptive to student feedback and to communicate well with her

classmates via email and Facebook to inform them about the actions taken by the School to address their concerns and suggestions.

In Scandinavian Studies, one active Class Representative raised various issues in both semesters one and two regarding closely-scheduled deadlines for required courses and student interest in additional courses, at the time not offered, which focused on Scandinavian history and politics. This Class Representative raised the latter issue in semester one: *'The staff said that there are no lecturers certified for teaching it. I replied that we could look into inviting PhD students with relevant degrees. The staff said that they will think about this problem and see what they can do.'* In semester two, she pursued the matter with staff. Of the result, she remarked: *'the staff decided to redesign one of the courses and make it more focused on history and politics. This course now will be run for the whole year instead of one semester, and will be launched in academic year 2016/17.'* She was delighted to have such an outcome to a problem she had identified and for which she had suggested a solution; though she and her classmates may not themselves directly benefit, she has achieved a significant improvement for future students.

A Neuroscience Class Representative reflected on the importance of highlighting positive feedback for staff as well as areas for improvement, such as suggesting how management of contact time could be improved. The student detailed the work: *'The feedback was compiled and communicated to our wonderful course organiser, who accepted the criticisms (although there weren't many) about the course while helping to explain and elaborate on various parts of the course that students had found ambiguous.'* In addition, when the staff mentioned that they were considering different ideas for new types of neuroscience practical work, this Class Representative eagerly leapt at the chance to involve other students on the course and offered to help gather additional student input about these ideas. The student reflected, *'I feel that events such as these which facilitate clear and honest correspondence between students and staff provide great benefit to both sides.'*

It was also helpful to see how blogging and earning Open Badges helped Class Representatives to reflect on the impact of their work and their personal development. For example, students' comments included the following:

I learned to be more patient and ask a bit more professionally about issues that I knew were due to academic rules that students disagreed on. I found this especially difficult at the first SSLC meeting where I thought all the class representatives were going to have a lengthy discussion about issues and my expectations had fallen when I didn't get to explain all my issues. We, as Class Representatives, decided that having a 'Pre-SSLC' with staff might be a helpful way to discuss with staff more in depth before the very fast pace general SSLC meeting. This worked super well! Not only did I feel that I got to explain my issues more in depth, but other Class Reps started to give more of their feedback as well! It gave all the Class Reps a chance to get feedback directly from the staff prior to our meetings and also get feedback from other Class Reps in different years. I learned that giving optimism a chance is far better than aggressively trying to change an issue all by myself, moreover that this is not what leadership means. However, the adjective I actively try to embody is 'proactiveness' instead of 'agressiveness'.

I have been a class rep for the entire duration of my 3 years of my degree course and been truly enlightened. It has been a privilege liaising between my fellow students and course organisers. It has given me a greater insight into how tutors listen to students' concerns before implementing appropriate measures to alleviate stressors and oversights. My communication and negotiation skills have been heightened and complemented on by my course director... I was able to take a note of my peers' sometimes forceful points and couch them in more diplomatic terms. This helped produce greater reciprocity between myself and staff leading to instantaneous improvements in the course structure... Student frustrations and criticisms were listened to and fairly acted upon. Students feel empowered and part of the course design which remains flexible as different experiences and problems are constantly shared. It has been a privilege to see this 2-way action in practice. It has also been useful to see things from another perspective. Being a class rep has meant my confidence has grown tenfold. My interpersonal skills have also improved – having a positive impact on my work... I am able to listen more assiduously to criticisms and liaise more effectively with members of staff, putting new procedures in place. Whilst no longer being afraid to challenge the status quo, I can nonetheless recognise that sensitivity and diplomacy are essential tools in change management.

These two Class Representatives used their blog posts to reflect on their work, the positive impact they achieved and also their own development of leadership skills.

Future Work

EUSA's pilot of its Open Badge scheme has been extremely rewarding, particularly in helping Class Representatives to understand the various aspects of their role and share their work with the whole community of Class Representatives at the University of Edinburgh. Those students who engaged with the pilot project tended to become extremely involved, writing multiple blog posts to share their work in different areas. This was inspiring to other Class Representatives, helping them learn about the impact that student representation can have in various contexts across the university. In their blog posts, Class Representatives provided meaningful reflections upon the impact of their work, which helped them to voice their achievements and share them more widely than had previously been possible at EUSA's in-person events. They showed that twenty-first century education is not only about helping students develop their knowledge and skills, but also about a sense of critical being and self-authorship that students can develop whilst at university (Barnett and Coate, 2004; Baxter Magolda, 1999).

During the 2015-16 academic year, EUSA will fully launch the Open Badge scheme for Class Representatives and it will be integrated into their new online training for student representatives so that they can better understand their role and set goals for the year. The Open Badges will help to encourage those who have previously been Class Representatives to work in different areas, earning badges from different categories, and the badges will be stepping stones for those who want to gain the Edinburgh Award for Representing Students (The University of Edinburgh, 2011). EUSA will also continue to work in partnership with the University of Edinburgh's Information Services team to investigate how the Open Badges might be better presented on LinkedIn, which would stimulate greater student engagement with them. Furthermore, EUSA will continue to share its Open Badge implementation work across the University of Edinburgh and with other universities so that Open Badges become more widely used and accepted as accreditation models within the higher education sector.

Reference list

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Appendix

Table 1: EUSA Class Representative Open Badge Criteria

Representation Category		
Activity	Overview Sentence	Criteria
Student-Staff Liaison Committee Badge	The Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) Badge acknowledges the Class Reps who attend and contribute to their School's SSLCs and represent their coursemates within this capacity.	Students will have to write up a brief report on the SSLC, including: - the issues/suggestions/solutions they raised with staff - the response/solutions offered by staff - their plan to communicate this back to students
Implementing Change Badge	The Implementing Change with University staff badge acknowledges the Class Reps who schedule	Students will have to write up a brief report on the meeting, including: - the problems they raised with the staff member - the solutions they proposed - staff response and action

	individual meetings with University staff members to bring their peers' concerns forward and find potential solutions.	- how they communicated with other students to let them know about the positive changes that were implemented
College Committee Membership Badge	The College Committee Membership badge acknowledges the Class Reps who represent students on their College Committees, above and beyond the remit of their own cohort.	Students will have to write up a brief report on the committee, including: - some of the issues raised in the committee - their thoughts on how it affected students
Meet the Deans Badge	The Meet The Deans badge acknowledges the Class Reps who attend the "Meet the College Deans" event, both to question the deans about problems as well as better to understand University structures.	Students will have to write up a brief report on the event, including: - some of the more interesting questions and discussion points - a question that they asked, or wished to ask - if applicable, the response from the deans and the action they would take.
EUSA Campaign Organising Badge	The EUSA Campaign Organising badge acknowledges that this Class Rep has contributed as a part of the campaign team of a live EUSA campaign.	Students will have to write up a brief report on the campaign, including: - the campaign they took part in - the contribution they made to it - a reflection on how this campaign will improve the student experience at Edinburgh University

Institutional Review Badge	The Institutional Review badge acknowledges that this Class Rep has contributed to a Teaching Programme Review (TPR), Postgraduate Programme Review (PPR), or the University's Enhancement-Led Insititutional Review (ELIR).	Students will have to write up a brief report on the internal review meeting, including: - details of their role as a student reviewer on a TPR or PPR (students are selected for this role through a formal recruitment process) or the contributions they made to the University's ELIR (such as providing written comments on the University's Reflective Analysis or being selected to meet with the ELIR review team) - reflections on how their contributions as a student contributed to the Institutional Review
Research and Communication		
Activity	Overview Sentence	Criteria
EUSA Committee Badge	The EUSA Committee badge acknowledges that this Class Rep has attended and contributed to the EUSA Standing Committees (Academic, Welfare and/or External Committee).	Students will have to write up a brief report on the council meeting, including: - some of the discussion points from the Committee - their contribution, if applicable - the actions they are taking from the committee or campaigns they will be taking forward
School Council Badge	The School Council Badge acknowledges that this Class Rep has attended and contributed to the School Council Meetings run by the elected School Convenor and EUSA.	Students will have to write up a brief report on the School Council meetings, including: - some of the issues raised in the council - their contributions in council - their actions from council

Research Badge	The Research badge acknowledges the Class Reps who have conducted quantitative and/or qualitative research to gather representative viewpoints of their colleagues.	Students will have to write up a brief report on the research they have conducted including: - how they conducted research regarding student opinion and on what topic(s) or how they conducted research about University policies or processes to inform students' awareness - their analysis and conclusions about the research findings - how they communicated representative viewpoints to staff members to inform the enhancement of the student experience
Community Development Badge	The Community Development badge acknowledges the Class Reps who have actively worked as leaders to develop a strong sense of community within their course, programme, or subject area.	Students will have to write up a brief report including: - how they developed a mailing list or liaised with staff to send emails to all students in their course, programme, or subject area - how they may have managed a Facebook group which they actively curate to share information with peers and solicit feedback - how this work helped them become more accessible to their peers who want to raise issues - how managing an online or in-person group has brought their peers together to promote a sense of cohort and a learning community
EUSAY Badge	The eusay badge acknowledges that this Class Rep has either submitted a new proposal on eusay, or suggested an amendment on another proposal.	Students will have to write up a brief report on their activity, including: - a link to their proposal/comment on eusay - their actions after the responses from students on eusay
EUSA Student Council Badge	The EUSA Student Council badge acknowledges the Class Reps who represent their cohort by attending Student Council and contribute to that	Students will have to write up a brief report on the council meeting, including: - a summary of the motions discussed - a description of how these motions affect students on their cohort and how they will communicate these issues to their peers

	student-wide forum, while also communicating the issues raised to their cohort.	
Student Development		
Activity	Overview Sentence	Criteria
Training Badge	The Training badge acknowledges the Class Reps who have attended and fully participated in a Class Rep Training session led by EUSA.	EUSA will validate that the Class Rep has attended training. Training is key for understanding: - the responsibilities of being a Class Rep - how to gather representative feedback - how to work effectively with University staff members to communicate the student voice and work on enhancing the student experience - how to work with EUSA to share and learn best practices with other Class Reps
Online Training Badge	The Online Training badge acknowledges the Class Reps who have fully participated in EUSA's online Class Rep Training module.	Students will have to write up a brief report on what they learned through the online training videos and modules, including: - the responsibilities of being a Class Rep - how to gather representative feedback - how to work effectively with University staff members to communicate the student voice and work on enhancing the student experience - how to work with EUSA to share and learn best practices with other Class Reps
Event Badge	The EUSA event badge acknowledges the Class Reps who have participated in EUSA's events and shared their experiences with peers.	Students will have to write up a brief report on what they gained from the event including: - which Class Rep Event they attended (title and date) - what they learnt from other Class Reps, EUSA staff, and/or University staff at the event which will help them give input into the campaigns and projects that are taking place at EUSA and across the University
School Induction Badge	The School Induction event badge acknowledges the Class Reps who have participated	Students will have to write up a brief report on what they gained from the event including: - which Class Rep School Induction Event they attended (School and date) - an overview of the key contacts and structures within the School to effect change and improve the

	in their School's induction event and shared their experiences with peers.	student experience - what they learnt from other Class Reps, University staff, and/or EUSA School Conveners or staff at the event which will help them work effectively as a Class Rep within the School
Problem-Solving Badge	The Problem-Solving badge acknowledges that this Class Rep has worked with staff to negotiate a solution to remedy a problem in her/his course or programme.	Students will have to write up a brief report including: - why problem-solving is an important skill for Class Reps - what problem they identified within their School or College - a description of how they worked with staff to identify and implement a solution which will improve the student experience
Career Development Badge	The Career Development badge acknowledges that this Class Rep has reflected on the transferable skills and qualities that she/he has developed in the role which would be helpful in her/his career.	Students will have to write up a brief report including: - a description of three skills they have developed through this role - their reflection on their work as a student representative and on the lessons they learned - how they included evidence of these skills in their CV after reflecting on them (and perhaps after visiting the Careers Service for additional guidance)