Awarding a Community Membership Badge - Teachers' Development of Digital Competences in a cMOOC

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Abstract. In this article the badge given in connection with a cMOOC designed by and for teachers is explored. *Digitala skollyftet* aimed to raise the digital competence amongst teachers in Swedish schools. The participants in *Digitala skollyftet* could apply to be awarded a badge for their participation. The awarding process, as well as the participation, of a small group of people who were awarded badges is analysed. Blog-posts were taken as evidence when applying for badges and blogging thereby became an important way to participate. Blogs can be regarded as exhibition spaces where the blogger exhibits and reflects on their learning process. Results show that there is a difference in how the blogs are designed, depending on the level of experience from the blogger. To a large extent, forums, such as Facebook and Twitter, are used as performance spaces, which facilitate the interaction and discussion with other participants.

Keywords: MOOC · Teacher development · Digital competence

1 Introduction

In recent years, there have been suggestions that Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) would arise as a new way of gaining knowledge and competencies. MOOCs have been portrayed both as a threat and an opportunity to universities [1]. However, there are different types of MOOCs and the ones classified as cMOOCs are based on community building and interaction [8] rather than xMOOCs, which are similar to the structure of traditional academic courses with a set starting and finishing point. This article concerns a national cMOOC held in Sweden, *Digitala Skollyftet,* aiming to raise teachers' digital and social media competencies. A badge was designed for the MOOC, which could be achieved after fulfilling a number of steps in the process of participating in the MOOC activities.

Since MOOCs are not very common in Sweden, particularly not cMOOCs, there was a general concern amongst the organizers that the participants may need some structure to get involved. Therefore, a starting point in November 2013 was established

and weekly hangouts were arranged where different issues were discussed and "experts" were invited to take part in the discussions. *Digitala skollyftet* may therefore be considered as a hybrid which was constructed with a connectivist pedagogical model in mind, but which also incorporated features from xMOOCs in order to give a skeletal structure which the participants could relate to.

The aim of this article is to explore the Digitala Skollyftet badge and the evidence given to be awarded with the badge in order to investigate what the badge entails and how it functions as an assessment of the involvement in the cMOOC. The awarding process is explored in order to elucidate the function of the badge as a form of assessment. The badge is regarded as a community membership badge [13]. Earlier research [9] indicates that it is difficult to assess the involvement in a cMOOC without constraining the autonomy of the participants. The requirements and design of this badge will be explored and the participation of some of those who were awarded with the badge will be analysed further.

In order to get a badge, the applicants had to present evidence of their engagement in the MOOC. The evidence predominantly consisted of blog-posts. This evidence presented by applicants and the feedback given on the applications are analysed to explore whether these blogs predominantly are utilized as a space for interaction with others or as a space for presenting your achievements. Furthermore, the feedback given on the applications are analysed to explicate how the badges function as a form of assessment.

1.1 Digitala Skollyftet

During the autumn of 2013, an internet site, *Digitala skollyftet*, was set up as a basis for a cMOOC designed by and for teachers addressing three cornerstones; digital competence, sharing-is-caring and school development. Four teachers, who have previously been involved in another initiative called *Skollyftet* in Sweden, set up the site and planned for the MOOC. *Skollyftet,* which is well-known among teachers in Sweden, originates from an attempt to counteract negative media coverage of Swedish schools and aims to emphasize positive aspects and changes in the Swedish educational system. On Twitter, a number of Swedish teachers actively post information and discuss school issues on a daily basis. Every Thursday night there is an hour-long discussion on a particular subject in what is called #skolchatt. Similar discussion forums have been created for those who work in pre-school and for headmasters, for example.

Over one thousand teachers enrolled in *Digitala skollyftet*. However, to enroll in a MOOC, particularly a cMOOC, does not mean committing to anything. Enrollment is free and open and there are no predefined expectations for participation [11]. Since the MOOC is open, participation is possible whether being enrolled or not. Therefore, the number of people who enrolled has little, or no, relation to the number of active participants. As McAuley et al. put it "participation in a MOOC is emergent, fragmented, diffuse, and diverse" [11].

Digitala skollyftet aimed to facilitate user engagement and the loose structure of the MOOC contained suggestions of weekly tasks which the participants could engage in. The participants were asked to present themselves and make attempts at finding other

participants in digital environments and networks. *Digitala skollyftet* was based on user engagement, offering a number of online tasks in which the participants could engage actively by interacting with others, contributing with posts in digital environments and social forums such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as setting up their own blogs. However, participation in a cMOOC like this does not necessarily mean actively interacting and posting, but could also consist of following the flow of events connected to the MOOC and receiving information through others by reading what they post as well as discussions in different forums.

1.2   The *Digitala Skollyftet* Badge

On the site *Digitala skollyftet* there is a certain page where the badge is presented and explained. The page includes a badge manual with basic information of what a badge is and more detailed descriptions of what applies to the *Digitala skollyftet* badge. There are links to a slide presentation created by the organizers, as well as to pages where open badges are explained. On the pages, badges are explained as a certificate for "abilities, achievements, participation, education, experience, interest etc. It is a way to digitally verify informal learning and works as a complement to formal qualifications such as credits from higher education and teacher diploma" [3]. It is also stressed that the badge contains easily accessible digital information about what it represents and that the badge is possible to display publicly in social media and on your own sites.

One of the organisers states in a blog post [13] that the *Digitala skollyftet* badge is a community membership badge and that the peer assessment involved in awarding badges is particularly suitable since the community is characterized by networks of peers, rather than the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. Furthermore, "all members in the community, not only expert members, are skilled in recognising the community membership of new members" [13]. Peer evaluation is regarded as a valuable contribution in building the community and not as a separate assessment process.

For those who fulfill the criteria for a specific badge, it becomes "a receipt and a recognition of the learning experience which it represents" [3]. The specific criteria for the *Digitala skollyftet* badge are related to the three cornerstones in the MOOC; digital competence, sharing-is-caring and school development, which are here also called the three key competences that distinguish the participants in *Digitala skollyftet* and the Online Community of Educators (*det Utvidgade Kollegiet*). Those who receive a *Digitala skollyftet* badge show their competence in using digital tools for communication, learning and creation. Furthermore, they show competence in "sharing-is-caring" since they learn from others and teach others in the Online Community of Educators. Finally, they show competence in school development since they use their skills in a way that supports the development of their role within the school [3].

In connection to the criteria for the badge the aim of the badge is further explained as recognition of the contribution to the Online Community of Educators. This is regarded as a sense of belonging, to which a learning experience is connected.

> "We use our skills with digital tools to communicate, learn and create knowledge together in a non-hierarchical spirit of "sharing-is-caring" and this knowledge is re-invested in the schools to create sustainable school development" [3].

A brief description of the awarding process is given on the page where the badge is explained. When applying for a badge, a short application form is filled in which includes a link to the "project" that meets the criteria for the badge. A short description of what the project is about is also required. The application should be sent to someone who already has a *Digitala skollyftet* badge and that person will give feedback on the project and award the badge.

The awarded badges are displayed on a page together with a short explanation of the badge (similar to the descriptions at the *Digitala skollyftet* site) [3]. The awarded badges can be accessed either by clicking on an image of the creator or through the list of short descriptions of badges further down on the page. The descriptions consist of an image of the creator, the title of the project, a description of the project and a link to the evidence, predominantly blog posts. By clicking on the title of the project a page is accessed where the creator of the badge states "steps taken" and "lessons learned" [3]. Further down on this page, the feedback given on this particular badge is displayed. The feedback is arranged in kudos, questions and concerns. Positive comments are given in the kudos section and more critical questions and concerns in the other sections. Sometimes the creator of the badge has made improvements which are displayed along with a new URL. This may be followed by further feedback from the person awarding the badge.

2 Theoretical Framing

MOOCs are often associated with connectivist perspectives on learning. *Digitala skollyftet* to some extent resembles the MOOC Connectivism and Connective Knowledge (hereafter CCK08), since both explore connectivist notions of knowledge building. In previous research [9, 10], the participants learning experiences in CCK08 have been explored in relation to the connectivist principles of autonomy, diversity, openness, and connectedness and interactivity [4]. 'Autonomy' means that learners have a choice of where, when, how, with whom, and even, what, to learn. 'Diversity' is related to there being a diverse population in the network in order to avoid group-thinking [12]. 'Openness' concerns the free flow of information and is supposed to encourage a culture of sharing and a focus on knowledge creation where there are no barriers between "in" and "out" [9]. 'Connectedness' and interactivity are considered to be what makes all this possible. Knowledge emerges as a result of connections, according to the connectivist perspective [2]. Though the CCK08 contained the connectivist principles, paradoxes also arose which constrained "the possibility of having the positive experiences of autonomy, diversity, openness and connectedness/interactivity normally expected of an online network" [9]. It could therefore be put into question whether it is possible to combine the connectivist principles, which are based on online networks, with MOOCs. To emphasize the network aspects, and downplay the course aspects, the organisers of *Digitala skollyftet* tended to refer to the MOOC as a Massive Open Online Community, rather than Course.

To frame participatory activities, Goffman's [5] concept of presentation of self may be used as a way to identify user interaction. For activities of participation, online performance has been used in investigating notions of front and back stage activities

[6]. However, as Hogan [6] points out, Goffman´s dramaturgical approach focuses on situations which are framed in time and space. Online environments, on the other hand, are often asynchronous and therefore less dependent on time and space. Hogan prefers the metaphor of exhibition, rather than Goffman´s metaphor of stage play, when considering online environments. Hogan distinguishes between performance spaces online where actors perform with each other and exhibition spaces where artifacts will be submitted by individuals in order to show to others [6]. This distinction will be used to further identify different ways in which it is possible to participate in MOOCs like *Digitala skollyftet*.

3 Method

The method for collecting data incorporates a number of different datasets which will be synthesized in the analysis in order to illuminate different aspects of the MOOC as well as of particular aspects of it, such as badges.

The empirical data consist of surveys, shown in Table 1, and open online resources, such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. These have been mined for data which concerns *Digitala skollyftet*. Tweets containing the hashtag *#digiskol* have been collected as well as posts on Facebook concerning *Digitala skollyftet*. Collecting data from social media is difficult and an area of research which is still very much at an exploratory stage when it comes to how to collect and analyse data, as well as ethical aspects of how to use data [7].

Table 1. An overview of the conducted surveys

Survey 1, October 2013	Questions regarding the participants workplace, work experience and basic information about their use of social media. Consent given to participate in the study. 438 persons agreed to further participate in the study
Survey 2, November 2013	In-depth questions about the use of ICT and social media in and outside the workplace. 140 persons answered the survey
Survey 3, February 2014	Open-ended questions about their participation in the MOOC. 97 persons answered the survey
Survey 4, April 2014	Additional survey sent to 10 persons who had taken a badge and 10 persons who had actively participated in the MOOC (based on answers in previous surveys) but not taken a badge. Open-ended questions about badges. 9 persons answered the survey

All in all, 66 persons answered survey one, two and three, 10 of these persons were also awarded with the *Digitala skollyftet* badge. In the entire MOOC, 47 persons were awarded the *Digitala skollyftet* badge, disregarding the organizers, and two of these applied to two badges. The fourth survey was carried out in order to focus on questions about badges and addressed participants who had actively taken part in the MOOC as well as the ten persons who had been awarded with badges.

The analysis in this article focuses on open online data connected to the badge such as blog-posts and application to the badge. The answers in the final survey are also

central to the analysis, whereas the other surveys and other online data are regarded as secondary information sources on which additional information about the participants are based.

4   Results

In this section, the total number of badges will briefly be mapped out, considering the content of them but also how the participants represent themselves and present their participation in the MOOC. Thereafter, the focus will be on the ten persons who were awarded with badges and who answered the surveys in this study.

4.1   Representation in Applications for Badges

This section analyses how the persons who have been awarded with a *Digitala skollyftet* badge represent themselves when applying for the badge. It should be pointed out that the analysis concerns the application for the badge and no extensive analysis of the evidence which the applicants attach to the application has been undertaken.

When ta king into account the open information in the application for the badges in *Digitala skollyftet*, it becomes clear that applying for the badge involves the presentation of self as well as of what is claimed to have been done in order to meet the criteria for the badge [3]. Representations of self and knowledge are intertwined so that the presentation of self may reveal how knowledge is viewed and vice versa. Some general characteristics of the presentations will be illuminated in order to highlight both differences and similarities in the presentations. These characteristics are pointed out to exemplify differences and similarities and no hierarchical order of presentation or participation is intended. The feedback given on the applications will also be regarded in the analysis.

There is a natural focus on what the persons themselves have done when they present the evidence for meeting the criteria of the badge. However, differences in focus can be distinguished where students and colleagues are emphasized to different extents. Some applicants predominantly focus on their own achievements; in the skills they have acquired in handling digital tools or in the enlarged network which they have established through participating in the MOOC. It is not always clear how their personal gains are put into practice in the work with students or how they are shared and spread with other colleagues. In other applications, the work with students is in focus and how personal gains are used in practices in the classroom are exemplified. Claiming a blog created by the teacher together with the students is an example of evidence, where the applicant emphasizes how skills and knowledge are utilized together with students and aimed at improving their classroom practices. Some applications stress how the MOOC has enabled them to share and spread knowledge with colleagues. In most applications, networking, as in participating in different forums in social media, is mentioned and the applicants increased participation in these forums is put forward as a personal gain. However, in some cases networking is in focus and the applicants convey how they have contributed to creating networking spaces, such as EdCamps and Teachmeets for

teachers. Both EdCamps and Teachmeets can be characterized as "unconferences", where it is up to participants to set the agenda and where the goal is to share and discuss ideas and concerns regarding educational issues[1].

Whereas the presentation of self and of evidence for the badge in one sense illuminates the autonomous paths of the different applicants, there are also signs of how these paths interconnect and draw on each other. A handful of Facebook groups and a couple of groups in Google+ are mentioned by several applicants as important sources for both information sharing, discussions and reflections. Some groups are concerned with particular content, such as flipped classrooms or formative assessment. Others appear to be of a more general character where the members have found other participants to engage with. Some applications, such as Pearls and Pinterest, are mentioned by several persons as tools which they have become accustomed to and used in different ways, to display their engagement in the MOOC or to display the work of students.

Initially it was the organizers who awarded the badges, but gradually those who have been awarded with badges also started to give feedback to others. Apart from the organizers, 12 persons have given feedback on applications. Most of them have given feedback on a couple of applications but one person has given feedback on as many as nine applications. The feedback given on applications predominantly consists of positive comments on the work that the applicant has done. If issues are asked they mainly concern what thoughts the applicant have in regards to developing for example a blog. Concerns are seldom raised. When they are, they mainly concern that the evidence given should be a particular text or page where it is stated how the criteria for the badge have been met, rather than giving an entire blog as evidence. Different persons giving feedback have requested this kind of evidence. These requests show signs of interconnectedness since when giving feedback, one of the newly awarded participants raise the same concern as has previously been given on his/her own application. Questions are raised in connection to a few applicants and they mainly concern how the person claiming the evidence for being awarded with a badge, has interacted with others. These questions can be regarded as a way to attempt to highlight the importance of sharing your experience as well as your concerns in social media. Thereby, the questions aim to downplay that personal gains are being focused in the evidence for the badge, and simultaneously highlight the importance of sharing and the use of social media as a forum for mutual distribution of knowledge, rather than somewhere where you, primarily, boost your own achievements and knowledge.

4.2   Participation

In this section the focus will be on the ten people who have answered the surveys in this study and who have also been awarded with a *Digitala skollyftet* badge. The evidence which these ten participants have enclosed in their application for the badge consists of blog-posts. Therefore, the blogs in question and their content and structure

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[1] For further information http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconference.

are taken into account in the analysis. The analysis will be based on the answers in the surveys and the application for the badge, including the evidence which was given for being awarded with the badge.

The evidence given to be awarded with the badge generally consisted of a blog-post. To a large extent, the content of the blogs reflects the journey of the blogger. At least, six of the ten blogs were started in connection with *Digitala skollyftet* and these bloggers can therefore be regarded as novice bloggers. The blogs, at least initially, serve as a way to present the blogger as a participant in *Digitala skollyftet*. The blogs are also a space where the bloggers' engagement in the MOOC is displayed. Blog-posts commonly concern the different digital tools the bloggers have tried out. There are also more reflective posts where some dilemma is considered or a text or film-clip which has been found on social media is discussed. These novice blogs typically have a few comments from other participants in *Digitala skollyftet*. Often the same person comments more than once and the blogger may also respond to the comments. The participants regularly comment on each other's blogs and often they do so since they share a common interest or work with the same subject or the same age-group of students. Networking, on these blogs, appear to present an opportunity to engage with those that you regard as similar to yourself in one way or another, rather than seeking out differences.

A couple of the blogs are class-blogs. This means that the blogs are used by the blogger, as a teacher, and their students to display what they do in school and to engage parents and others who may be interested. The focus of these blogs becomes what is done in the classroom and the blogs mainly address an audience consisting of the students and their parents. This could be regarded as another type of sharing-is-caring which may not be the intention of the MOOC but which serve a clear purpose for using digital tools. These blogs facilitate openness towards those who are not in the classroom so that they can follow and engage in classroom activities.

A few blogs started before *Digitala skollyftet* and these bloggers are therefore more experienced. To a large extent, the content on these blogs are reflections on activities that the bloggers have done in the classroom or things that they are planning to do, or would like to do. Two bloggers stand out as experienced both in blogging and in regularly engaging in social media and the Online Community of Educators. These two blogs are somewhat different in character compared to the others. There are fewer comments on these blogs and the blog-posts appear to display the bloggers' ability or expertise in different areas rather than their experiences or learning process in the MOOC.

The structure of a MOOC is sometimes portrayed as non-hierarchical since there are not supposed to be any teachers or experts. However, structures where some participants take on, or are given, the role of expert can be discerned from the difference in both content and structure of the blogs of these participants. Though the building of a community of peers may be the vision of a MOOC, the reality may be that structures of more-capable peers are inevitable. However, these structures should not be seen as negative, but rather as a way in which participants learn from each other and where more-capable peers can be regarded as assets since they may scaffold the experiences of newcomers.

The two expert bloggers and participants, highlighted in the previous paragraph, expressed a particular interest in the badge as a phenomenon in their answers in the surveys. Two of the other ten mentioned badges but did so because they thought that the process of being awarded with the badge had been complicated and difficult. The experiences bloggers thereby displayed familiarity and curiosity concerning badges as a phenomenon, while several of the others said that they had little or no knowledge of badges prior to the *Digitala skollyftet.*

When being asked whether they considered the badge to be a form of assessment and/or feedback, the answers convey that the badge was mainly considered as a form of feedback which also served as evidence for having participated in the course. Giving feedback to others when awarding badges was by some seen as positive and a way to promote a more open and less personal climate, others pointed out the risk of the criteria being interpreted differently or subjectively.

5   Conclusion

The persons who were awarded with a badge in *Digitala skollyftet* utilize their blogs as an exhibition space where their own journey through the MOOC is exhibited and reflected upon. However, there appears to be a difference in how this exhibition space is used by novice bloggers and more experienced ones. Those who are more experienced bloggers use their blog as an exhibition space where they display their views and knowledge on certain issues. These blogs have few comments from other participants. Since the less experienced bloggers have more comments on their blogs and engage in exchanges with others through the comments to a greater extent than the experienced bloggers, these blogs become hybrids which serve as both an exhibition and a performance space.

Mak et al. [10] explore the participants' use of blogs and forums in the MOOC CCK08. They come to the conclusion that blogs are used mainly as a personal space for learning and reflection. Forums, on the other hand, are largely used for interaction, discussion and sharing of ideas with others. Hogan [6] makes a similar distinction between exhibition spaces and performance spaces. Comparing interactions on Facebook and Twitter in *Digitala skollyftet,* the discussions on Facebook more closely related to classroom issues whereas discussions on Twitter generally regarded broader issues. Engaging in forums on Facebook may be a first step when attempting to use social media in your profession, having your own blog and using Twitter may be a next step, which most of the persons awarded badges have taken.

The connectivist principles of autonomy, diversity, openness, and connectedness and interactivity were by Mackness et al. [9] found to be constrained in the MOOC. Learner autonomy and assessment are, for example, regarded as difficult to simultaneously achieve. The comments given on applications for badges were generally positive and the participants conceived them as feedback on their participation rather than assessment. The badges can then be regarded as awards for participation rather than assessment of that participation. Largely omitting critical comments in the award process can be a way to overcome the paradoxes involved when applying connectivist principles to a MOOC.

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