Faces and Places: The wave of the future, circa 1983

What does a diploma say these days? Does it tell potential employers or colleges about an individual's skills, experiences, interests and competencies? Or does it more often tell them about an individual's ability to master a test, to jump through hoops, and memorize and regurgitate information they likely forgot the moment they left the class.

As an employer, or a college/university, how do I really know whom I'm getting when I offer someone a job, or send an acceptance letter? Does a diploma or a resume really tell the whole story? Is there a better way to represent someone's skill set and experience? These are all tough questions our society is grappling with, as we address the need to reconstruct our education system into one that better serves the reality our students, employers and communities live in. This past month, Beth and I were privileged to travel to the heart of Silicon Valley to attend the Summit to Reconnect Learning where they were discussing a possible answer to these questions.

We spent two days with educators and innovators from around the country, in a fancy shared-space office building that fit Silicon Valley's modern style, complete with slide open-air courtyards and a full-on kitchen. The topic of discussion, which was expertly facilitated by the McArthur and Mozilla Foundations, was digital badges and the creation and adoption of a new and improved currency for achievement. In preparing for the summit I spent a bit of time wrapping my brain around the concept of digital badges. Digital badges, in essence, are tokens of achievement. Just like a boy scout collects badges on his uniform for mastering wilderness skills or participating in scout camp, students can collect badges for participating in activities such as a robotics program, or by showing proficiency in algebra. The badges can be as varied as a child's interests, and allow record keeping of skills that aren't reflected on a traditional diploma, from experience with service learning projects or civic engagement to animal husbandry, or technical achievements. Digital badges are collected in a "digital backpack," access to which can be provided to parents, educators, or potential employers.

The question that I went to the Summit asking was "so what?" So we start giving kids badges for participation, or even for mastering certain skills, how does that help bridge the gap between what students are taught, and what they really need to know? To answer this question, Mark Surman of the Mozilla Foundation compared where we are in the development of digital badges, to where email was in the early 80's. In 1983 only the most tech savvy and forward thinking individuals used email, and it wasn't terribly useful because so few people were using it as a means of communication. Yet, over the past 30 years, the development of the digital infrastructure required to support email, the growth of the World Wide Web, and the evolution of the personal computer has increased that number to roughly 3.9 billion email users world wide.

In regards to digital badging we are in 1983. The need to communicate an individual's true skills, ranging from leadership and teamwork, to circuits and gears—many of the skills students develop outside of school hours—is growing. Digital badging is an innovative part of the solution to this problem.

As Connie Yowell of the McArthur Foundation stated, the widespread adoption and evolution of an open digital badging system is going to be messy. There are still a lot of questions that need to be answered. Who gives a badge? Who develops criteria for issuing badges? Who holds the data, and how do we protect our students' personal information?

OregonASK and the Afterschool Alliance, hope to help answer some of these questions by joining the newly established Badge Alliance, a network of organizations and individuals building and enhancing an open badging ecosystem.

Part of their strategy involves piloting badging systems in afterschool and summer programs across the nation. Digital badges offer not only the opportunity to create a new currency of achievement, but also support achievements made during every part of the day and year bearing equal weight, which will allow afterschool and summer programs to be valued as legitimate contributors to an individual's academic and social development.