The Validity of Digital Badges as a Currency for Soft Skill Attainment

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Abstract

The alignment of soft skills with hard skills in education has become an agenda of significant importance for developing student competencies critical for success in today's constantly evolving society. The successful development of soft skills in education requires explicit teaching and strategic assessment. Digital badges afford educators a currency which can then be associated with their attainment. The value of a digital badge in this context is therefore directly linked with the validity of its awarding criteria and with the correlating evidence.

This paper describes an investigation into the development and assessment of soft skills within post-primary education. This research is part of a three year longitudinal project funded by the European Commission which is exploring the accreditation of soft skills through the medium of digital badges.

The soft skill central to this study was collaboration. A pedagogical rubric was designed to guide to integration of soft skill development into educational practice. This then underpinned all of the activities the students engaged with. Initially, lessons were delivered which were designed to explicitly teach about collaboration and how to be an effective collaborator. Succeeding these, the students engaged with an activity purposefully designed to measure their understanding and attainment of this skill. The purpose of this was to explore the potential of digital badges as a viable currency for the attainment of soft skills and to investigate the nature and validity of the evidence produced.

During this study two challenges were encountered during the implementation phase. First, due to the nature of soft skills, the evidence associated with their development would be a blend of both objective and subjective. This subjectivity is problematic for the validity of their assessment and therefore in order to adjudicate on their development the imposed assessment architecture needed to take cognisance of this dichotomous evidence. In order to achieve this balance a triangulated approach to assessment was utilised which recognised self-evaluation, peer evaluation and expert evaluation in conjunction with an objective measure.

The second challenge encountered was perhaps more significant and will form the core of the discussion of this paper. Despite the initial lessons being strategically designed to develop collaborative skills within the students, when faced with the assessment activity which was designed to induce collaborative behaviour, the students resorted back to working as individuals. This misalignment between the observed student behaviour and the expected student behaviour raises concerns for the validity of the data generated as evidence of the development of collaboration.

Despite the self, peer and objective evidence indicating collaborative skill attainment, in practice the skill was circumvented contradicting what was otherwise perceived to have been learned. This raises a critical issue concerning the valid accreditation of soft skills with digital badges within education. Traditional school practices may be acting as an influential deterrent for students when evidencing soft skills. If this proves true, in order for valid adjudication to occur steps will need to be taken to counteract this deterrent in order to uphold the currency of the digital badge.