Open Recognition

Richard E. West

Open recognition is the use of open technologies and practices to recognize all learning, including learning not formally recognized by traditional degrees and certificates. It encompasses similar concepts such as microcredentials, open/digital badges, blockcerts, verifiable credentials, and comprehensive learner records. The goal of open recognition is to recognize all learning, whether in formal educational settings or in non-formal or informal learning practices, and to create technologies for collecting, sharing, and displaying these learning recognitions. In this article I discuss the important role that credentials and learning recognition plays in society, and then contrast an open recognition approach with more traditional approaches to recognizing and credentialing learning. I discuss various new technologies to emerge to promote microlearning and credentialing, but argue for open recognition as a more expansive view, enabling us to recognize all learning from formal, non-formal, and informal settings.

Open recognition is the use of open technologies and practices to recognize all learning, including learning not formally recognized by traditional degrees and certificates. It encompasses similar concepts such as microcredentials, open/digital badges, blockcerts, verifiable credentials, and comprehensive learner records. In addition, it is strongly connected to movement to recognize prior learning through Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR). The goal of open recognition is to recognize all learning, whether in formal educational settings or in non-formal or informal learning practices, and whether previously learned or currently in the process of learning. To accomplish this recognition of all learning, there are new and emerging technologies for collecting, sharing, and displaying these learning recognitions, including open badges and microcredentials.

The Important Role of Recognition in Educational Systems

Humans are continually learning. Every second, our senses take in 11 million bits of information (NPR, 2020). We naturally, and often unconsciously, use that information to reshape mental schemas, emotional frames, and behavioral patterns. We are constantly learning and growing, irrespective of and largely uncontrolled by any external system or instructional "design."

Despite always learning, our learning often must be recognized in order to be useful in our lives. It is recognized by an employer when they see us qualified for a particular job or promotion, or by a school admissions board when they judge that we have learned enough to qualify for higher education. There are also important informal recognitions of learning, such as when a peer recognizes our ability in a particular area and asks for our assistance, or when we recognize our own abilities and shortfalls, and make decisions about what to focus on learning next. These informal recognitions motivate and inspire learners in interesting ways. Much of the field of instructional design relies on recognition of learning as part of analyzing learner needs, gaps in knowledge, objectives that should be learned, and the sequencing of learning that might be most helpful.

Thus, while most efforts to reform or improve education focus on educational content or the important relational communities that support learning (see West, 2023), it is equally important to consider the recognition that is part of any educational system. Similarly, in attempting to make education more open, we need to consider open recognition equally to open content and open pedagogies. In this article, I briefly discuss the different ways we formally recognize learning, and propose a framework for understanding open recognition alternatives.

Traditional Recognition of Learning

Traditionally, the emphasis in learning recognition has been top-down. In this approach, an institution is trusted to appropriately recognize whether and what a student has learned, and certify this learning. This recognition of learning appears in the form of grades, progress reports, competency dashboards, certificates, and degrees. These markers are "proxies for ability and potential" (Gallagher, 2016, p. 38) that signal to other entities in society (e.g. employers) about what the student has learned. These end entities trust these proxies because of the trust they have in the institution recognizing the learning.

This formal, top-down recognition of learning is important as both "the foundation of the business model for most higher education institutions" (Gallagher, 2016, p. 3) as well as a key pillar of an industrialized society in need of specific skill sets. However, this form of learning recognition is also limited for several reasons:

1. Lack of Equity — A top-down system breeds inequity as the power within society, as it relates to education, is controlled by few hands—in this case, usually universities. As all institutions can exhibit bias, this has the potential to exacerbate a lack of equity within society.

2. Lack of Access — When recognition of learning is controlled by a small segment within society, then access to the benefits of learning recognition is limited. Even though humans are constantly learning, only those who can get their learning recognized by the correct institution will be able to benefit from their learning. As an example, it is possible to learn a skill such as computer programming outside of a university, but for a long time this knowledge was not recognized as equally valuable. Because of the power of technology companies in society, that view, in this particular domain, is changing as more technology companies recognize alternatives to higher education degrees (Caminiti, 2022).

3. Lack of Openness — Openness, as related to educational content, has been defined as the ability to reuse, retain, revise, remix, and redistribute (Wiley, 2015). Learning recognition can similarly be considered open only when a learner can retain their own learning data/credentials, reuse them for their own purposes, revise and remix them to better represent their own abilities, and redistribute them. This openness requires new technologies that take control of the recognition of learning away from institutions and instead share it equally with formal/informal learning institutions, as well as learners and communities.

Open Recognition: A New Standard

In 2012, the Mozilla Foundation released the Open Badges standard as a new potential technology to recognize learning wherever it happens. Since then, other technologies have also been created to similarly afford open recognition, including blockcerts, verifiable credentials, and comprehensive learner records. These technologies provide a similar potential, and are in many ways technically interoperable. All make it possible for anyone to recognize the learning of another, or even for a learner to recognize their own learning and codify it in a marker or credential that describes their ability.

While these technologies share many similarities in how they handle learner data, the practices surrounding how these technologies are used are very different. For example, badges can be used to simply digitize grades, certificates, and degrees, while still being issued by the same institutions for the same learner performances as before. They can be used to represent large portions of learning, such as a certificate earned over several months or years, or very small portions of learning, such as participation in a single activity. They can be tied to skills and competency frameworks, or be informally awarded as a form of "micro-reference" or endorsement that simply states that one person noticed the performance of another.

Due to the wide variety of practices surrounding the implementation of these open credentialing technologies, a division has arisen in various communities of research and practices. In these cases, nomenclature becomes important: communities using these technologies for official, top-down credentials awarded by large institutions (e.g. universities, employers, and national organizations) typically refer to these as open microcredentials or certificates. Meanwhile, communities using these technologies for informal/non-formal learning, community-based recognition, or self-claiming recognition call these awards open badges or open recognition. The term open recognition appears to have emerged in the Bologna Open Recognition Declaration (2016) and later referenced in a document produced by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission.

Later, Open Recognition was described as "a movement born from the practice of Open Badges, exploring and promoting practices, tools and policies enhancing and broadening the opportunities for everybody, individuals and communities to be recognised and contribute to the recognition of others." (Mirva, 2020, see also http://www.openrecognition.org/bord/). While a fairly recent movement, it hearkens back to how learning was recognized within non-formalized learning communities. As Belshaw and Hilliger (2023) explained, Open Recognition is

similar to "peer-to-peer validation and communal acknowledgement of skills and achievements, similar to how guilds or apprenticeships operated in the past" (para. 14).

A Unifying Open Recognition Standard

Proponents of open recognition see the movement as inclusive of open microcredentialing, certificates, and other top-down practices (see Figure 1). Simply, Open Recognition is the recognition of all learning, by any learner, acquired anywhere, at any time. This includes formal learning in school or through an employer-based system, non-formal (but intentional) learning such as MOOCs and other internet courses or community classes/lessons, or informal learning that arises unintentionally through daily activities (Council of Europe, 2023).

Figure 1.

Open recognition includes, but also extends, concepts like open badges and open credentials.
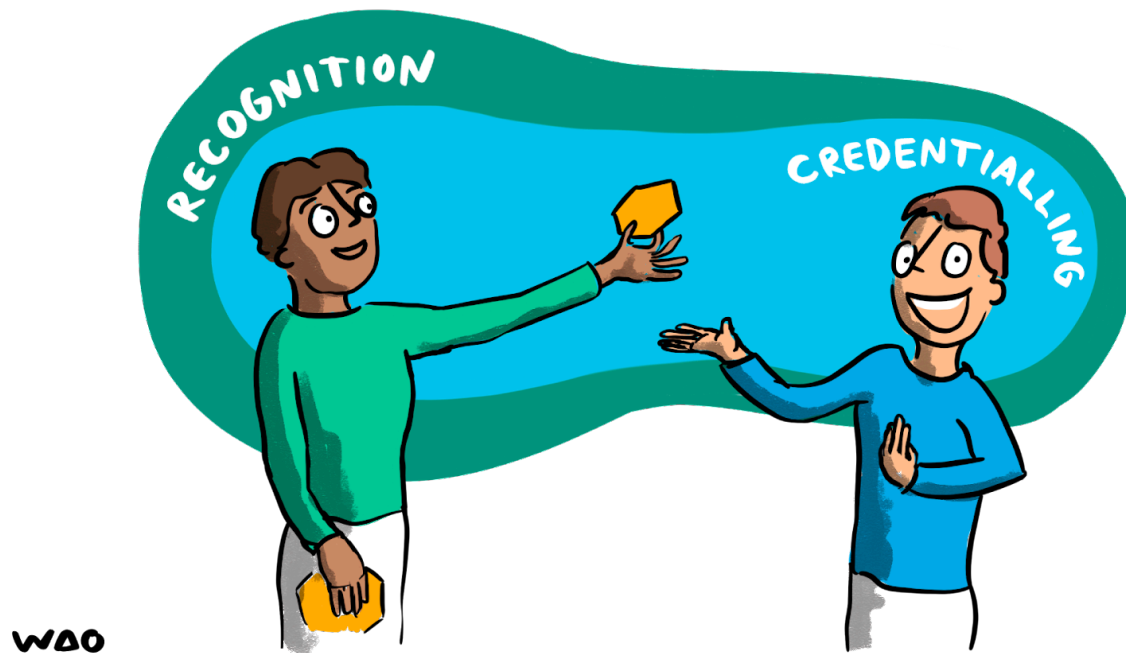

Image CC BY-ND Bryan Mathers. <u>Link</u>

Thus, while there is overlap between the practice of microcredentials and open badges, they are also often used to mean different kinds of educational practices. However, they are all part of an Open Recognition framework that provides a method and technology for recognizing all types of learning. Figure 2 by the We Are Open community, based on ideas from Serge Ravet, visually depicts how these various types of learning recognition are related to each other on a spectrum from formal learning to informal learning, and from a focus on traditional/institution-based recognition to non-traditiona/community-based recognition.

Figure 2

A depiction of how various types of credentials and badges are related to each other and represent options for formal, informal, and non-formal learning recognition.
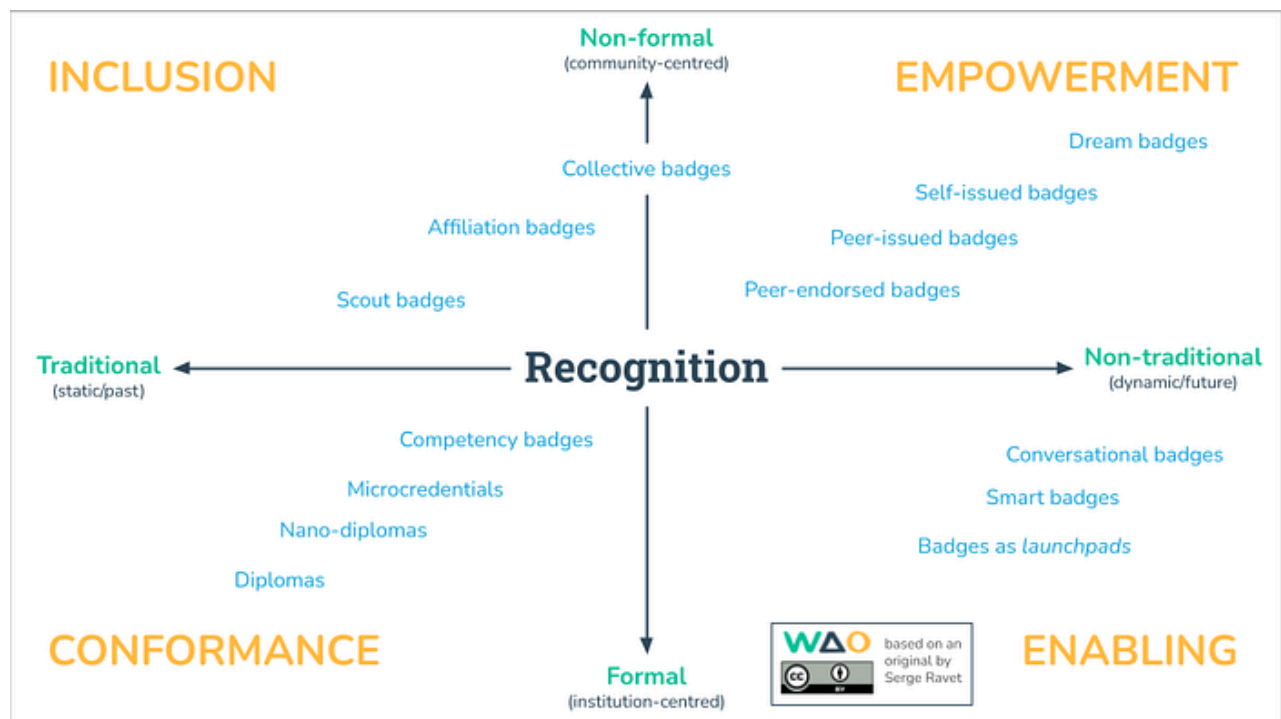
Image CC-BY We Are Open Co-Op (https://weareopen.coop/).

Or perhaps more simply put, open credentials may represent the award given at the end of an educational journey that is valued by outside entities, but open recognition also represents the very real recognition of performance that arises within communities and relationships (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Credential and Recognition
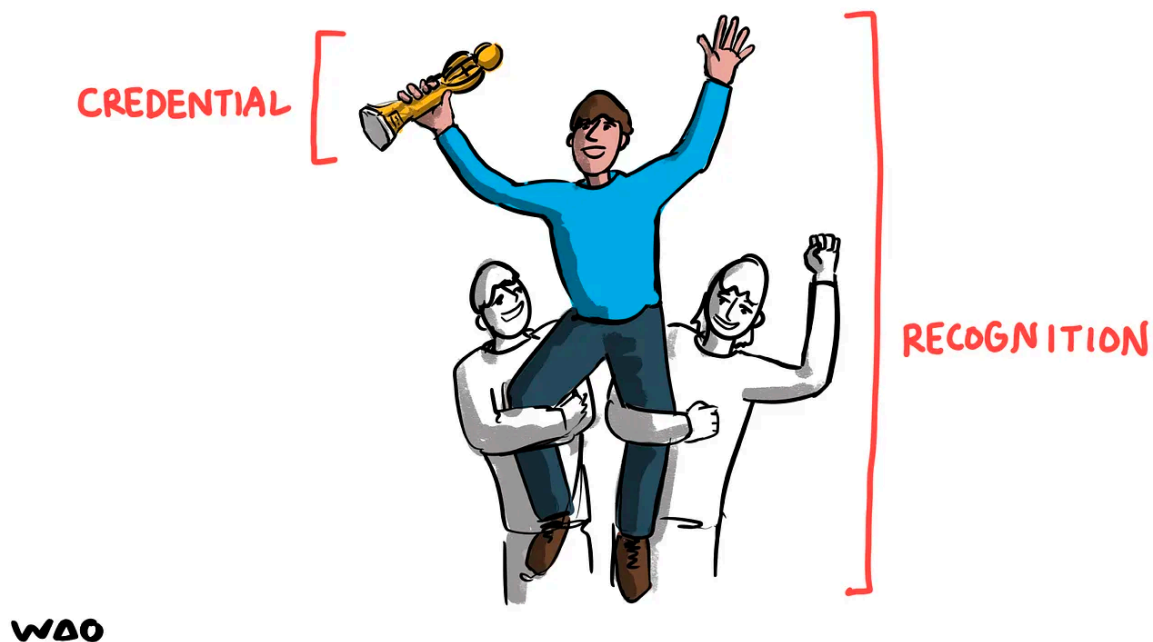
Potential Pitfalls of Open Recognition

The goal of open recognition is to bring more equity to learning and human development by allowing for all growth and accomplishments to be recognized and valued. This has the potential to improve upon traditional systems of education, where the power to recognize learning and growth is held by a relatively small number of institutions, such as universities. However, there are also potential pitfalls with open recognition practices. For example, without clear descriptions of the learning, evidence for the accomplishments, and standards for judging the evidence, the credential or recognition may not be valued by others. There is danger that individuals may seek alternatives to formal education, only to discover that the credentials they earn do not aid them in achieving their professional/economic goals. The creation of more ways to recognize human growtn and learning may potentially bring confusion to the credential marketplace.

Indeed, these are important issues, but the potential of open recognition to provide greater opportunity and equity, if wisely implemented with transparency and evidence, could create new pathways for learning that benefit individuals, institutions ill-equipped to support all learners, and societies eager for greater equity and economic prosperity.

Conclusion

Open recognition provides an exciting pairing of technologies and practices "that could potentially disrupt the educational status quo" (Belshaw & Hilliger, 2023, para. 8) in a future where "universities and other institutions still play a role, but they are no longer the sole arbiters of who is 'skilled' and who is not. They are nodes in a broad ecosystem of learning and recognition that includes employers, co-ops, communities, and self-directed learners" (Belshaw & Hilliger, 2023, para. 2).

For instructional designers, policymakers, and instructors, it is important to acknowledge the nuanced differences in how we can recognize learning in order to make wise decisions about what type of recognition or credential we believe to be most important in a given setting. Whether awarding microcredentials in a formal educational setting, or open badges in an informal, community-based experience, all learning deserves to be recognized for the value it brings to individuals, families, and communities.

For more information about open recognition practices, and how to implement these practices as a learner or institution, please see the Open Recognition Tookit at <u>https://badge.wiki/wiki/Open_Recognition_Toolkit</u>.

Related Terms

Open Badges, microcredentials, digital badges, blockcerts, verifiable credentials, comprehensive learner records, recognition of prior learning (PLAR).

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Acknowledgments

Community Artifacts

For more information on open recognition, see this list of articles: https://badge.wiki/wiki/Open_recognition

And consider joining the Open Recognition is for Everyone community at Participate.com

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Dr. Richard E. West is an associate professor of Instructional Psychology and Technology at Brigham Young University. He teaches courses in instructional design, academic writing, qualitative research methods, program/product evaluation, psychology, creativity and innovation, technology integration skills for preservice teachers, and the foundations of the field of learning and instructional design technology.

Dr. West's research focuses on developing educational institutions that support 21st century learning. This includes teaching interdisciplinary and collaborative creativity and design thinking skills, personalizing learning through open badges, increasing access through open education, and developing social learning communities in online and blended environments. He has published over 90 articles, co-authoring with over 80 different graduate and undergraduate students, and received scholarship awards from the American Educational Research Association, Association for Educational Communications and Technology, and Brigham Young University.

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