

INTRODUCTION

eLearning-Standards – Why and How?

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Throughout the last decade the eLearning scene has developed a variety of specifications, sometimes incorrectly referred to as “standards”. They concern a broad range of eLearning issues and they are often as complex as the learning scenarios they support. This special issue presents achievements of and ongoing work on eLearning specifications, emphasizing the role these specifications are designed for and the value they add to the field of eLearning.

During my work with eLearning specifications over the last year – as head of an eLearning support unit of a university, in research and development projects, as member of IMS specification workgroups and in support of the IMS compliance testing program – I came across several misconceptions of the role and potential of specifications which, I hope, this TICL issue can help clarifying. Some of these are:

- Learning is so individual – it cannot be standardized. In reality, no specification attempts to standardize learning. All that is standardized is the format of learning resources and there are standard guidelines to the planning of some educational processes.
- Standards constrain learning. In practice, the problem is rather to the contrary: Allowing so many forms of learning materials and learning services, some of which are only seldom used, has made some specifications so complex that this has become an obstacle to their implementation. In fact most specifications are flexible and can even be extended and adapted to the needs of particular communities.

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- Premature standards block further development. The purpose of specifications is to collect practical experience before they are submitted as a standard. As a consequence, specifications can only mature if they are taken up and user experience is fed back into their development.

This TICL issue intends to provide a survey of the most relevant developments in the field of eLearning specifications for the non-specialist. The authors of this issue play key roles in the most important eLearning standardization efforts in different organizations. The efforts they describe are of a very different nature and in different states of development. Together they form a picture of a dynamic and diverse development, driven by new technologies as well as by educational experience and economic interests.

Rob Abel is the CEO of the IMS Global Learning Consortium. He describes the context of current eLearning specification efforts, the influencing factors and the paradigm shift towards increased support for current eLearning practice.

Phil Barker and **Lorna Campbell** have contributed to a number of educational metadata specification initiatives including IMS Learning Resource Meta-data, the DC- Education Application Profile Task Group, and ISO Metadata for Learning Resources. They describe the development of metadata standards, probably the oldest standardization effort in the eLearning domain.

Charles Severance has been the CEO of the Sakai foundation. He is one of the leaders of the development of the IMS Tools Interoperability specification. He reports with **Ted Hanss** and **Joseph Hardin** on this hot topic and provides implemented examples how it can benefit the learner.

Describing instructional design in a standardized machine-readable way has always been a central point of discussion at TICL workshops. **Gilbert Paquette**, former chair of the large Canadian Lornet network, describes current developments around the IMS Learning Design specification.

Finally, **Jan Pawlowski** discusses how standards may support achieving quality in eLearning. He is the chair of the CEN/ISSS Workshop Learning Technologies.

I should like to thank these authors for their willingness to contribute to what seems to be one of the most representative surveys of standardization efforts in

the eLearning domain. I also thank the editors of the Journal for Technology, Instruction, Cognition and Learning for the opportunity to bring this group together. Final thanks go to the European Commission who has supported the editorial and reviewing work partially within the eContentPlus project ASPECT under Contract ECP 417008).

I hope this special issue will help the reader to get an impression on the power and problems of eLearning specifications and, perhaps, to contribute to these efforts.