Standards for Educational Technology – IMS

Phil Siviter, University of Brighton UK. Phil.Siviter@brighton.ac.uk

1. Introduction and Background

The last decade of the millennium has seen rapid progress in the development of learning technologies, giving hope to many that we may be approaching the realisation of a vision of an educational landscape in which education providers form virtual partnerships to deliver distributed provision. A landscape in which learners sharing the same learning programme can do so across fading boundaries of time and space.

Throughout that same decade however, some of us have been pointing out that this vision requires more than just good learning technologies - it requires interoperable learning technologies. This is because the vision is predicated on education providers (and learners) being able to piece together resources from diverse sources, and present them as coherent integrated packages in which the components interact to provide rich educational experiences. Without interoperable courseware components this kind of "pick and mix" facility is just too difficult for most people to bother with. But, to achieve interoperability amongst courseware components requires technical standards. Until now, there have been none.

The word is now out however. The world is waking up to the problem of incompatible learning technologies and the need for technical standards to enable them to interact. There are now three major initiatives attempting to address the problem of technical standards for learning technologies:

- IMS is a consortium with scores of academic, government and commercial partners including all the leading computing industry companies.
- The IEEE working group P1484 (now renamed the Learning Technologies Standards Committee - LTSC) is another prominent initiative with widespread support.
- The European Union standardisation mandate in the domain of "Learning and Training Technologies & Educational Multimedia Software".

Even better, the three initiatives appear to be talking to one another and attempting to harmonise, and even build upon, each other's efforts. In addition, they are making great efforts to build on top of well known software standards, such as CORBA, DCOM, HTTP, and XML.

This Special Interest Group discussion focuses on either (or both) of two issues which I believe are vital to the success of these standards-forming initiatives:

1. The generation of a wide range of innovative, futuristic scenarios involving learning technologies - i.e., "fleshing out the vision". This is important because scenarios are what drive the requirements gathering process. They form reference points which can be used to verify the outputs from standards projects.
2. A discussion of how the outputs from the projects can best be implemented in the delegates' host institutions/organisations.

2. References

Note: Dates in square brackets following a URL are the dates the author last visited the URL.

IMS. http://www.imsproject.org/ [8th July 1999]