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Learning Consortium

Article Series on Learning Impact

An Integrated Learning Platform Improved with IMS Global Learning Standards

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When **Desire2Learn (D2L)** created their learning platform in 1999, distance education was in its primitive stages and consisted of little more than mailing cassette tapes to users.

“There was a big gap between what technology could be doing and what it was doing. We set out to break down the traditional barriers that kept everyone from accessing education – including distance, time and accessibility,” said Jeremy Auger, Chief Strategy Officer.

“In the very early days, the industry started with simple concepts for online course management, responding to the need for ‘how do I post course notes online?’ As we entered the market, we looked at systems as an institutional tool and were interested in how could we look at programs and outcomes and track a student’s progress and performance across their courses. As the technology progressed, we went from being more course-centric to focusing more on student outcomes and learning methodologies.”

As time went on, students and institutions began using more platforms and applications, Auger said.

“The advanced publishers were going digital and providing more tools for instructors. Instructional designers began creating their own content, and before long, the concept of Open Educational Resources (OER’s) was introduced. In a short period of time, there was a flood of resources and tools at the fingertips of instructors like they had never experienced before.”

For many years, he said, higher education was engaged in a “feature” war where people were evaluating systems based on whether or not they had the latest bells and whistles. This resulted in monolithic systems that promised to do everything, but did very few of those things well. The problem with this approach was that every institution, learner and teacher has different needs and different approaches that need to be supported. This is why we talk about the LMS as more of a learning environment and its one reason why we’ve evolved to an integrated learning platform.”

“Rather than having two dozen disparate systems that don’t talk to each other, an integrated learning platform acts as the core, almost like an educational

operating system for the suite of things that an instructor, institution, or a learner need to support their personalized learning journey,” he added. “An integrated approach allows for easy things such as single sign-on between tools. This used to be a difficult task that required consultants, service engagements, time and money. As an industry, we’re moving from the concept of monolithic systems that do everything to more of a distributed network of systems that integrate and can talk to each other.”

Auger noted that most D2L clients migrate from competitors, so the recurring migratory process needed to be addressed. They came to D2L with thousands of courses that required exportation from the competitive system so they spent time building course conversion tools. “You had to have a tool that could read course packages in different formats from each competitor. There were all these packages coming in that were really hard to support. Not to mention, every time a competitor released a new version or update or service pack, they tended to tweak their format, which meant more work for us,” said Auger. D2L spent a lot of time making sure customers could port everything needed to their environment, and it helped understand and prepare for a new world of interoperability.

Searching for a better solution, D2L early on became a supporter of interoperability standards provided through the [IMS Global Learning Consortium](#). “We also adopted [SCORM](#), which was based largely on IMS standards,” he said. “But they were different enough that you had to have support for both. We were still experiencing a problem with interoperability in those days, however, because there wasn’t the critical mass of adoption where it became the ‘one’ accepted way to do things. It became just another format we had to support.”

Auger said that even though the adoption of IMS standards was not widespread early on, his company still attempted to position its adherence and support of interoperability as thought leadership, differentiating from its competitors.

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“Our first adopted standards were around IMS content packaging to support course conversion from other systems,” he said. “Even as we would architect some of our back-end systems, the data models we built were around IMS standards. For example, our competency engine and our learning environment, we structured the data around the [RDCEO](#) (The Reusable Definition of Competency or Educational Objective) specification. We figured that in the future, if people start exchanging competency data and there’s a standard out there, we are going to at least support the data model that everyone built off of. We have also been involved in the development and support of [Learning Information Services](#) (LIS). We have achieved IMS certification for LIS because we believe it is important to be able to communicate effectively with student information systems and that the flow of information between those systems is critical to interoperability and reduces the work of system administrators. We also built support for IMS’ [Learning Tools Interoperability™](#) (LTI™). We were one of the earliest implementers of LTI.”

As D2L adopted the standards and became a leading proponent of the work being done by IMS Global Learning, the company chose to take on a leadership role within the organization itself as an IMS Contributing Member. Employees have actively participated in a number of the IMS work groups that have developed specifications, and Auger himself has served on its Board of Directors for a number of years.

“I’ve seen increasing levels of involvement and adoption of standards over the past decade,” he said. “I think a turning point was with the offering of

LTI and **Common Cartridge** (CC). Today, if you're the start-up that's built a learning tool and you don't have LTI support, people will now look at you and wonder how you intend to sell that offering. The feedback we're receiving from some users is that 10 to 100 times improvement is in the cost and time to integrate by using some of these integration standards. That's a pretty compelling value proposition."

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Going forward, Auger said that one of the things he is excited about is the IMS focus on developing standards that will allow for the import of learning 'sensor' data from disparate tools and learning activities into a central or distributed data warehouses where the information can be compiled and analyzed. When you start getting those big data sets that come from multiple systems and content

applications, he said, you could generate even more powerful insights that can be used to have big impacts on teaching and learning.

"IMS is about interoperability, it's about efficiency, and ultimately, it is about having impact on learning," he added. "Impact is ultimately what D2L is trying to affect, which is why we're so involved with IMS. The idea is if you can take the technology out of the way by making it easy, then you can focus on what's important, which is improving outcomes and having a more meaningful impact on teaching and learning. That's what our Integrated Learning Platform is all about. Technology needs to do more than manage learning, it needs to improve it."

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About IMS Global Learning Consortium

IMS Global is a nonprofit organization that advances technology that can affordably scale and improve educational participation and attainment. IMS members are leading suppliers, institutions and government organizations that are enabling the future of education by collaborating on interoperability and adoption initiatives. IMS sponsors Learning Impact: A global awards program and conference to recognize the impact of innovative technology on educational access, affordability, and quality. For more information visit www.imsglobal.org or contact info@imsglobal.org.

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