



DfES' e-learning guru: Learning Design is the way ahead.

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In her keynote speech to the IMS Open Technical Forum, Professor Diana Laurillard, the head of the e-Learning Strategy Unit of the UK Department for Education and Skills (DfES), called for the widespread adoption of Learning Design. The specification still needs to be formally adopted by IMS, but was hailed for its ability to allow easy re-use of successful learning models, without straightjacketing adopters into one single pedagogical approach.

Before Professor Laurillard outlined her vision, the packed hall in the Magna Science Adventure Centre was reminded of the goals that learning technology standards are designed to provide: seamless interoperability of content and systems and decent meta-data, which allows data interchange between institutions, reduce cost by re-using content, open up competition between vendors and avoid vendor lock-in. That same push for standardisation, she claimed, has also brought a few less desirable trends: a lot of unimaginative learning content and standards that threaten to tramline content developers into one single pedagogical approach. The unimaginative content is to be remedied by more research and development that is both scientifically rigorous and independent, she said, while guaranteeing the pedagogical flexibility of technology required standards like Learning Design.

What Learning Design allows content developers, according to Professor Laurillard, is a greater flexibility in designing the learning experience. Learners are not constrained to just view the linear instruction part of a learning object followed by a simple test; on their own and self-paced. Instead, learning activities can be done simultaneously by a number of people in multiple roles, supported by any number of objects and services. Also, Learning Design's structure would allow the best models of learning activities by re-used by teachers rather than eLearning specialists. A successful learning design could be taken, have its structure abstracted from the specific text and pictures and then pushed back to teachers as a template be filled with different assets to address a different topic. In this way, she said, standards would bring back elearning design to the classroom.

The greater significance behind this keynote is that it makes the present debate about learning technology standards quite clear: one group sees guaranteed conformance of content and applications to specifications as an immediate problem that needs resolution first, while another group feels that the technology may not be sufficiently mature yet to be set in stone. Professor Laurillard is quite clearly in the latter camp when she calls for the further development of existing specifications, the adoption of a specification that has not yet reached draft status and her view that we need to "appraise the feasibility" of the proposed UK Standards Conformance Authority (SCA).

Learning Design is a proposed draft IMS specification that has been developed from Educational Modelling Language (EML), a language that was designed by the Open University of the Netherlands to support as many different pedagogical approaches as possible. The vote on Learning Design's draft status will close on Monday, 30 September. The director of CETIS, Bill Olivier, is directly involved in the development of Learning Design.