

MS Global Learning Impact 2007

The Summit on Global Learning and Industry Challenges

by Julian Clayton

The IMS Global Learning Consortium's annual conference, Learning Impact, took place in Vancouver from 16-19 April 2007. The conference aimed to keep participants focused on the latest innovations in learning systems, digital learning content, the learning enterprise, and open technologies.

Vancouver harbour storms sweeping through the New England resulted in your correspondent regrettably missing the opening keynote from Dr Bernard Luskin, EVP at Fielding Graduate University. In the second keynote, Lawrence Grossman gave an informative and inspiring overview of the ambitions of the Digital Promise initiative, of which he is Co-Chair. Digital Promise aims to raise money to fund the transformation of America's education, training and lifelong learning sectors through the application of technology. Grossman urged us to attend a briefing on the progress of legislation towards the development of the Digital Promise initiative in the US Capitol Building on 9th May.

Following the opening keynotes participants separated into parallel tracks. Joel Greenberg from the Open University (OU) chaired the 'What's Next for Learning Systems' track. Although the first session, entitled 'Online Learning: are all the Pieces Finally in Place?' resulted in a vigorous debate, I am not sure that it produced a definitive answer to the question posed! During this session, and also in subsequent sessions, there was much interest in the OU's adoption of Moodle. Particular Moodle issues that the OU is addressing are robustness, production workflow, innovative technologies and pedagogies and content handling tools.

I crossed the hallway to find out how the Chairs of the 'What's Next for Digital Content?' track, Daniel Rinn and Tom Grega from Thomson Learning, were getting on. During the 'ThomsonNOW on Sakai: A Showcase of IMS Development Standards and Interoperability' session we were treated to an overview of the qualities and functions of ThomsonNOW and were shown how this powerful system integrated with eCollege. Later on, Peter Lamothe from HarvestRoad showed us how important a well-structured and well-functioned repository is to the reusability and interoperability of learning content. This was followed by Chris Moffat from Microsoft's impressive demonstration of how - via high bandwidth availability - the

Conference XP platform can facilitate very high quality video enabled collaborative and distributed learning across multiple locations.

Back in the 'What's Next for Learning Systems?' track, Bob Alcorn from Blackboard sketched a vision of a future 'virtual VLE' where institutions and users interact with an 'archipelago' of online resources rather than engaging only with discrete local applications. I got the impression that Blackboard is working towards becoming a 'point of sale' application for e-learning, gathering data on teachers and students in the same way that Tesco gather data about their Clubcard members. Edward Mansouri of Ucompass echoed this theme when he predicted that future users will interact with 'Webtop' applications rather than the desktop alone. Finally Fabrizio Cardinali of Giunti Labs gave an inspiring and interesting presentation on the opportunities for personal and mobile learning delivered at and within the context of the learner. Although I missed George Ward's presentation in this track on the California State University's (CSU) plan for a Digital Marketplace, in discussion with him separately I was impressed by the scope of this initiative that - using Sakai Open Service Interface Definitions as the building blocks - aims to place interoperability and control of learning resources and research information in the hands of users of the CSU system.

I managed to participate in one session from the third track 'The Academic Enterprise: Assessment, Analytics and Student/Institutional Performance'. Mladen Maljkovic from Pearson Education gave a persuasive demonstration of the MyLab concept, which ties online learning tightly to student outcomes. He informed us of the system's ability to personalise a student's learning experience based on its understanding of their competencies and intentions, and cited research that indicates a student pass rate improvement of up to 40% using MyMathLab (within my own company John Wiley & Sons, we can corroborate this, finding similar improvements using WileyPLUS).

The next day was a full day plenary session with 5 successive panel discussions.

Panel 1: What are the successes of open initiatives in education so far and what is coming next? What business models are working and why?

There was general agreement that Moodle and Sakai represent successful examples of open initiatives in education. The discussion then moved on to open content initiatives. In this field the consensus seemed to be that successful open source initiatives require a strong community, but that in the content field such communities have yet to emerge. Joel Thierstein, executive director of the

Connexions Project, proposed that communities needed to be well seeded with content in order to allow them to become self-generating, while Joel Greenberg referred to the significant production effort required to initiate and maintain the OU's OpenLearning initiative. Rather surprisingly, I did not note any mention in this session of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) OpenCourseware (OCW) initiative or of Merlot, both of which are significant open content repositories.

Panel 2: Exploring best practices in government support for ICT Panellists from four different countries discussed why their respective governments support ICT:

- \* Korea: Strong, centralised desire to exploit high bandwidth to deliver and manage national educational resources.
- \* New Zealand: Market too small to support commercial initiatives.
- \* US: Market fragmented and government can promote standards.
- \* UK: Aim is to foster collaboration and kick start innovation within institutions.

Panel 3: Performance vs. Prestige: Does the work of the spellings commission signal a new era of access, affordability, and accountability? Why or why not?

The Spelling Commission report is clearly controversial. Consensus on the answers to the above questions seemed to be "No" and "Because there is no agreement on measures of affordability and accountability". The panel was unanimous in praising the quality of the analysis which underpins the Spelling Commission report, but were wary of the presumed introduction into higher education of the assessments and measurements associated with the 'No Child Left Behind' philosophy.

Panel 4: Will technology enable Higher Education to solve the access-affordability-quality tradeoff?

The panel concluded that technology does offer solutions toward improving efficiency and cost-effectiveness in higher education. They predicted that specific future developments would be:

- \* Collaboration tools
- \* Formative and adaptive assessment tools

\* Scaling tools

Panel 5: The evolving business model(s) of learning content: Does free or ad-supported equate to better? Why or why Not?

Despite being scheduled at the end of a long day this session was animated and covered significant ground. Questions and opinions which were raised were:

\* Q. What difference or threat does the MIT OCW initiative pose to course creators and publishers?

A: None to very little, in fact OCW provides a useful reference point and source of supplementary content.

\* Q Is there any future in instructor self-authoring?

A. No: it is very difficult for instructors to be compensated for their efforts.

\* Q. What is the future of e-textbooks?

A. Future Content may be structured around formative assessment (as evidenced on the previous day by the Pearson MyLab presentation).

\* Q. What new e-learning business models may emerge?

A. One possibility might be institutional purchasing of content. This could lead to 100% adoption of course material (versus 40% at present) and consequent significant reduction in cost per student for adopted e-textbooks (assuming they are the adopted course material).

\* Q. What about inclusion of advertising in online course content?

A. This is likely to occur only in ancillary content; it is unlikely to be acceptable to instructors and students within the body of the course content.

\* Q. With the expectation that learning content will become more granular, might a market develop for the sale of learning objects (microsales)?

A. No. Although this writer observes that this is the principle supporting the above mentioned CSU Digital MarketPlace initiative.

The comments above are not necessarily the unanimous views of the panellists, rather they were the those that I heard loudest!

The meeting concluded with the Learning Impact Awards. Platinum awards were made to: the Open University for OpenLearn; Cyber Home Learning; Korea; and ETS Criterion Online Writing Evaluation Service. A full list of awards is available at IMS Global Awards.

In summary, IMS Global Learning 2007 was a useful and informative conference which broadly delivered on its intention to keep participants focused on the latest innovations in learning systems, digital learning content, the learning enterprise, and open technologies. In side meetings and demonstrations much progress was reported in the development of the IMS Common Cartridge standard and an additional workshop solicited much discussion about learning standards and the integration of learning content. It is always difficult to strike a balance between managed presentations and free flowing discussions. Despite the difficulty in initiating, controlling and developing discussions from the floor, I think the balance of the conference might have benefited from a bit more discussion and less presentation. Under the leadership of Rob Abel, in the last year IMS has taken on a new lease of life and this conference confirmed the central role IMS has in shaping and serving the agenda for the development of online learning globally. I look forward to next year's conference. In Hawaii, please!