

# Statement to the E.E.P. conference

*10th October 2006*

Becta's focus on centralised procurement has distracted it from its key task, which should have been to create a robust framework for interoperability.

## What is interoperability?

There are two kinds of interoperability.

- Vertical interoperability passes data upwards from schools to LEAs and to central government. This issue is being addressed.
- Horizontal interoperability allows different applications within a school to work together. Very little has been done in this area even though it is this, I shall argue, that is essential to the successful implementation of e-learning in schools

## The problem with e-learning

Many believe that one of the main problems with e-learning is with content discovery: teachers simply don't know what is out there. Becta's response has to do a lot of work on tagging and classifying content – applying, if you like, the digital equivalent of the Dewey-decimal system in libraries.

It's the wrong solution: people now find information, not using formal classification systems but with free text search engines such Google.

It's also the wrong problem. The problem in schools is not content discovery but content deployment: teachers know what's out there, but they can't use it productively in the classroom. They do not have a deployment infrastructure to support individual study and group work.

The teacher must be able to assign content to their students, see whether the assignment has been completed and how well the students got on. More advanced, adaptive content needs to access back-end data, authentication and communication services. Without this infrastructure, most content is very difficult to use; and adaptive content is very expensive to develop.

## Runtime content interoperability

This infrastructure is provided by an LMS, a Learning Management System, to which learning content can 'plug in', passing data backwards and forwards at runtime using open standards for interoperability.

These standards have been developed in America (the best known is SCORM) but little has been done to promote their use in the UK or to adapt them for use in UK schools. The first and as far as I am aware only content officially to support the SCORM runtime is the BBC's Digital Curriculum – but its support is purely nominal. BBC content will open a communication channel with a third-party LMS will not use it. All significant data is passed back to the BBC management system

using proprietary protocols. It is like a toaster that plugs into the mains for show but really runs on batteries.

Other content publishers are also developing proprietary management systems locking schools *in* to a single content provider and locking smaller publishers *out*. And what teacher wants several different mark-books? A multiplicity of proprietary management systems is inefficient, anti-competitive and unsustainable.

## The need for flexible markets

So what's the evidence that LMSs will make the difference? As there are none deployed in schools, the answer is 'very little'. But there is very little hard evidence for any pedagogy working effectively: the ImpaCT2 reports have shown improvements in exam results, attributable to the use of ICT, to be negligible. The correct response to such a finding is surely to diversify and experiment

It is much easier to make a toaster than a complete electrical distribution network. Being able to 'plug in' to a mains infrastructure encourages small, innovative, easily deployed products. Centralised procurement of expensive one-stop solutions does precisely the opposite.

## Two types of standard

The market for learning content is doing little more than limping along, supported for only a little longer on the crutches of e-learning credits. It isn't surprising. Where would the music industry be without technical standards allowing interoperability between content and infrastructure: standards defining the long-playing record, the CD and streaming audio?

There is a vital difference between standards defining functionality and standards for interoperability. The industry is right to oppose the former as prescriptive, but desperately needs the latter.

## Conclusion

Becta is a technology agency. Technology is about providing the means, not about defining the ends. There is urgent work to be done in creating a robust technical infrastructure for e-learning in schools, that will underpin a dynamic and innovative market. But deciding what works in the classroom should be left to that market: to the creativity of industry and to the discernment of teachers.

Becta may be increasingly receptive to these ideas but is looking to industry to provide a consensus on the back of which it can act. It may be that the controversies surrounding the Learning Platform Procurement and the roll-out of the Digital Curriculum will provide the impetus for achieving such a consensus. It may be that with the Learning Platform Procurement completed, the new year will bring real opportunities for progress. If so, it is critical that those opportunities are not missed.

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