Chapter 8
E-Learning Standards:
Beyond Technical Standards to Guides for Professional Practice

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ABSTRACT
Over the past decade e-learning standards have attracted substantial and growing attention from practitioners, institutions and governments. Millions of dollars are being invested in a process of standardization that, while aimed at supporting e-learning, seems to have neglected pedagogy and the need to engage with practitioners who are not technology specialists. In parallel, a culture of quality assurance has developed internationally within higher education resulting in quality frameworks that are driven by external compliance agendas rather than directly influencing the quality of the student and teacher experience of education. The e-learning Maturity Model provides a standard that guides professionals and organizations in assessing their e-learning capability, but also complements this with quality enhancement and feasibility elements that support reflection, prioritization of resources and guide personal and organizational development of e-learning.

INTRODUCTION
Tanenbaum’s wry observation on standards “The nice thing about standards is that there are so many to choose from” (Tanenbaum, 1981, p. 221) is an almost obligatory quote in papers that consider the role of standards in e-learning and higher education. However, when one assesses the standards available (Marshall, 2004) it is clear that if practitioners are seeking standards as guides for professional practice in e-learning they are not offered a wide selection of choices unless their interests run to interoperability or resource discovery.

Standards and standardization, rather than being seen positively as tools for simplifying and
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supporting professional work are widely regarded as irrelevant to most academics. The ‘standard’ approach to teaching implies a raft of negative connotations to those trying to improve the use of technology and the quality of the student e-learning experience. ‘Quality’ has similarly been transformed from a positive expectation to an idea tinged with negativity, the almost inevitable expectation that a quality agenda is one of auditing, compliance and expensive bureaucratic oversight.

It is easy to blame governments and consultants for the negative conceptions of standards and quality in higher education. However, some of the blame for these being ‘secret standards business’ (Mason, 2003) must lie with the lack of engagement by the wider academic community in setting their own professional standards. Part of the responsibility must lie with the culture of academic freedom, which many choose to interpret as a requirement for independence in all things and individual action without reference to the immediate institutional context or the needs of their programme or students. The reality is that collegiality is a strength of the university that requires collective action and responsibility, particularly as resources become ever more closely constrained and as universities take on a greater social role promoting equity and access to education for all groups.

This chapter explores the work on standards and quality that has been undertaken over the past decade. It takes a critical perspective on the extent to which this work has resulted in a greater sense of professional identity and participation amongst the e-learning community. The e-learning Maturity Model (eMM) is discussed as an example of how benchmarking and quality activities can be owned by the community and used as guides for professional practice, not just as a tool for management measurement and institutional accountability, but a positive force for growth and innovation.

E-LEARNING STANDARDS

The Technical Dominance of Standards

The term ‘standard’ is a both simple and complex in definition. In the formal sense (ISO/IEC, 1996, p8) it is “a document, established by consensus, that provides, for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for activities or their results, aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of order in a given context.” Standards in the strictest sense can only be created by specific organizations such as the International Standards Organization. In reality and common usage, as well as in the rest of this chapter, a standard can be an official document, but it also could be a de facto creation of a professional body or vendor, a specification, a reference model or framework, or a collection of guidelines. Guidelines or heuristics generated by expert practitioners and possessing strong face validity rather than empirical support constitute the predominant guides to good practice within e-learning evident in the literature.

The development of E-learning standards in all their myriad forms over the past decade has resulted in a complex ecology of organizations, working groups and documents that make engagement by non-specialists challenging (Friesen, 2005; Devedzic, Jovanovic & Gasevic, 2007). Key organizations include the IEEE Learning Technology Standardization Committee (LTSC; http://www.ieeeltsc.org), the ISO/IEC Joint Technical Committee I Standing Committee 36 (ISO/IEC JTCI SC36; http://www.jtclsc36.org), the IMS Global Learning Consortium (IMS; http://www.imsproject.org), and the Advanced Distributed Learning Initiative (ADL; http://www.adlnet.org), as well as a number of nationally or regionally focused organizations. The backgrounds of these groups provide an important context to their work. IMS arose from early work on metadata standards undertaken by the EDUCAUSE
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