

Stewardship

A significant portion of the “Advancing ADL through global collaboration” will focus on “stewardship.” Prior to having a meaningful conversation on this topic, it is necessary to understand what is meant and what outcomes are expected. This paper addresses these topics as a means of facilitating fruitful discussion.

What is Stewardship?

In keeping with modern times, we may use the *Wikipedia* definition:

“In general stewardship is responsibility for taking good care of resources entrusted to one.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stewardship>)

Or, to take an American-centric view, Miriam Webster’s Online defines stewardship as

“The conducting, supervising, or managing of something; *especially*: the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.”

So to understand what we mean by “stewardship,” we need to answer two questions:

- What is being entrusted to our care, i.e. stewardship *of what*?
- What is involved in taking care (conducting, supervising or managing)?

Stewardship of What:

In the narrowest sense, the stewardship being discussed is that of SCORM, i.e. of a documented collection of profiles of specifications and standards that have become a *de facto* standard in many sectors of the learning technology universe. The cost of maintaining SCORM includes keeping current documentation, supporting the SCORM user community through a Web site, creating and maintaining sample SCORM technology and conformance test suites and participating in various associated standardization activities.

“SCORM,” however, is not static, and one should not seriously equate the role of a steward with that of a curator for SCORM 2004. So when we speak of “SCORM stewardship” it almost certainly includes the care and feeding of *the future of SCORM*. At the very least, stewardship includes responsibility for research, requirements gathering, development, testing, revision and dissemination of future specifications and standards.

But we must ask *which* future specifications and standards. The future specifications and standards to be addressed by a steward could be confined to “content-related” issues, but it would be very hard to know where to draw the line and any such demarcation would be artificial. A glance at the JISC/DEST e-Framework for Education and Research (<http://www.e-framework.org/>), or at the work coming out of the “serious games” community, will quickly convince us that there is a great deal of complexity and a large range of topics that must potentially be understood and addressed to enable the most basic forms of interoperability among

distributed learning systems, and it is not clear that interoperability alone is the goal of SCORM. The part of the Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL) Initiative that currently acts as the steward of SCORM engages in activities (such as the maintenance of a sample RTE) that focus on aiding implementation rather than on enabling interoperability in a more abstract framework.

“SCORM Stewardship” is therefore a slippery slope, or perhaps better put, a slippery scope. Caring for the future of SCORM necessarily involves deep involvement with the entire future of learning, education and training. Even if the only goal is to create specifications and standards, the specifications and standards must fit into a much larger context. The narrowest interpretation of the scope of “stewardship” does not remain narrow for long.

Not everyone thinks of stewardship as “SCORM stewardship.” Other, much broader notions have been discussed, ranging from a steward for “learning” to a steward for the advancement of “learning technology.” These broad notions need to be much better defined before one can answer the question of what is “in or out” of the responsibility set for a steward. Just as “SCORM stewardship is too narrow, the broadest notions of stewardship are too vague. The steward cannot have stewardship simply of “learning,” since that would include cognitive psychology, educational policy and virtually every human activity, assuming we excluded machine or animal learning. Even narrower fields like “learning technology” or “distributed learning” may be too broad to be meaningful.

Is there a Common Goal?

Another approach to defining stewardship is to think in terms of *goals*. The one goal that has been enunciated over and over in different contexts is *universal access to effective learning*. This encapsulates the mass customization and personalization often referred to by Wayne Hodgins; the training goals of military and corporate organizations; and the stated mission of many educational institutions world-wide.

Stepping back, some steward-makers are focused on a *method* (SCORM) and others are focused on a *goal* (universal access to effective learning). Both perspectives can find legitimacy if we re-examine the *what*.

DISCUSSION POINT: It is proposed that the following premise serves as a focal point for discussion in Melbourne:

The steward is a steward of the technology ecosystem needed to enable universal access to effective learning.

A discussion of this type may clarify the issues for which the steward should be responsible. The generalists may object to “technology” and to “access” (why not just *an ecosystem for enabling learning?*) and the specialists may object to “ecosystem” and “universal access” (why not just *technology needed to enable advanced distributed learning?*). There is a need, however, to agree on the basic concepts underlying the different uses of terminology.

Stewardship by What Means:

Much has been discussed about how a steward would be funded and governed. Those conversations are to some extent premature without a clear notion of what is being cared for. There seems to be a consensus developing around a structure run by government in association with certain non-government organizations, as per the paper that Neil Mclean has already circulated. What is less clear is the range of activities for a steward.

In determining the activities for a steward, one has to ask what problems need to be solved. The ADL has a very concrete problem, namely the magnitude of the resources required to maintain SCORM. The various standards and specifications bodies in our domain also have a problem. In my *opinion* (emphasized!) every one of them finds itself half way between success and irrelevance. Regardless of the “what” in stewardship, a mechanism is needed to coalesce and focus the shared resources of these organizations. Educational systems also have a problem. The technology used to support “distance learning,” “blended learning,” and other forms of network-enabled learning is almost universally decried as tied to traditional educational methods and as falling far short of its potential for improving the quality of education. Training organizations have a different problem – they are still in the distant arms of the corporate galaxy, obscured by dust clouds from the view of the center. Getting way down in the weeds, there are areas such as *competencies and objectives* that must be grappled in order to achieve *any* of the goals a steward might have, be they caring for SCORM or enabling universal access to learning.

SUGGESTION: I suggest we spend some time discussing *concrete problems* that a steward could realistically address. We should settle on two or three *example problems* that illustrate what a steward could do and to which others will relate.

Outcomes

For a group that is so involved with learning and training objectives and outcomes, we are surprisingly lax about defining the outcomes we expect from our own interactions. If we really all agree to *what* is being cared for and have some examples of what problems could be solved, we shall not be too far away from formulating proposals.

PROPOSAL: The desired outcome of Melbourne should be a plan to get stewardship proposals written and on the table. The plan has to include how the proposal writing will be supported, who will do it, what will be in the proposals, who will review them, and to whom they will be submitted. Agreement on concrete action items should be the primary goal of the Melbourne forum.

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