Chapter I

An Abridged History of Learning Objects

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Abstract

What follows is a short history of learning objects in both the academic, governmental, and corporate sectors. This is by no means an exhaustive list of events. The origin of the term will be traced from 1992, as Wayne Hodgins coined it, to the present. Key standards will be listed as they occurred, such as the sharable content object reference model (SCORM). In addition, landmark collaborative applications and repositories will be mentioned along with their intended mission. Corporate and academic interpretations of the term are noted and its use within organizations.
Introduction

Querying the words learning and object in a search engine will yield tens of millions of results. Constraining the search to the phrase “learning object” yields a few hundred thousand to just over a million results depending on the search agent. Results are likely to grow exponentially into the millions in the coming years. Amazingly, only three years ago there were tens of thousands of records. Several reasons for this staggering phenomenon are supposed:

1. The popularity of e-learning and the Internet along with the plethora of online communication technologies such as Web authoring tools, blogs, forums, and the like that allow almost anyone to create content and dub it as a learning object.
2. Ambiguity in its meaning, as a variety of individuals and entities has offered numerous definitions depending on the context in which it is used.
3. Reduced cost of production and rapid lesson development as the education arena shifts into technology-mediated instruction and away from traditional teaching-learning methods.

Additional explanations may be available; however, this chapter is concerned with the second reason and the understanding of the term learning object in its historical context. To divulge the forthcoming of the term learning object, a brief review of existing literature is necessary. To this end it is necessary to raise awareness of the various definitions and uses offered by a variety of scholarly works and trade publications.

Some selected applications of “learning object” in the literature are educational objects (Friesen, 2001), media object (Norton, 1996), knowledge object (Merrill, 1996), rapid learning object™, reusable learning object (Barritt, Lewis, & Wieseler, 1999), Oracle learning architecture (Ellwood, 1997), shareable courseware object (Dodds, 2000), shareable content object (Dodds, 2001), units of learning (Koper, 2001), e-learning objects (Collier & Robson, 2001), instructional object (Gibbons, Nelson, & Richards, 2000), intelligent object (Gibbons et al., 2000), and data object (Gibbons et al., 2000). Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably and at other times independently. The prolific usage of the coined term learning object is the most widely recognized of the variants. As such, its history is decidedly the focus of this investigation. What will follow is a brief historical listing of key events and publications related to this phrase and its inception into e-learning. This is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list.
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