TOPcast Episode #128: Strategic Imperatives from 1EdTech

Narrator: When you know what you want for the future, you need the present to line up with your goals. UCF Online offers more than 100 fully online programs in healthcare, engineering, criminal justice and more, so you can get to your future and beyond.

(Musical transition)

Kelvin: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast.

Tom: It's a different intonation there. It's almost like, “You're in trouble!” (Rising intonation) You're listening to this, you're in real trouble now.

Kelvin: That's right. You're not going to be able to stop listening. You're going to have to keep listening and learn stuff. (Rising intonation)

Tom: Yeah. Wow. Well, I think this'll be a good episode for learning some stuff.

Kelvin: I'm always up for learning some stuff.

Tom: Yeah. Maybe the first thing I'd like to learn is what's in my cup of coffee today here?

Kelvin: Well, Tom, this is a Sumatra single origin from JBC Coffee Roasters in Madison, Wisconsin. The JBC Coffee Roasters business website says that... Here's what they aspire to. Unparalleled quality, a human story, and sustainability. That's our coffee philosophy. So, I read that, and I thought, "That reminds me of the aspirations of our field and those of our associated professional associations."

Tom: All right. Yeah.

Kelvin: So, what do you think of the coffee, and could you find some glimmer of a connection to today's topic?

Tom: Well, I like the coffee a lot. You were commenting just before we started recording that you liked it, too.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm. I did.

Tom: Yeah, no, it's good, and I think you've given me the connection. Yeah, I'll agree with that. Yeah. I mean, I think that those are all aspirations for our community and our professional organizations that we all belong to.
Kelvin: What's that got to do with today's topic?

Tom: Well, interestingly enough, we are talking about one particular professional organization that we are quite fond of and its recent rebranding. I could tell you who I interviewed recently, or you could set it up for me. It's your choice. Fielder's choice. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Well, Tom, you recently interviewed Dr. Rob Abel, who is CEO of the association now known as 1EdTech, and formerly known to so many of us as the IMS Global Learning Consortium.

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: Anything you want to say about the interview before we get to it?

Tom: Yeah. It's always fun talking to Rob. I think we had a good discussion about the recent rebranding from IMS Global to 1EdTech, and just in the interest of transparency and full disclosure, I do sit on the Board of Directors for 1EdTech, so if that makes a difference to your listening, I am an advocate for the organization and for this rebranding.

Kelvin: Well, there you go. Well, through the modern marvel that is podcast time travel, here is your interview with Rob.

(Musical transition)

Tom: Well, Rob, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Rob Abel: Well, it's great to be here with you, Tom.

Tom: All right. What I thought we could talk about is the news of the day and the rebranding of IMS Global to 1EdTech. For those that are maybe not as active in the community or don't know a lot about it, I thought we could bring them up to speed on all of the exciting doings within the organization. But maybe as a place to start, maybe you could give us a little bit of the history and mission of IMS Global and bring us up to the point where the rebrand happened.

Rob: Yeah, yeah. Well, thanks for giving me the opportunity to go through that. It's a bit of a long story, but I'll try to keep it short. Actually, the history of IMS started in the mid-1990s. It was a project within EDUCAUSE, the part of EDUCAUSE that would be called ELI today. It was a set of universities that were working together to build what they thought was going to be called an IMS, an instructional management system. What they were actually building, of course, or thinking they were going to build is today what we would call an LMS or learning management system. But that's how early this started. This was before the LMSs were widespread at all or even existed.

So, what happened was is that the universities got together, they hired someone to lead the effort, and they started recruiting in corporate partners. That's how I first got involved. I was actually one of the sponsors of the IMS work when I was at Oracle at the time as a corporate person. I was doing e-learning products there. What happened was is the suppliers that got involved said, "Well, it's great that you want to build this IMS
thing, but basically, wouldn't it be so much better if you tried to help us build an ecosystem of open standards, so that the suppliers and everybody else could all work together?" From 1997, '98 on, it really became more focused on standards and specifications, and an early specification was published for an IMS, and that turned out Blackboard was involved in that. Blackboard was a five-person company at the time.

Then it spun out as its own entity. IMS spun out as its own entity in 1999 out of EDUCAUSE. From that point forward, we've had a lot of success actually in terms of getting open standards published that fit the needs of first higher education. Now we're big in K-12 as well, and we've got standards that are pretty ubiquitous and actually are probably better known than the name IMS, so things like LTI, Learning Tools Interoperability, or Open Badges, or One Roster, which is used in K-12. These are pretty ubiquitous standards these days. So, the mission, when I came in as a CEO in 2006, we had about 50 members then. Now we have about 750. So, we've grown very, very substantially.

In fact, we're about the same size now as the Worldwide Web Consortium, believe it or not, which is probably the best-known standard setting consortium in the world. We've had a lot of success with standards, but basically because of the unique partnership that exists in the organization between the institutional members, of which you guys are one at UCF, and the supplier members, and now we have K-12 school districts and states, it really is a partnership to shape what we call the ecosystem, right? It's about standards, but the standards are a way to shape the ecosystem that we want in terms of how innovative is the ecosystem? This is going to support the things that we want to do as educators.

The new name, 1EdTech, really just reflects that evolution to more of a partnership, a committed partnership amongst the members to really help shape the future of this whole realm of EdTech. The “1” signifies a united commitment to work on that together, and it's a great name. It's much more meaningful than IMS, which of course, although it was a good brand in terms of the member experience, of course the term Instructional Management System basically doesn't mean anything anymore, so it was time to move to a new name.

Tom: Yeah. The way I've thought about it, because we've been very involved with especially the LTI standard, but some of the others as well, that it makes sense that the organization repositioned itself so that these are standards not for standards' sake, but standards in the service of a mission, standards in the service of accomplishing things, of serving students and faculty and others. In that regard, I think it makes a lot of sense. You as CEO, and I know that as part of your effort in the rebranding process, have identified these four overarching imperatives: One is Transformative Digital Learning; one is Achievement, Opportunity, and Employment; Personalized Learner Journeys; and Learner Success, Retention and Outcomes. I wonder if you could say a word about those, and how you think that not only the new brand, but the legacy work of the organization can support those.

Rob: Yeah, yeah. Thanks for asking that. Your comment reminded me, basically since 2006, since I came in, we realized right away that our calling was to develop great standards, but in order to develop great standards, we had to have the full engagement of the community, especially the end user community. That meant that being involved in the adoption of standards in terms of large-scale projects, as well as the understanding what
the impact of standards is. We actually came up with a name for that. We called it Learning Impact, and to this date, that's our Twitter handle. We started having a Learning Impacts award at our annual conference called Learning Impact. It was all about trying to understand, and reward, or acknowledge the transformational nature of when you put in an ecosystem with a foundation of open standards, it really helps you scale innovation in a way that you couldn't, not just across the entire industry, but in your particular institution, or if you're a supplier, within your particular ecosystem.

So, we really started working pretty early on, from 2006 forward, to understand how we would build a much more engaged community, not just around standards, but around what the impact of standards is. We've been involved in the middle of the whole next generation digital learning environment discussion and GDLE, because the reality is that our community is probably doing as much or more to shape the future of learning technologies through the standards and the ecosystem work as any. So, as part of the rebranding, we're actually working with the board of directors. We worked with all the members, but we worked especially close with the board of directors to try to understand, well, what are some of the areas we felt going forward for the future we would be impacting so that we could be talking about those with the brand.

So, not just things we have done, which we have done a lot, but also where this is all going. Those four imperatives, we like that term imperatives, but basically you could think of them as leadership strategies as well. They're leadership strategies both from an institutional perspective and also from a supplier perspective. The transformative digital learning is really how to build a foundation to accelerate leadership in digital learning at your institution, or if you're a supplier, how to be part of an ecosystem that's accelerating digital learning. So, what this basically means in a few words is responsiveness. You want an ecosystem that's responsive to the needs of the faculty and the students, right? Wasn't the pandemic a great example of the need for responsiveness?

But quite frankly, it comes up all the time. If you want to be innovative, you have to be able to turn relatively fast. You have to be able to support a wide variety of diverse things. The other area that's part of the transformation, the digital learning part for us is this whole idea of a big focus on vetting, vetting of applications, because that's something that institutions are all doing. Basically, we're trying to make it easier to help vetting, particularly relative to things like student data privacy, and accessibility, and so forth. That first area is really about, hey, you got to set up an ecosystem that's forward looking and can be responsive to the needs going forward, right?

LTI plays a big role there, especially the advanced features of LTI, and also some of the other baseline specifications like in K-12 one roster, right? We've got a new one in higher ed coming up called EDU EPI, which is about the SIS integration. The personalized learning, the second one, is really all about basically creating a foundation of choice, choice for the teachers and the students by leveraging a very wide ecosystem based on open standards, but also at the modular level. It's the ability to not only be able to do great digital learning, but to give access to a variety of resources at what some people historically have called the learning object level or something along those lines. Those two things together allow personalization. Some of the features of LTI like deep linking are very important, but also, we have something called thin common cartridge, which allows content to be described essentially as an index or a manifest, and then be accessed or searched directly from an LMS, or learning object repository, or what have you.
The third area about the recognizing student achievement is really about creating an architecture for micro-credentials and utilizing micro-credentials to essentially do so much more than you could do with a traditional transcript, and also giving a way for not only the institution to capture those achievements for the students, so they can tell their story better in terms of their career opportunities, but also something called the Comprehensive Learner Record. You might capture those achievements as an open badge, that's one of our standards, the open badges standards, but also, we have something called the Comprehensive Learner Record, which can be used by a learner to essentially curate their achievements throughout their lifetime.

The last one is aligned with this whole area of student success, which has been quite a catchphrase, buzz phrase, whatever you want to call it. Where we're coming from here is a little bit different. We're talking about, well, if you want to get the student success that's related to your learning systems, what you need is you need real-time information, you need real-time data, and therefore you need data built into your ecosystem. The products you buy, whether it's an LMS, or the applications that are part of your universe that surround your LMS, or your student information system, these systems have to have data that's easy to get at, easy to access, and can actually be streamed in real time so that you can use modern data architectures to create all sorts of alerts and other things along those lines.

Our call to action there is LTI plus Caliper and a certain set of baseline information from the Caliper standard that emits data in real time. But the important thing is that as a buyer, institutions start asking for that as being built into their products as they acquire them. We see all of those four areas as four areas that were already making an impact, but they're really areas for really the next decade to really be digging in on and continuing to build a community around.

Tom: Yeah, thank you. I know one of the questions that has come up around the rebrand, and it was a little bit, I think, of confusion even at the Learning Impact Conference, was, "Wow, these are all cool things, and we're all on board, but does this mean you're not going to support standards anymore?" The way you just described it, it's clear, of course you're going to support standards. The standards are part of achieving the goals behind each of those imperatives.

Rob: Well, standards are a funny topic, because the people we want to care most about standards don't naturally care about them. [Laughter]

Tom: Right, yeah. [Laughter]

Rob: They just think that that happens somehow. Standards just show up. There are people somewhere, I don't know exactly where they are. They might be working for Tom Cavanagh, or they might be working for whoever that somehow those things are just showing up, because in a way, standards are ubiquitous. But a lot of standards that are developed in the general marketplace, like say, networking standards, suppliers basically build them on their own, because by building them on their own, that creates a much larger market opportunity for them, because if their products don't work together, you can't have a network, so it's kind of that simple, so they did.
But in education, it's a little more tricky than that because it's a little bit more unclear. In fact, the mold that we came into, IMS in 2006 when I came as a CEO, is that just the opposite, most of the systems were standalone, right? “Walled gardens” is the favorite term that we like to use out there, because the suppliers don't see the incentive. Good news is some of the suppliers do, some of the suppliers did, and some of those suppliers are participating with us. But it's really the institutions that come in and say, “No, no, you guys don't get it. We really do have to have these products work together. It's really suboptimal for our faculty, our teachers, our students if these things are standing alone and our assessment system is not fully integrated, whether LMS, or our classroom response system, or these things have to be integrated to really be used.” So, the question is, how do you get people interested in standards? And the answer is, will you talk about the impact of standards?

That's what the imperatives are about. They're about the impact of standards, but you can't have an ecosystem without standards. The standards are the language of the ecosystem. They are the thing that defined the ecosystem. In the biological sense, they're like the oxygen you breathe or whatever, that the creatures breathe. [Laughter] Without those standards, there are no rules by which you know, so the standards are really important. Believe me, the testing, the certification, making sure the standards are plug and play, the products are certified is really, really important, because you can have standards, too, but they can be implemented differently by every party and then you really don't have much interoperability, or standards can be used to lock you in.

I mean, many big tech companies use standards primarily to lock you into their ecosystem because they add stuff on top. That's one of the really important things that the 1EdTech community does, is we create that demand, and we also verify the trusted part of the ecosystem. How do you get a trusted ecosystem? Well, it's through verification. That's the best way. That builds lasting partnerships. We see great partnerships in the community because the suppliers that are involved and the institutions are involved get it together that they're working to really create something lasting.

Tom: Cool. Well, thanks for taking the time to be on the show to talk about all of that. We will, in our show notes, link to the 1EdTech website so people can dig into each of those imperatives a little bit more, or if they're not familiar with the work of 1EdTech or even previously IMS, they can get a lot more information there, maybe get involved in the community, join, have a voice in the development, and ongoing support of these standards. It's why we participate, because I agree with you, that's a good way to describe it. There's the language of the ecosystem, because these things are going to have to talk to each other. So, Rob, on behalf of Kelvin and myself, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Rob: All right. Thanks, Tom.

(Musical transition)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Rob.

Tom: It was, yeah. Like I said, I always talking to Rob, and this was, I think, a good opportunity to share some of the rationale behind the rebranding, and for people to understand that IMS Global, now 1EdTech hasn't abandoned standards, but it's a different
lens through which to look at standards that they are more in the service of strategic academic objectives and goals as opposed to standards for standards' sake.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, I think that makes sense. We've talked about this before, and I told you that a couple years ago I sat for one of those, I don't know, they partnered with an outside firm to do some interviews with people at the annual conference, and kind of get a sense from community members how the brand was perceived, and for better or for worse, and all that stuff. I remember some of that conversation, one, because it was in San Diego. I think it was San Diego. I looked out this window, it was beautiful out there. I kept looking out there while I was talking with the interviewer. I remember in the conversation we talked about the tendency for some to view this work as sort of invisible, like plumbing. You just expect it to work, unless sadly it stops working. [Laughter]

Tom: Right, yeah.

Kelvin: Which bad things happen.

Tom: It's like a referee or an umpire. You only notice them when something goes wrong. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's right. That's right.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah, and I'm sure Rob would take exception to the description of standards and the technology behind them as plumbing, although I get why some people say that sometimes.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: I've heard that also about the LMS.

Kelvin: Yes, that's right.

Tom: Just plumbing.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah. Well, you could look at it that way, but you're not taking full advantage of the affordances of what it offers if that's how you consider it.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. I think certainly the organization has been leaning into leadership, and guidance, and direction within a certain lane within our broad community, not just plumbing, obviously.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Specifically, those four imperatives that we talked about, so I'll just sort of recap them here: Transformative Digital Learning, Personalized Learner Journeys,
Achievement Opportunity and Employment; Learner Success, Retention and Outcomes. How could you argue against any one of those? Right? They're all super important, not just us in higher ed, but 1EdTech has a very large and substantial impact in the K-12 community and has been working with the supplier side, so that they're better positioned to serve both higher ed and K through 12.

Kelvin: Yeah, for what it's worth, I really appreciated Rob's retrospective on the history. I knew some of that. I've lived through some of that, but it certainly predates me and my involvement in this community, and that was good. Some of the related work, like NGDLE, we've talked about here in past episodes of the next generation digital learning environment. Again, easy to overlook. But one of the things I was struck with listening to your interview is a phrase I've been using, it seems like for a while and this year, is the importance of operationalizing the strategic. We sometimes look at those two terms as in conflict, the operational or the strategic. I've begun pondering that and leaning into the operationalizing of the strategic, and I think that is a way of describing the work of 1EdTech.

Tom: Yeah, yeah, I would agree with that. I think that this rebranding is a good way to really underscore that, that strategic, less operational, less transactional sort of thing.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: But for what it's worth, I would encourage people, institutions to get involved in the community, even if you're just a consumer of the standards. I mean, that's how we started. We started with LTI, and we were a big user of it, and felt like we needed to be a part of the community, and have a contributing voice to the development of that. Now, we have a center of excellence for LTI and other kinds of things. It's a big, open, welcoming community, and you really can help shape the future. It really is member driven.

Kelvin: That's great. Well, you want to try to put this plane on the ground safely?

Tom: Let's see what we can do here. Our digital learning community features a number of valuable professional associations, and we belong to a lot of them, each with its own unique distinctives, their own charisms, so to speak. 1EdTech's recent rebranding is intended to more strategically support the higher ed ecosystem in general. I, for me, look forward to their future impact.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well said. No, that's good. Well, I will probably finish drinking my coffee before I depart, because it's good. I don't want to waste it.

Tom: It is good, yeah. It's getting low in the mug here.

(Musical outro)

Kelvin: That's right. Well, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.