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## A FLEXIBLE AUTHORING TOOL SUPPORTING LEARNING ACTIVITIES

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### ABSTRACT

The need for e-learning systems that support a diverse set of pedagogical requirements has been identified as an important issue in web-based education. Until now, significant R&D effort has been devoted aiming towards web-based educational systems tailored to specific pedagogical approaches. The most advanced of them are based on the IEEE Learning Technology Systems Architecture and use standardized content structuring based on the ADL Sharable Content Object Reference Model in order to enable sharing and reusability of the learning content. However, sharing of learning activities among different web-based educational systems still remains an open issue. On the other hand, existing Learning Management Systems (LMS) provide authoring tools that are only tailored to the capabilities of the specific system in hand. The open question is how web-based educational systems should be designed in order to enable reusing and repurposing of learning activities. In this paper we first examine the limitations of the current state-of-the art authoring tools and investigate the use of the Learning Design framework as a mean to address those limitations. Then, we propose a high-level architecture of a SCORM compatible authoring system that utilizes the Learning Design principles to provide the means for designing web-based pedagogical scenarios that can be reused in different contexts and across different web-based educational platforms. Finally, we introduce the ASK-LDT, an authoring system developed based on the proposed architecture and demonstrate its use in the design of learning activities.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

During the last years, several tools have been developed in order to support the process of web-based authoring and several learning systems have been implemented tailored to specific pedagogical approaches. Several systems already exist supporting the process of web-based authoring for providing active learning, constructive learning, collaborative learning, intentional learning, conversational learning, contextualized learning, reflective learning etc. (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy, 1999, Marra and Jonassen, 2001, Carr, 2001, Constantino-Gonzales, Suthers and Escamilla, 2003).

Currently, there are several educational e-content repositories and networked infrastructures available ranging from federated or distributed learning repositories to brokerage platforms (Dolog, Henze, Nejd and Sintek, 2004, Simon, Dolog, Miklos, Sintek and Olmedilla, 2004). Nevertheless, the level of learning content reusability remains relatively low, due to the fact that sharing of learning activities across systems has not been addressed yet. This limitation prevents systems from reusing the same learning scenarios, leading to significant extra pedagogical effort for reusing learning content in different contexts. On the other hand, existing Learning Management Systems (LMS) provide tools for web-based authoring that are tailored to the

capabilities of the specific system in hand. As a result, reusing and repurposing of learning activities and content is not supported in a consistent manner (Brusilovsky and Nijhawan, 2002).

In this paper we first examine the limitations of the current state-of-the-art authoring tools and investigate how the Learning Design framework can be incorporated in the architecture of a SCORM compatible authoring system in order to address those limitations. To this end, we define an abstract high-level authoring system architecture that utilizes the Learning Design principles to provide the means for designing pedagogical scenarios that can be reused in different contexts and across different web-based educational platforms.

The paper is structured as follows: In section 2, we present the current state-of-the-art authoring tools, investigating the limitations of those systems. Section 3 presents the principles of the Learning Design framework, emphasizing in modeling learning activities. In Section 4, we propose an architectural definition of a SCORM compatible authoring system that addresses the identified limitations incorporating the Learning Design framework. Finally, we present the ASK-LDT, an authoring system for learning scenarios developed to implement the proposed architecture and demonstrate its use in the design of learning activities.

## 2. CURRENT STATE-OF-THE-ART AUTHORIZING TOOLS

Nowadays, there are several vendors that provide platforms (such as Blackboard, WebCT, Lotus Learning Space, learn eXact etc.) being standard conformant. Those platforms provide authoring tools that are based on the ADL Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM). The SCORM reference model provides a reference interaction model between learners and learning content, and describes within a common technical framework for computer and web-based learning the creation process of reusable learning content as "instructional objects", referred to as *sharable content objects* (SCOs).

The main limitation of the SCORM-based courseware authoring tools is that they are based on a "single learner model". This model assumes that a learner interacts only with content objects and that the learning activities are content-based activities engaging the learner in the learning process. Thus, the support provided by SCORM-based courseware authoring tools in the authoring process is limited in supporting the creation and sequencing of single learner, content-based learning activities. To this end, such authoring tools exclude the design of activities based on state-of-the-art pedagogical approaches such as constructive learning, collaborative learning etc. Moreover, since interactions between individual learners and/or between a learner and a tutor are abstracted in the SCORM reference model with no reference on how a learning management system could support those interactions, SCORM-based authoring tools limit the interoperability between systems to only content interoperability. These tools do not allow the description of such interactions leading to possibly different interpretation of learning activities between different systems.

On the other hand, a wide variety of non-SCORM conformant systems exist providing specific pedagogical approaches including active learning, constructive learning, collaborative learning, intentional learning, conversational learning, contextualized learning, reflective learning etc. (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy, 1999, Marra and Jonassen, 2001, Carr, 2001, Constantino-Gonzales, Suthers and Escamilla, 2003). The main drawback of those systems is that they are closed, self-contained systems that cannot be used as service components (*lack of reuse support*). Additionally, due to their close architecture they cannot support all the required functionalities in a learning process since they cannot use external services (*lack of integration*). On the other hand, even if an open and scalable environment has been implemented, the supported content and learning scenarios are a-priori designed to serve and support a specific pedagogical approach. As a result they are non-flexible in supporting different pedagogical approaches and they require extensive redesign effort in order to be used in different domains.

## 3. MODELING LEARNING ACTIVITIES

For the purpose of our work, a *learning activity* can be formally defined as a triple containing the content that is delivered by an educational system, the actors participating in the learning activity (such as the learner

or a group of learners, the tutor etc.) and their corresponding interactions. These interactions include three types, namely, interactions with the learning content, interactions with the educational environment and interactions between the participating actors.

Reusing learning activities across different web-based educational platforms requires that all components of a learning activity can be modeled in a commonly understandable form (Koper, 2001, Hummel, Manderveld, Tattersall and Koper, 2004) and that those platforms include the structural components required for the support of learning activities (Brusilovsky, 2004). A first step is to agree on common ways for representing learning scenarios and describing the interactions between participating roles (learners, tutors, etc) and educational systems' services. The ultimate goal is to structure the learning scenarios in such a way that separates them from the learning resources. Thus, learning resources can be reused within different scenarios and scenarios can be also reused when populated with different resources. Moreover, repurposing of learning activities in a consistent manner requires authoring tools that are capable of handling the machine understandable representation form of learning activities (McAndrew, Woods, Little, Weller, Koper and Vogten, 2004).

To this end, standardization efforts on learning technologies have led to the IMS Learning Design specification (IMS, 2003) which provides a standard notation language for the description of learning scenarios. This specification promises the capability of describing a wide variety of learning activities based on different pedagogies. IMS Learning Design has the ability to define the role of different actors in the learning process, enabling the definition of both teacher-led and student-led scenarios. This specification builds upon the IMS Content Packaging specification, thus can integrate single learner (SCORM-compatible) activities in more complex activity-based learning scenarios.

### 3.1 Learning Design framework

The core concept of the Learning Design framework is that regardless of the pedagogical strategy, learners attain learning objectives by performing a specific order of learning activities. *Multiple roles* can participate in *learning* and/or *support activities* of the training process. This formalization has the potential to describe a wide variety of learning activities based on different pedagogies.

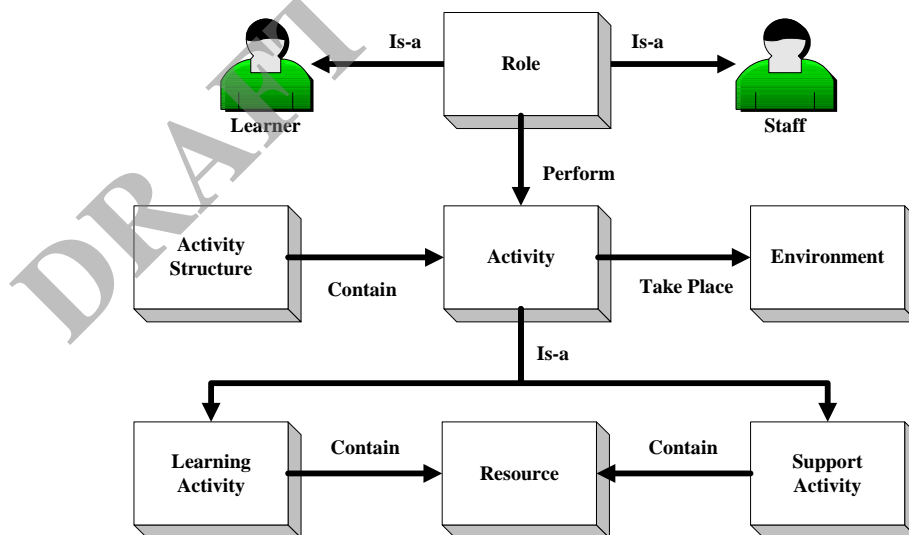


Figure 1. Learning Design Rationale

The core components of the Learning Design Framework are shown in figure 1 and summarized below:

- *Role* component specifies the participating roles in learning activity. There are two basic Role types: the *Learner* and the *Staff*. These roles can be sub-typed to allow learners to play different roles in certain types of learning activity such as task-based, role-play and simulations. Similarly, support staff can be sub-typed and given more specialized roles, such as Tutor, Teaching Assistant, Mentor, etc.

Thus, Roles set the basis for multi-user models of learning. The name that a certain role is given depends on the underline pedagogy and the setting in use. In some instances a learner is called a ‘student’, whereas in others a ‘participant’. The names of staff roles can be even more diverse, e.g., teacher, trainer, tutor, facilitator, mentor, assessor.

- *Activities* are one of the core structural elements of the ‘learning workflow’ model for Learning Design. They form the link between the roles and the services in the learning environment. They describe the activities that a certain role can undertake within a specified environment. They also specify their termination conditions and the actions to be taken upon termination. There are two basic types of activities: *Learning Activities* and *Support Activities*. A Learning Activity is directed at attaining a learning objective per individual actor. A support activity is meant to facilitate a role performing one or more learning activities.

The Learning Design framework is implemented in the IMS LD specification at three Levels. Learning Design Level A includes the following elements: a series of activities (assessment, discussion, simulation), performed by one or more actors (learners, teachers etc.) - roles, in an environment consisting of learning objects or services. Level B adds properties (storing information about a person or group), and conditions (placing constraints upon flow). Level C adds notifications (triggered events - e.g., if a student asks a question, the teacher needs to be notified that a response is needed).

#### 4. THE PROPOSED AUTHORIZING ARCHITECTURE

In this section, we present the high-level architecture for authoring of learning activities that combines the components of a SCORM compatible authoring system with the Learning Design framework. The key design principle in this architecture is the separation of the learning design process from the content packaging process. This separation enables the design of learning scenarios by defining the participating actors, the response of a learning system to their interaction with the learning content and the services provided by the learning system in such a way that is independent from the learning content. Thus, it enables the same learning scenario to be used with different content, as well as, different learning scenarios to use the same content objects.

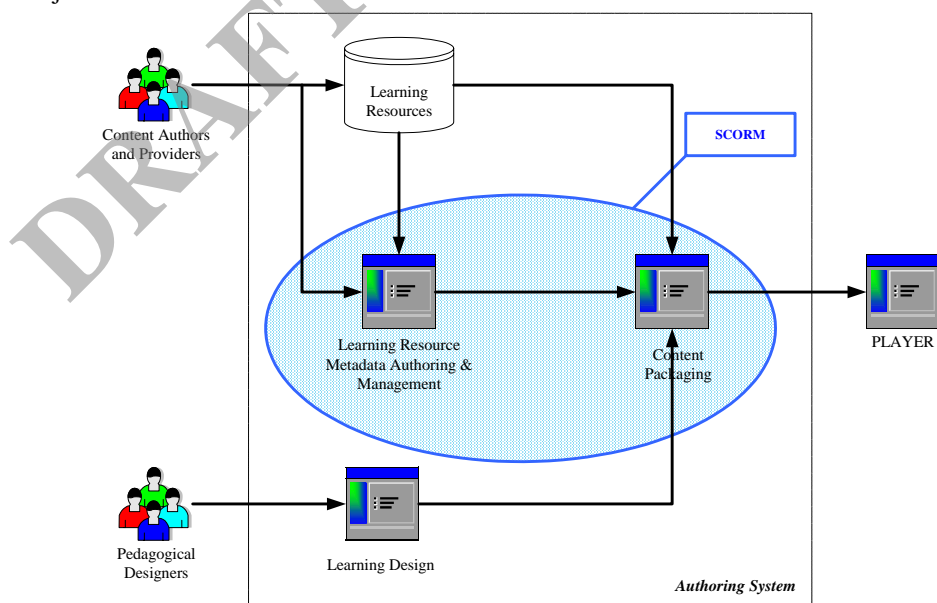


Figure. 2. Authoring System Architecture incorporating Learning Design

Figure 2 presents the proposed authoring architecture based on the Learning Design framework described in the previous section of the paper. This figure shows the structural components of the authoring system and

their interconnection paths. Interconnection between components is modeled by associations (directed arrows). These associations represent direct connections or they abstract away details of more complex connection and communication patterns (e.g. indirect communication based on events).

The main components of the proposed architecture are the following:

- *Learning Design subsystem.* This part of the authoring system is based on the use of IMS Learning Design specification in order to provide the pedagogical designer with the environment for defining learning scenarios. The main scope is to enable the definition of generic, domain independent learning scenarios that can be used by the content packaging system in order to create learning activities based on the use of the learning objects stored in the content repository.
- *Content Packaging subsystem.* This part of the authoring system enables the population and packaging of learning scenarios with the learning content. In our system implementation, the development of such packaging tool is based on the commonly used IMS Content Packaging v1.1.3 specification and the supported metadata for indexing the content components of learning activity is based on the IEEE Learning Object Metadata standard.
- *Learning Resources Metadata Authoring & Management subsystem.* This part of the authoring system supports the metadata authoring and repository management. The main goal of this component is to provide an easy-to-use and accessible from anywhere platform capable of authoring, storing, managing and deliver the educational metadata produced for supporting searching and retrieval of learning resources.

## 5. THE PROPOSED LEARNING DESIGNER TOOLKIT (ASK-LDT)

The ASK Learning Designer Toolkit (ASK-LDT) introduced in this paper, is a tool supporting the proposed architectural approach for learning activities authoring. The ASK-LDT is based on the use of IMS Learning Design specification in order to provide to a pedagogical designer the environment for defining complex learning scenarios. The produced learning scenarios conform to the IMS Learning Design v1.0 Level B specification. The ASK-LDT, also, supports metadata for learning resources that conform to the IEEE Learning Object Metadata 1484.12.1-2002 standard.

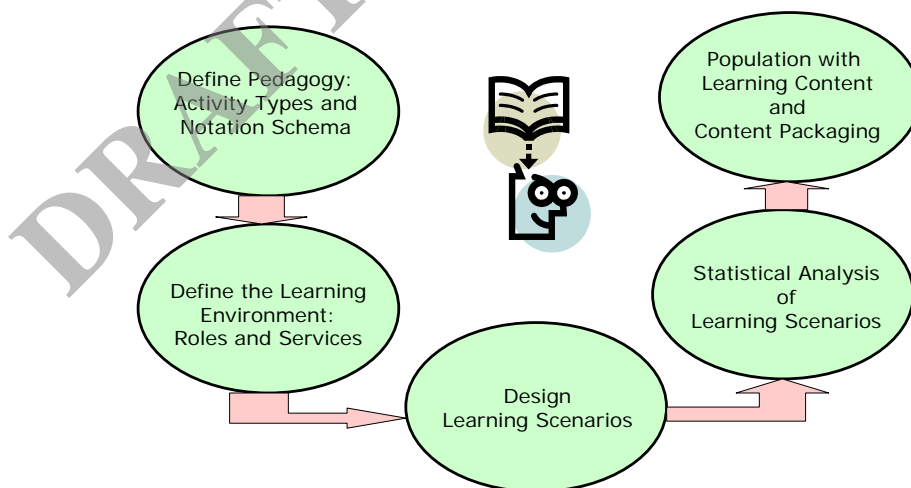


Figure. 3. ASK-LDT authoring process

Based on the Learning Design framework principles, the authoring process that the ASK-LDT supports consists of the following steps (figure 3):

- *Definition of Pedagogical Elements.* At this step the ASK-LDT supports the pedagogical designer in defining the activity types he/she wants to support in a learning scenario, as well as, in defining a notation schema for each activity type specified. During this step the designer has the ability to characterize each activity type as “learning” or “support” activity.

- *Definition of the Environment.* At this step a designer defines the participating roles in the desired learning scenario, as well as, the environments in which the activities are taking place. An environment can be a virtual environment such as a virtual laboratory, an on-line chat, a discussion forum etc., or a software tool exposed as a service such as an annotation tool, a search engine etc.
- *Learning Scenario Design.* During this step the designer specifies the activity sequence of a learning scenario using a graphical user interface. For each activity the designer defines the participating roles, the environment in which the specific activity is taken place, as well as, the method by which this activity will be completed and/or terminated (user choice or time limit).
- *Statistical Analysis.* At this step the ASK-LDT provides statistics of the use of each activity type and environment in the learning design specified, in order to visualise the designer's decisions.
- *Content Packaging.* This is the final step in the authoring process, in which the content components required to support the designed activities are specified. The output of this step is content packages conforming to the IMS Content Packaging v1.1.3 specification.

The core design concept of the ASK-LDT is to provide a graphical user interface for the design and sequencing of learning activities, which, on one hand uses a standard low-level notation language for the description of learning scenarios (so as to be able to inter-exchange learning activities between different systems), and on the other hand enables pedagogical designers to use their own design notation (high-level notation) for the definition of learning scenarios (see Figure 4).

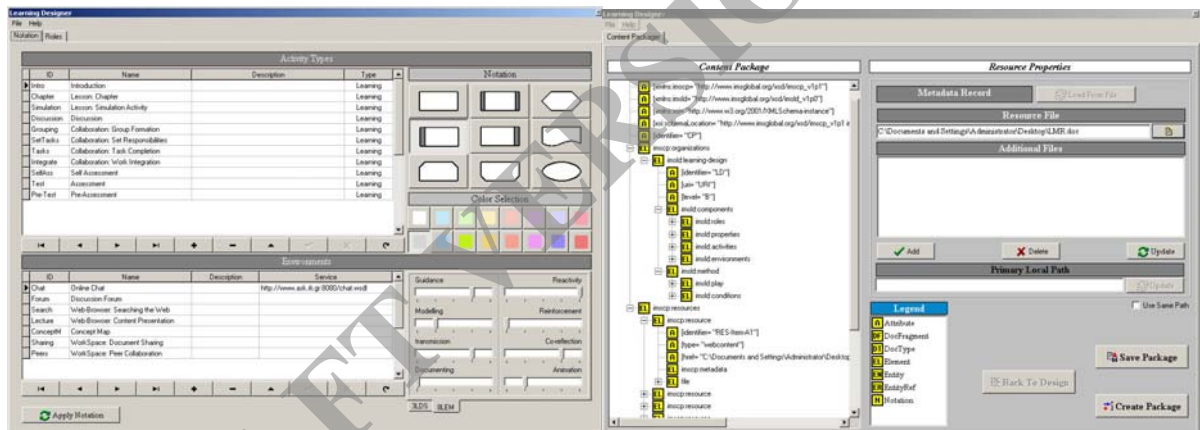


Figure 4. Supporting high and low level notation with the ASK-LDT

The ASK-LDT supports the learning design process by allowing the design of sequences of learning activities, as well as, the definition of the participating roles and the corresponding environments for each part of these activities. It provides several advanced features including the capability to define participating roles based on specific attributes of a user model (see figure 5) and offers advanced control of learning activities sequencing based on the definition of properties and conditions upon learning flow.

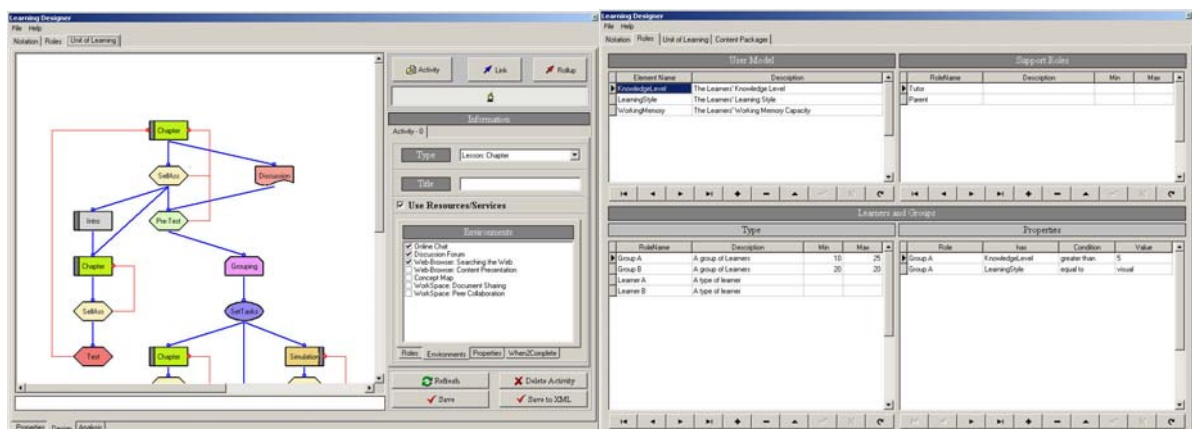


Figure. 5. Supporting learning scenarios design and role definition through a graphical design interface

The following section presents the use of the ASK Learning Designer Toolkit in the definition of learning activities following the principles of the Learning Design framework.

## 5.1 Collaborative creation of concept map scenario

An example of a learning scenario which can be defined with the use of the ASK-LDT is a scenario for collaborative creation of a concept map. In this scenario several participants are trying to collaboratively create a concept map based on their experiences on a specific subject. For each concept or relation defined on the concept map they are asked to explain (by annotating the corresponding concept or relation) the reasons for adding this information.

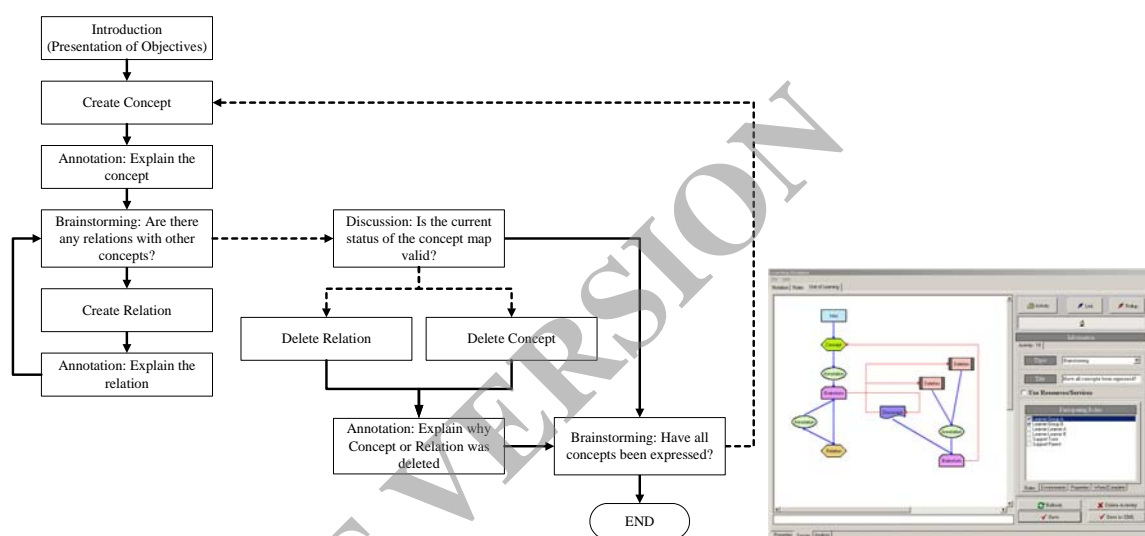


Figure 6. Example of scenario for collaborative concept-map creation

Following the authoring process supported by the ASK-LDT the pedagogical designer has to follow the following steps:

- *Definition of Pedagogical Elements.* In this learning scenario the activity types in use are “brainstorming”, “annotation”, “discussion” and “knowledge expression”.
- *Definition of the Environment.* In these activity types two roles are participating: the moderator and the users. The environments in which these activity types are taking place are discussion forum, on-line chat, annotation tool and concept representation tool.
- *Learning Scenario Design.* During this step the designer specifies the activity sequence presented in figure 6, representing the desired learning scenario. For each activity specified the designer defines the participating roles and the corresponding environments.
- *Content Packaging.* In this step of the authoring process, the content components required to support the designed activities are specified e.g. an introductory text-based component presenting the objectives of the whole activity.

The output of this process is a content package conforming to the IMS Content Packaging v1.1.3 specification that can be delivered through an IMS Learning Design conformant learning platform.

In the literature, a number of systems implementing this scenario exist (Kay, Miller, 2003), (Milrad, Spector, Davidsen, 2004). The main limitation of those systems is that they are closed systems. Thus, they support only the specific learning scenario and that those systems due to their architecture cannot be used externally from other platforms to support the learning process. By using the ASK-LDT, pedagogical designers can specify their desired learning scenarios in an abstract way that enables system designers to implement required software components as services. As a result, software components can be reused to support different learning activities e.g. the same annotation tool used in the above mentioned scenario for concept map creation can also be used in a collaborative peer reviewing scenario.

Moreover, since the learning scenario is not hard-wired in the specific learning platform, but acts as a script delivered by the learning platform, learning platforms can support several pedagogical scenarios enabling at the same time reusability of learning activities across different platforms

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this paper we presented the limitations of the state-of-the-art of authoring systems and discussed open issues and problems concerning the support of learning activities authoring. Based on this discussion, we investigated how the Learning Design framework can be incorporated in the architecture of a SCORM compatible authoring system so as to address those issues. Thus, we proposed a high-level authoring system architecture that utilizes the learning design principles providing the means to design pedagogical scenarios that can be reused in different contexts and across different web-based learning platforms. Finally, we introduced a tool, referred to as, the ASK-Learning Designer Toolkit, which implements the presented architectural approach and demonstrated the use of the tool in the definition of a complex learning scenario, namely, the collaborative creation of a concept map.

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