SCORM in plain English for the rest of us
Welcome to SCORM in plain English.

A basic introduction to this word that floats out there, you might see listed somewhere in your learning management system, but you aren’t using because you don’t know what it is. Or you assume it’s something just for the technical geeks. Or you’ve heard ba-a-a-a-d things about it. We’re going to walk through what it is, what it does and why you actually should care about SCORM.
tim
martin
It’s a set of standards created with the idea of “making things work” in mind. Each addresses a different aspect of how e-learning content should act.
The military wanted to make sure content it purchased would work in its system. Creating standards makes that possible.
What is a standard? – It’s what makes DVDs work, MP3s work, Flash work every time you load, import or launch. When the content creators follow the standard, you can use your content with confidence.
SCORM was created to bring consistency across elearning content so when it says SCORM, you know it should work.
This isn’t always the case, unfortunately. Standards get interpreted differently by different people. This is a large part of why people have so much trouble with SCORM and we’ve always had work.
In an ideal world, SCORM would operate in the background and you’d never think about it – much like the standards for DVD and MP3 players. Until that happens, it’s good to have a good understanding of SCORM as a standard so you can use it with as little pain as possible.
WHAT it does
First step to getting a grasp of SCORM is understanding what it does. (And by inverse – what it doesn’t do.) The doesn’t do part is probably shorter and easier – it has nothing to do with your content. SCORM doesn’t care what the content is – doesn’t care what order you put information, doesn’t care whether you’re using video, doesn’t care whether your quiz is 10 questions or 110. SCORM has nothing to do with the content itself, only with how the LMS finds and delivers it.
From your standpoint, there are two main functions of SCORM you need to know about. First, the SCORM standard answers the interoperability question. Not between systems – we know that is a big deal in bringing in new systems – but between content and the system. So the goal with SCORM is for you to be able to buy or create SCORM content and know that it will work in a SCORM player. Just like DVD works in your DVD player. (Note that there are versions of SCORM; compare that to DVD regions.)
The second thing SCORM does you need to know about is the tracking and data collection portion. Part of what SCORM does in the delivery portion is track various things happening in your course – how long they spend on a certain page, what they answer on question four, where they went after reading section three. All very cool things to know. Set up your SCORM correctly and it can collect the data and also tell your LMS to keep it. (Sometimes that doesn’t happen.)
Here’s a look at the data SCORM can collect. Not very pretty, not very easy to read and use. Depending on your LMS, you might get a nice report that makes the data readable. There are several add-on products out there just for that purpose.
And yes, we have one for our SCORM player clients. Here's what it looks like to give you a prettier easier to digest look at SCORM data.
we care
So – SCORM is this big fancy technical spec that does a bunch of uber geeky stuff. What difference does that make to you?
Well – it might not. Not everything needs to be SCORM conformant. You might create content right in your LMS and deliver from there. You might not care about the extra data collection. You might be creating something for one-time use. There are a lot of times when SCORM might not be relevant for you.
And the eventual goal is that SCORM becomes so background you don’t even notice it.
But, there are times when you want to use SCORM and need a decent grasp of it. Specifically if you need to track learner performance, buy content from outside sources, create a library of learning objects.
And in all these cases—whether you create SCORM or buy SCORM—a basic understanding will help you move forward with confidence in your choices. Whether you are creating content and need to decide on functionality, reusability and other issues.
Dealing with a vendor, whether to buy content or even a new LMS.
Or just getting smarter about what your learners are doing, how they use content and what you can be doing to help them learn better.
In all cases though, to know enough to say no at those times when you don’t need it and definitely to say no to bad SCORM ...
And embrace the benefits SCORM can bring when used well.
SCORM

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