



Open Source at Microsoft

The Road to Open: SharePoint Learning Kit

What once was a stand-alone Microsoft® educational product has become the center of a thriving software community. Before its retirement in 2006, Microsoft Class Server had been an integral part of the software-based learning infrastructure in institutions worldwide since 2000. Nevertheless, as part of its continual assessment of products and business strategy, Microsoft stopped internal development on the product and pursued new learning server development to keep up with the benefits afforded by new standards and technologies. While customers would no longer benefit from improvements to Class Server, a ground-breaking innovation awaited them.

Taking a page from the open-source community, the Learning Server team decided to build Microsoft SharePoint® Learning Kit (SLK), a new education technology, with the intent of releasing it through the Shared Source licensing program. The SharePoint Learning Kit (SLK) helps instructors turn any electronic resource into an online assignment. Also, because Microsoft Windows® SharePoint Services 3.0 conforms to SCORM 2004 and includes e-learning and tracking capabilities, it is immediately relevant to education customers and partners.

Since its release, SLK has become a prime example of how Microsoft can participate with the software community to make high-quality software available to customers, partners, and the community at large. And because Microsoft released code to the community in a way that would encourage ongoing community interest and provide immediate customer value, Microsoft took the approach of solving a key difficult problem and leaving other development to the community.

According to Mike Hines, Product Manager for SLK:

SCORM is arguably the most prevalent education content standard worldwide, so SCORM conformance is very important for software offerings in the education and training market. The process of obtaining SCORM compliance is at best a labor-intensive effort involving more tedious work than creative problem solving. But now, by providing SCORM conformance as Community Source with SLK, customers and partners can focus on the educational value they bring to the table, and not spend effort on the internal plumbing of standards compliance.

This conformance of learning content standards caught the attention of many early adopters, including Kent School District in the U.K. and even some Fortune 500 companies.



Figure 1: Contributions to and from the SLK community

In some cases, customer deployments needed only SLK, along with Windows SharePoint Services. In other cases, developers created

custom components for SLK, many of which were shared with other developers through the [Learning Gateway](#). In other cases, SLK provided economic opportunity for systems integrators wanting to build custom solutions for their customers. One such integrator was SolutionsIQ, a full service systems integration, outsourced development, and technology consulting business based in Redmond, Washington.

Chris Mayer, SolutionsIQ Practice Manager for Education Solutions, recounts:

We had customers using Class Server and we worked with them to help develop requirements for SLK. We also developed a reporting framework, allowing for the generation of specific key performance indication and item level analysis, which we in turn contributed back to the project. Through this work and participation on the Learning Gateway, we found a good deal of potential customer interest.

These customers included traditional education customers such as school districts and government as well as large corporations looking for better ways to train their employees. As Chris Mayer notes, “Today most of our customers are institutions, and we anticipate in the next 12 months many of our customers will be content developers looking for new ways to distribute and package their content.”

Because of the way SLK is licensed under the Microsoft Community License (MS-CL), SolutionsIQ can create custom solutions for their customers that include SLK as a key component. For one well-known customer, SolutionsIQ built a custom certification solution that included prerequisites and sequencing. The

solution, coupled with SLK and Windows SharePoint Services, changed the way employees obtained on-the-job certifications and built career-oriented training plans. Mayer adds:

While SLK is available as a solution unto itself, it is built upon API-accessible toolkits, such as Microsoft Learning Components, that allow for very specific, robust, and localized training solutions.

While the MS-CL allows SolutionsIQ to build their business, the license also allows for businesses around the world to have the same economic opportunity available. By using SLK and components available through the community—along with custom development, services, or both—businesses around the world can experience returns like SolutionsIQ.

Although SLK continues to improve and the volume of solutions available through Learning Gateway continues to grow through contributions from various sources, another key partner in this development model exists. In some cases, a software challenge may require specialized skills or a unique approach founded in academia and research. In the case of SLK, such a challenge arose in considering standards translation as an SLK feature. Standards translation would enable users to ensure compliance across various sets of standards using the same tools, a valuable feature when considering content portability.

To solve this problem, Microsoft worked with the Center of Excellence for Research, Innovation, Education and Industrial Lab Partnerships (CEFRIEL) at the University Politecnico Milan. In a project currently underway (as of July 2007), CEFRIEL is developing a standards translation engine that

can be bundled with SLK and that will be contributed back to the SLK community. The community benefits when Microsoft works with a partner such as CEFRIEL because key challenges are solved and the solutions are made available as part of SLK. Further, by living up to its charter, CEFRIEL can provide additional research challenges and opportunities to its staff and students.

Through the combined skills and talents of a community of developers and users, commercial contributors and partners, educational and research institutions, and Microsoft, SLK provides value to a range of businesses and institutions worldwide. What's more, SLK provides evidence that Microsoft and open-source methods are not truly opposed.

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