

## Interview with Peter Higgs from TAFE Tasmania and Chris Jones from the Learning Edge

**Interviewer: Jo Murray**

**Jo:** *Hi Everyone. Today we're speaking with Chris Jones of the Learning Edge and Peter Higgs of TAFE Tasmania's Learning Media Services, about their recent partnership to support online teachers with the Learning Edge, a new product. Welcome to the Knowledge Tree Chris and Peter. So what is the ground-breaking Learning Edge, and where did it come from, how did it develop?*

**Chris:** Ok, Peter, I might just start with that. The Learning Edge is actually two things in one: it's a learning content management system, and it's also a content authoring tool. And we believe we're fairly unique in actually developing the two of those together with seamless integration. It developed, I guess, out of discussions we had with a number of our customers. Our main company Dytech Solutions has developed large scale content management systems for the likes of the Learning Federation, and also AShareNet, and also with all the products we developed for the Tasmanian Department of Education and also for the ACT Department of Education. So we've built up a lot of expertise in that area. We decided there was a need for a new generation of product that did something similar and that was also off the shelf.

**Jo:** *OK so, what are its basic functions and where does it fit between an LMS and a LCMS and have I got the acronyms right? Tell us where it fits.*

**Peter:** From an educational perspective, the Learning Edge is both a repository and also then a content assembler tool that we use. From a repository perspective it allows a teacher to either store their own learning objects or content in that repository and search for and retrieve from other search facilities, such as the EdNA Federated Search. So it basically opens the world up to the teacher to actually download learning objects, and content from wherever they have permission to do so.

**Jo:** *OK so a repository is a database sort of thing is it? Like a file, place where you store files, like a filing cabinet.*

**Peter:** Yes. Or you can actually liken it to a library, where a library stores a whole range of resources, a repository is an online library and it's storing up a whole range of resources that are online. But one of the real strengths in the assembly area of the Learning Edge is that teachers don't have to become familiar with tools such as Dreamweaver and Flash and Fireworks, because they can assemble in the Learning Edge, with simple drag and drop solutions, to create a lesson or lesson plan within an environment that they are familiar with, similar to Word, or anything that they work with on a daily basis.

**Jo:** *Gee, that sounds like a very welcome innovation for teachers. Have you found it's gone down well with people who are using it?*

**Peter:** The people who are using it at the moment, because it's still very much in a test development phase within TAFE Tasmania, teachers in the Department of Education in Tasmania have found that a very useful application or advantage of the Learning Edge that they do no longer have to become familiar with the other tools, that have been used for web development.

**Jo:** *Great. So, have you got anything more to add to that, Chris? About basic functionality?*

**Chris:** I was just going to explain some of the acronyms because the LMS or Learning Management System you can think of if you like as the more of the student type portal where the student logs in and does their assignments and you can think of us as more of a tool if you like for the educators and trainers themselves to log in and put together the online assignments for later on delivery through the learning management system, so we see ourselves as being very much a complementary solution to whichever learning

management system the institution might select and that could be WebCT Blackboard, Janison. moodle you name it.

**Jo:** *Ok so have you done any specific customizing for TAFE Tasmania or is it pretty much off the shelf as it stands?*

**Peter:** No, we've done a fair amount of customisation because when Learning Edge came to us it was based on curriculum, because it was designed initially for the Department of Education. TAFE Tasmania has worked with the Learning Edge company to develop it in line with Training Packages and competencies, and we've structured it in that way. So teachers can come in a search and assemble on competency codes or Training Package codes.

**Jo:** *And just like from a umm... well from a teacher's point of view I guess, how long would it take me to get a lesson organised, if I know how to use Word and I'm reasonably comfortable with getting a computer started and working?*

**Peter:** I always try and reflect on the fact that a teacher is a very busy person and they generally are preparing lessons tonight for tomorrow's delivery, and I believe this is a very effective tool to meet that 'just-in-time' preparation. It may be that the lesson has to run for three or four weeks, but they might only do tomorrow's delivery tonight and the Learning Edge really value-adds to them to be able to add and deduct from that lesson plan as the three or four week lesson evolves. So they can be developing on the fly.

**Chris:** I think the key also, part of the repository process is .. collaboration...which is a term that hopefully is becoming more and more familiar with where teachers should work and rather than developing everything themselves, by collaborating you can search and use and discover material that maybe other people have developed, maybe some people in central part of the institution have developed. So you don't necessarily have to do it all from scratch, reinvent the wheel, you can now work with mainly your peers in terms of collaboration, but also work with other people that might have developed really good learning material.

**Jo:** *OK. Well that certainly sounds pretty promising, given the way it's been to date with the amount of professional development teachers have to do to be able to use the web, so it sounds great. What do you think are the main benefits of the assembly area and why do you think, if that's what you're calling it, still, why do you think teachers will love that particular part of it?*

**Peter:** An example that we've worked through this week, recently, is that teachers can actually take material out of hard print learning resources, off the web, off of CDs and assemble them in a very quick way. That, in itself, is one advantage of it. The real distinct advantage then is that the teacher can add their own context around that content, so they're not necessarily being given the content they have to work with they can customise it suit themselves. So top me I think it's very powerful and it allows teachers to have that personalisation where they can create the learning environment that they know their students need.

**Jo:** *So you can just go in and put your cursor in and type away, that sort of thing?*

**Peter:** Yes, you can basically use the work area the same as you would use Word. It's got similar icons on the top taskbar, for teachers to use, to put in their own text around graphics and/or learning objects.

**Jo:** *That sounds fantastic. So where else can you see it being useful?*

**Peter:** The Learning Edge repository sits between the PC that a teacher would work at and also the learning content management system that a teacher might have within their organisation. The Learning Edge also has the ability to deliver without it being a learning

management system, so a teacher who is first putting their toe into the water with online teaching and learning could become familiar with the Learning Edge very quickly and deliver without having to become familiar with the learning management system.

**Jo:** *Oh OK.*

**Peter:** So that is a distinct advantage. It doesn't have the student management functions of a learning management system but it delivers online and for some teachers that's all they want. It also has the distinct advantage that you can use it simply to create your online and hard print material, collaboratively, at the same time. So you can package it off and send it to a PDF format if that's what you want. So there are some distinct advantages.

**Jo:** *Sounds great. And what about interfacing with national initiatives like the Toolbox, I heard you mention that before, how can a teacher access those resources to pull into a lesson plan? Is that possible?*

**Peter:** That is possible. There are two ways that can be done the Toolbox project has developed a toolbox learning object repository, which is undergoing another refinement this year and when that is completed, teachers, trainers will be able to access that repository and pull learning objects from there into the particular learning content management system. In our instance, we're taking it into the Learning Edge and we're currently repackaging the Toolbox learning objects and using them within TAFE Tasmania. Those particular learning objects are coming out of Toolboxes that we've purchased, so we have a purchase arrangement and then we are completely disaggregating the Toolbox and providing teachers with the components that they want.

**Jo:** *So, I could either access a learning activity out of a Toolbox off the institution's server where you've – it's been unpacked, where a Toolbox has been unpacked; or could I go direct to the database on the web and download it and unpack it that way?*

**Peter:** Yes you can. The federated search functionality of the Learning Edge allows it to go through EDNA and/or Google and search the federated searches that EDNA provides. So you have direct access, as you are assembling, to any of the repositories that EDNA searches and also Google searches, so it's very powerful in that way.

**Jo:** *It is, you could basically pull anything from anywhere in the world?*

**Peter:** On the fly whilst you're developing your lesson plan.

**Jo:** *Yes, look.. that's sounds brilliant.*

**Chris:** The other thing the system can do is, it does have a powerful work flow engine, and so it's great to be able to pull this information in but also you need to be able to potentially put it through a quality control process, and that process can involve maybe people on the library site, checking things like metadata, but also I've seen the K12 sector curriculum people, making sure that it adheres to whichever state curriculum that you might be applying as well.

**Jo:** *Gee*

**Peter:** What Chris is alluding to there is that if the workflow indicates that I create an object, I can also have a need then to share that object with three or four other moderators within TAFE before it's allowed to go live. And that acts and controls and manages the QA workflow through the whole process.

**Jo:** *And I've heard it enables you to track digital rights as well, is that possible?*

**Peter:** Yes. Recently we've worked with the Learning Edge to invoke some very elementary digital rights management functionality, and that is at a point where a teacher downloading a particular object provided that has the DREL, that is Digital Rights

Expression Language, attached to it, the Learning Edge, in our instance, will now display the rights by which a teacher can use that. So over the web, they'll download something and they'll know whether they have permission to use that learning object straight away and in that way it's cutting down the paper chase that tends to go on about using the material or not.

**Jo:** *Fantastic. It's sounding better and better to me. How does it work with open source systems, say like moodle. I heard you mention that before, because that's reasonably available and easy to set up. It goes with that OK?*

**Peter:** It's not tested at this point, TAFE Tasmania is using Web CT currently and we have two instances of moodle being trialled around the state. Web CT and moodle both claim to be IMS compliant and, in theory, the Learning Edge should work with either system. There will be, no doubt, some front-end and back-end work that will probably be required to ensure that happens, but we are certainly in a research and development phase with the Learning Edge and we would like to see that functionality happen. At the moment the Learning Edge have in fact had export tools built into it, that allows us to export directly to Web CT and export directly to Blackboard. As time progresses I would imagine that Learning Edge will negotiate rights to have export functionality built in to other learning management systems.

**Jo:** *So this is a pretty interesting partnership you've got going, what's the crucial aspects of that working relationship?*

**Peter:** I would believe that some of the crucial aspects are that we both are Tasmanian based, that is TAFE Tasmania and the Learning Edge. As well as that, the educational bodies within Tasmania have all worked collaboratively for some time, particularly in the technology workspace. So that has tended to draw us together and certainly TAFE Tasmania acknowledges the work that both Dytech and the Learning Edge have done over recent years, in the education field. So it was natural for us to actually form a collaborative partnership with the Learning Edge to develop it in a way that it would serve VET Australia wide.

**Chris:** I s'pose we're software developers... we need to ideas...especially on the, if you like, the business logic of the product from our customers, and we work in with customers not just in the VET sector, like with Peter, but also in the university sector, we've got four university customers now and in the K-12 sector, we have done a bit of a foray into the corporate sector with a small licence to a corporate customer area in Australia.

**Jo:** *Well that sounds pretty good for business, what about international interest, is it going outside of Australia yet?*

**Chris:** Yes, we've, we haven't actually had to really market the product yet apart from in Australia, although we have had some interest now in New Zealand, in Canada and USA and in Asia. So they've been really customers I guess through word of mouth and networking and they've discovered about us and wanted to learn more and one of the advantages with web software is we are able to give presentations across the web so we don't have to actually go out in aeroplanes these days and fly across and do that. So we've done a number of web presentations now of the products to overseas customers, so we're on some shortlists at the moment, so stay tuned.

**Jo:** *That sounds very positive, so where can we look at or trial the Learning Edge?*

**Chris:** The website of the Learning Edge is [www.thelearningedge.com.au](http://www.thelearningedge.com.au) There is a trial version which is at [www.trial.thelearningedge.com.au](http://www.trial.thelearningedge.com.au) and that does require log on access so if you approach us to get a log on name and password we'd be happy to entertain that.

**Jo:** *Great. Well that sounds like really useful support for teachers who let's face it they are the ones at the learning edge, so thanks for sharing your innovations with the Knowledge Tree and best of luck with your projects and collaboration together.*

**Peter/Chris:** Thanks very much Jo