

Encyclopaedia Britannica



Interviewed: Adam Bates, Encyclopaedia Britannica Education

Encyclopaedia Britannica¹ first went online in the 1990s with a web site offering simple online access to its content repository. Today it offers specialised online editions for schools and for HE or FE organisations. Articles and papers are rewritten by editors to make them contextually appropriate for different age groups, and to put them in the context of what a teacher or pupil wants. The information on any given topic will be fundamentally the same across all groups, but written and presented differently. In all cases the ethos is the same: to be an authoritative, trusted source of information as expected of the Britannica brand.

Britannica recently began to use Shibboleth to manage access to its schools content.

Traditionally, says Britannica's Adam Bates, the schools offering was bought by a librarian and would sit on two or three machines in a library. Commercially, this was a limited market: it also became clear that teachers weren't aware it was available and, when they found out, were wondering why they hadn't known about it earlier.

Since then, furthermore, there have been changes in library budgets and indeed in the whole way that libraries are used in schools: learning platforms have become far more common. The question, Adam says, was therefore: "How can we take what we've got and make it readily available to teachers, pupils and parents? Not only so they know it's there but so they can use it when, where and how they want."

SHIBBOLETH

Initially Britannica would work with learning platform developers separately, one by one, to integrate its content and make it available to teachers. Britannica had its own proprietary technologies for handling this and for dealing with the matter of user authorisation. As Britannica began working with multiple Regional Broadband Consortia (RBCs), this was found not to be appropriate: technically it was too complex, it didn't work commercially and, says Adam, it didn't fit with the way RBCs and some learning platform providers were going.

Britannica had already come to Shibboleth and Single Sign-On through its HE and FE contract with JISC. Britannica saw that this was also the way to go with schools.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation was very straightforward: thanks to its experience with the JISC HE/FE contract, Britannica had already had a year of Shibboleth testing under its belt and had signed up with the UK federation. A WAYF² was implemented in September 2008. Since then, Britannica has talked to RBCs and schools and found that they feel the WAYF gets in the way. It involves choosing an organisation from a list that pops up on screen and is seen as one more step to go through before reaching the resources in question. Users would rather login through a portal at the level of the RBC and then go straight to the content. Adam says that the development work to get round this was very light, just involving a little integrating of code.

¹ www.britannica.co.uk

² Where Are You From: the service that authenticates a user. The UK federation recommends organisations find an alternative means of identity discovery to the WAYF; however, a national WAYF will always be available from the federation for those who want to use one.

FURTHER WORK FOR SCHOOLS

Britannica is now developing the Shibboleth system further, fine-tuning the access permissions.

“embc, for instance, is seen as a single institution, which is fine if you want to switch access to the whole of embc on or off. However, they wanted to trial access with some schools but not others, and then let local authorities procure centrally, or let schools within the authorities procure individually.”

To address this issue the UK federation has collaborated with representatives from the schools sector to develop a synthetic scope for use by RBCs and local authorities. This allows for individual schools and education-based establishments within the RBCs' or local authorities' remit to be referenced individually via their scoped affiliation attribute. Utilising this specific schools sector scope allows an RBC to be authenticated as an institution but would also keep the ability to switch off individual users (i.e. schools) beneath it. The eduPersonEntitlement attribute also allows for specific groups of students to have access to specific services.

“It's more elegant than authenticating either the whole school, or none of it. It's also a selling point for schools. For example, you can give sixth form students access to sixth form materials and primary students access to primary materials immediately they log on, without them having to self-identify or specify what they're after. Previously, to do this Britannica would have had to create whole new separate sites for sixth form, primary and so on.”

After logging in, schools now get access either via a learning platform or to Britannica direct, with no further logging in required. Adam says: “We're very careful not to dictate to schools or learning platform providers the way they should do it – we work with them instead. Access to databases is fairly open, with Britannica providing tools for integrated search. Schools see that Shibboleth fits in with their own strategies.”

BENEFITS

Adam is clear about how Britannica benefits from Shibboleth: “As a publisher, it cuts on down on our development costs. With Shibboleth and Synthetic Scopes there should be no more development at our end: maybe a level of account maintenance but otherwise no additional overhead.”

“If a new service or delivery mechanism comes up – for example, an RBC develops a new portal – then Britannica doesn't need a new development phase to keep up with it. We can very quickly provide solutions, which cuts down on headaches. Previously it took a couple of years with each learning platform provider: development requests must be booked in and scheduled, weeks down the line. With Shibboleth we don't need to rely on internal development.”

FUTURE PLANS

The Synthetic Scopes system is proving quite sufficient for current needs but there are further items looming on the drawing board, Adam says. “We will look at ways as a publisher to use Shibboleth to do different things: for instance we currently see a school as statistically a single customer and can't tell how many actual pupils are using it. We will see if that information can be extracted.

“Otherwise, we will be positioned to act if anything else comes along. We talk to content providers and have good relations with Becta and the RBCs so we can pick up on what's coming.

“We will look to see if we can use Shibboleth for better stats, and to manipulate content available to specific users. It's down to what schools want. Some can already manipulate access with their learning platforms. It's better for Britannica to go to schools with a solution they can take away and decide how to use, rather than make schools do it our way. We are empowering each Service Provider to use it and do it their way.”

Thanks to Adam Bates for agreeing to be interviewed for this case study.