A Template Application for Managing Online Assignments

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ABSTRACT

I developed a Microsoft Windows internet-based computer application (GroupMaker) for managing online-submitted assignments that is optimized to make grading student assignments easier. The application controls student submissions with templates, is internet-based, and presents information in panels that forestall errors. Assignments can be targeted to individual, group, and section. Assignment time settings include begin, due, end, and graded. Allowed privacy settings include none, group, full, and their combinations. Students submit assignments by typing and cut-and-paste, which allows character-input limits to be enforced. A demonstration version of GroupMaker can be downloaded from https://wp.towson.edu/precha/.

INTRODUCTION

Consider how you grade your students. If you do it through a written exam, you use a template. Perhaps you also grade students by taking attendance, reading their papers, and listening to their presentations. In all these instances, you most likely have a template for your students. You may require that they write their initials beside their printed name on an attendance form, a required template. You may ask that their papers and presentations conform to a three-part structure, a suggested template. Templates are pervasive in grading, for they make grading easier.

GroupMaker is a Microsoft Windows computer application I developed that takes your templates, puts them online, and manages the process so that grading can be done more easily. GroupMaker is internet-based (Pillutla, 2003), not web-based, so GroupMaker directly accesses the computer’s operating system. In contrast, a web-based application depends upon a browser to intercede between itself and the operating system, which means that internet-based applications respond at least as fast and generally much faster to user commands than web-based applications.

PANELS

To forestall errors, information is presented in panels where closely related items are grouped together. The Main Panel, visible to both students and instructor, is shown in Figure 1 (names appearing therein are fictitious). The instructor’s Administration Panel is shown in Figure 2. The instructor controls what appears on the main panel and how the application functions through the Options Panel, Figure 3. The instructor edits student profiles through the Edit Panel, Figure 4; re-organizes group membership through the Reorganize Panel, Figure 5; and sets assignment attributes through the Set Assignment Panel, Figure 6. The instructor uses the Grade Panel, Figure 7, both to enter instructions to students accompanied by an optional template, and to score student submissions accompanied by optional comments and edits of student work.

Students use the Submit Panel, Figure 8 both to submit assignments and to see their scores and the instructor’s comments and edits. Students can send instant messages to each other through the Message Box Panel, Figure 9.

ASSIGNMENT TARGETS

Instructors target assignments to one of three categories: individual, group, and section. Targeted to individual, each student submits an individual assignment and receives an individual score. Targeted to group, members of each group submit a joint assignment and every participating group member receives the same score, plus or minus instructor-specified points for specified members. Targeted to section, all members of the class section submit a joint assignment and every participating member receives the same score, plus or minus instructor-specified points for specified section members.

For ease in managing group and section assignments, the application considers the member who first OKs the assignment to be the assignment leader, unless the instructor decides otherwise. The application considers a member to have participated in the assignment if that member either OKs the assignment or is checked present by the leader. When the instructor enters a score for the joint assignment, the application credits all participants with the same score.

TIMES

For each assignment, the instructor sets four times: begin, due, end, and graded. The assignment is visible to the students after the begin time. Assignments accepted after the due time are flagged as late. Assignments are not accepted after the end time. Instructor assigned scores, optionally accompanied by comments and edits of student submissions, are visible to students after the graded time.
FIGURE 1
MAIN PANEL

FIGURE 2
ADMINISTRATION PANEL
FIGURE 3
OPTIONS PANEL

FIGURE 4
EDIT PANEL

FIGURE 5
REORGANIZE PANEL
FIGURE 6
SET ASSIGNMENT PANEL

FIGURE 7
GRADE PANEL
PRIVACY

Privacy of assignments can be none, group, or full. None allows each student to view the submitted work of every other student of the same class section, group allows only group members to view each other’s submission, and full allows no one to view another’s submission. Three compound privacy settings are available: full-to-group, full-to-none, and group-to-none. Compound privacy settings change assignment privacy from the more restrictive to the less restrictive at an instructor-specified interval of time after the due time.

Compound privacy settings are suitable for activities requiring separate work followed by joint work. Thus, in case analysis, students might be assigned to submit their individual analyses of the case before a group meeting to discuss the case. In this instance, the case assignment would be an individual assignment with full-to-group privacy. The due time would be an easily remembered time before the group meeting and the time for privacy to change from full to group could be the scheduled time for the start of the meeting. For example, if the group will meet at 10 a.m., the due time could be set at 12:59 p.m. of the previous day, and the interval-of-time to change from full privacy to group privacy could be set at 600 minutes past the due time. Set this way, students who miss the due time but submit their work by the schedule time of the meeting will not gain the advantage of seeing the work of their peers in advance of their own submissions. Yet, the group will not lose the advantage of seeing every member’s submitted work, including work submitted late, when the group meets to discuss the case.

CHARACTER INPUT LIMIT

Penalizing students for writing too much is distasteful. For this reason, the application enforces an instructor-set character input limit on every assignment. When a student attempts to type or paste characters that exceed the limit, the excess characters are discarded.

CONCLUSION

The application makes grading student assignments easier by controlling student submissions, by responding faster to user commands, and by displaying setting in panels that forestall errors. A summary of its distinctive attributes follows:

1. Template application. Students fill in template-derived forms, either by typing or by cut-and-paste. They do not upload files for the instructor to download. Uploads and downloads are time consuming, require the instructor to spend time responding to errant submissions, and involve the risk of transmitting viruses.
2. **Rapid response.** Instructors can rapidly compare submissions, comment on submissions, edit submissions, assign points, and make changes to assignments, comments, edits, and points. Rapid response is possible because the application (a) does not have to deal with the vagaries of native document files and (b) is an internet-based application with direct access to the computer’s operating system.

3. **Choice of assignment target: individual, group, and section.** Individual assignments are individually completed, group assignments are jointly completed by group members, and section assignments are jointly completed by all members of a class section. Instructors can re-assign students to groups, or allow students to switch groups, between assignments.

4. **Choice of privacy settings: none, group, full, full to group, full to none, and group to none.** *None* means that every member of a class section can view the submission of every other member. *Group* means that only group members can view each other’s submissions. *Full* means that no one can view another’s submission. The remaining privacy settings mean that the setting changes from the more private to the less private at an instructor-specified interval of time after the due date.

5. **Character input limit.** Students are limited in the number of characters they can type or paste into forms, avoiding the issue of penalizing submissions that exceed the instructor-specified length.

A demonstration version of GroupMaker can be downloaded from [https://wp.towson.edu/precha/](https://wp.towson.edu/precha/). Select Downloads >> GroupMaker.
REFERENCES

GroupMaker. [Developed by P. Thavikulwat] Towson, MD (601 Worcester Road, Towson, MD, USA). [Available from http://wp.towson.edu/precha/]