Assignments

This chapter covers the following MTC skills: 5.1 Assignments

After the complex and powerful quiz module, assignments are a refreshingly simple method for collecting student work. They are a simple and flexible catch-all for things you want to grade that don't fall into any of the other tool types.

The assignment module gives you an easy way to allow students to upload digital content for grading. You can ask them to submit essays, spreadsheets, presentations, web pages, photographs, or small audio or video clips. Anything they can store on their hard drives can be submitted in response to an assignment.

Assignments don't necessarily have to consist of file uploads. You can create offline assignments to remind students of real-world assignments they need to complete. Alternatively, you can ask students to input their answer directly into the assignment itself.

Assignments are a useful tool you can use in creative ways to collect more authentic responses from your students than is possible with the quiz engine.

Assignment Types

There are four assignment types:

Upload a Single File
> This allows each student to upload a single file in any format, including a ZIP file.

Offline Activity
> This is useful when the assignment is performed outside of Moodle. It could be something face-to-face or on paper. Students can see a description of the assignment, but they can't upload any files.

Online Text
> This allows students to input text online. You can grade the assignment online and, if necessary, add inline comments or changes.

Advanced Uploading of Files

This allows each student to upload one or more files in any format. As the teacher, you can also upload one or more files for each student, either at the start or in response to their submission. A student may enter notes describing their submitted files, progress status, or any other relevant information.

Creating Assignments

Compared to some of the other tools we've looked at, assignments are easy to create. Once you've decided on the basic type of assignment, you can very quickly create a place for students to upload or enter their responses to the materials.

To create an assignment:

1. Click "Turn editing mode on."

2. Select an assignment type from the "Add an activity" drop-down menu.

3. On the "Adding a new assignment" page, as shown in Figure 7-1, give your assignment a descriptive name.

4. In the Description area, carefully describe your assignment. It's a good idea to be very detailed here, even if you've already detailed the requirements in your syllabus. In fact, you might want to copy and paste from your syllabus to avoid confusion.

5. Choose the grade scale you want to use for the assignment.

6. Set the "Available from" date and "Due date" for your assignment or check the Disable boxes.

7. Decide whether to prevent late submissions.

8. Choose the options for the type of assignment you have chosen:

   Advanced uploading of files

   • Set the maximum size for a file upload. (The top of the scale is set by your system administrator. There is also a maximum upload size in your course settings.)

   • Choose whether students may delete uploaded files at any time before grading.

   • Set the maximum number of files each participant may upload. Note that students can't see this number, so it's a good idea to write the actual number of requested files in the assignment description.

   • Choose whether to enable students to enter notes into the text area. This can be used for communication with the grading person, for assignment progress description, or for any other written activity.

   • Decide whether to hide the assignment description prior to the date when the assignment is available.

- Choose whether teachers should be alerted via email whenever students add or update their submission.

Online text

- Decide whether to allow students to resubmit assignments after they have been graded (for you to regrade).
- Choose whether teachers should be alerted via email whenever students add or update an assignment submission.
- Choose whether the student's submission will be copied into the feedback comment field during grading, making it easier to comment inline or to edit the original text.

Upload a single file

- Choose whether to allow students to resubmit assignments after they have been graded (for you to regrade).
- Choose whether teachers should be alerted via email whenever students add or update their submission.
- Set the maximum size for a file upload. (As mentioned previously, the top of the scale is set by your system administrator and there is also a maximum upload size in your course settings.)

9. Select the common module options:

Group mode

Another location to set the group mode for the activity. If group mode is forced in the course settings, then this setting will be ignored.

Visible

This determines whether students may view the activity or not.

10. Click the "Save changes" button to make your assignment available.

Your assignment will appear in your course page. It will also be added to your course calendar and will appear in the Upcoming Events block to remind students when it's due.

> To see how your assignment appears for your students, select Student from the "Switch role to" drop-down menu in the top-right corner of the course page, next to the "Turn editing on" button. The "Return to my normal role" link at the bottom of each page restores your teacher status.

Figure 7-1. Adding a new assignment

Assignment Capabilities

The assignment module has only three capabilities:

View assignment
> This allows a user to view the assignment but not submit anything.

Submit assignment
> This allows a user to make an assignment submission.

Grade assignment
> This allows a user to view all assignment submissions and grade them.

Managing Assignment Submissions

To view your students' submissions, click on the assignment name in your course page. You'll see the assignment name and details and a link in the upper-right corner of the page telling you how many assignments have been submitted. Click on this link.

The assignment submissions page, as shown in Figure 7-2, contains a table with these headings: First name/Surname; Grade; Comment; Last modified (Student); Last modified (Teacher); and Status. The list may be sorted by clicking on a particular heading.

Figure 7-2. Assignment submissions

Clicking twice on the same heading sorts the list in the opposite order. If the table is too large, then columns may be collapsed by clicking on the Hide icon next to a particular column heading.

By default, 10 submissions are shown per page, though this may be changed at the bottom of the page.

To grade a submission, click on the Grade link opposite a particular student's name. A new window will open containing a feedback area (see Figure 7-3).

For *Upload a Single File* and *Advanced Uploading of Files* assignments, there is a link to download the file together with the date it was last submitted. You will need to open it in another application, unless it's a web page. So if your student submits a Word document, you'll need to save it to your desktop and open it in Word.

For an *Advanced Uploading of Files* assignment, you have the option to upload a response file. Students may upload draft files for you to review at any time. When their assignment is finished, they can mark it as final by clicking the "Send for marking" button. Prior to grading, you may choose to revert an assignment back to draft status.

For an *Online Text* assignment, the text is displayed in a box with the word count above. If comment inline has been enabled, then the text is copied into the feedback comment field.

Once you've reviewed the student's assignment, pick the grade for the assignment from the drop-down list. (You set the scale when you created the assignment.) Below the grade scale, you can type comments regarding the student's work. When you're done, click "Save changes" or "Save and show next."

> To quickly grade multiple assignments all on one page, rather than one by one in a new window, check the "Allow quick grading" box at the bottom of the assignment submissions page. Simply add the grades and comments, then when you're done click "Save all my feedback" at the bottom of the page.
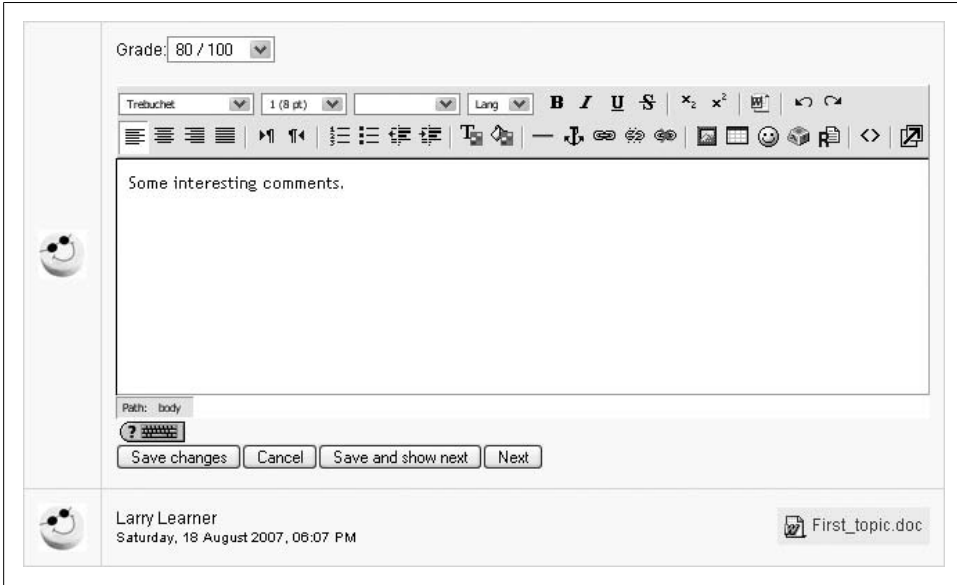
Figure 7-3. Assignment feedback

If you've set an *Offline Activity* assignment, you can enter grades and comments in the same way as for the other types of assignments.

Students can see their grades and comment in two ways. First, they can click on the assignment link again. They will see their grades and comments below the submission block. Alternatively, they can click on the Grades link in the course Administration block. They will see the grade for the assignment and can then click on the assignment name to get the written feedback.

Effective Assignment Practices

The two most basic assignment types, offline and upload, are so generic you may find it difficult to use them effectively at first. You may find it useful to think about them as two separate modules sharing a common interface.

Offline assignments are useful for recording grades for real-world activities. Currently, they are a sort of hack that allows the creation of manual columns in the grades module. If you look at the grades area (which we'll cover in Chapter 13), you'll notice there is no way to add a column in order to add grades not automatically generated by a quiz or other tool. The offline assignment gives you a way around this limitation by adding a column in which you can record any grade at all. This limitation will be addressed in Moodle 1.9, which includes a completely rewritten gradebook.

The offline assignment is more than just a hack, however. You can use this tool to record scores or feedback for student presentations, class participation, performances, sculptures, or any other nondigital performance. You can create a scale to give nonnumeric feedback if you don't want to give a numeric score to a creative performance. Again, we'll cover creating scales in detail in Chapter 13.

Uploaded assignments are probably what most people expect when they think about assignments. Remember, you can use these assignment types for any sort of digital content. Most instructors use assignments to collect essays and other word-processing assignments. You can also use them to collect other types of student work. Students could upload PowerPoint slides prior to a presentation. You could assign a what-if scenario using a spreadsheet and ask students to submit it. Students could take a digital photograph of a sculpture or mechanical project and submit it for evaluation.

As long as the file is smaller than the upload maximum, you can create assignments for any sort of digital content. Consider the types of work products you want your students to produce during your course. How many of them could be digital files submitted using an assignment?

Creative Assignment Practices

Simple, flexible tools can lend themselves to creative problem solving. The uses for the assignment module are limited only by your imagination. Let's take a look at case studies, an advanced use of assignments, to get the creative process started.

Case studies are important learning tools in a number of professional fields. Medical schools, business schools, and others use case studies to convey information in a narrative context and give students a chance to immediately apply their new knowledge.

Designing a good case study does take some time, but an iterative approach works well. Start small and build up over time. Eventually, you could follow one case study across an entire semester, or build a set of cases, forming the basis for your students' practice.

Jason: My wife's engineering capstone course used one case study in several parts, over the course of a semester, to test the students' abilities to apply the engineering concepts they had learned over the previous four years. Each phase of the course introduced new challenges they had to solve using different techniques and concepts.

Case studies have a few basic parts. There's a narrative setup, background data, and a problem statement. The problem statement should be an interesting challenge linked to course goals and solvable by applying concepts and procedures learned in class. The narrative setup is important because it contextualizes the assignment, giving students a feel for the people involved in the problem. You can make the case easier or harder depending on how ambiguous your narrative and data are. For more advanced challenges, you may want to create a case where there is no clear-cut answer, to encourage student discussion.

Most case studies require combining assignments with resources to present the case and give students a way to submit their answers. Add your narrative and data as resources using the files and resources tools discussed in Chapter 3. Then add your problem statement as the description of an assignment.

Students should use the narrative and data to solve the problem posed by the assignment. The response should show how the resolution of the problem is supported by the data.

Summary

Assignments are an easy way to gather and track student submissions. Students can submit any type of electronic file to fulfill the requirements. Instead of collecting unwieldy stacks of paper, you can let Moodle track who has turned in a paper and when. The feedback options provide you with an easy way to send grades and/or comments back to the students about their work.