
Overview of the web-publishing script and templates

1. Introduction

In basic terms the script acts like a simple, flat file database engine, taking input from the users, storing it and then re-displaying it according to user preferences. What the script may lack in terms of sophistication, compared to deploying a full database system, is balanced by its' small footprint, portability (it will run on any Unix server and with slight modification on a WindowsNT platform) and ease of use.

The input of data is controlled by the design of the form based web pages and the output of data by the display web pages. The script handles all the processing of the data contained in the forms invisibly in the background. Pre-designed web pages have been coded and are available to use with the script. These html template sets have been designed to provide standard, tested methods for interacting with the script and getting information to and from the web server.

2. Setting up a web publishing system

The tasks involved in setting up a web publishing system can be divided into two areas: '*local tasks*' such as editing the template files and '*system tasks*' such as moving the templates to their working directory on the web server. Once running, the web publishing system requires very little maintenance. The major overhead comprises simple administrative tasks such as monitoring student work and general course management issues.

As an illustration, the table below briefly outlines the steps and time taken to set-up a basic web publishing system 'out of the box':

Task:	Approximate time:	Local or system:
• Download and extract zipped files	5 min	<i>Local computer</i>
• Add course title and name to appropriate template files and check the correct input fields are present	20 min ... these basic alterations might also include changing fonts and colours.	<i>Local computer</i>
• Transfer directory structure and files to the web server	5 min	<i>System</i> - requires access to a web-server
• Add directory location to the 'id_setup' file	3 min	<i>System</i> - currently requires access to the script 'cgi-bin'
• Change file permissions for the archive directory	2 min	<i>System</i> - requires ability to telnet to the correct web server directory
Total time:	30 min	

3. What types of functionality do the script and templates provide?

The central theme driving the utilisation of the script is the ability to publish work, ideas and comments, quickly and easily onto the web without the user requiring any specialised web page production or publishing skills. In other words, to provide an intuitive, usable, and transparent system for manipulating textual work. The increased visibility of student work afforded by the system can be used to promote dialogue, collaborative working and open discussion. In essence the publishing system can be viewed as tool that enables both students and tutors to take advantage of the opportunities that are offered by working in a web-based, networked environment.

The versatility of the script is such that there are a variety of different formats in which the script's basic functionality can be exploited and tailored to a range of course requirements and designs. The template sets provide some basic starting points and ideas for setting up a web-publishing system. Below is a brief overview of the template sets (first versions) which have been developed so far:

Template set	Description of use	Illustration
scrapbook	A whiteboard facility that can be set-up as a multi-user notepad. This can be used in a variety of ways, e.g. as a discussion tool, a scrapbook for students to distribute revision notes.	<i>French (1st run + running continuously with 5 groups)</i> <i>Bioinformatics (planned)</i>
groupwork	A simple group-working system. Students can be provided with their own online work space for producing collaborative documents, discussion and comments.	<i>Bioinformatics (planned)</i>
publish	A general textual work submission system with a commenting facility and the option to have students working in groups.	<i>Italian (1st run)</i> <i>Law (planned)</i> <i>Bioinformatics (planned)</i>
gallery	A general textual work submission system (similar to publish_v1) with the additional functionality of adding images as a focus for the submissions.	<i>French (2nd run)</i>
reviews	A reviews publishing system. Allows a customisable archive of reviews to be built from student reviews or comments on various types of resource such as research articles, books, web-sites, primary or critical texts.	<i>French (1st run)</i> <i>History (1st run)</i> <i>English (ready to run)</i> <i>Bioinformatics (planned)</i>