

EXPRESSING THE IMPLICIT INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN LANGUAGE EMBEDDED IN AN LMS: MOTIVATIONS AND PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Many difficulties met in the use of the LMS systems lead to express the need of reengineering works or some additional design approaches. In this paper, we propose an LMS-centered instructional design approach. This approach is based on the specific instructional language of LMS systems. It focuses on an original process for the identification and the formalization of the instructional language of LMS systems. This process takes into account two complementary viewpoints: the HMI-centered viewpoint based on the Human-Machine Interfaces (HMI) analysis and the technical-centered viewpoint primarily based on the database analysis. We illustrate this process with the example from experimentations conducted on Moodle platform.

KEY WORDS

Learning Management System; Re-engineering; Human Machine Interface; HMI-centered analysis; Technical-centered analysis; Process; Model; Moodle.

1. Introduction

Many teacher-designers have difficulties [1] [2] while using LMS (Learning Management System) for learning design purposes, owing to the paradigm embedded in the platforms. They have to manage and to appropriate various screens as well as to set up form-based interfaces in order to configure their learning situations. Today, many standards (IMS-LD [3], SCORM [2], etc.), approaches (as Design Pattern approach [4]), languages (LDL [5], etc.) and tools (e-LD [1], LDI [5], etc.) are proposed to facilitate the instructional design. But, these are often not compatible with LMS and they do not ensure the full operationalization of the produced models. Some translations leading to information loss and semantics are still required to exploit the models produced into the targeted LMS.

In order to overcome these gaps, we propose an LMS-centered instructional design approach. It aims (1) to facilitate the instructional design and (2) to ensure the specification of models in conformance with the instructional design languages of LMS. In order to take into account this specific language, we propose a specific process aiming to guide its identification and its formalization. This process can be used for many

purposes (the specification of new design tools that conform to LMS languages, the development of transformation tools between EML and LMS, the comparison between different LMS languages, etc.). We are interested in its use for the specification of learning scenarios out of the LMS space. We think that the instructional design can be facilitated when providing teacher-designers some graphical tools more adapted to their practices. These tools have to conform to the specific instructional design language of LMS. Following this approach, we guaranteed the full operationalization of the produced models which can be done by specific facilities supporting this specific language.

The paper is organized as follows. We present our global approach based on the LMS-centered instructional design in the section 2. Then, the paper is focused on the specific analysis process for the identification and formalization of the LMS instructional design languages. Section 3, 4 and 5 respectively describe the three main steps (the HMI-centered analysis, the technical-centered analysis and the confrontation) of the analysis process. All the process parts are illustrated by examples from the validation we conducted on the Moodle platform. Finally, we conclude by discussing the advantages of this process and the emergent opportunities in terms of design and simulations. We also discuss the possibility of reusing our approach for other LMSs.

2. LMS-Centered Instructional Design

2.1 Overview of our Approach

Although the various approaches (centered on designer's practices, pedagogical patterns, EML, standards, etc.) supporting the instructional design, teacher-designers encounter many difficulties when using platforms for designing or implementing their courses. They have to manage the various platform interfaces. Many parameters of the form-based interfaces have to be adjusted. These parameters are sometimes optional but often too technical at a very low level, with a low meaning in learning design. Our aim is to overcome the difficulties of design for an LMS and go farther the low level of the LMS interfaces. We propose an LMS centered instructional design approach aiming to provide teacher-designer a user

friendly design tools. Our hypothesis is that each LMS is not pedagogically neutral. It embeds an implicit language based on the LMS specific paradigm to specify the design of a learning activity. Thus, our proposal is based on the following idea: the LMS instructional design language can be identified and explicitly formalized in a computer-readable format. This language (as well as its meta-model) can be the basis to provide practitioners with some LMS-centered VIDLs (Visual Instructional Design Language) and their external learning design editors. They can facilitate thinking and communication for practitioners (human interpretable formalism). For developing VIDLs and their dedicated editors, we propose to adopt an MDE (Model Driven Engineering) and DSM (Domain-Specific Modeling) approach [6]. We consider that a scenario can be conformed to platform language when it is expressed with a Domain Specific Modeling Language (DSML). The DSMLs are composed by abstract and concrete syntaxes. The identified instructional design language of an LMS formalizes the abstract syntax. It also represents the domain model of these DSMLs. Concerning the concrete syntax, these DSMLs have to propose a specific notation to represent the language vocabulary in a graphical format. The VIDLs are specific DSMLs centered on didactic and learning field. They have to manage the persistence of produced learning scenarios on top of LMS language in the machine-readable format of the considered LMS (binding). The second objective of our work concerns the operationalization of learning scenarios produced by the means of these VIDLs. The operationalization could be achieved without semantics gaps by extending the concerned LMS with import/export functionalities. In our general approach, we propose to add to the LMS new communication facilities which deal with the import of scenarios specified by specific DSMLs. These facilities allow also the export of the existent courses on platform into an external file. We have chosen to serialize such a file in conformance with the format (meta-model, XML schema, etc.) of the identified instructional design

language. A module of communication has to ensure the achievement of these facilities. This module is different and more flexible than the existing engines (as CopperCore for IMS-LD models) required by some approaches since one of their principals roles is to parse and implement scenarios or models without any transformations.

2.2 Overview of the Analysis Process

For defining such a language, we propose an original LMS-centered process. This process could interest many communities of practice as the pedagogical engineers and the developers-designers of an LMS-community. Teacher-designers will be the user of our work results (design tools, import/export API, etc.). At first, we have conducted many studies and experimentations from a teacher-designer viewpoint on several platforms and LMS systems (Moodle, Ganesha, etc.). Many uses (as the creation of courses, the specification of quiz, the addition of pedagogical resources, etc.) were made in order to appropriate these platforms/LMSs. Each LMS has its specific paradigm and instructional design language. These differences are not critical and we are able to propose a common analysis process. Then, the analysis work focused on two viewpoints. The first one is centered on the HMI (Human Machine Interface) according to two strategies: the analysis of an existent course and the analysis of the creation of new courses. The second is centered on the technical methods.

The analysis process is composed by three main parts (figure 1): the HMI-centered analysis, the technical-centered analysis and the confrontation and formalization. The first one is centered on the HMI analysis. Performed with a top-down approach, it is conducted by three sub sequential analyses (macro-HMI analysis, functional analysis and micro-HMI analysis). Each analysis has its specific features and provides its own model(s) and formalism(s). The composition activity is based on the models produced by the previous analyses. It consists in

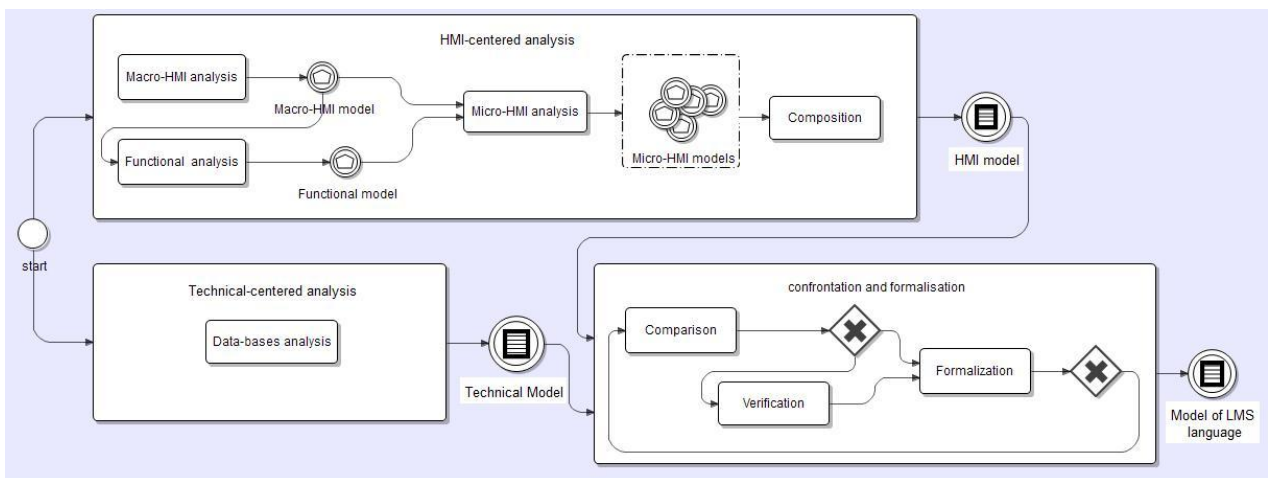


Figure 1: Analysis process of the instructional design language

specifying the main model of the HMI-centered analysis. The second step concerns the technical-centered analysis. Several analysis methods could be adopted (data-bases, source code, course backup, etc.). During this step, the focus is put on the database analysis. The last process step concerns the confrontation between the HMI-centered and the technical-centered models. The aim here is to specify the abstract syntax (e.g. meta-model) of the instructional design language for the considered LMS. This meta-model can be used as the basis for the specification of new LMS-centered VIDLs and their dedicated editors.

We have modeled all the process activities by the means of the UML activity diagrams. Such diagrams allow a detailed description of all activities. They propose a routing to be followed to achieve the objectives. This routing is guided by some conditions, transitions, synchronisations, etc.

The HMI centered analysis ensures the identification of the ‘user-visible’ part of the LMS language provided for users. The technical-centered analysis ensures that models can be specified in conformed format with the LMS language and thus supported by the LMS system. These two analyses are complementary. At last, the confrontation between their models ensures the refinement of the HMI-centered analysis and the detection of such lacks.

2.3 Overview of the Experimentation Example

In this paper, we illustrate the process activities by the means of extracts of our global Moodle experimentation. Moodle is a distance learning platform based on socio-constructivist pedagogy [7]. Our choice was motivated by: (1) its open source code and its modular and extensible architecture allowing the addition of new modules, (2) its large community of users and developers and (3) its use in our university.

Moodle provides a learning environment to create courses, define activities, manage and grade students and so forth. It includes many types of activities (as lessons, assessments, forums, databases, quizzes, etc.). The forums and quizzes are highly developed on Moodle. The experimentation is about the identification of the specific instructional design language of the forum activity. A forum is an activity frequently used in courses with Moodle. Its specification requires the setting of many HMI which embeds several pedagogical elements. We will apply the analysis process to identify this specific language. It concerns all elements, attributes, syntaxes, relations and constraints defining the forum activity. In the next sections we explain the different process activities and we illustrated each analysis work through the forum experimentation.

3. HMI-Centered Analysis

3.1 Macro-HMI Analysis

An LMS system is generally composed by several HMI developed for different purposes and categories of users. The macro-HMI analysis concerns all the interfaces but it consists in identifying the ones specifically dedicated to the instructional design. These specific HMI allow teachers to specify the content of their learning scenarios or courses. The HMI are identified both (1) when creating a new course content and (2) when analyzing existing course content. The aim of this analysis is to produce a macro-HMI model. This model is a mapping of the interfaces dedicated to the instructional design. We have chosen to represent each HMI by their main concept in the macro-HMI model. The main HMI concepts are identified by the help of the analysis of the interface titles and sometimes with the analysis of the navigation paths. Often, the adopted ergonomic when designing the interface aims to put the associated titles in relief as well as the titles of the blocks, menus and main parts of an interface. The title is generally situated at the top of the page in a specific format (specific size and/or color, etc.). It indicates the main concept of the interface or its occurrence. Sometimes, more than one concept such highlighted. The analyst can choose one of them. The others concepts will be analyzed in the future analyses (functional and/or micro-HMI). The navigation paths (if any) as well as the URLs of interfaces are also information sources to identify their main concept of interfaces.

Then the relations between concepts are only based on the relations between interfaces. The following activity diagram (Figure 2) describes the methodology of the macro-HMI analysis.

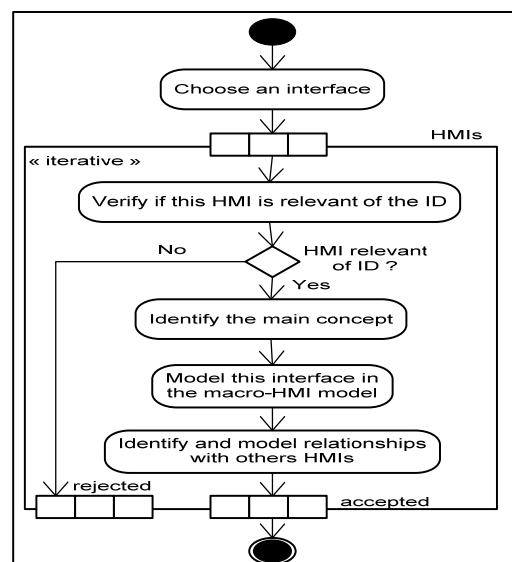


Figure 2: Activity diagram of the macro-HMI analysis

In the case of the forum experimentation on Moodle, the macro-HMI analysis consisted in identifying their related HMI. The creation of a new forum gives access to new interfaces allowing the specification of new dedicated concepts. We identified HMI for the setting up of discussions. Thus the macro-HMI model is composed by two main concepts: 'forum' and 'discussion'.

3.2 Functional Analysis

Based on the previous analysis result, the functional analysis consists in identifying the functionalities dedicated to the instructional design of course on such LMS. The HMI are analyzed from a functional viewpoint. They embed both pedagogical and technical functions. The technical ones (as display functions, etc.) do not concern our work and thus they are rejected from the functional model. The functionalities are implicitly embedded in interfaces via HMI widgets (buttons, links, etc.) facilitating the interactions between users and system. Each widget has to be tested in order to determine its pedagogical features. Then, the analyst has to give a function name for each pedagogical widget (as add pedagogical resources, add lesson, answer to questions, etc.).

We have grounded the formalism of the functional model on the SADT (Structured Analysis and Design Technique) Model [8]. SADT is a multi language supporting the communication between users and designers. It is based on simple concepts in an easy graphical and textual formalism. This language is conformed to our functional analysis approach: top-down, hierarchical, modular and structured.

The diagrams are hierarchically ordered. We have chosen the UML use cases diagrams [9] for representing the internal sub-functional models. Each identified functionality is represented by the mean of a new use case. Their sub-functionalities are represented into a new use case diagram. Only the elementary functionalities (ones which do not have a sub-functionalities) are represented into the same use case diagram of the main functionality. Then, this diagram is merged into the main use case diagram. The following activity diagram (Figure 3) describes the methodology of the functional analysis.

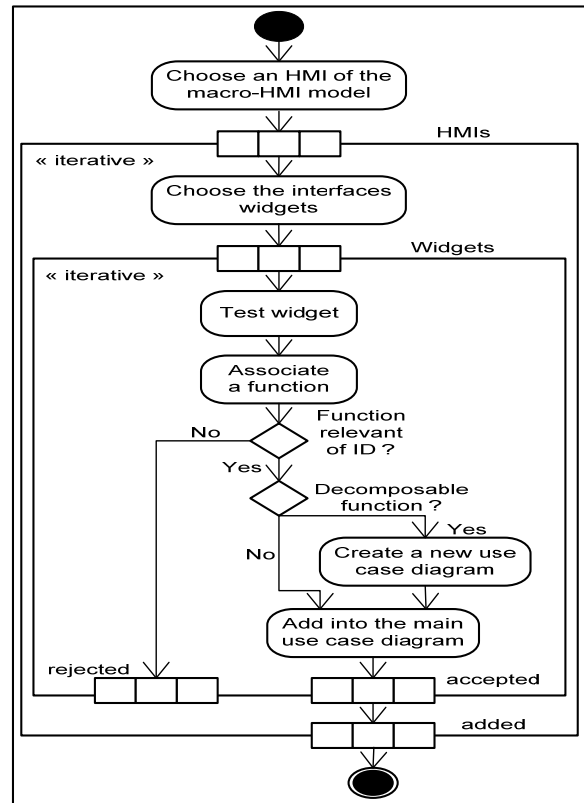


Figure 3: Activity diagram of the functional analysis

Concerning the forum experimentation on Moodle, the functional analysis has to identify the pedagogical functionalities related to the specification of Moodle forum and its dedicated elements. Similarly to the macro-HMI analysis, these functionalities could be identified through two strategies: the analysis of an existing forum and the analysis of how creating a new forum.

We identified the “add a forum” functionality by analyzing the main course HMI. This functionality is represented into a form-based HMI in a drop-down list. Then by analyzing a specific forum, we have identified some dedicated sub-functionalities. These ones aim to perform some operations on the discussion element (as “add a discussion”, “answer to discussion”, “separate a discussion”, etc.). Figure 4 shows an extract of the functional model dedicated of the Moodle forum.

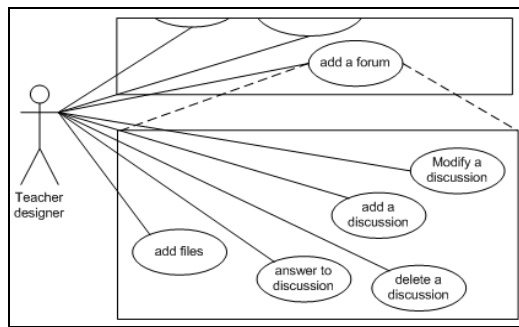


Figure 4: Extract of the functional model dedicated to the Moodle forum

3.3 Micro-HMI Analysis

Based on the macro-HMI and functional models, the micro-HMI analysis consists in analyzing the concerned interfaces at a finer scale. It aims to identify all elements relevant to the instructional design. Many micro-HMI models result from this analysis. They describe the elements of the instructional design by including all their features (as attributes, types, etc.)

To conduct this analysis, we propose the following approach. After choosing an element of the macro-HMI model, the analysis concerns the interfaces for realising/defining a dedicated use case of the functional model. In order to facilitate the analysis work, we have chosen to break down the concerned interface into many areas. Each element (component) of each area of HMI has to be analyzed in order to determine its pedagogical features. The first step is to analyze the titles of blocks, menus, forms, etc. Then, the analysis concerns many pedagogical elements which are described by the use of various forms, widgets and software components (buttons, links, etc.). Two main categories of the forms elements/attributes can be identified: required elements and optional elements. The required ones are highlighted in specific format (bold, underline, red color, preceded by a specific character, etc). These ones have to be identified because they form the main elements of the instructional design language of LMS. The non-setting of these elements prevents the ordinary working of system.

On the other side, some widgets could implicitly hide some pedagogical elements. They have to be tested and analyzed. They can represent some pedagogical details. For example, some widgets handle the ordering of the Moodle course content. Others ones allow to add some contents or to identify new elements. It is also important to identify the attributes of the identified elements and their properties. During our analysis work, we noted that some value fields are associated to some attributes. Some of them have also default initializations. The value fields and initializations have to be identified: it presents an important feature of instructional design language for LMSs. The identification of these elements could be realized by analyzing the titles and forms in the different

areas of HMI. Some dependencies and relationships between elements are detected when analyzing forms and conducting some tests. For example, the setting of some elements could imply the setting of others ones. More, the description of relationships requires the definition of multiplicities between their elements. The multiplicity can be represented by a pair of lower/upper bounds. Finally, we noted that the elements ordering are an important feature within the instructional design because it may influence the organization of the course. We have chosen the mind map format to represent the micro-HMI model. The mind map allows a full representation and description of instructional design elements in terms of attributes, types, properties, value fields, initializations, constraints and relationships. As well as the micro-HMI and the functional analyses, the methodology of the micro-HMI analysis is described through the following activity diagram (figure 5).

In the case of the forum experimentation on Moodle, the micro-HMI analysis consisted in analyzing at first the form-based interface of forum. This analysis had to identify the related elements and attributes to forum. We have identified the attributes of forum, their types, their domains fields and their initializations. The same analysis concerned the discussion element in order to identify the dedicated language. The multiplicity between forum and discussion is determined by associating many discussions to forum. This analysis had led to specify two micro-HMI models: forum and discussion models.

3.4 Composition of the HMI Model

The composition step aims to formalize the partial instructional design language derived from the HMI-centered analyses into a single model. It consists in combining the micro-HMI models. The relationships between them are based on their relations into the macro-HMI and the functional models. The composition consists in taking the elements of the macro-HMI model into top-down approach. The relations into the macro-HMI are easily identified but the relations into the functional model are deduced by the help of the following approach. For each element of the macro-HMI model, we have to identify the related part form of the functional model. Many use cases can reference one or many element(s) which is (are) required for realizing such functionalities. These elements are already identified into the micro-HMI analysis. As well as the functional model, the identified elements are represented at such level. Then the elements required by the sub-functionalities are also represented at a lower level and so on. Finally, the multiplicities between models/elements have to be added in the HMI centered model by following an analog process to the micro-HMI analysis. Some of them are already identified during this analysis. At the end, the HMI centered model merges whole set of the micro-HMI models using the mind map formalization.

Concerning the forum experimentation on Moodle, the composition had led to produce the dedicated HMI centered Model. It consists in associating the ‘forum’ and ‘discussion’ models defined by the micro-HMI analysis. Based on the macro HMI model, as well as the functional model, we deduced discussion is a sub element of forum. We have then specified the multiplicities already identified into the micro-HMI analysis between them. Figure 5 shows an extract of the HMI centered model dedicated to the forum design.

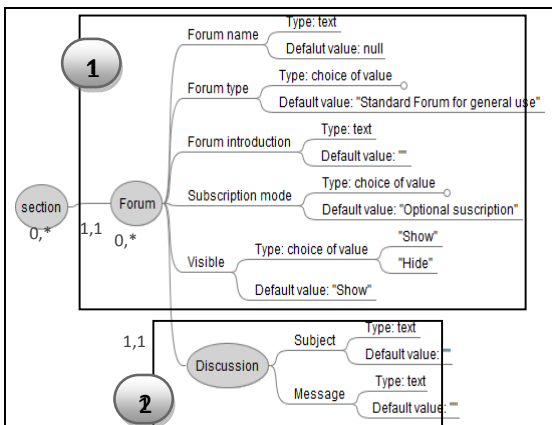


Figure 5: Extract of the HMI centered model focusing on the forum design

4 Technical-centered Analysis

The second step of the process we propose concerns a technical-centered analysis. During our experimental work we have identified in an LMS several technical aspects to analyze: data-bases, source code, courses backup/restore (if exist), etc. During this step, the main source of information for identifying the instructional design language is the LMS databases. The other technical analyses would be used during the confrontation step.

The data-bases analysis consists in specifying a reduced Conceptual Data Model from the one available (if any). Such a model can be also defined on the basis of the relational data model generated by some tools with reverse engineering facilities [10]. However, most of these tools are not free and their results depend directly of the database size. In our approach, the database analysis has to be restricted to the tables/columns in relation to instructional design data. The main difficulty is to identify them. Information from the first HMI-centered analysis could be useful to achieve this.

To conduct this analysis, our methodology consists in (1) looking over all database tables in order to sketch a first draft of the model, (2) focusing on tables embedding elements in relation to instructional design concepts. These tables can be identified through the semantic

analysis of their titles or their record fields. Some tables could be identified through their dependencies with others or through the foreign keys. The analysis then consists in specifying the database schema on the basis of the databases reverse engineering rules. The Conceptual Data Model can be finally specified from this schema. This model is relevant to represent the technical-model viewpoint because it hides ill-structured databases and misconceptions or redundancies. Some tables relations also require a manual analysis in order to reject the ones created for low-level specific purposes.

In the case of the forum experimentation on Moodle, we first looked over all the Moodle database tables (around 275 tables). We then targeted those related to the forum design through the semantic analysis of their titles. Some tables and have been rejected because of their focus on observation purposes (but one can consider them as parts of the instructional design and aim to identify and exploit them). Rejected data are not represented in the technical-model. We have then specified the relations between the concerned tables. At this stage, some specific data required the identification of other tables. For example, we have added the ‘course_module’ table because this one stores the hidden/visible attributes of course content (forum in this case). We also had some difficulties when defining the relationship between some tables (‘course_module’ and ‘forum’) because of their common reference to the ‘instance’ level of the forum module. Finally, we transformed the database schema dedicated to the instructional design of forums into a conceptual model (figure 6).

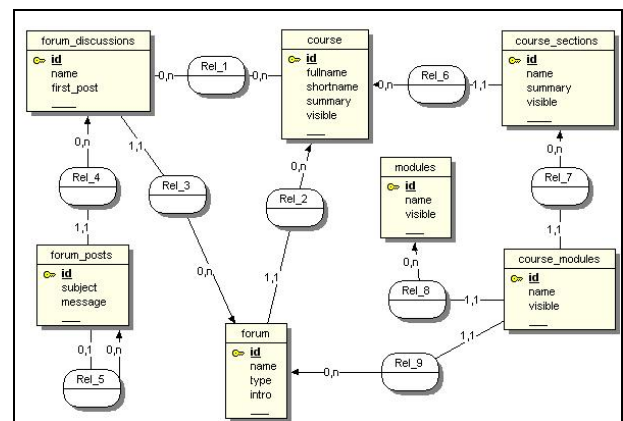


Figure 6: Extract of the technical-model focusing on the forum design

5 Models Confrontation and Formalization of the Final Model

The last process step concerns the confrontation of both HMI and technical models, and the formalization of the final instructional design model. The HMI and technical models are compared in order to (1) refine the HMI-model, (2) detect and correct the difference between

models, (3) ensure that the final model can be easily bind to a computer-readable format for the existent LMS.

The confrontation conducts verifications on the definition of the instructional design elements on both models. Some differences or ambiguities (like the definition of similar elements, the non-existence of some attributes, divergences about the types of attributes, etc.) are so identified. They require a deeper and finer analysis of both HMI and technical analysis. At this step, other technical-centered analysis (source code, backup packages, etc.) can be useful. For example the source code analysis consists in directly reviewing the LMS code. It primarily concerns the code of the HMI definition and the queries for inserting / selecting data. This analysis can reveal many details that developers have chosen to encode for effectiveness or portability reasons.

The aim of this process step is to formalize the instructional design language. We have chosen the meta-model formalization because of future use for the specification of VIDLs, and the development of dedicated editors, on top LMS languages in accordance with the DSM approach. These LMS meta-models will also drive the specification of an equivalent XML schema for the development of the LMS import modules required in our TEL-centered approach for developing future learning scenarios.

For each element of the HMI model, the process checks the existence of this element in the technical-centered model. When the existence of an element is verified, it can be modeled as a meta-class in the meta-model. Then the process verifies the attributes of this element. The verification concerns the existence and the type of attributes. The verified attributes are represented as meta-attributes of the parent meta-class element. Finally, the relations between meta-classes must be defined by taking into account the existing relations between elements into the HMI and technical models. Multiplicities are also verified in each model before its representation on the meta-model.

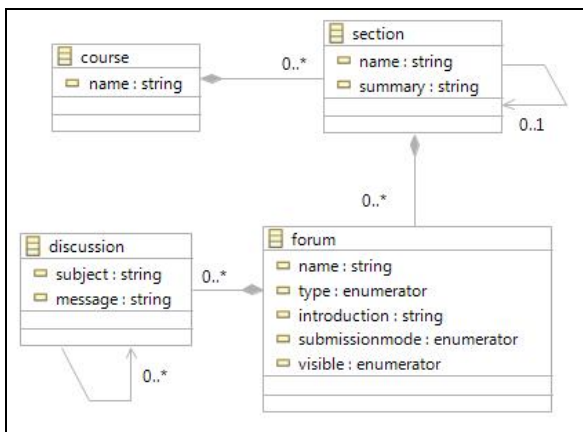


Figure 7: Meta-model extract of the forum instructional design language

For specifying the Moodle meta-model we used the EMF (Eclipse Modeling Framework) framework and the.ecore representation. Nevertheless, others meta-modeling tools can be used.

The figure 7 represents the visual part of the meta-model dedicated to the forum sub-part of the Moodle instructional design language (the concrete native formalization of the.ecore Model is XML: the class-diagram-oriented representation do not allow all meta-information).

From the meta-model of Moodle instructional design language, we have generated an equivalent XML schema. This schema is used in a communication API we have added to Moodle 2.0 platform. It adds export/export facilities to the course-design content [11]. We have also already experimented the use of the meta-model for the development of a very first VIDL, and its dedicated graphical editor, according to the DSM approach. Current experiments by teacher-designers about their uses (editors plus import/export binding) are very promising for helping them for focusing on the global design of courses. Our approach allows to shift the design of low-level aspects (concrete resources, technical data, enrollment informations, etc.) to a second design-time within the LMS [11].

6 Conclusion

This paper proposes a new LMS-centered approach for instructional design. The aim of this approach is to overcome difficulties of both the design and the implementation of learning scenarios on such LMS. Focused on the potential internal semantics embedded in the targeted LMS, we have presented a specific process to identify and to formalize its specific instructional design language. We have defined this process by taking into account two main viewpoints. The HMI centered viewpoint ensures the identification of the ‘user-visible’ part of the LMS language provided for users. The technical viewpoint guarantees the models conformed to this language will be operationalized on the targeted LMS.

This process opens the opportunities to exploit this language for many purposes as (1) the specification of learning scenarios conform to this language and (2) the generation of new VIDL and dedicated editors on top of this language. The analysis process could also be conducted on any other LMS. It can guides comparisons between LMSs. For exploiting the instructional design language, we actually work on the specification of new design tools on top of the meta-model resulting from the analysis process.

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