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SYSTEM AND METHODS FOR CONTEXT SPECIFIC ANNOTATION OF ELECTRONIC FILES

Abstract

Embodiments described herein are directed to an annotation system having a remote processor, and a client processor in data communication with the remote processor. The client processor is adapted to send a first request for an electronic file to the remote processor, receive the electronic file from the remote processor, define at least one new annotation about the electronic file, and define at least one anchor associated with the at least one annotation. The at least one of the remote processor and the client processor is adapted to store the at least one anchor and the at least one annotation in an annotation file that is separate from the electronic file.

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Background/Summary

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED PATENT APPLICATIONS [0001] This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 18/442,443, filed on Feb. 15, 2024, which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 17/716,462, filed on Apr. 8, 2022, which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 15/337,782, filed on Oct. 28, 2016, which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/269,164, filed on Oct. 7, 2011. The entire contents of each of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 17/716,462, U.S. patent application Ser. No. 15/337,782 and U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/269,164 are herein incorporated by reference for all purposes.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The embodiments herein relate to annotations of electronic files, and in particular to system and methods for facilitating annotations of electronic files in a distributed environment such as for webpages in a web-based e-learning system.

INTRODUCTION

[0003] Electronic learning (also called e-learning or eLearning) generally refers to education or learning where users engage in education related activities using computers and other computing devices. For examples, users may enroll or participate in a course or program of study offered by an educational institution (e.g. a college, university or grade school) through a web interface that is accessible over the Internet. Users may receive assignments electronically, participate in group work and projects by collaborating online, and be graded based on assignments and examinations that are submitted using an electronic drop box.

[0004] Electronic learning is not limited to use by educational institutions, however, and may also be used in governments or in corporate environments. For example, employees at a regional branch office of a particular company may use electronic learning to participate in a training course offered by their company's head office without ever physically leaving the branch office.

[0005] To facilitate electronic learning, electronic files such as web pages are provided over a communication network, for example the Internet or a local area network (LAN). These electronic files may include various types of content such as course materials, learning tools, controls and administrative tools. A user of the e-learning system (e.g. a learner, an instructor, an administrator, etc.) is able to interact with the electronic files, for example via one or more servers providing the web pages.

[0006] In some circumstances, the user may desire assistance when interacting with the electronic files. For example, the user may not be familiar with the content and/or control options that are provided on a particular web page. In such cases, the user may want to seek assistance from another user or consult an instructional manual for the information that the user is seeking. However, instructional manuals or other assistance information may not specifically address a user's questions as the information contained therein is often prepared by another individual in advance of the user using the e-learning system. Furthermore, it may be difficult for a user to seek help from another user in real time, as other users may not be active on the system at the same

time.

SUMMARY OF SOME EMBODIMENTS

[0007] According some embodiments, there is provided a computer-implemented annotation method having the steps of sending a first request for an electronic file to a remote processor, receiving the electronic file from the remote processor, defining at least one new annotation about the electronic file, defining at least one anchor associated with the at least one annotation, and storing the at least one annotation and the at least one anchor associated therewith in an annotation file that is different from the electronic file.

[0008] According to some other embodiments, there is provided a computer-implemented annotation method having the steps of receiving a first request for an electronic file from a client processor, sending the electronic file to the client processor, receiving at least one new annotation about the electronic file, receiving at least one anchor associated with the at least one annotation, and storing the at least one annotation and the anchor associated therewith in an annotation file that is different from the electronic file.

[0009] According to some other embodiments, there is provided an annotation system having at least one remote processor and at least one client processor in data communication with the at least one remote processor, the at least one client processor being adapted to send a first request for an electronic file to the at least one remote processor, receive the electronic file from the at least one remote processor, define at least one new annotation for the electronic file, and define at least one anchor associated with the at least one new annotation. At least one of the remote processor and the client processor is adapted to store the at least one least one annotation and the at least one anchor associated therewith in an annotation file that is separate from the electronic file.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0010] The drawings included herewith are for illustrating various examples of systems, methods and apparatus of the present specification and are not intended to limit the scope of what is taught in any way. In the drawings:

[0011] FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of an eLearning system according to some embodiments;

[0012] FIG. 2 is a schematic diagram of an exemplary interaction between the client computers and the servers of the eLearning system shown in FIG. 1;

[0013] FIG. 3 is a schematic diagram of an exemplary web page provided by the servers of FIG. 2;

[0014] FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram of yet another exemplary interaction between client computers and servers shown in FIG. 2;

[0015] FIG. 5 is a computer implemented annotation method according to some embodiments; and

[0016] FIG. 6 is a computer implemented annotation method according to some embodiments.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF VARIOUS EMBODIMENTS

[0017] For simplicity and clarity of illustration, where considered appropriate, reference numerals may be repeated among the figures to indicate corresponding or analogous elements or steps. In addition, numerous specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the exemplary embodiments described herein. However, it will be understood by those of ordinary skill in the art that the embodiments described herein may be practiced without these specific details. In other instances, well-known methods, procedures and components have not been described in detail so as not to obscure the embodiments generally described herein.

[0018] Furthermore, this description is not to be considered as limiting the scope of the embodiments described herein in any way, but rather as merely describing the implementation of various embodiments as described.

[0019] In some cases, the embodiments of the systems and methods described herein may be

implemented in hardware or software, or a combination of both. In some cases, embodiments may be implemented in computer programs executing on at least one programmable computing device comprising at least one processor, a data storage device (including in some cases volatile and non-volatile memory and/or data storage elements), at least one input device, and at least one output device.

[0020] Each program may be implemented in a high level procedural or object oriented programming and/or scripting language to communicate with a computer system. However, the programs can be implemented in assembly or machine language, if desired. In any case, the language may be a compiled or interpreted language.

[0021] In some embodiments, the systems and methods as described herein may also be implemented as a non-transitory computer-readable storage medium, configured with a computer program, wherein the storage medium so configured causes a computer to operate in a specific and predefined manner to perform at least some of the functions described herein.

[0022] Some embodiments described herein relate systems and methods for annotating electronic files which allow users to create, store, and/or retrieve one or more annotations for one or more electronic files. For example, the user may insert user-customized annotations at one or more particular locations on a web page. The inserted annotations are then stored and may be made available for subsequent retrieval and display, in some cases by the same user, in some cases by other users.

[0023] In some cases these embodiments may permit a user to create self-authored user-generated help text, notes or other comments that can be made available when the user (or another user) subsequently revisits the web page. This may be particularly helpful in distributed environments where users may not be physically located at the same location and may not have the opportunity to easily ask each other for help, for example eLearning environments and other distributed environments. For example, a user may be able to “take-notes” on a particular webpage during orientation or a training session for the tools or controls provided on that webpage. These notes can then accessible to the user for review at a later time, such as when the user subsequently views that webpage to use some of those controls.

[0024] Furthermore, some embodiments described here may permit users to share annotations that are created by one or more users. For example, in an eLearning system a user (e.g. a learner) may have the option to select or retrieve annotations created other users, such as other fellow learners in the same virtual course (e.g. classmates), instructors, or administrative staff.

[0025] From the perspective of particular users (e.g. staff or instructors in an eLearning system), some embodiments described herein may allow them to address frequently asked questions and/or other topics of discussion by “pushing” annotations out to the users at appropriate locations in particular web pages. For example, if an instructor is receiving a number of questions with respect to a particular topic on a web page, the instructor may wish to create an annotation with an answer to that question, and then have the annotations be presented to the users who are viewing the topic on the web page. Similarly, technical staff (e.g. IT staff) may push out annotations to address technical questions that users may have, such as the use of particular controls on a web page.

[0026] In some embodiments, users may leave tips or hints in the form of annotations that may be displayed to another user who might have difficulty understanding some content on the web page. In some cases, the annotations may only be displayed to a user when the user had unsuccessfully attempted to respond to a particular question on the web page, for example when the user is taking a quiz.

[0027] Referring now to FIG. 1, illustrated therein is an educational system **10** for providing electronic learning or eLearning adapted for annotation of electronic files according to some embodiments. While some embodiments described herein are generally directed to eLearning systems, it should be understood that in other embodiments the systems and the methods described herein may be implemented outside of an eLearning environment.

[0028] Using the system **10**, one or more users **12**, **14** may communicate with an educational service provider **30** to participate in, create, and/or consume electronic learning services, including courses. In some cases, the educational service provider **30** may be part of, or associated with, a traditional “bricks and mortar” educational institution (e.g. a grade school, university or college), another entity that provides educational services (e.g. an online university, a company that specializes in offering training courses, or an organization that has a training department), or the educational service provider **30** may be an independent service provider (e.g. for providing individual electronic learning).

[0029] It should also be understood that a course may not be limited to formal courses offered by formal educational institutions. The course may include any form of learning instruction offered by an entity of any type. For example, the course may be a training seminar at a company for a group of employees or a professional certification program with a number of intended participants (e.g. PMP, CMA, etc.).

[0030] In some embodiments, one or more educational groups can be defined that includes one or more of the users **12**, **14**. For example, as shown in FIG. **1**, the users **12**, **14** may be grouped together in an educational group **16** representative of a particular course (e.g. History **101**, French **254**), with a first user **12** or “instructor” being responsible for providing the course (e.g. organizing lectures, preparing assignments, creating educational content etc.), while the other users **14** or “learners” are consumers of the course content (e.g. users **14** are enrolled in the course).

[0031] In some examples, the users **12**, **14** may be associated with more than one educational group (e.g. the users **14** may be enrolled in more than one course, one user may be enrolled in one course and be responsible for teaching another course, and so on).

[0032] In some cases, educational sub-groups may also be formed. For example, the users **14** may be part of educational sub-group **18**. The sub-group **18** may be formed in relation to a particular project or assignment (e.g. sub-group **18** may be a lab group) or based on other criteria. In some embodiments, due to the nature of the electronic learning, the users **14** in a particular sub-group **18** need not physically meet, but may collaborate together using various tools provided by the educational service provider **30**.

[0033] In some embodiments, other groups **16** and sub-groups **18** could be defined using other contexts. For example, a group could include users **14** that share common interests (e.g. in a particular sport), that participate in common activities (e.g. members of a choir or a club), and/or have similar attributes (e.g. users that are male, users under twenty-one years of age, etc.).

[0034] Communication between the users **12**, **14** and the educational service provider **30** can occur either directly or indirectly using any suitable computing devices. For example, the user **12** may use a computing device **20** having one or more client processors, such as a desktop computer that has at least one input device (e.g. a keyboard and a mouse) and at least one output device (e.g. a display screen and speakers).

[0035] The computing device **20** can generally be any suitable device for facilitating communication between the users **12**, **14** and the educational service provider **30**. For example, the computing device **20** could be a laptop **20a** wirelessly coupled to an access point **22** (e.g. a wireless router, a cellular communications tower, etc.), a wirelessly enabled personal data assistant (PDA) **20b** or smart phone, a terminal **20c**, a tablet computer **20d**, a game console **20e** over a wired connection **23**, and so on.

[0036] The computing devices **20** may be connected to the service provider **30** via any suitable communications channel. For example, the computing devices **20** may communicate to the educational service provider **30** over a local area network (LAN) or intranet, or using an external network (e.g. by using a browser on the computing device **20** to browse to one or more web pages (electronic files) presented over the Internet **28** over a data connection **27**).

[0037] In some examples, one or more of the users **12**, **14** may be required to authenticate their identities in order to communicate with the educational service provider **30**. For example, the users

12, 14 may be required to input a login name and/or a password or otherwise identify themselves and gain access to the system **10**.

[0038] In some examples, one or more users (e.g. “guest” users) may be able to access the system **10** without authentication. Such guest users may be provided with limited access within the system **10**, such as the ability to review one or more components of the course, for example to decide whether they would like to participate in the course, but without the ability to participate in class discussions, and so on.

[0039] In some embodiments, the wireless access points **22** may connect to the educational service provider **30** through a data connection **25** established over the LAN or intranet. Alternatively, the wireless access points **22** may be in communication with the educational service provider **30** via the Internet **28** or another external data communications network. For example, one user **14** may use a laptop **20a** to browse to a webpage that displays elements of an electronic learning system (e.g. a course page).

[0040] The educational service provider **30** may include a number of functional components for facilitating the provision of electronic learning services. For example, the educational service provider **30** generally includes one or more processing devices such as servers **32**, each having one or more processors. The processors on the servers **32** will be referred to generally as “remote processors” so as to distinguish them from client processors found in computing devices **20, 20a-20e**.

[0041] The remote processors on the servers **32** are configured to send information (e.g. electronic files such as web pages) to be displayed on the computing devices **20** in association with the electronic learning system **10**.

[0042] The educational service provider **30** also generally includes one or more data storage devices **34** (e.g. memory, etc.) that are in communication with the servers **32**. The data storage devices **34** could include relational databases (such as a SQL database), or other suitable data storage devices. The data storage devices **34** are configured to host data **35** about the courses offered by the service provider, for example the course frameworks, educational materials to be consumed by the users **14**, records of assessments done by users **14**, and so on. As described below, the data storage devices **34** may also include annotation information to be presented when particular electronic files are presented to a user.

[0043] The data storage devices **34** may also store authorization criteria that define what actions may be taken by the users **12, 14**. In some embodiments, the authorization criteria may include at least one security profile associated with at least one role. For example, one role could be defined for users who are primarily responsible for developing an educational course, teaching that course, and assessing work product from other users for that course. Users with such a role may have a security profile that allows them to configure various components of the course, post assignments, add assessments, evaluate the performance of other users, and so on.

[0044] In some embodiments, some of the authorization criteria may be defined by specific users **40** (e.g. administrators) who may or may not be part of the educational community **16**. For example, users **40** may be permitted to administer and/or define global configuration profiles for the system **10**, define roles within the system **10**, set security profiles associated with the roles, and assign the roles to particular users **12, 14** in the system **10**. In some cases, the users **40** may use another computing device (e.g. a desktop computer **42**) to accomplish these tasks.

[0045] The data storage devices **34** may also be configured to store other information, such as personal information about the users **12, 14** of the system **10**, information about which courses the users **14** are enrolled in, roles to which the users **12, 14** are assigned, particular interests of the users **12, 14** and so on.

[0046] The servers **32** and data storage devices **34** may also provide other electronic learning management tools (e.g. allowing users to add and drop courses, communicate with other users using chat software, etc.), and/or may be in communication with one or more other vendors that

provide the tools.

[0047] In some embodiments, the system **10** may also have one or more backup servers **31** that may duplicate some or all of the data **35** stored on the data storage devices **34**. The backup servers **31** may be desirable for disaster recovery (e.g. to prevent undesired data loss in the event of an event such as a fire, flooding, or theft).

[0048] In some embodiments, the backup servers **31** may be directly connected to the educational service provider **30** and located within the system **10** at a different physical location. For example, the backup servers **31** could be located at a remote storage location at a distance from the service provider **30**.

[0049] Generally, servers **32** and data storage devices **34** store electronic files that are to be provided to the computing devices **20** for consumption by the users **14**. In an eLearning environment example, the electronic files may be web pages that contain learning material such as course content, quizzes, discussion boards or any other content that facilitate the eLearning process. In other examples the electronic files may be other types of files or have other types of content.

[0050] Referring now to FIG. **2**, illustrated therein is an exemplary embodiment of client-server interactions between the servers **32** and the computing devices **20** in the eLearning system **10**. For ease of illustration, the servers **32** from the system **10** of FIG. **1** are represented by a single server **52** and the client computing devices **20-20e** from the system of FIG. **1** are represented by a single client computer **50**, although it will be understood that multiple servers **52** and client computers **50** may be used.

[0051] As shown, the server **52** has access to web pages **54** and annotation files **56**, which may be stored for example in the data storage device **34**. To access a web page located on the server **52**, the client computer **50** transmits a request **58** and context information **60** to the server **52** as shown. The request **58** may include information that is at least partially necessary to identify the particular web pages **54** that the client computer **50** is requesting. For example, the request **58** may include URL information of the web page.

[0052] The context information **60** generally contains information about the circumstances surrounding or associated with the request **58**. For example, context information **60** may include information about previous activity associated with the client computer **50**, an account identifier associated with one of the users **12, 14** who is making the request **58** using the client computer **50**, or other information. Generally, when the context information **60** is combined with the request **58**, the server **52** can identify the particular web page **55** that client computer **50** is requesting.

[0053] In some examples the context information **60** may also include information pertaining to the display of web pages on the client computer **50**. For example, if there are multiple web pages **54** that are being requested by the client computer **50**, the context information **60** may include instructions relating to how each particular web page should be displayed in relation to other web pages.

[0054] In some embodiments, the context information **60** may be stored in a file (e.g. a cookie) associated with a web browser application on the client computer **50**. In some examples, the client computer **50** may provide the context information **60** to the server **52** without receiving a specific request therefor from the server **52**. In effect, the client computer **50** can voluntarily supply the context information **60**.

[0055] In other examples, the client computer **50** may initially only send the request **58**; the server **52** may then request the context information **60** and the client computer **50** may subsequently provide the context information **60** in response.

[0056] In some cases, the context information **60** may not be required to identify a specific web page that the client **50** is requesting. For example, if a guest user is requesting a root or a home page of an eLearning website, then it may not necessary to provide the context **60** to identify the particular web page of interest.

[0057] Upon receipt of the request **58** and the context information **60**, the server **52** attempts to fill the request **58** by locating the particular web page **55** that the client **50** requested. In some cases, the web page **55** is located based on the URL information and the context information **60**. In addition, in some instances the server **52** may dynamically modify or format the web page **55** based on the context information **60**, or based on other information known to the server **52**.

[0058] The web page **55** is then transmitted to the client **50**. The server **52** may also determine whether there are any annotation data that are associated with the web page **55** and the context information **60**. In the example shown, annotation data **57** is associated with the given web page **55** and context information **60** and the annotation data **57** is provided to the client **50**. In some embodiments, the annotation data **57** may have been previously generated by the same user or other users.

[0059] The annotation data **57** may be selected from one or more annotation files **56** stored in the data storage device **34**. The annotation data **57** generally includes data associated with annotations and anchors on the particular web page **55**. For example, the web page **55** may be a web page **70** that includes annotations as shown in FIG. **3** and described below.

[0060] Referring now to FIG. **3**, illustrated therein is an exemplary web page **70** that may be provided by the server **52** in response to a request **58**. For example, the web page **70** may correspond to the web page **55** shown in FIG. **2**.

[0061] The web page **70** may include control tools **72**, text content **74**, image content **76**, video content **78**, and other elements.

[0062] The control tools **72** may allow the user to interact with the particular web page **70** or more generally with the server **52**, and could include for example radio buttons, check boxes, buttons, drop down lists, and so on. In some cases, these control tools **72** may be added to the electronic document based on the context information **60**. In some cases, similar control tools **72** may also be added to other web pages.

[0063] The text content **74**, image content **76**, video content **78** may include course specific content, such as study materials for a user, or other suitable content.

[0064] The web page **70** also includes a user-generated annotation indicator **90**. The indicator **90** may be interacted with (e.g. by having a pointing device pointing at it or by clicking on it) to allow the user to add, modify, or review annotation information associated with the indicator **90**. For example, as shown, an annotation object **92** is displayed when the indicator is interacted with. The annotation object **92** allows the user to input annotation information **94** associated with the indicator **90**. The annotation information **94** can then be saved for future reference (e.g. in the data storage device **34**). The annotation information **94** may be of various formats, and for example could include text, images, videos, links, and so on.

[0065] In some embodiments, the annotation object **92** may include various sharing options **96** to permit dissemination of the annotation information **94** to other users of the system **10**. For example, the annotation information **94** may be shared with other classmates, a specified group of users (e.g. friends), instructors, administrators, to a discussion board, and so on.

[0066] When the annotation information **94** is shared, the annotation information **94** may be provided to another user. For example, when a second user requests the same web page **70**, that user may be provided with a visual cue (e.g. a community annotation indicator **100**) indicative of the existence of shared annotation information **94**. In another example, the recipient may be alerted of the shared information via a form of electronic communication, such as a popup message, an email, and so on.

[0067] In some embodiments, the annotation indicator **90** is associated with an anchor **91**. The anchor **91** is defined by the user and is indicative of the location of an annotation object **92** on the web page **70**. For example, the user **12** or **14** may select a point on the web page to add the indicator **90**. That is, the user may define an anchor **91** for the location of the annotation indicator **90**.

[0068] Generally, the anchor **91** may be defined by the user when the user selects a specific location on the web page **70** to add annotation information thereto. In some embodiments, the anchor **91** may be associated with a location on the web page **70**. For example, the anchor **91** may also be associated with a raster coordinate in the web page.

[0069] In some embodiments, the anchor **91** may be associated with various content objects on the web page such as a text box, a control button, an image, a video frame, an iFrame, etc. In such cases, the anchor is associated with that content object such that the associated annotation is provided each time the content object. That is, if the content object (and the anchor) is provided as part of one or more other webpages, the annotation associated with the content object will also be provided. The association between the anchor **91** and a content object could be based on user input or be automated, for example based upon the proximity of the annotation object **92** to the anchor **91**. In some embodiments,

[0070] Generally, it may be desirable to associate the anchor **91** with one or more of the content objects so that the location of annotations in subsequent renderings the web pages tend to be more uniform. That is, if the annotation is semantically associated with a content object, then it may be desirable for the annotation to display near that content object regardless of the location in the page on which the content object is rendered.

[0071] Furthermore, associating the anchor **91** with control objects may allow the annotation information associated therewith to be made available on each web page that the control object is displayed on. For example, if the same control objects **72** with the annotation information are also displayed on other web pages, associating an anchor **91** with that control object **72** would permit the annotation information **94** associated therewith to be made available to other web pages displaying the same control object **72** (without having to recreate the user-generated annotation information **94**) for each web page.

[0072] It should be noted that the annotation indicator **90** and annotation object **92** are generally defined by the user using the client computer **50**. For example, the annotation indicator **90** and annotation object **92** may be generated by the user on a web page without any user-generated annotations. That is, the annotation indicator **90** and the annotation object **92** are not initially defined by the server **52**, although in some embodiments they may be stored in the data storage device **34** by the server **52** after being defined. In this manner the annotation indicator **90** and annotation objects **92** can be contrasted to pre-generated annotation information (e.g. as usually provided as part of a help file) which is normally generated by a server or defined in advance and provided as part of a web page or software application, for example.

[0073] In some embodiments, after being defined the user-generated annotation information **94** and the anchor **91** are provided to the server **52** such that they may be stored and made available when the web page **70** is subsequently requested. In some embodiments, the user-generated annotation information **94** is stored locally on the client computer **50**. For example, a browser plug-in application may be used to store and retrieve such locally stored annotation information **94** on the client computer **50**.

[0074] In other embodiments the annotation information **94** is stored on the server **52** such that this information may be made available to that user (or another user) regardless of which particular computing device **20** is used to access the web page **70**.

[0075] Also illustrated in FIG. **3** is a help indicator **78**. The user may interact with the help indicator **78** (e.g. by having a pointing device pointing at it or by clicking on it) to display additional help information **82**, as shown in a help object **80** having help information **82**.

[0076] In contrast to the annotation object **90**, the help object **80** is generally pre-generated. That is, the help information **82** is normally authored at an earlier time, for example by a programmer of the control tools **72**. The location of the help object **80** is normally also predetermined.

[0077] In the embodiment shown, the help object **80** may allow the user to edit the existing help information **82**. In other embodiments, the help text box may allow the user to add to (but not

remove) the existing information **82**. If the help information **82** is edited, in some embodiments the edited information may be stored so that it can be subsequently made available on the web page **70**. [0078] The help object **80** may also include various sharing options **84** to permit dissemination of the user edited information **83** to others. These sharing options **84** may be similar to the sharing options **96** provided in the annotation object **90**.

[0079] Also shown in FIG. **3** is a community annotation indicator **100**. The community annotation indicator **100** is similar to the annotation indicator **90** in that it provides a visual cue of the existence of additional information. The community annotation indicator **100** (when interacted with) may display additional community annotation information **104**, for example using in a community annotation object **102**. In some embodiments, this annotation object **102** may also be shared using the sharing option **106**.

[0080] In some embodiments, the community annotation information **104** may include various information provided by other users of the system **10**, and which may be customizable based on user preferences. For example, a user may provide preference information as to whose annotations should be displayed first, or if a particular users annotations should be displayed at all. For example the user may choose to display annotations for instructors first, followed by annotations from trusted friends, followed by classmates in the same class, followed by other members of the general eLearning community.

[0081] In some embodiments, the display of the community annotation information **104** could be customized based on reputation, grades, level of permission, and other suitable factors.

[0082] In some embodiments, the community annotation information **104** from members of various groups could be displayed using various colors or other patterns associated with each group so as to visually distinguish each group from the next.

[0083] In some circumstances, one of the users **12**, **14** may wish to “push” certain information out to users who view the web page **70**. For example, instructors may wish to address frequently asked questions and/or other topics of discussion by disseminating the information about that topic using instructor annotations located at relevant points on the web page **70**. Illustrated in FIG. **3** is an important annotation indicator **110** (shown generally with an exclamation mark) with an important annotation object **112** displaying instructor-provided annotation information **114**. This information may also be shared with other users using the sharing option **116**.

[0084] In some embodiments, broadcasting or pushing of annotation information may not be limited to instructors. For instance, in some embodiments a super-user with access to super-user account identifiers (e.g. technical or administrative staff) may push annotation information out to one or more users.

[0085] In some embodiments, the same or similar features used to create a user-generated annotation may be used by a super-user to broadcast their user-generated annotation as important information **110**. For example, if the user **12** is a super-user (e.g. through an account identifier provided in the context information **58** sent by the client computer **50** to the server **52**) the web page **70** may provide an option to push that super-user's generated annotation information, for example, as part of the sharing options **96**.

[0086] In other embodiments, annotations associated with the same content objects may be amalgamated so as to reduce the number of indicators that are displayed on a given web page. For example, if there are many different user annotation objects, community annotation objects and important annotation objects associated with one or more objects, one or more of these objects may be amalgamated with other annotation objects to reduce the number of overall objects or indicators displayed on the page.

[0087] Referring now to FIG. **4**, illustrated therein is another embodiment of an exemplary client-server interaction between the client **50** and the server **32**. As shown, modified annotation data **120** and context **60a** are transmitted to the server **52** for storage. The modified annotation data **120** may include information that may be needed to reproduce the annotations generated by the user. This

may include, for example, user-generated annotation information **94** and the anchor **91**. In cases where the user edits information in the help object **80** or a community object **92**, such data may also be provided to the server **52**.

[0088] In some embodiments, the modified annotation data **120** may also include annotation data **57** that was transmitted along with the web page **55** to the client computer **50**. In some other embodiments, the modified annotation data **120** may include just the annotations implemented by the user on the given web page **70**.

[0089] In some embodiments, the modified annotation data **120** may also include annotation metadata associated with the annotations generated by the user. For example, modified annotation metadata **120** may include an account identifier associated with the user that provided the user generated annotation. In another example, the modified annotation metadata may include general information about the web page **70** where the annotations were added, such as a course, topic, or content relating to the web page **70**. The annotation metadata may be used to enable sharing and discovery purposes.

[0090] In some embodiments, the modified annotation data **120** may also include sharing options **96** selected by the user **12**, **14**. In some embodiments, the annotation data **120** may also include an account identifier associated with the one or more users **12**, **14** that provided the particular annotations.

[0091] In some embodiments, the context **60a** would generally include a URL address and other information that may be needed to uniquely identify the web page that the modified annotation data **120** corresponds to. This may, for example, include URL information, account identifier information, and other information similar to that of context information **60** described above.

[0092] Upon receipt of the annotation data **120** and the context **60a**, the server **52** may store the modified annotation data **120** as part of annotation files **56**. It should be noted that the modified annotation data **120** is stored in annotation files **56** that are separate from the web page **54** or the electronic files.

[0093] Furthermore, if the annotations are to be provided to other account identifiers (i.e. users), then corresponding annotation files may be modified such that the annotations are provided to the intended recipients when the recipients subsequently requests that web page **70**.

[0094] Similarly, when the web page **70** is requested by the client computer **50**, the web page **70** is provided to the client computer **50** along with the modified annotation data **120** such that the user is given access to the relevant annotations associated with the web page **70**. That is, if there are any user-generated annotations, an annotation indicator may be displayed on the web page **70** based on the anchor associated therewith, and an annotation object containing the user-generated annotation object may then be displayed when the annotation indicator is interacted with. Similarly, the community annotations, help annotations, and important annotations as applicable may also be displayed.

[0095] In some embodiments, the contents **82**, **94**, **104**, **114** of the annotation objects may not be automatically provided with the web page **70**. For example, in some embodiments the contents **82**, **94**, **104**, **114** of the annotation objects may be provided upon request, which could be triggered by interaction with the annotation indicators **80**, **90**, **100**, **110**.

[0096] Referring now to FIG. **5**, illustrated therein is a computer-implemented annotation method **150** according to some embodiments. The method **150** may be executed by a computing device, such as the computing devices **20-20e** or the client computer **50**. The instructions to execute these steps on the processors of the computing devices may be in the form web pages or web requests.

[0097] At step **152**, a request for an electronic file is sent to a remote processor. The electronic file may in some embodiments be a web page, such as the web page **70** as described herein above. The request may be similar to request **58** and the remote processor may be a processor on a server, such as the server **52**. [0098] At step **154**, the electronic file is received from the remote processor.

[0099] At step **156**, at least one new annotation is defined, for example by a user. The annotation

may include annotation information such as annotation information **84, 94, 104, 114** as described above. It may also include an anchor such as the anchor **91**. It may also include instructions on reproducing various annotation indicators and the annotation objects. [0100] At step **158**, at least one anchor associated with the at least one annotation is defined. The anchor is indicative of a location for the annotation. In some embodiments, the anchor may be a raster location on the web page and associated with the web page. In some embodiments, the anchor may be a content object, which may be on the web page. [0101] At step **160**, the at least one annotation and the at least one anchor associated therewith are stored in an annotation file that is separate from the electronic file. For example, the annotation may be stored locally in a file accessible a browser-extension plugin. In another example, the annotation (in some cases along with instructions for storing the annotation information) may be transmitted to the remote processor for storage at a remote data storage device. [0102] At step **162**, a second request for at least one electronic file having the anchor is sent to the remote processor. For example, the second request may be for the same electronic file provided in step **154**. In another example, the second request may be for a different electronic file that has the same anchor (e.g. the content object associated with the anchor). This step may be executed in another session or at a subsequent time to the first request. [0103] At step **164**, the at least one electronic file requested for in step **162** is received from the remote processor in response to the second request. [0104] At step **166**, the at least one annotation associated with the anchor, which was stored in step **160** is retrieved. In some embodiments, where the annotation is stored remotely on the remote server, then the annotation may be received along with the electronic file and this step may involve locating the annotation in the received electronic file. In some embodiments where the annotations are stored locally in an annotation file, then this step may involve locating the relevant annotation associated with the electronic file. [0105] At step **168**, the electronic file, the anchor and the at least one annotation associated therewith are displayed. This may involve displaying the annotation indicator and when it is interacted with, displaying the annotation object and the annotation information.

[0106] Referring now to FIG. **6**, illustrated therein is a computer-implemented annotation method **200** according to some other embodiments. The method **200** may be executed by server **50** to facilitate annotation of electronic files.

[0107] The method begins at step **202** where a first request for an electronic file is received from a client processor. The electronic file may be a web page as described above and the client processor may be a client processor located in the computing devices **20-203** or client computer **50**. The first request may include context information and URL information necessary to identify the appropriate web page. [0108] At step **204**, the electronic file is transmitted to the client processor. [0109] At step **206**, the method comprises receiving at least one new annotation for the electronic file. The at least one new annotation may be similar to the annotation data **120** described herein above or the annotation as described in conjunction with step **150**. [0110] At step **208**, at least one anchor associated with the annotation is received. The anchor is indicative of the location of the annotation. The anchor could be a location on the electronic file or a content object in the electronic file. For example, the at least one anchor may be the anchor **91** described herein above. [0111] At step **210**, the annotation and the anchor associated therewith is stored in an annotation file that is separate from the electronic file. [0112] At step **212**, a second request for at least one electronic file having the anchor is received from the client processor. The second request may include information necessary to identify the electronic file and the annotations associated therewith. For example, it may contain URL information about the webpage, relevant context, and an account identifier. [0113] At step **214**, the at least one annotation associated with the anchor is retrieved from the annotation file. [0114] At step **216**, the electronic file, the anchor and the at least one annotation associated therewith are sent to the client processor in response to the second request. [0115] It should be understood that the systems and methods according some embodiments may be applied in distributed systems other than the eLearning environment.

[0116] In other words, while the above description provides examples of one or more apparatus, methods, or systems, it will be appreciated that other apparatus, methods, or systems may be within the scope of the present description as interpreted by one of skill in the art.

Claims

1. A computer-implemented annotation method comprising: sending a first request for an electronic file to a remote processor; receiving the electronic file from the remote processor; defining at least one new annotation about the electronic file; defining at least one anchor associated with the at least one annotation, the at least one anchor being indicative of the location of the at least one annotation, wherein the anchor is associated with a control object such that the at least one new annotation can be made available on each web page that the control object is displayed on; storing the at least one annotation and the at least one anchor in an annotation file that is different from the electronic file; receiving an account identifier and associating the at least one annotation with the account identifier; receiving, from an account identifier device, an instruction designating the at least one annotation as important annotation information for user broadcast; and in response to the instruction, transmitting to the remote processor the at least one annotation, the at least one anchor, and metadata identifying the annotation as the important annotation information.
2. The method of claim 1, further comprising: sending a second request for at least one electronic file having the at least one anchor to the remote processor; receiving the electronic file with the at least one anchor from the remote processor in response to the second request; receiving the at least one annotation associated with the at least one anchor from the annotation file; and displaying the electronic file with the at least one annotation.
3. The method of claim 1, wherein the at least one anchor is associated with at least one of a location in the electronic file and a content object.
4. The method of claim 2, wherein the at least one annotation and the at least one anchor are transmitted to the remote processor and stored remotely and the at least one annotation is received from the remote processor in response to the second request.
5. The method of claim 1, wherein the at least one annotation and the at least one anchor are stored locally on the annotation file located in a client device and the at least one annotation and the at least one anchor are received locally from the annotation file.
6. (canceled)
7. The method of claim 2, further comprising receiving an account identifier and associating the at least one annotation with the account identifier and wherein the at least one annotation received in response to the second request comprises a plurality of annotations that are associated with a plurality of account identifiers.
8. The method of claim 7, wherein the plurality of annotations received in response to the second request are ranked based on at least one heuristic criteria.
9. The method of claim 1, further comprising generating annotation metadata associated with the annotation.
10. The method of claim 9, wherein the annotation metadata includes at least one of at least one account identifier associated with the annotation and contextual information about the electronic file associated with the annotation.
11. A computer-implemented annotation method comprising: receiving a first request for an electronic file from a client processor; sending the electronic file to the client processor; receiving at least one new annotation about the electronic file; receiving at least one anchor associated with the at least one annotation; associating the at least one anchor with a control object such that the at least one new annotation can be made available on each web page that the control object is displayed on; storing the at least one annotation and the at least one anchor in an annotation file that is different from the electronic file; receiving an account identifier and associating the at least

one annotation with the account identifier; receiving, from an account identifier device, an instruction designating the at least one annotation as important annotation information for user broadcast; and in response to the instruction, transmitting to the remote processor the at least one annotation, the at least one anchor, and metadata identifying the annotation as the important annotation information.

12. The method of claim 11, further comprising: receiving a second request for at least one electronic file having the at least one anchor from the client processor; retrieving the at least one annotation associated with the at least one anchor from the annotation file; and sending the electronic file, the at least one anchor and the at least one annotation associated therewith to the client processor in response to the second request.

13. The method of claim 11, wherein the at least one anchor is associated with at least one of a location in the electronic file and a content object.

14. (canceled)

15. The method of claim 14, wherein the second request for the at least one electronic file includes the account identifier and the annotations are retrieved based at least partially upon the account identifier.

16. The method of claim 12, wherein the at least one annotation being sent to the at least one client processor includes a plurality of annotations associated with a plurality of account identifiers.

17. The method of claim 16, wherein the annotations received in response are ranked based on a heuristic criteria.

18. The method of claim 11, further comprising generating annotation metadata associated with the at least one annotation.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein the annotation metadata includes at least one of at least one account identifier associated with the at least one annotation and contextual information about the electronic file associated with the at least one annotation.

20. An annotation system comprising: at least one remote processor; and at least one client processor in data communication with the at least one remote processor, the at least one client processor adapted to: i. send a first request for an electronic file to the remote processor, ii. receive the electronic file from the remote processor, iii. define at least one new annotation about the electronic file, and iv. define at least one anchor associated with the at least one annotation, the at least one anchor being indicative of the location of the at least one annotation, wherein the at least one anchor is associated with a control object such that the at least one new annotation can be made available on each web page that the control object is displayed on; v. receive an account identifier and associating the at least one annotation with the account identifier; vi. receive, from an account identifier device, an instruction designating the at least one annotation as important annotation information for user broadcast; and vii. in response to the instruction, transmit to the remote processor the at least one annotation, the at least one anchor, and metadata identifying the annotation as the important annotation information, wherein at least one of the remote processor and the client processor is adapted to store the at least one annotation and the at least one anchor associated therewith in an annotation file that is separate from the electronic file.

21. The system of claim 20, wherein the remote processor is further adapted to: receive a second request for at least one electronic file having the at least one anchor; retrieve the at least one annotation associated with the at least one anchor from the annotation file; and send the electronic file, the at least one anchor and the at least one annotation associated therewith to the client processor in response to the second request.

22. The system of claim 20, wherein the at least one anchor is associated with at least one of a location in the electronic file and a content object.

23. (canceled)

24. The system of claim 21, wherein the second request for the electronic file includes the account identifier and the annotations are retrieved based at least partially upon the account identifier.

- 25.** The system of claim 21, wherein the at least one annotation sent to the at least one client processor comprises a plurality of annotations associated with a plurality of account identifiers.
- 26.** The system of claim 25, wherein the annotations received are ranked based on a heuristic criteria.
- 27.** The system of claim 20, wherein at least one of the client processor and the remote processor is further adapted to generate annotation metadata associated with the at least one annotation.
- 28.** The system of claim 27 wherein the annotation metadata includes at least one of at least one account identifier associated with the annotation and contextual information about the electronic file associated with the annotation.
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