VCU College of Engineering

CS25-312: Java Pedagogical Libraries for Code Analysis Project Proposal

Prepared for

Luke Gusukuma

VCU College of Engineering

By

Derek Chiou, Luca Doutt, Ghulam Mujtaba Qasimi, Kennedy Westry

Under the supervision of

Luke Gusukuma

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Executive Summary

Growing classroom sizes and propagation of online classes in a post-2020 world have presented challenges for both students and instructors in introductory computer science courses, in which timely, quality feedback plays a key role in adjusting to the thought processes and skills needed for students to grow into self-sufficient programmers. The existing Pedal framework, developed by Austin Bart and Luke Gusukuma, integrates with autograding platforms such as Gradescope to help instructors deliver this feedback. While Pedal has found success in the classroom, it is specialized for Python source files where many courses focus on Java. Our aim is to work towards JPedal, a port of Pedal into Java.

Pedal is split into several modules, each of which contributes some functionality for instructors. Since the complete Pedal suite is anticipated to be infeasible to port within the academic year, our focus lands on the CAIT module, which allows instructors to match patterns from the AST (abstract syntax tree) generated from student submissions. We plan to build the CAIT module in steps while leaving the project open for the rest of the modules to be added later.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary 2
Table of Contents 3
Section A. Problem Statement 4
Section B. Engineering Design Requirements 5
B.1 Project Goals (i.e., Client Needs) 5
B.2 Design Objectives 5
B.3 Design Specifications and Constraints 5
Section C. Scope of Work 6
C.1 Deliverables 6
C.2 Milestones 6
C.3 Resources 7
Appendix 1: Team Contract (i.e. Team Organization) 8
Step 1: Get to Know One Another. Gather Basic Information. 8
Step 2: Team Culture. Clarify the Group's Purpose and Culture Goals. 9
Step 3: Time Commitments, Meeting Structure, and Communication 10
Step 4: Determine Individual Roles and Responsibilities 11
Step 5: Agree to the above team contract 12
Appendix 2: Cost-Importance Analysis Table 13
References 14

Section A. Problem Statement

As class sizes grow and more classes are taught remotely, instructors of introductory-level programming classes face challenges in delivering quality individualized feedback on students' code submissions (Gusukuma et al., 2018). While many courses implement auto-grading technology to display unit testing results or compiler errors, the feedback is usually insufficient for introductory students who are likely unfamiliar with the language of error messages. For example, a student may be tasked with writing a function that takes the sum of a list of numbers. A currently implemented unit test could give the error "expected 10 but was 3," which is usually not specific enough to help identify the underlying gap in understanding.

For this project, we focus on improving feedback in computing and programming courses, specifically the feedback provided to students on their submitted code for unit tests. Since the 1960s, automated feedback systems have primarily emphasized scalability and correctness (Douce et al., 2005). However, these systems often lacked the pedagogical depth needed to effectively support novice learners. Recent research shows that incorporating immediate, adaptive feedback—tailored to the individual's misconceptions—can improve student engagement and increase their intention to persist in computer science (Marwan et al., 2020). This kind of feedback provides real-time corrective responses, which are crucial for beginners who struggle with debugging their code.

Pedagogically driven tools like Pedal, created by Luke Gusukuma and Austin Bart, offer real-time, targeted feedback that is particularly valuable for novice programmers. This capstone project expands on Pedal by adapting it for Java and working towards a language-agnostic system that can support multiple programming languages. Ultimately, the project aims to enhance both the learning experience and the scalability of feedback, overcoming the limitations of traditional automated grading systems.

Section B. Engineering Design Requirements

B.1 Project Goals (i.e., Client Needs)

Pedal has already been successfully used in the classroom, but its use is limited to Python source code files. Many introductory computer science courses instead use Java. The project goals are as follows:

- To port the CAIT (Capturer for AST-Included Trees) module from Pedal to Java
- To build a foundation for the other Pedal modules to also be ported to Java
- To begin building a foundation for a language-agnostic syntactic analysis backend

B.2 Design Objectives

Much of the functionality will replicate modules in Pedal. The JPedal design will:

- extract **syntactic information** from Java source files and expose an **API** to interact with this information.
- provide an interface **for instructors** to control how feedback is shown to students.
- support **immediate** delivery of feedback to students.
- run predefined **unit tests** to check code output.

B.3 Design Specifications and Constraints

Being a piece of software, mechanical constraints are not applicable to this project. With that in mind, the design must:

- be **compatible** with **Java versions 8 and newer**
- process each student submission in **under 5 seconds**
- expose its **source code** for **open access**
- incur **zero monetary cost of use** for instructors

Section C. Scope of Work

C.1 Deliverables

All project deliverables will be digital files, minimizing the risk of physical disruptions.

- **UML diagram**: describes the functionality of each module in the JPedal framework, as well as the channels they have available to interact.
- **Shell code**: A fully-interfaced module, with test messages in place of implementation.
- **Minimum viable product**: A module with core functionality implemented and tested.
- **Full implementation**: A module with feature-parity with the corresponding Pedal module and successful tests against simulated real-world scenarios.
- **Documentation**: Written information on the module and how to use it.

C.2 Milestones

CAIT is highest on our priority list for this year's work on this project. Refer to Appendix 3: Cost-Importance Analysis Table for more information on how we prioritized different parts of the framework. Academic deliverables are highlighted in blue.

Task	Time cost (person-hours)	Completion date
Whole-framework UML diagram (tentative)	8	2024-10-28
Java library tooling setup	10	2024-11-04
Source module shell code	2	2024-11-07
Source module implementation	6	2024-11-14
Fall poster	50	2024-11-15
CAIT module shell code	4	2024-11-18
CAIT module minimum viable product	15	2024-12-02
Preliminary design report	50	2024-12-09
Source module documentation	2	2025-01-13
CAIT module full implementation	45	2025-02-10
CAIT module documentation	16	2025-02-24
Abstract and EXPO poster	50	2024-03-28
Final report	50	2024-05-02

C.3 Resources

All the resources we anticipate needing for this project are freely available to us:

- Visual Studio Code for writing code, or any alternative IDE
- Git and GitHub for version control
- Open-source Java libraries
- Pedal and its documentation

While not essential, the following services may be considered for purchase:

- IntelliJ IDEA Ultimate, for efficient development of Java code
    - Note that JetBrains offers educational licenses
- GitHub Copilot, to facilitate programming
    - Note that GitHub offers educational licenses

Notably, we have no particular hardware requirements - our project should be able to be built and run on any modestly powerful machine. In practice, much of the library's code execution will happen on Gradescope's servers, so hardware is not an anticipated obstacle.

Appendix 1: Team Contract (i.e. Team Organization)

Step 1: Get to Know One Another. Gather Basic Information.

Task: This initial time together is important to form a strong team dynamic and get to know each other more as people outside of class time. Consider ways to develop positive working relationships with others, while remaining open and personal. Learn each other's strengths and discuss good/bad team experiences. This is also a good opportunity to start to better understand each other's communication and working styles.

Team Member Name	***Strengths Each Member Brings to the Group***	***Other Info***	***Contact Info***
Kennedy Westry	*Proficient in SQL, great with organization, enjoys designing*	*Scrum master certified, so I am proficient in planning and project management*	*westrykj@vcu.edu*
Luca Doutt	*UI, web design, optimization of memory/CPU*	*Experience with Java, HTML/CSS, and game design. Interested in user interactions with software.*	*douttl@vcu.edu*
Derek Chiou	*Algorithms/data management, software architecture, learning software tools*	*Experience as a computer science tutor/TA*	*chioudj@vcu.edu*
Ghulam Mujtaba Qasimi	*QA testing software, white test, and black testing (database and UI)*	*Test the end-to-end software workflow to ensure the expected result meets the actual result.*	*gqasimi@vcu.edu*

Other Stakeholders	***Notes***	***Contact Info***
Luke Gusukuma	*Acts as both our sponsor and faculty advisor*	*gusukumals@vcu.edu*

Step 2: Team Culture. Clarify the Group's Purpose and Culture Goals.

Task: Discuss how each team member wants to be treated to encourage them to make valuable contributions to the group and how each team member would like to feel recognized for their efforts. Discuss how the team will foster an environment where each team member feels they are accountable for their actions and the way they contribute to the project. These are your Culture Goals (left column). How do the students demonstrate these culture goals? These are your Actions (middle column). Finally, how do students deviate from the team's culture goals? What are ways that other team members can notice when that culture goal is no longer being honored in team dynamics? These are your Warning Signs (right column).

Resources: More information and an example of Team Culture can be found on the Biodesign Student Guide "Intentional Teamwork" page (webpage | PDF)

Culture Goals	***Actions***	***Warning Signs***
Showing up to each meeting on time and prepared	- *Set up meetings in shared calendar* - *Make sure each person is clear on what they need prepared before meetings*	- *Student misses first meeting, warning is granted* - *Student misses meetings afterwards – issue is brought up with faculty advisor*
Proactive communication	- *Set and communicate reasonable deadlines and note when an extension is needed* - *Notify in advance whenever changes need to be made*	- *Student shows up for weekly meeting with no considerable work done* - *Student does not give prior notice when circumstances arise that hinder scheduled attendance*
Being respectful	*-Exercise basic mutual respect* *-Display empathy and understanding for others' viewpoints*	*-When a team member feels hurt or unheard, they should communicate that*

Step 3: Time Commitments, Meeting Structure, and Communication

Task: Discuss the anticipated time commitments for the group project. Consider the following questions (don't answer these questions in the box below):

- What are reasonable time commitments for everyone to invest in this project?
- What other activities and commitments do group members have in their lives?
- How will we communicate with each other?
- When will we meet as a team? Where will we meet? How Often?
- Who will run the meetings? Will there be an assigned team leader or scribe? Does that position rotate or will the same person take on that role for the duration of the project?

Required: How often you will meet with your faculty advisor, where you will meet, and how the meetings will be conducted. Who arranges these meetings?
See examples below.

Meeting Participants	***Frequency*** ***Dates and Times / Locations***	***Meeting Goals*** ***Responsible Party***
Students Only	***Tuesday****: In person 5:30 pm, West Hall Atrium* ***Thursday****: In person 6:00 pm, Location flexible (West 101, Cabell study room, etc)*	*Update group on day-to-day challenges and accomplishments (Luca will record these for the weekly progress reports and meetings with the advisor)*
Students + Faculty advisor	***Monday****: virtually at 1:00 pm (Zoom / Discord)*	*Update faculty advisor and get answers to our questions (Derek will scribe; Kennedy will create the meeting agenda and lead meeting)*

Step 4: Determine Individual Roles and Responsibilities

Task: As part of the Capstone Team experience, each member will take on a leadership role, ***in addition to*** contributing to the overall weekly action items for the project. Some common leadership roles for Capstone projects are listed below. Other roles may be assigned with the approval of your faculty advisor as deemed fit for the project. For the entirety of the project, you should communicate progress to your advisor specifically with regard to your role.

- **Before meeting with your team**, take some time to ask yourself: what is my "natural" role in this group (strengths)? How can I use this experience to help me grow and develop more?
- **As a group,** discuss the various tasks needed for the project and role preferences. Then assign roles in the table on the next page. Try to create a team dynamic that is fair and equitable, while promoting the strengths of each member.

Communication Leaders

Suggested: Assign a team member to be the primary contact for the client/sponsor. This person will schedule meetings, send updates, and ensure deliverables are met.

Suggested: Assign a team member to be the primary contact for faculty advisor. This person will schedule meetings, send updates, and ensure deliverables are met.

Common Leadership Roles for Capstone

1. **Project Manager:** Manages all tasks; develops overall schedule for project; writes agendas and runs meetings; reviews and monitors individual action items; creates an environment where team members are respected, take risks and feel safe expressing their ideas.
   Required: On Edusourced, under the Team tab, make sure that this student is assigned the Project Manager role. This is required so that Capstone program staff can easily identify a single contact person, especially for items like Purchasing and Receiving project supplies.
2. **Logistics Manager:** coordinates all internal and external interactions; lead in establishing contact within and outside of organization, following up on communication of commitments, obtaining information for the team; documents meeting minutes; manages facility and resource usage.
3. **Financial Manager:** researches/benchmarks technical purchases and acquisitions; conducts pricing analysis and budget justifications on proposed purchases; carries out team purchase requests; monitors team budget.
4. **Systems Engineer:** analyzes Client initial design specification and leads establishment of product specifications; monitors, coordinates and manages integration of sub-systems in the prototype; develops and recommends system architecture and manages product interfaces.
5. **Test Engineer:** oversees experimental design, test plan, procedures and data analysis; acquires data acquisition equipment and any necessary software; establishes test protocols and schedules; oversees statistical analysis of results; leads presentation of experimental finding and resulting recommendations.
6. **Manufacturing Engineer:** coordinates all fabrication required to meet final prototype requirements; oversees that all engineering drawings meet the requirements of machine shop or vendor; reviews designs to ensure design for manufacturing; determines realistic timing for fabrication and quality; develops schedule for all manufacturing.

Team Member	*Role(s)*	*Responsibilities*
Kennedy Westry	*Project Manager*	*Manages all tasks; develops an overall schedule for the project; writes agendas and runs meetings; reviews and monitors individual action items; creates an environment where team members are respected, take risks, and feel safe expressing their ideas.*
Ghulam Mujtaba Qasimi	*Test Engineer*	*Oversees the experimental design, test plan, procedures, and data analysis; acquires data acquisition equipment and any necessary software; establishes test protocols and schedules; oversees statistical analysis of results; leads presentation of experimental findings and resulting recommendations.*
Luca Doutt	*Systems Engineer*	*Analyze Client initial design specification and lead establishment of product specifications; monitor, coordinate, and manage the integration of subsystems in the prototype; develop and recommend system architecture and manage product interfaces.*
Derek Chiou	*Logistics Manager*	*Coordinates all internal and external interactions; leads in establishing contact within and outside of the organization, following up on communication of commitments, obtaining information for the team; documents meeting minutes; manages facility and resource usage.*

Step 5: Agree to the above team contract

Team Member: Kennedy Westry *Signature:* Kennedy Westry

Team Member: Derek Chiou *Signature:* Derek Chiou

Team Member: Luca Doutt *Signature:* Luca Doutt

Team Member: Ghulam Mujtaba Qasimi *Signature:* Qasimi

Appendix 2: Cost-Importance Analysis Table

Since the scope of Pedal is beyond what we are likely to achieve within one academic year, we must prioritize different aspects based on their urgency of value and cost of implementation. Though it is difficult to provide precise measurements for these attributes, here we put forward a rough estimation.

Problem	Importance	Solution	Cost (person-hours)	Priority Ratio	Cumulative Cost
Raw student code is difficult to analyze directly due to the wide variation in possible realizations of each type of token.	M	**Source module**: Translate student code into an AST (abstract syntax tree) and write it down such that other modules may access it	10	M	10
Instructors need flexibility in patterns to look for in student code, returning appropriate responses.	M	**CAIT (Capturing AST-Included Trees) module**: Provide an interface for inspection of the AST	80	M	90
Unit testing is an essential step of grading work, and standard unit tests may not provide the most useful feedback to students.	3	**Assertions module**: Provide methods for unit test assertions, similar to the built-in unit testing functionality.	10	300	100
Each run of the pipeline can produce many error messages, not all of which are equally important.	4	**Resolver module**: Determine which feedback message(s) to show to the student	20	200	120
Arbitrarily executing student code may present security risks, and some useful data may not be captured when running the code standalone.	3	**Sandbox module**: Run student code in a specialized thread, storing metadata about the run as well as isolating it from sensitive data.	75	40	195
Some student submissions may fail to compile due to syntactic errors for which the compiler errors are not explicit in how to fix the issue.	1	**TIFA (Type-Inference Flow Analyzer) module**: Look for syntactic issues relating to scope and type	30	33	225

References

Gusukuma, L., Bart, A. C., & Kafura, D. (2020). Pedal: An Infrastructure for Automated Feedback Systems. *SIGCSE*, *Paper Session: Python Debugging*, 1061-1067. https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3328778.3366913

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