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CAPSTONE PROJECT DISSERTATION

GoLearn — Learning Resource Management
System

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Abstract

There are plenty of services and programs out there for allowing Teachers to upload resources and for their learners to access them. Most of these are not purpose designed for places of learning, such as school, colleges and universities. Those that exist for this specific use-case tend to be over-engineered and can be overly complicated (Moodle is a good example of this). The purpose of GoLearn is to provide a simple LRM experience for teachers and students to interact with the same resources without a large amount of overhead in setting up the system: it should work out of the box.

This report contains a look into methods of implementation for web applications in general, plus the choices in technology and design that were made for GoLearn.

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Introduction

Background

2.1 Similar Services

There are various LRMS's available in the market, with some of the more popular one being:

Udemy is a free to access learning site that puts a paywall over all of the courses. Creators can sign up to the site and create a course very quickly. Learners can sign up to courses (paying whatever charge is applied) and have unlimited access to them. They can access these from their own 'Courses' dashboard.

Skillshare is a similar service to Udemy, but is subscription based rather than pay per course. This means that learners can access all of the courses on the site for a monthly fee. Creators can create courses and upload them to the site, with the same access restrictions as Udemy.

LearnDash[1] is a WordPress plugin that allows you to create and sell courses on your WordPress site. It is a very popular plugin, with over 50,000 active installs and a 4.5-star rating on the WordPress plugin repository. It is a very powerful plugin, with a lot of features, but it is also very complex and can be difficult to use.

Being a plugin for WP, it is very easy to customise how the plugin looks by modifying the theme on the site to best suit the business / individual's needs. The plugin allows teachers to create courses and students to access them, with a lot of customisation options for the courses.

Moodle[2] is the closest comparison that is currently available to GoLearn. It is a PHP based LMS that is very powerful and feature-rich. It allows learning institutions to design their own courses/modules and add specific 'student' users to them. This is a very similar model to what GoLearn is aiming to achieve. The main difference is that Moodle is very complex and can be difficult to use. It is also very resource-intensive, requiring a lot of server resources to run effectively.

2.2 Tech Stacks

A 'Tech Stack' is the term used to describe the combination of programming languages, frameworks, libraries, and tools that are used to build a software application. The choice of a tech stack is crucial as it can affect the performance, scalability, and maintainability of the application. The following are some of the popular tech stacks used in web development:

LAMP/LEMP Stacks This stack consists of 4 major components: Linux, Apache/Nginx, MySQL and PHP. Linux is the OS that is used in the stack, with Apache or (E)nginx as the web server, MySQL as the database and PHP as the server-side language. This stack is very popular and is used by many web developers. It is used by various Frameworks (such as Laravel), as well as in vanilla PHP applications (no framework used).

PHP is the programming language of choice for this kind of stack for websites and applications that need to render the pages dynamically, but don't need a lot of reactivity to user input on the page. For example, a blog or a news site would be a good use case for this stack, as they largely need to retrieve data from a db when a page is loaded, and can use caching strategies easily to only make a DB request for cached pages after a certain period after the cached content was stored.

On the other hand, applications that have a lot of user interaction to perform CRUD operations would be harder to write within this stack, as JS would have to be loaded and ran to submit the changed data. Other stacks (as mentioned below) instead rely less on page loads to perform actions, and instead are designed with responsive and reactive implementations in mind.

MEAN/MERN/MEVN Stacks The 'M' refers to the database implementation used (such as mySql, MongoDB)..., the 'E' refers to ExpressJS, which is a NodeJS framework used for all forms of JS applications, and is the layer between the templating framework and NodeJS to serve an application. The 'V', 'A' and 'R' refer to the templating framework used to create the layouts used, and reference 'VueJS', 'AngularJS' and 'ReactJS' respectively. The 'N' refers to 'NodeJS', which is a server-side JS runtime environment that is used to run JS code on the server.

This stack is very popular for creating SPAs (Single Page Applications) and PWAs (Progressive Web Applications). These are applications that are designed to be very reactive to user input, and can update the page without needing to reload the page. This is done by using JS to update the page, rather than relying on the server to render the page and send it to the client. This is achieved by requesting information from the server about what to load and how to load it, and then using JS to render the page based on the information received. This is a very powerful stack, but can be difficult to learn and use effectively.

Full Stack Frameworks A full stack framework is a framework that is designed to be used

for both the front-end and back-end of an application. This means that the framework can be used to create the server-side code, as well as the client-side code. This is very useful as it means that development teams can rely on a single codebase for the entire application, rather than having to use multiple codebases. This can make development faster and easier. As well as this, it allows type safety and code completion to be used across the entire application easier than in separate front- and back-end applications.

Some examples of full stack frameworks are NextJS and NuxtJS. These frameworks are designed to be used for both the front-end and back-end of an application. They are very powerful and can be used to create very complex applications. They each use a different templating framework (NextJS uses ReactJS, and NuxtJS uses VueJS). The benefit of these frameworks is that they allow for server-side rendering as well as client-side rendering, which can be very useful for SEO and performance reasons.

One drawback of these frameworks is that there can be a steep learning curve to get started with them. As well as this, the codebase can get very complex and the boundaries between client and server code can get blurred, which can make it difficult to debug and maintain the codebase if it is not well organised.

2.3 Databases and ORMs

A database is a collection of data that is stored in some structured format. Databases are used to store data that can be accessed and manipulated by software applications. There are many different types of databases, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, but all fall into one of two categories: relational or non-relational.

Relational Databases store data in tables, with each table containing rows and columns. The columns represent the attributes of the data, while the rows represent individual records. Relational databases use SQL (Structured Query Language) to query and manipulate the data. Some popular relational databases include MySQL, PostgreSQL, and SQLite.

This category of database is called relational because it allows for relationships to be defined between the columns in different tables. For example, a database for a school might have a 'students' table and a 'courses' table. The 'students' table might have a column that references the 'courses' table, which would allow for a relationship to be defined between the two tables. This is called a foreign key, and can be used to enforce that a student can only be enrolled in a course that exists in the 'courses' table.

Non-Relational Databases store data in a more flexible format, such as key-value pairs, documents, or graphs. Non-relational databases are often used when the data is unstructured or when the data model is likely to change frequently. Some popular non-relational databases include MongoDB, Cassandra, and Redis.

This category of database is called non-relational because it does not enforce relationships between tables. This can make it easier to work with the data, as the data can be stored in a more flexible format.

An ORM is a layer between the application and the database that allows the application to interact with the database using an object-oriented interface. These are used to simplify the process of interacting with the database, and to make it easier to work with the data in the database. They supply an API for developers to be able to perform CRUD operations on the database without having to construct many (if any) queries or statements to do so.

Some examples of ORMs include Prisma, TypeORM, and Sequelize. These ORMs are designed to be used with different databases, and have different features and capabilities. For example, Prisma is designed to be used with PostgreSQL, MySQL, and SQLite, and has a strong focus on type safety and code generation. TypeORM is designed to be used with TypeScript, and has a strong focus on type safety and code generation. Sequelize is designed to be used with MySQL, PostgreSQL, SQLite, and MSSQL, and has a strong focus on performance and scalability.[3]

2.4 Authentication

Authentication can be defined as: ‘Verifying the identity of a user, process or device, often as a prerequisite to allowing access to resources in an information system.’[4]. Simply put, it refers to any processes used to ensure that only those with the right to access a resource or perform functions can do so. This is a very important part of any application, especially those that can be accessed from a remote location (such as via the internet). This is because protecting the data that is managed by the application is a legal requirement (see Chapter 6).

There are several methods of authentication that can be implemented. A few are listed and described below:

Basic Authentication[5] This is the simplest form of authentication, and is often used in conjunction with a username and password. The user is prompted to enter their username and password, which is then sent to the server. The server then checks the username and password against a list of valid credentials, and if they match, the user is granted access to the resource. This is a very simple form of authentication, but it is not very secure, as the username and password are sent in plain text over the network. This means that anyone who is able to intercept the request can read the username and password and use them to access the resource. For this reason, it is not recommended to use basic authentication for anything other than testing purposes.

Token-Based Authentication[6] This is a more secure form of authentication that is often used in conjunction with a username and password. The user is prompted to enter their username and password, which is then sent to the server. The server then checks the

username and password against a list of valid credentials, and if they match, the server generates a token and sends it back to the client. The client then includes the token in all subsequent requests to the server, and the server checks the token against a list of valid tokens to ensure that the user is authenticated. This is a more secure form of authentication, as the token is not sent in plain text over the network. This means that even if someone is able to intercept the request, they will not be able to read the token and use it to access the resource.

OAuth[7] is an open standard for access delegation, commonly used as a way for Internet users to grant websites or applications access to their information on other websites but without giving them the passwords. This is done by authorizing the application to access the data on the user's behalf, and then the application is given a token that can be used to access the data. This is a very secure form of authentication, as the user's password is never sent over the network. This means that even if someone is able to intercept the request, they will not be able to read the password and use it to access the resource.

Technical Specification

3.1 Framework

Of the stacks mentioned in Section 2.2, the NextJS framework was chosen for the GoLearn project. This was chosen for the following reasons:

ReactJS[8] ReactJS is a very powerful and popular front-end framework that is used to create SPAs and PWAs. It is very flexible and can be used to create very complex applications. It is also very easy to learn and use, which makes it a good choice for the GoLearn project.

As well as this, it was a framework that the author had used before, meaning that he could get started with the project quickly and easily and wouldn't have to spend a lot of time learning to use a new framework or architect his own solution from scratch. This proved to save a lot of time in the development process, as the author was able to get started on the project and make progress quickly.

Server Actions[9] As of NextJS 14, the framework included a feature called 'Server Actions'. This allowed functions to be shared between server- and client-side code. Whenever a server action was called, a request is sent to the server as a Fetch/XHR request from the client, the server would handle the request and return the result to the client. This would prove to be a very useful feature, as it allows for CRUD operations to be ran

3.2 Database and ORM

The ORM chosen for the GoLearn project was Prisma. This was chosen for the following reasons:

Type Safety[10] Prisma is designed to be used with TypeScript, and has a strong focus on type safety and code generation. This means that the author could be confident that

the code he was writing was correct and that the database schema was being enforced correctly. This was very important for the GoLearn project, as it was a project that was being developed by a single developer, and there was no QA team to review the code.

Code Generation[11] Prisma uses code generation to generate the database schema and the client-side code that is used to interact with the database. This means that the author could be confident that the code he was writing was correct and that the database schema was being enforced correctly. This was very important for the GoLearn project, as it was a project that was being developed by a single developer, and there was no QA team to review the code.

Prisma can be used with many different databases, including PostgreSQL, MySQL, and SQLite. One of the factors that was considered was the ease of creating and maintaining the database. Originally the author had considered using a service called 'Supabase', which is a service that provides a PostgreSQL database, and is a service that Prisma has a lot of support for.

Later in the project when the application hosting was being considered, it was decided that the author would the application on Vercel, which is a service that provides hosting for NextJS applications. Vercel has a feature called 'Vercel for Databases', which allows you to create a PostgreSQL database that is hosted on Vercel. It was a relatively simple process to migrate the database from Supabase to Vercel, and the author was able to do this without too much difficulty. The Vercel database is also a PostgreSQL database, which meant that the author could continue to use Prisma with the database without any issues.

Implementation

4.1 Data model

There was a lot of thought put into the data model for the GoLearn project. The data model was designed to be as simple as possible, while still being able to store all of the information that was needed for the application to function correctly. The following models were implemented, with various relations between them:

User The User model was used to store data about a User, such as username, password, role, etc. The role was used to determine what permissions the user had, such as being able to edit content or not.

Student The Student model was used to store data about Students, such as their home and term addresses, enrolled course and modules. These fields were used to determine which modules and course pages they could access. If a student was not enrolled in a course, they would not be able to access the course page, the same being for the modules.

Teacher The Teacher model was used to store data about Teachers, such as their address and the modules they were teaching. These fields were used to determine which modules pages they could access. If a teacher was not teaching a module, then they can not add content to those modules, nor make edits to them.

Course A course has a name, description and a list of modules that are part of the course. The course is the top-level resource in the GoLearn project, with all other resources being children of the course, or children of children, etc. The students that are enrolled in the course are also associated to a course.

Module A module has a name, description, assignments, units, students and teachers. This is an important model, as it acts as a container for students and teachers to interact with

the content. Teachers can create and modify the content in a module and it's children, and students can view the content if they are enrolled in the module.

Assignment Assignments are a type of resource that can be created by teachers within a module, which students can then create submissions for. Assignments have a name, description, due date, and a list of submissions that have been made for the assignment.

Unit A unit is a resource that teachers can create within a module. This is a method for organising the content within a module into smaller, more manageable chunks. Units have a name, description, and a list of resources that are part of the unit. There can also be sections within a unit, which are used to further organise the content within the unit.

Section A section is a resource that acts as a container for Resources within a Unit. Sections have a name, description, and a list of resources that are part of the section. The reason for this inclusion into the model was to allow teachers to better organise content within a unit such that they can group together resources that are related to each other without having to use naming convention to organise it for them.

Resource A resource is a leaf resource that can be created by teachers within a section and/or. This is the lowest level of resource that can be created, and is used to store the content that is displayed to the students. Resources have a name, description, and a content field that is used to store the content that is displayed to the students. As well as this, they can have any number of files attached to them, which can be used to provide additional resources to the students that is more complex than can be expressed by markdown.

4.2 Authentication

The method of authentication that was chosen for the GoLearn project was token-based authentication. This was chosen as it is a relatively simple form of authentication that is secure and easy to implement. Within the database, a 'UserSession' table was created to store the tokens that are generated for each user. When a user logs in, a token is generated and stored in the 'UserSession' table, and the token is sent back to the client. Whenever a user makes a request from the server, it checks if a token has been included in the request, and checks that token against the list of valid tokens in the 'UserSession' table. If the token exists and is not too old to be used, the user's request is granted, and the user is able to access the resource.

This was effective, but has a few drawbacks. The main drawback is that the token is stored in the database, which means that the database has to be queried every time a user makes a request. This can be slow and can cause performance issues if the database is not optimised. A better implementation of this might have been to use a library that was written to interact on the server fully and store the token in memory, rather than in the database. This would

have been faster as querying memory is significantly faster than querying a remote database, as well as allowing the database to not get cluttered with old tokens that have either expired or are no longer in use.

4.3 CRUD Operations

4.4 Data Loading

4.5 Known Issues

Testing

5.1 Unit Testing

5.2 User Testing

Legal and Ethical

Project Planning

Conclusions

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