

MDL-68093 Design document

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Original issue

The original issue report for this tracker item was that where students are added into groups based on protected characteristics (for example, students with a dyslexia being added to a group so they can be given an extra time to complete an assessment via a group override), these group memberships are visible to all course members via the Participants screen. Under various data protection laws such as GDPR and FERPA, displaying protected data in this way represents a breach of students' privacy.

Initial suggestions to resolve this issue were:

1. Add a "private" option to groups, removing these groups from the Participants page and anywhere else they might be listed except to teachers and administrators.
2. Remove group memberships from the Participants page
3. Remove permission to view the Participants page from the student role

Option 2 would not have been sufficient to prevent privacy breaches as group membership can be determined via other means. For example if a forum is set to Visible Groups mode, a user can see who has posted in each group.

Option 3 shares the same issues as option 2, and prevents access to a lot of other useful information that can be accessed via the Participants screen, and could easily be overcome by changing the default permissions.

For these reasons, Option 1 was pursued in the discussions on the issue.

Use cases

Further discussion about the different ways groups are used identified 4 different visibility levels for groups:

- Visible to everyone (this is the current behaviour)
- Visible only to members of the group, and can see other members of the group
- Visible only to members of the group, but cannot see other members of the group
- Not visible to anyone, including members of the group.

Some staff will need to be able to see all groups regardless of their visibility. This does not necessarily overlap with the existing managegroups capability which allows users to edit groups and their members, so requires a new "viewhiddengroups" capability.

Additionally, it was discussed that some groups are used purely as "administrative" groups rather than "activity" groups, so shouldn't be available when participating in activities that have "Separate Groups" or "Visible Groups" mode enabled.

This created a second “participation” dimension to be implemented. Originally it was suggested that this should be an option for all visibility levels except “not visible”. However, on investigating how this would work, it did not make sense to allow “Cannot see other members” groups to participate in activities, since you cannot see the people you are participating with. This left us with these 6 possible combinations:

1. Visible to everyone, can participate in activities
2. Visible to everyone, cannot participate in activities
3. Can see other members, can participate in activities
4. Can see other members, cannot participate in activities
5. Cannot see other members, cannot participate in activities
6. Not visible, cannot participate in activities.

Impact

Groups are used in several areas of the course. These areas have been identified as impacted by these changes:

- Group creation/editing – new options for visibility and participation. These options are frozen once a group has members, to prevent situations where a user has participated in an activity as part of a group which then has its properties changed so that it is no longer available within that activity.
- Participants screen – the “Groups” column must only show group memberships that the current user is allowed to see.
- Conditional availability – conditions including groups that are not visible to everyone must be hidden, or else users not satisfying the condition will see the group name on the course page. This includes modifications to the available rules interface to force the rules to be hidden when a hidden group is selected.
- Group overrides (quiz, assign and lesson activities) – groups that are not visible to members cannot be used for group overrides, otherwise they may see that they have a group override for a group they should not know about.
- Messaging – groups where members cannot see each other cannot have group messaging enabled.
- Activity modules with group support – Only groups with participation enabled should be available when Separate Groups or Visible Groups mode is selected. Furthermore, usage of groups in each activity must honour the group visibility settings. In most cases, this means that the list of groups that the activity group selector must exclude non-participation groups, and users who are only in non-participation groups should be treated as though they were members of no groups.