

Permissions over-rides for the online users block in user page contexts do not seem to be working as expected

Moodle 2 Block Issues with Permissions Over-rides in Certain Contexts, part 2

The block in question: Online users.

Target Contexts: My Moodle and User Profile pages

What I'm trying to do: Make the online users block only visible to adults (staff and faculty) when launched in user context pages such as My Moodle or User Profiles.

Why I'm trying to do it: The online users block can be a powerful tool for teachers to use to get in touch with students at exactly the time the students need assistance. It can also be a powerful tool for peer interaction and social reinforcement of course requirement expectations, etc. However, the younger the students are, the more controls need to be placed on its context availability.

In the U.S., we have laws based on something called FERPA that govern privacy. The crux of the law is to ensure that names and identities are protected within certain contexts. For this reason, the online users block can present issues regarding privacy breaches in certain contexts. It is okay, for instance, in most (but not all) cases for students within a course to know who their fellow course participants are--especially if they already see them in a face to face environment. However, it is not okay for the entire school to have access to student profiles, or to have access to the ability to send a message to other students not in their classes, or to even know if other students are online at certain times.

A real-life story for the "why" behind not having online users info available outside of extremely controlled "walled gardens" of specific course contexts: I once had a student who had to leave school to seek intensive therapy for an eating disorder (actually, I had a few students face this situation) yet she needed to stay on target with school work. As part of her therapy, it was NOT a good idea for her peers to know she was online or for them to interact with her in any way, so I created a whole new course for her that only she could see with her course assignments in it. Then I hid the online users block in my full course. Unfortunately, I was on a shared site at the time, and the ramifications of the online users block and privacy weren't super clear then. One of the other admins turned on the full site online users block on the front page of the site, and suddenly, everyone knew when she was logging in. I fixed it as soon as I saw it, notified the other admin that this was a concern, and we all learned about pitfalls and advantages to having this block available in certain contexts.

The bottom line: The k-12 sector especially needs to be able to lock down context and amount of info shared in blocks that have user info in them such as the recent activity block and the online users block.

Why I expect to be able to do this in 2.x: In 1.9, I was able to accomplish this capability by over-riding permissions for the online users block so that only teachers could see it, but then at that time, the only contexts were the site front page and their course pages--both areas that are easier to control for student view access. In 2.x, we now also have the added layer of user context pages, and this seems to be complicating matters. Yes, My Moodle existed as an option in 1.9, but it was an option that many schools I worked with turned off because of these user permission conflict complications. Now it is not an option that can be easily turned off, so the question becomes how to make it work for that site-wide context when facing these types of privacy restrictions.

The simplest fix: Just don't allow use of the online users block on user context pages by making it so users cannot customize their profile and My Moodle pages; then don't launch the online users

block in these contexts. Well, after failing to make permissions work, that is where I was headed, but then I ran into a different bug.

The tests: The following sequence documents the solutions I tried in order to either get a working teacher view-only online users block (again, this would be the ideal, especially for the growing number of online-only programs out there in k-12) or to remove that block from the options displayed on user pages.

Step 1: Go to default user page contexts and over-ride permissions for the online users block.









First, the test. This pic shows the over-rides that I did on both the default My Moodle page and the default User profile page under Site administration>>Appearance>>Default pages permissions tweaks.

Not pictured: various combinations of prohibiting students and enabling teachers through creating specific roles for teachers and students in this space (since everyone is basically an authenticated user in this context as there is no course role associated here).

[Home](#) > [Block: Online users](#) > [Permissions](#)

Permissions in Block: Online users

Advanced role override

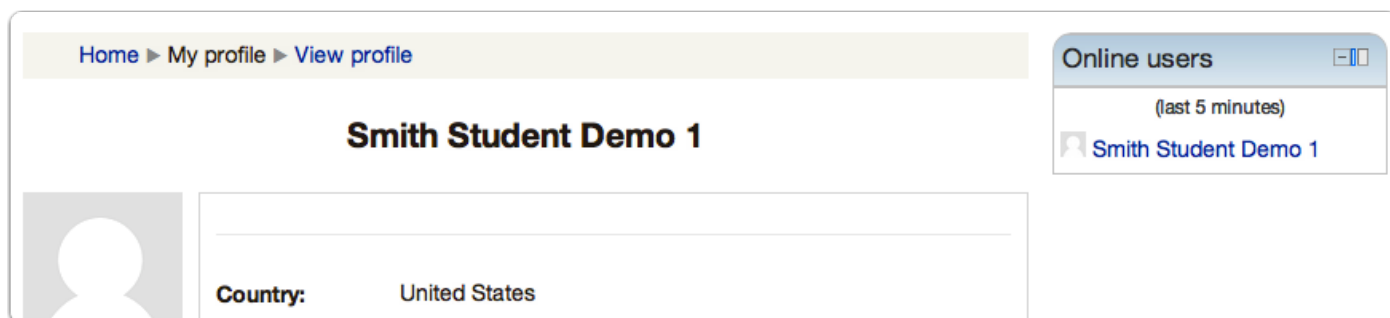
Capability	Risks	Roles with permission	Prohibited
Block: Online users			
View list of online users block/online_users:viewlist	+		Authenticated user on frontpage  , Authenticated user  +
Block			
Edit a block's settings moodle/block:edit	 	+	Authenticated user on frontpage  , Authenticated user  +
View block moodle/block:view		+	Authenticated user on frontpage  , Authenticated user  +

[Back to Block: Online users](#)

as Lesli Smith (Logout)

Step 2: Log in as target user and view the user context pages.

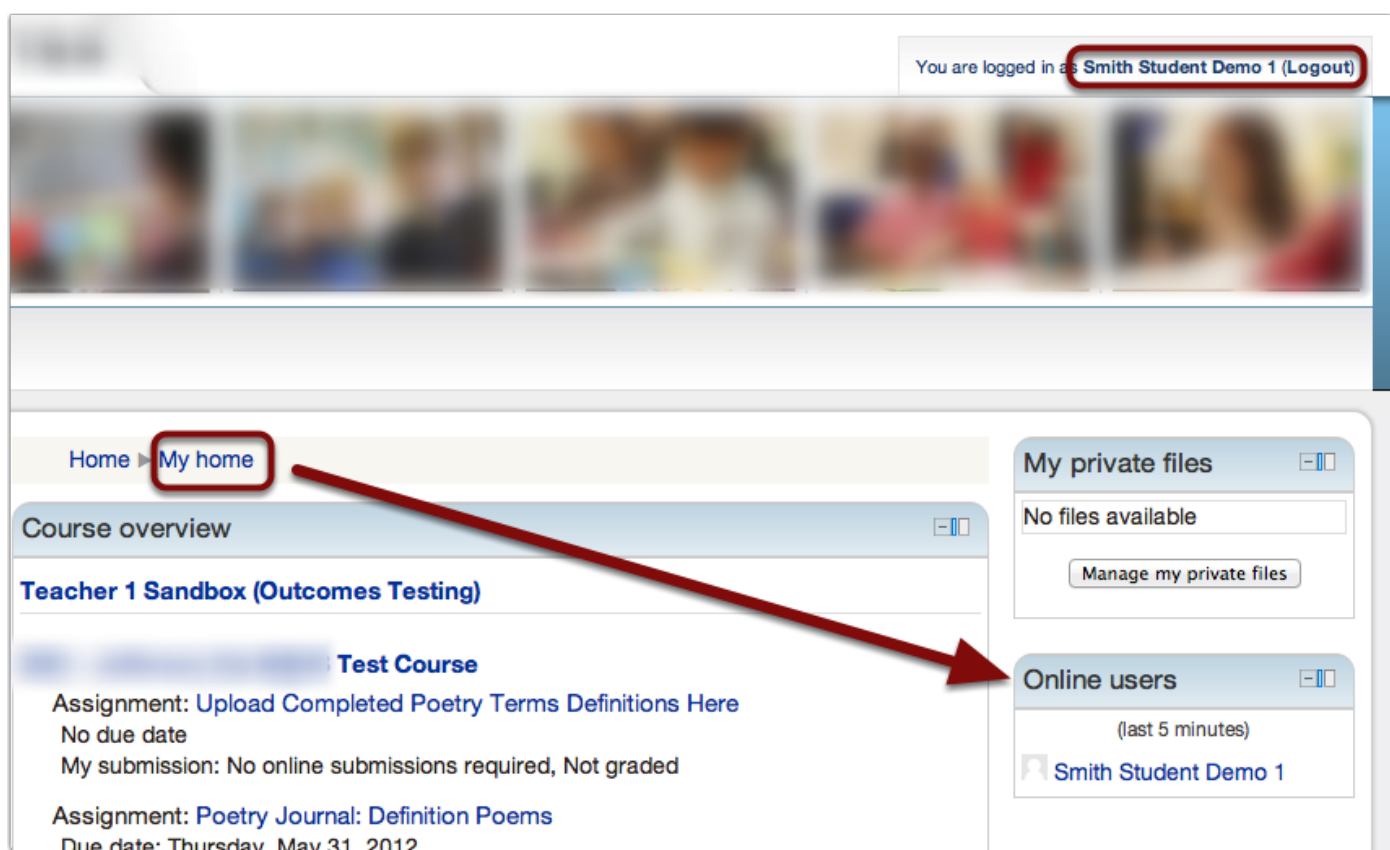
Then I logged in as my student user. I could still see the online users block on the student user's profile page.



This screenshot shows a Moodle user profile page. The breadcrumb trail at the top reads 'Home > My profile > View profile'. The profile name is 'Smith Student Demo 1'. Below the name is a placeholder for a profile picture and the text 'Country: United States'. On the right side, there is a block titled 'Online users' with a sub-header '(last 5 minutes)' and a list containing 'Smith Student Demo 1'.

Step 2: Log in as target user and view the user context pages.

I could also still see the block on the My home page (Default My Moodle).



This screenshot shows the 'My home' page in Moodle. At the top right, a notification bar says 'You are logged in as Smith Student Demo 1 (Logout)'. The breadcrumb trail is 'Home > My home'. The main content area is titled 'Course overview' and 'Teacher 1 Sandbox (Outcomes Testing)'. It lists two assignments: 'Upload Completed Poetry Terms Definitions Here' (no due date, no online submissions required) and 'Poetry Journal: Definition Poems' (due Thursday, May 31, 2012). On the right side, there are two blocks: 'My private files' (showing 'No files available' and a 'Manage my private files' button) and 'Online users' (showing '(last 5 minutes)' and 'Smith Student Demo 1'). A red box highlights the 'My home' breadcrumb, and a red arrow points from it to the 'Online users' block.

Step 3: Double-check front page role permission contexts.

Thinking perhaps there was some permissions overlap issue with roles in front page contexts, I looked there next.

1. I removed all roles from the list of those able to view list of online users.
2. I restricted editing and managing blocks on the front page to managers only as this site will not likely have a need for teachers to be granted teacher permissions on the front page.
3. (Not pictured) I made sure there were no users assigned to the front page in any role context via assign roles on the front page.

Block: Online users

[View list of online users](#)
block/online_users:viewlist

Block: Remote RSS feeds

[Manage any RSS feeds](#)
block/rss_client:manageanyfeeds

[Manage own RSS feeds](#)
block/rss_client:manageownfeeds

Block

[Edit a block's settings](#)
moodle/block:edit

[View block](#)
moodle/block:view

[Manage blocks on a page](#)
moodle/site:manageblocks

[Back to Front page](#)

Home | You are logged in as Lesli Smith (Logout)

Step 4: Log back in as target student user and double-check permissions and visibility.

I logged back in as a student and got the same results as before. The student could still see the online users block in both contexts.

Just in case I missed something somewhere still, I double-checked the specific student user's permissions for the block in that context.

Home ► Block: Online users ► **Check permissions**

Check permissions in Block: Online users

Permissions for user **Smith Student Demo 1**

Capability	Allowed
Block: Online users	
View list of online users block/online_users:viewlist	No
Block	
Edit a block's settings moodle/block:edit	No
View block moodle/block:view	No

Select another user

Potential users matching 'smith' (8)

- Smith Manager Demo 1
- Smith Student Demo 1**
- Smith Teacher Demo 1
- Lesli Smith
- Test Faculty Smith
- Test Faculty 2 Smith
- Test Staff Smith
- Test Student Smith

Search

Search options ▾

Step 5: Log in as the target teacher user and check block visibility.

Curiously, however, the teacher could only see it on the My home page, but not here on her profile page.

Home > My profile > **View profile**

Smith Teacher Demo 1

Country: United States
Email address: [blurred]
School: [blurred]
Grade: Faculty

Calendar July 2012

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

No online users block for the teacher, just for the student?

Home | You are logged in as Smith Teacher Demo 1 (Logout)

Step 6: Attempt to remove the online users block from the default pages altogether.

Note that I have removed the online users block from the default user context pages under "Appearance."

Home > Site administration > Appearance > **Default My Moodle page**

Customize this page

Course overview

No course information to show.

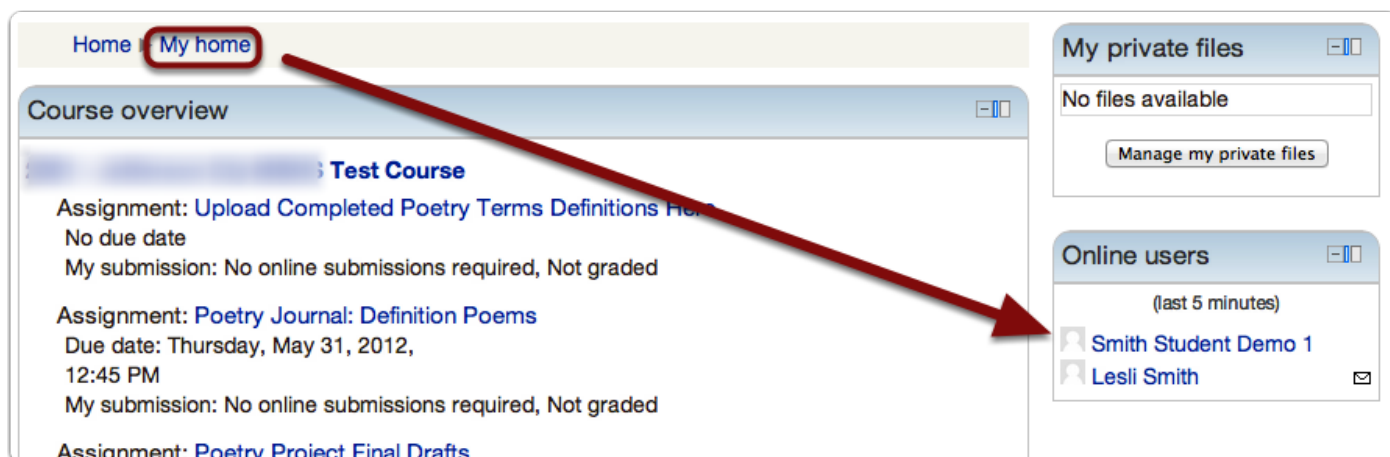
No online users block here.

Home | You are logged in as Lesli Smith (Logout)

Step 7: Log back in as target student user and check visibility on My Moodle page.

Smith Student Demo 1 logged back in after I removed the online users block from the default user pages completely, and there it was on the My home page, complete with the ability to send the admin a message.

(Yes, I know there is a different way for admins to go incognito if they wish, but the point is that students can see ALL users on the site here, not just those users in his/her courses, near as I've been able to tell from other tests as the target teacher user appears, too, if I log in as her.)

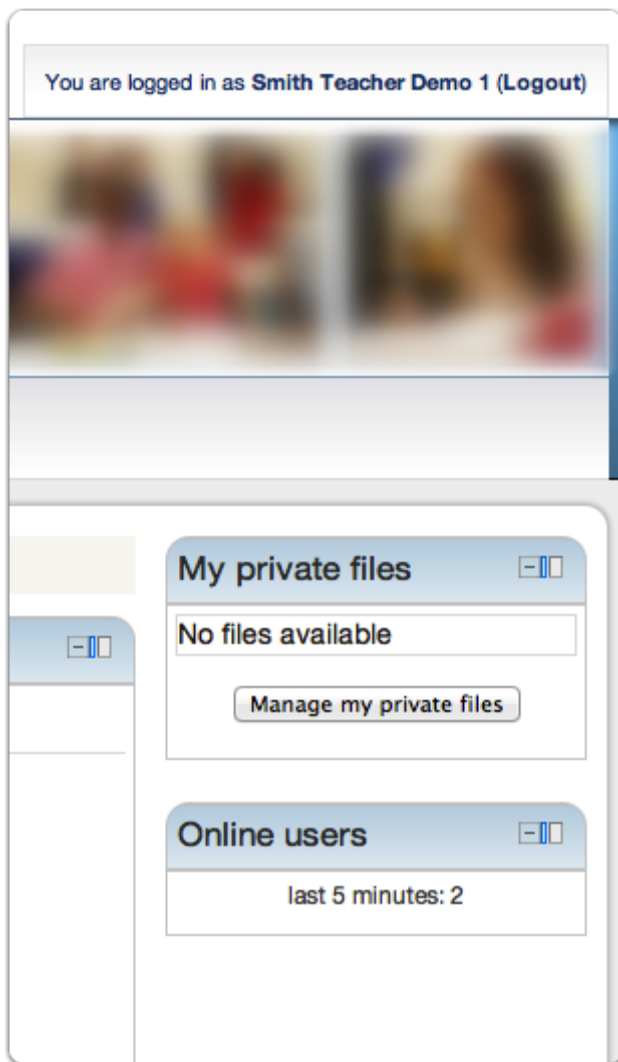


The screenshot shows the Moodle 'My home' page. At the top, there are two tabs: 'Home' and 'My home', with 'My home' selected and highlighted by a red circle. A red arrow points from this circle to the 'Online users' block on the right side of the page. The 'Online users' block is titled 'Online users' and shows a list of users who have been online in the last 5 minutes. The list includes 'Smith Student Demo 1' and 'Lesli Smith'. Below the list, there is a message icon. The 'Course overview' block on the left shows a list of assignments, including 'Upload Completed Poetry Terms Definitions Here', 'Poetry Journal: Definition Poems', and 'Poetry Project Final Drafts'.

Online users
(last 5 minutes)
Smith Student Demo 1
Lesli Smith

Step 8: Attempt a workaround for the list of users (which is the main issue) and not the block itself.

I found out that if I edit the authenticated user role so that it can no longer view the list of online users, teachers can't see the list, either.



Step 9: Attempt to create a target role with online users list view permissions and assign the target teacher to that role.

If I create a block-specific authenticated user role and assign a teacher user to it in context on the default user page, the teacher still cannot view the list.

Here is where I'm not quite certain if I should have created the role from scratch or if choosing the authenticated user role as the default base was the correct choice. I was pretty sure I needed the back end, unseen authenticated user role capabilities that aren't in the permissions chart for the teacher user to be able to do the other things she'd need to do in this context, and that is why I chose it as my base, but I could be wrong.

This is the point at which I put my hands up and decided to seek help. Please help.

