



# From Difficulties to Functional Requirements - Deriving Requirements from Literature about Tool-supported Teaching of UML Diagrams in Software Engineering Education

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## ABSTRACT

With the increasing complexity of software systems, it is becoming more and more relevant for students in software engineering education to learn how to elicitate requirements from customers or stakeholders and visualize them in a diagram. This continues to present different challenges to novice modellers. To counteract these, educators and researchers have developed support tools. These offer various functionalities to address different challenges. However, it is unclear what functionality needs to be provided to address all of these issues and not just individual ones. Therefore, this paper extracts such functional requirements and summarizes them. It also shows how they can be translated into activities during an exercise lesson.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Software engineering education**; • **Software and its engineering** → *Software creation and management*.

## KEYWORDS

Software Engineering Education, UML, Tool-Supported Teaching, Student Requirements

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

An important part in the education of computer scientists is software engineering [16, 18]. In this context, students often receive textual requirements descriptions from an educator alongside with the task to develop a diagram that matches the specified functionalities. For diagram generation, the Unified Modeling Language (UML) is widely used [18]. However, learning how to abstract such software requirements and transfer them into a diagram is not an easy task for students [27, 40, 42]. Since many graduates will be confronted with customers' or stakeholders' requirements in their daily work, it is important for them to overcome these hurdles.

Students' misconceptions and difficulties within the modeling process have already been in focus of numerous publications (e.g. [31]). To address these issues, some educators and researchers have developed tools that are able to support their students during the modeling process. These were summarized in a systematic literature review (SLR) [17]. Along with the five most named difficulties for students in diagram generation, the various tools are explained. Despite the fact that all these tools have similar goals, they provide a variety of functionalities to tackle different problems. However, it is unclear from the SLR what functionalities a software tool should provide in order to support a students' entire learning process and not only specific parts of it. The large number of developed tools and additional publications in this topic illustrates the interest of the research community and especially educators. The contribution of this paper is a summary of the software requirements described in the papers included in the SLR. These are intended to serve as building blocks for the development of new applications that take a holistic approach and seek to address many students' problems at once. It is important to note that the focus is on functional requirements [22]. Non-functional requirements [22] (such as the response time of a server) are not described.

After the extraction process, the functional requirements are translated into activities, that either students or educators could perform during an exercise lesson.

The following sections are structured as follows: section 2 covers related work. Afterwards, functional requirements are extracted from the described list of papers in section 3. Finally a short conclusion is given in section 5.

## 2 RELATED WORK

As can be seen from the previous section, a SLR about tool-supported teaching of UML diagrams [17] serves as a starting point for this publication. The reviewed sources [1–5, 7, 8, 10, 12–15, 19–21, 23–26, 28–30, 32, 34–39, 41, 43, 45, 46] will be used to extract the functional requirements. The publications mentioned in the related work of [17] also relate to this one.

Authors in [31] performed a SLR about publications that cover students’ errors in UML artefacts. Furthermore they provide an overview about problems that occur during the actual modeling process. Focusing on difficulties and not functionalities to solve those, this publications’ intention differs from the goals described in [31].

A similar goal was pursued by [9]. The result is a catalogue of students’ mistakes when modeling different types of UML diagrams. This publication also does not consider the software-based options that can reduce these errors.

Some publications focus on the challenges of teaching (UML) modeling (e.g. [6]). As software engineering education as a whole is an active field of research, there is also literature on its challenges in general (e.g. [11]). Those difficulties and challenges might have been a motivation for researchers to develop various supporting tools. However, they do not deliver insights in the actual functionalities that were implemented in order to overcome those issues. The authors of this work have not been able to find a publication that covers this topic. We follow [44] who advocates research on tool development and usage in software engineering education.

## 3 REQUIREMENTS ELICITATION

The selected papers all suggest a classroom setting, where students receive some sort of a textual requirements description provided by an educator. They have to solve the given exercise with the support of a tool. Such a scenario will serve as the basis for this work. It contains two actors: an educator and a student. Therefore, it is useful in this section to capture functional requirements for both groups. In addition, functional system requirements must be described. They include functionalities such as calculating a grade on base of a defined algorithm.

The results of the SLR show that there are two main approaches. Most of the included publications compare a students’ diagram to a given set of rules or a sample solution. A smaller group uses different visualization techniques (like 3D or Virtual Reality) in order to support their students. The requirements from both groups are therefore divided into *basic* and *visualization* requirements. As already mentioned, this is a summary based on a modular principle and not a list of mandatory functionalities. A breakdown of the requirements into clusters supports this idea and makes it possible, for example, to add or omit visualizations.

For the elicitation process, all selected papers were read and the described tool functionalities listed. Once a specific functionality has been mentioned three times, it is included in our list. All requirements are formulated following the suggestions of [33].

**Table 1: Basic requirements for educators**

ID	Requirement
BE1	The system shall provide an educator with the ability to open a session, where students can login and work on the same exercise simultaneously.
BE2	The system shall provide an educator with the ability to enter an information about the intended learning outcome alongside with the exercise that shall be imported.
BE3	The system shall provide an educator with the ability to import an exercise text with UML diagram requirements descriptions.
BE4	The system shall provide an educator with the ability to import a sample solution in form of a UML diagram.
BE5	The system shall provide an educator with the ability to create a sample solution within a simple modeling editor.
BE6	The system shall provide an educator with the ability to specify which UML components shall be compared to each other.
BE7	The system shall provide an educator with the ability to view questions that students entered during a session.
BE8	The system shall provide an educator with the ability to answer questions that students entered during a session.
BE9	The system shall provide an educator with the ability to view a statistical overview about the students activities during the modeling process.
BE10	The system should provide an educator with the ability to view submitted students’ diagrams alongside with the differences to a sample solution and the grade the system calculated.

### 3.1 Requirements from an Educators’ Perspective

This subsection describes all the extracted requirements from an educators’ perspective. They are summarized in table 1. Because from this point of view, there is no support required, no visualization requirements were raised.

### 3.2 Requirements from a Students’ Perspective

This subsection describes all the extracted requirements from a students’ perspective. Table 2 contains the basic ones, while table 3 summarizes requirements related to visualization.

### 3.3 System requirements

This subsection describes all system requirements. The basic ones are listed in table 4. Because visualizations have to be generated (for example a 2D UML diagram has to be converted into a 3D model), table 5 summarizes the visual system requirements.

**Table 2: Basic requirements for students**

ID	Requirement
BST1	The system shall provide a student with the ability to login to a session and work on a specific exercise provided by an educator.
BST2	The system shall provide a student with the ability to view the intended learning outcome of the displayed exercise.
BST3	The system shall provide a student with the ability to view the exercise text provided by an educator during the session.
BST4	The system should provide a student with the ability to create an UML diagram within a simple editor.
BST5	The system shall provide a student with the ability to ask questions about a specific exercise.
BST6	The system shall be able to assess the students' diagrams during the modeling process.
BST7	The system shall provide a student with the ability to view all the relevant components within the requirements descriptions.
BST8	The system shall provide a student with the ability to import an UML diagram in XMI, JPG or PNG format.
BST9	The system shall provide a student with the ability to submit an UML diagram for comparison with a sample solution provided by an educator.
BST10	The system shall provide a student with the ability to view the detected differences in the comparison of two diagrams.
BST11	After two UML diagrams have been compared to each other, the system shall provide a student with the ability to view a list of theoretical topics that should be revised in order to resolve detected mistakes.
BST12	After the student received feedback, the system shall provide a student with the ability to submit an improved version of the diagram and restart the comparison process.

## 4 REQUIREMENTS VISUALIZATION

Using activity diagrams, this section illustrates how the described requirements in a classroom situation could be used from an educator's and a student's perspective. This is to show when and in which order the described requirements are applicable.

### 4.1 Educators' Activities

Through which activities an educator could go during an exercise lesson, using a tool that meets all of the above requirements, is shown in Figure 1.

After starting the tool, an 'educator view' can be opened. It allows to create a new session. Educators can enter an intended learning outcome, a requirements text, a sample solution and information

**Table 3: Visualization Requirements for Students**

ID	Requirement
VST1	The system should provide a student with the ability to write code for a displayed exercise and automatically generate a related UML diagram.
VST2	The system should provide a student with the ability to create an UML diagram and automatically generate the related code.
VST3	The system should provide a student with the ability to search for keywords within the diagram.
VST4	The system should provide a student with the ability to navigate through an AR, 3D or 3D VR model.
VST5	The system should provide a student with the ability to run the visualized code and display the runtime states of the individual objects.
VST6	The system should provide a student with the ability to interact (create, move, edit or delete) diagram elements within the 2D, AR, 3D or 3D VR view.

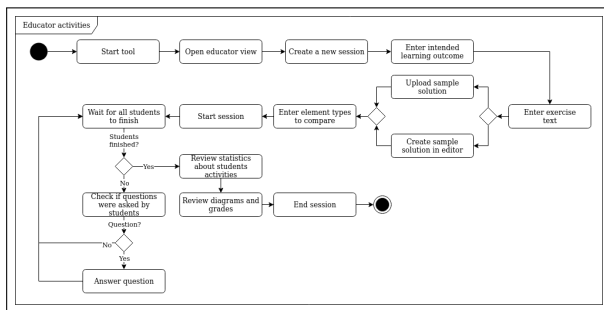
**Table 4: Basic system requirements**

ID	Requirement
BSY1	The system shall log the students' activities during the modeling process.
BSY2	The system shall be able to export a modelled UML diagram into an XMI file.
BSY3	The system shall be able to convert imported diagrams into a defined structure, which allows the comparison of them.
BSY4	The system shall be able to grade the students' diagrams according to a grading algorithm.
BSY5	The system shall be able to detect synonyms for class, attribute and method names in a students' solution.
BSY6	The system should create statistics about the differences detected in multiple comparison processes.
BSY7	The system should be able to generate feedback after a comparison process.
BSY8	The system shall be able to compare two imported diagrams to each other and outline the differences.
BSY9	The system shall be able to apply a predefined set of rules to check an imported students' solution and outline detected deviations.

about which of those diagram elements shall be compared to the ones from a student's solution. When the session is started, the exercise participants can join and work on the provided contents. If questions arise, they can be entered into the tool and answered by

**Table 5: Visualization system requirements**

ID	Requirement
VSY1	The system should be able to create a 3D diagram from a 2D diagram created by a student.
VSY2	The system should be able to visualize different levels of granularity within the diagrams (classes, attributes, methods).
VSY3	The system should be able to create an AR diagram from a 2D diagram created by a student.
VSY4	The system should be able to display code an related UML diagrams alongside each other.
VSY5	The system should be able to create a 3D VR model from a 2D diagram created by a student.
VSY6	The system should be able to highlight a selected line of code within the UML diagram.



**Figure 1: Educators activities during the exercise**

the educator. When all students have finished modeling, statistics can be reviewed as well as the students’ diagrams alongside the grades the system calculated.

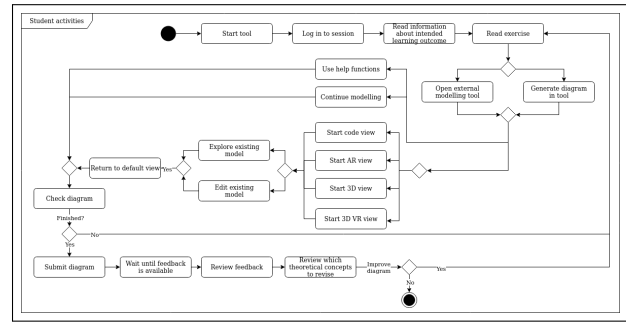
### 4.2 Students’ Activities

Activities a student could perform using such a tool during an exercise lesson, are visualized in Figure 2.

When the tool has been started, a student can login to a provided session. The information about the intended learning outcome and the requirements description can now be read. Afterwards, students can either choose to take an external modeling tool or use the provided editor. During the diagram generation process, they can use the described help functions (e.g. ask questions) or display the diagram using one of the visualization techniques. When the students have finished, they can submit their diagram and receive feedback alongside with suggestions, on which theoretical aspects to revise for improvement. If desired, the submitted solution can be redesigned or the exercise be exited.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Especially for novices in software engineering education, learning how to elicitate and convert requirements into an UML diagram is challenging. Therefore, educators and researches have made an effort to develop several supporting tools to improve their students



**Figure 2: Student activities during the exercise**

learning success. However, with these heterogenous solutions, it is unclear what functionality a tool needs to provide to address all difficulties and not just solve individual problems. This paper has extracted all the functional requirements from a selected set of publications (see [17]) and shows how they can be translated into activities during practice sessions. Since this is a summary from the literature, this list is not yet complete. It is important to emphasize that not every requirement presented needs to be met in an educational context in order to teach software engineering efficiently. In future work, students and teachers will be interviewed about further requirements.

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