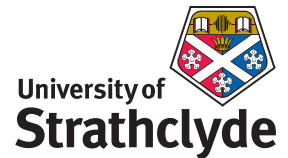




<http://spider.science.strath.ac.uk>
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SPIDER Newsletter

October 2005



SPIDER

<http://spider.science.strath.ac.uk>

SPIDER is a bespoke VLE delivering learning material, providing online support and departmental management tools to a wide sector of the university community.

This newsletter outlines recent innovations, updates and changes made to the system

More information on current SPIDER development is available via the "development diary" link on SPIDER-DEV at spider-dev.pharmacy.strath.ac.uk

Feel free to email comments or suggestions about SPIDER or this newsletter.

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Normal Service Resumes

After the relatively quiet summer months, SPIDER page visits have returned to around the 1.4 million mark, slightly surpassing last Octobers number. Minor changes in browser usage were noted - Firefox, the open source browser based on the original Netscape browser, has had its usage figures tripled from around 50,000 visits to 150,000 this year. This is still dwarfed by Internet Explorer which accounts for the lions share of the 1.4m page visits, but mirrors the general trend on the internet as a whole as users migrate from the Microsoft browser, which is seen as outdated and prone to security problems (if not kept up to date) by many.

The favoured operating system of SPIDER users is still very much in the Microsoft camp, with Windows XP dominating. The number of Windows 2000 machines are dropping off compared to last year (7% vs 15%), as this OS is now being replaced with XP. Mac users, although a small percentage of the total user base, have shown a small growth (1.04% to 1.71%), with a shift from the older "system 9" to OS X evident (15% increase in OS X users). Unix and Linux users have also grown (0.77% to 1.73%) to around the same level.

Out of hours?

The majority of users still show a tendency to use SPIDER within office hours (62% of visits are within 9am-5pm), but a significant proportion of visits take place after closing time (6% of visits occur between 11pm and 5am).

Focus on....

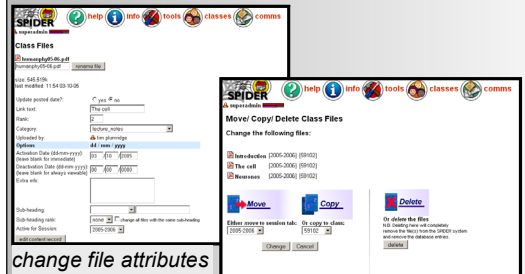
The Focus on... Section is a regular monthly feature used to highlight some of SPIDER's many tools. This month...

Class content

SPIDER classes, like any other VLE system, allow certain users to manage basic file based content, such as Word, Acrobat pdf or Powerpoint slides. This content is able to be organised under a set of different headings, such as "lecture notes" or "assignments", and displayed with an optional sub-heading and "note" field. Date-dependant display options allow staff to

File-o-facts

Files uploaded on SPIDER have various attributes, which can be changed to alter when it appears to students, what session it belongs to, what category heading it appears under etc. SPIDER also offers



change file attributes

copy, move or delete sets of files

class editors the option to copy multiple files between session tabs or even copy sets of files between different classes. This is particularly useful if classes share blocks of lecture material - staff need only upload the files once, and then copy the files and all their associated attributes to a second class with a few mouse clicks.

delay a file's appearance until after a lecture or other relevant time, or to be hidden from view after a deadline date has passed. How SPIDER differs is that each file also has an "active for session" option, which defaults to the current academic session (e.g. 2005-06). The heading under which the file is displayed is organised into different session "tabs", allowing an archive of content to be built automatically. By default, all users can access any "ses-



content 'session tabs' under the "lecture notes" heading

session tab" to view the materials that are available. However, any class editor, cluster editor or admin level user can alter the permissions for the class to limit access to older session tabs. Options include showing all content to anyone (the default); only showing students who were in the class for the relevant session the material, or only allowing staff users to see older material. This allows current students to see the material for the current session, while allowing students who have taken the class in earlier years to access the material they actually used for revision

SPIDER Status

Page visits

October 2005	1,455,483
<i>Monthly 2005</i>	
January	1,109,057
February	1,012,323
March	1,110,545
April	1,026,083
May	1,028,573
June	280,072
July	169,710
August	202,628
September	486,100

Monthly 2004

January	670,745
February	700,745
March	921,142
April	702,324
May	638,881
June	167,310
July	124,638
August	167,754
September	285,340
October	1,325,512
November	1,701,827
December	1,194,879

Monthly 2003

July*	25,593
August	111,082
September	147,304
October	822,565
November	910,088
December	897,199

Busiest day

Dec 13th 2004: 95,221 visits

*SPIDER went live mid-July 2003

Users

Total registered	11,435
Staff	710
Students	9,923
Alumni	802

Classes

Total: 706

applied-phys	39
bioscience	143
business	26
CAS	10
chemeng	1
chemistry	71
computing	15
economics	30
education	60
maths-stams	75
pharmacy*	60
physics	92
SCA	81

*includes 8 duplicate classes for IMU twin programme

SPIDER uses Linux, Apache, MySQL and PHP aka "LAMP"

all code developed in house by Ian Thompson, Tim Plumridge, Ian Thurlbeck and Fraser Murray

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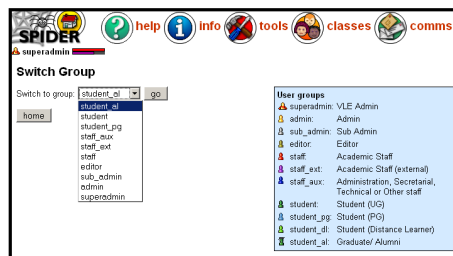
purposes. This is of particular use if solutions or other result-based material have been made available in previous sessions, or if there have been significant changes to materials.

New Tools

A number of extras have been added to SPIDER during October.

Staff tools: User group switcher

The open nature of SPIDER means that generally speaking, all users see most of the same things in classes and other parts of the system. However, sometimes staff have the requirement to see the site exactly as a student would, as certain tools and features are only visible or available to other user groups. In the past, staff could simply request a second account, or a shared departmental, temporary student account was created. This will no longer be required, as the new *user group switcher* tool allows any staff user to temporarily become a member of any group with lesser access privileges. This means admin level users can switch to any user group, and regular staff can become any of the different student groups. They can then view SPIDER exactly as if they were a user in that group. From within the group switch tool page, users simply select the group they wish to become, and click "go".



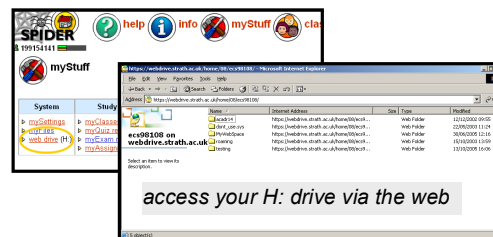
user group switcher tool

Switching back to the original group is equally straightforward. SPIDER remembers that you have switched, and a link on the home page returns you to the switch tool.

Web drive

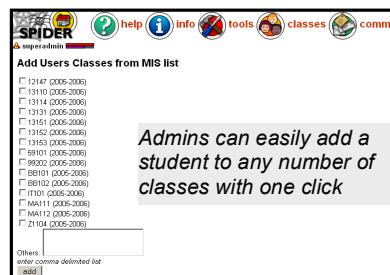
IT Services introduced web-based access to users' network H: drives in the late summer using "Web-DAV" technology. Access is available using the Internet Explorer web browser or Windows Explorer using windows 2000 or XP. Mac OS X (10.4+) users can also access the drives. The URL to the web drive is not easily remembered so to simplify access, SPIDER now has a link to the drive under myStuff (students) or staff tools. After logging in, you can access your H:

drive like any other drive on your computer. See <http://webdrive.strath.ac.uk> for more information.



Add student to classes

Although SPIDER is successfully integrated into the Oracle registry database for access to student data and class lists information, a small proportion of students still find they don't appear on some of their classes lists. Admin users have always been able to manage class lists, but they can now quickly add a single student to any number of classes, without the need to update each list independently.



Filter management

All users on SPIDER can customise their filters to determine what news and discussions they are shown on the home page. The *classes* page now shows if the user has each class in their news and discussion filters and allows a one click update to match the filters to their classes.



In Development

Changes in the pipeline include updates and wider accessibility to the programme (degree) management tools, improvements to the private messaging system and ongoing tweaks to the assignments tools.

As always, anyone wishing to suggest new features/ improvements to SPIDER, or to submit anything for publication in the newsletter, just contact us at: e: spider-vle@strath.ac.uk t: x2969