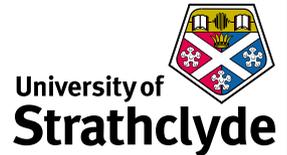




<http://spider.science.strath.ac.uk>
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SPIDER Newsletter

March 2006



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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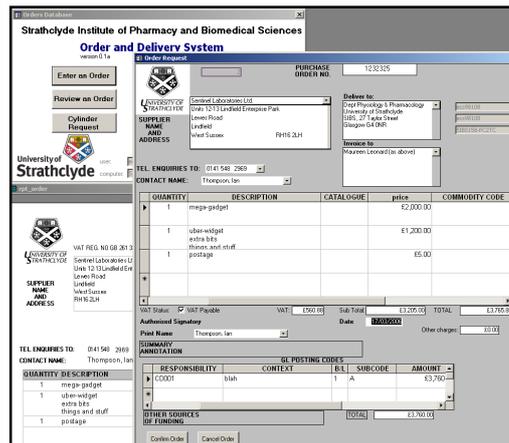
physics
 Ricky Martin

SCA
 Eric Norris/ Glen Coutts

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Access?

I've spent most of last month retraining my MS Access and MSSQL skills, as the new SIPBS institute needs an electronic ordering system (EOS) in place for 1st August. Physiology & Pharmacology already have an EOS using Access, which is being used as the basis of the new system. The Access front-end remains, but is being married to a MSSQL database in order to allow it to scale up to cope with the extra demand that the entire institute (5 departments) will place upon it. This may not seem immediately relevant to SPIDER, but it will have knock on benefits. SPIDER uses the programming language "PHP", which is able to pull data from MSSQL databases with the same ease as data from SPIDER's "native" database mySQL.



The new EOS currently in development using Access and MSSQL; eventually SPIDER will provide an alternative front-end to Access

Once the new EOS is in place it will be possible to create a web-based front end to the EOS within SPIDER, giving an alternative (or even a replacement) to the Windows-only Access front-end. This will grant web access to any authorised user, regardless of their platform and not requiring a copy of MS Access. Further benefits could be gained by linking the existing databases on SPIDER, such as the radiation and asset systems, to the EOS. For example, when items are delivered and logged in the EOS, the radiation and asset databases could automatically be populated with the relevant data. A number of departments using SPIDER also make use of the timetabling software "CELCA". The latest version of this software makes use of a MSSQL database, so again it would be possible to use SPIDER to get

More Access?

Access keys are keyboard shortcuts that are intended to help users who find it difficult to use pointing devices such as a mouse or trackball. Different web browsers implement the shortcut keys in different ways.

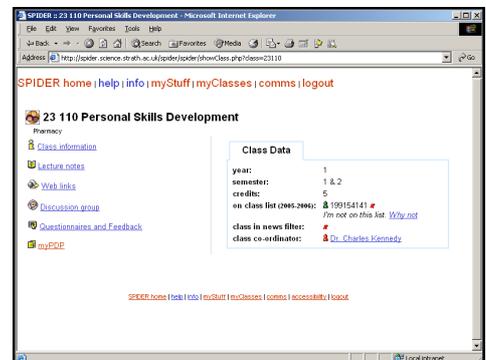
- Microsoft Internet Explorer 4 on PC: press "alt" and access key character at same time
- Microsoft Internet Explorer 5 or 6 on PC: press "alt" and the access key character at the same time, then press the enter key
- Microsoft Internet Explorer 5 on Mac: press "ctrl" and the access key character at the same time
- Netscape 6, Mozilla, or FireFox: press the "alt" key on a PC, or the "ctrl" key on an Apple Macintosh at the same time as the access key

The shortcut keys in use on SPIDER are numbers 1-8, plus 0 and the letter s. They link to the following pages:

- 1 - SPIDER home page
- 2 - help
- 3 - info
- 4 - tools/ myStuff
- 5 - classes
- 6 - comms (communication tools)
- 8 - logout
- 0 - accesskeys
- s - skip navigation - skips the navigation section and goes straight to the main page content.

Skip navigation is particularly useful to users who don't use a visual browser (e.g. screen reader), as it allows them to "skip" ahead without having to listen to the reader go through each navigation button (home, help, info, tools, etc.) and get straight to the information held in the body of the page they are browsing.

information out of this database. This would enable the generation of tools on SPIDER which would display a users timetable. Having these features in place is some way off, but does show the potential that SPIDER has as a single point of management not only for teaching, learning and student development, but also for a variety of departmental information systems.



Text-only navigation makes full use of access keys

Updates & New Features Accessibility

SPIDER allows users to tailor how the systems looks and feels to them so that each time they login, the text size, colours,

SPIDER Status

Page visits
 March 2006 1,359,610

Monthly 2006
 January 1,185,389
 February 1,132,823

Monthly 2005
 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
 October 1,455,483
 November 1,641,738
 December 1,016,651

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 12,543
 Staff 798
 Students 10,942
 Alumni 803

Classes
 Total: 758
 applied-phys 32
 bioscience 144
 business 26
 CAS 15
 chemeng 1
 chemistry 94
 computing 17
 economics 30
 education 60
 LASS 1
 maths-stams 79
 pharmacy* 63
 physics 94
 SCA 102

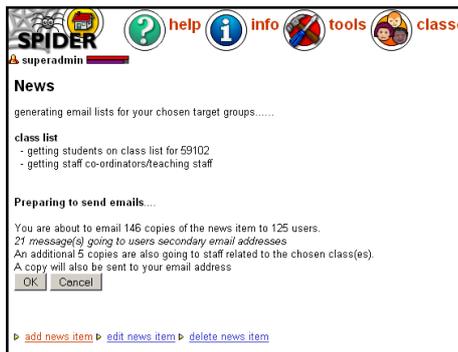
*includes 8 duplicate classes for IMU twin programme

SPIDER uses Linux, Apache, MySQL and PHP aka "LAMP". All code developed in house by Ian Thompson, Tim Plumridge, Ian Thurlbeck and Fraser Murray

background etc. are unique to that individual. Version 5 of SPIDER introduced alternative navigation options (classic, buttons, menus or text only) along with a move to support the latest HTML standards. At this time, accessibility was high on the agenda, but unfortunately one important feature was missed out - a link detailing what these accessibility options were. This has now been rectified, and the standard "bottom of page" menu now includes an "accessibility" link (access key 0). This means that the accessibility page is available at any time, from any page on SPIDER. The page lists the access keys in use on the system and gives a summary of how the mySettings page can be used to help users tailor SPIDER's interface to their needs.

News email copy

News "email copied" to a class or classes now also copies the message to the sender, the class co-ordinator and staff listed as teaching on that class. This removes the need to create a specific mailing list for a class if you wanted to copy message to the staff as well as students.



Email copies of news now automatically go to relevant staff users as well as students in class

Bug fixes

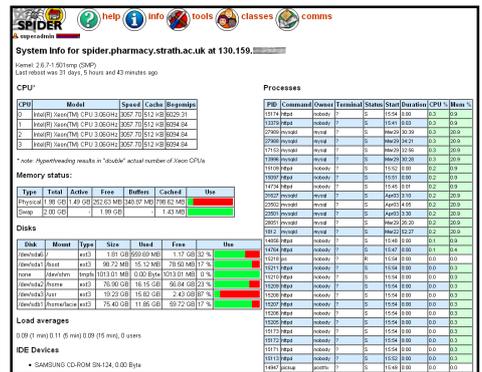
A couple of minor fixes. First, the PDP upload page was allowing users to upload files with [and] in the filename, which was confusing the download script (this script checks the user is authenticated before letting them access the file). These characters are now replaced with an underscore '_'. Another minor 'character' problem in the questionnaire "nag" features was fixed. The '/' is used as an escape character for single and double quotes (" and '). Scripts use quotes as string boundaries, so to include a quote within a string you "escape" it, so that scripts treat it as part of the string rather than a boundary. The bug was adding in extra escape / to the emails, which has now been fixed.

Focus on....

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

Sysinfo

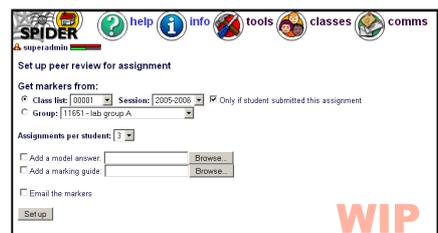
SPIDER admins have access to a number of monitoring tools. One of these, the sysinfo tool allows admins to get a quick view of the server status - RAM usage, disk capacity, load and a list of active processes. This useful utility allows the system status to be observed without having to use the more traditional method of using a 'terminal' to access the server - a simple click on the SPIDER site gives access to all this information.



Sys-info gives admins a quick overview of the system status without having to use a terminal

In Development

Work is underway to create a peer marking capability for the current electronic assignment returns. This will allow staff to use SPIDER as a means of automatically and anonymously assigning a student a number of their peer's submitted assignments for marking. The staff member will then be able to view the student-generated marks for the entire class, which can then be checked, verified and assigned to the submitted work. As well as potentially reducing staff marking, peer review can be a valuable learning experience for students. We'll keep you posted on this feature's development.



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