

SPIDER Newsletter

October 2004

Below is information and a few comments on recent changes to SPIDER that have taken place since early summer and the last "SPIDER updates" email. Please forward this to anyone who you think would be interested.

General Updates

Discussion groups

You may have already noticed that discussion groups now have "pagination" allowing you to view page by page some of the longer discussions. Users can set the number of messages per page in their mySettings page (e.g. to 10, 20...). The discussions have also been given an academic session to keep old and new discussions separate.

Class Content

Many of you will have seen the new academic session "tabs" on the content pages (lecture notes, lecture slides etc). These automatically categorise class content based on the year it was made available (2003-04, 2004-05...) automatically archiving previous content. Class editors (editors, sub admins, admins) can now control access to this archived material with the option to:

- allow anyone to view the archived material [show to all]
- limit to the class list from corresponding session [show to class list only]
- limit to "staff only" [show to staff only]

Content can also be made available to "all" sessions, so that material that is relevant from year to year appears in all "tabs".

Class Lists

Some of you will have already seen my last email noting that SPIDER can now import class lists from the central registry Oracle system. This feature is available to class editors, sub admins & admin users. Data is pulled from registry every morning at 8am, and is then available for these users to populate the SPIDER class lists. The old ways of inputting class lists are still available to allow manual entry of students to class lists.

Documentation

The SPIDER documentation and help has been updated to take account of the changes in SPIDER authentication to reflect the changes made earlier this year (users can now login using either their SPIDER or "DS" credentials. I've also added a short history and "features and tools" page listing (nearly!) all of SPIDER's features. See

<http://spider.science.strath.ac.uk/spider/about.html>
<http://spider.science.strath.ac.uk/spider/features.html>

User Groups

I'm in the process of completing a few more user groups: "alumni", "postgraduate" and "distance learners" to expand the potential of SPIDER. The alumni group will allow users to continue to access SPIDER after graduation, but with a limited feature set. The other 2 new groups will allow better control of access to tools and services to these groups, who were previously either simply made "students" (UG) or "other staff" depending on access needs.

User accounts can now also be de-activated, classed as dormant or "alumnify"d (superadmin only just now), which will allow us to control users who have left, graduated etc. Once I've rationalised this tool, will make it available to all admin users.

Groups tool

The groups tool has been improved to allow staff users to input groups by cutNpaste from Excel (or similar) in addition to the existing methods (automatic groups from class list or self-select users). Class based groups can now be viewed via the "view groups" link on the class home page

User info

Staff users can click on the "pawn" icon of any user (icon is green for students, red for academics etc) to see summary information about that user. This information has been extended to include staff teaching responsibilities, "groups" information and counsellee/counsellor data.

Staff Tools

Assignments

The SPIDER assignments tool allows staff to set and receive electronic assignments via SPIDER. There is now the option to upload a file as "feedback" for the students. Assignments uploaded to class pages were previously limited to requiring the student to upload an electronic return. This is now an option, so assignments returns can be done electronically on SPIDER or via traditional "paper" return.

pageBuilder/ pageLoader

These two tools allow users to build and upload web pages to create "web modules" which can be displayed via the class pages. Users now have a number of new options which are:

- have the web module open in same or new browser window
- including/ not the "class header" (class title and name) on their pages
- adding/ not navigation buttons to content
- pageLoader now deals with web pages made with a wider range of authoring tools or can upload them without modification if need be
- web modules can now be organised under headings instead of just a plain list

Admin Tools

Mailing lists

The mailing list tool allows admins to create email lists from a combination of class lists and staff emails. These lists are then available as "targets" for email copies of news sent via the messaging/news tool. The tool is now available to sub admin level users.

Add Counsellees

The add counsellees tool allows admin users to quickly add student counsellees to staff users myCounsellees lists. Expects input in the form:

registration number | staff email address
registration number | staff email address
registration number | staff email address
.....

I can modify the staff side if needed, but email address is the easiest "known" value about staff users, as there aren't any limitations on what form staff usernames take to align to departmental staff listings.

SINQ & SWIMS

WebCT quiz import tool

SPIDER can now import quiz and questionnaire questions build in WebCT. WebCT exports a version of the IMS QTI standard, and it is this format that SPIDER will upload and convert. This tool extends SPIDER's import capabilities which already cover "SPIDER" format quizzes and Blackboard/CourseCompass quizzes.

New Clusters

SPIDER has a new cluster "chemeng", which Dr. Linda Campbell of Chemical and Process Engineering is the cluster admin. SPIDER-chemeng is primarily being used to provide an ePDP solution and hosts a single class (CP101) on this cluster at present, with 12 staff and 65 student users currently registered.

Charles Byrne in the Department of Creative and Aesthetic Studies is currently evaluating SPIDER on the development system, again primarily as a means of delivering an ePDP solution.

SPIDER Status

SPIDER now has over 6400 active users and around 400 classes in 10 clusters. There have been over 250,000 page visits in October already, with a typical weekday count of just over 50,000. Last session we had over 6.8 Million page visits (Sept03-Aug04), and with the increased user base, these figures are set to increase. Funds from faculty were made available for the purchase of a new server* over the summer, which has plenty of reserve capacity to handle the predicted increases. No doubt we'll manage to beat the "page visit" record set on Dec 15th 2003 (61,616).

The new server is now the "primary" system, the 2 older SPIDER servers are being used as backup "mirrors" (one is live). We also purchased 2 removable storage drives for off-site backup, and I'm currently trying to find the time to update the second "old" server, which will be housed outwith the School of Pharmacy once its ready to go live, further improving SPIDER's reliability and resilience.

Thanks must go to Tim Plumridge for implementing many of these changes, particularly the development of the class content "tabs" and pageBuilder/Loader improvements, and to all those who made excellent suggestions for new tools or ways to improve existing features.

That's most things covered. If you want to see more information on these developments see the "development diary" link on SPIDER-DEV at <http://spider-dev.pharmacy.strath.ac.uk/>

As always, feel free to email me comments or suggestions,

best wishes,

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* for those interested in techo-trivia, the new server is:
Dell PowerEdge 2600 Dual Xeon 3.0Ghz 2GB RAM 108GB RAID 5 (4x36GB SCSI)
old servers (x2):
Dell PowerEdge 2400 Single PIII 866MHz 1GB RAM ~48GB RAID 5