

## Forum98

### **(Software review - Response from the producer)**

We at Forum Inc. are delighted that the reviewer saw right away that FORUM has a unique advantage of providing a fully shared on-line workplace for students and instructors and that such software is the wave of the future.

There was some apparent misunderstanding about some of the features. For example, users can be given (by the instructor or other activity leader) permission not only to read or have full access, but they can also have permission to read and make links, without permission to edit.

Thus, for example, they can annotate somebody's work without actually being able to change it. The instructor can also assign "no access" permissions. Finally, these permission changes can be made "on the fly," and can be made at either the individual or group level. An example use would be work assignments that the instructor wants to keep confidential. To keep groups from seeing each other's work, the instructor can assign "no access" to all groups except the authoring group. Then, when the work is graded, the instructor can with the click of a mouse change the permission on all workspace to "read only" so that students can see how the others approached the task. Another use of the permissions feature is for the instructor to give students a deadline to finish a certain task, and then lock up their page so they cannot go back and finish it after the deadline.

We have not figured out a better way to explain the difference between "activities" and "articles." An "activity" is analogous to a Web. An article is analogous to a Web page. Initially, we designated activities as "conferences," but such workspace can be used in multiple ways besides group conferencing. For example, I use activity workspace to set up separate research projects with individual students. "Articles" are the items (files) within an activity, and we would call them documents, except that the items can be Web sites or graphic files.

Similarly, we don't know a better way to explain the difference between a Web link and a graphic link. The Web link launches the default browser and opens the designated Web page. The graphic link opens a \*.bmp graphic file. Note that the graphic files can also be inserted in-line into an article document.

We don't know how to make more intuitive the discrimination among the colour-coded link types. But our users have not complained, and they have not found it hard to learn quickly that a blue-highlighted character string means a link to an article, red means a link to a bookmarked spot in the current document, green means a link to a Web site, and yellow is a link to a pop-up quick note. We could just make all link anchors black, but wouldn't that negate the advantages of colour coding? Also, we should mention that a right mouse click on anchor text brings up a topic window which should identify the topic of the target page.

The complaints about disconnects were probably due to server crashes at our demo site, which was having problems during the period of the review. Server problems also occur with Web sites. We are working on a server-less version of FORUM.

The complaint about irresponsible students doing malicious things in a group workspace is a concern for any kind of shared workspace software. However, in the five years that my colleagues and I have been teaching this way, we have never encountered sabotage. If students in a learning group cannot trust each other, then they cannot do group work effectively, with or without computers. One way to avoid this is to make students in a learner group truly interdependent, which experts on collaborative learning insist should be done anyway. This includes a common mission, clear roles and duties for each member of the group, group process mentoring, and group grading. Under these conditions, malicious behaviour punishes the perpetrator.

Two items that got only two-star ratings were not discussed. The Pedagogical Foundation category gets high marks from others, because FORUM is much more of a constructivist environment than competing software that only allows students to exchange e-mail messages. FORUM encourages the creation of deliverables (for example, case studies, projects, reports, multimedia portfolios). Also, the relatively low ranking on "Interactivity" seems questionable, given that FORUM is the only on-line environment that I know of that encourages in-context annotation (electronic "writing in the margin"). Unlike threaded-topic mail organising software, the interaction among students is much more direct, because students can get inside each other's documents to annotate specific words or phrases or they may jointly edit shared documents.

Finally, I think it is important to call attention to our Web site on teaching applications for FORUM:  
<http://www.cvm.tamu.edu/wklemm/contents.htm>

Bill Klemm  
Forum Enterprises, Inc.