

Forum98 (Software review)

Reviewer: William Sugar

East Carolina University, BLET
113 Joyner East, Greenville, NC 27858 USA
Tel: +1 252 328 1546
Email: sugarw@eastnet.educ.ecu.edu

Product details:

Product Name:	FORUM98
Product Category:	Educational Collaboration
Producer Name:	Forum Enterprises, Inc.
Producer Link:	http://www.foruminc.com/
Product Link:	http://www.foruminc.com/forum.htm

Snapshot review:

Ease of use	☆☆
Ease of navigation	☆☆
Documentation	☆☆☆☆
Price/value ratio	NA
Available power	☆☆☆☆
Pedagogical foundation	☆☆
Instructional values	☆☆☆
Production values	☆☆☆☆
Interactivity	☆☆

Best/worst features:

Provides the ability for students and instructors to share documents within an interactive environment. It represents a good initial attempt to provide such a dynamic environment. There was some confusion over what exactly features/terminology mean. Several times, the program closed for no apparent reason.

We do live in a networked world. Seemingly, every movie, every current automobile, every company and almost every common household item we encounter has a web site. Thus, it is only natural to encounter a software program that enables instructors and students to share documents within this networked world.

Forum98 purports to provide such an environment for educational purposes. Forum98 is a software program that enables students and instructors to collaborate and "create a shared workspace environment that allows students, alone or in groups, to create a 'web' of linked documents and graphics." Students and instructors log on to a centrally located server and asynchronously work on common projects, such as term papers, manuscripts, reports, *etc.* Participants can add or delete information, add notes, add pictures and other related activities. The instructor sets up particular permissions for each user. User can have full access or read only access for a particular document.

Students and instructors also have the ability to create links to other documents found in the server. That is, a Biology professor might create a link from her syllabus to the first midterm examination. One of the advantages of Forum98 is that it allows individuals, who cannot create HTML code to create links and new documents within a networked environment. Forum98 developers state that their program can enable others to participate in online meetings where everyone can "contribute to shared documents and annotate discussions and debates in context with hyperlinks." The goals of Forum98 are to be commended. Networked environments for educational purposes are necessary and will be commonplace in the future classroom. Providing the ability to have a shared workplace for both students and instructors will be a required instructional tool.

Navigating through such a tool also is mandatory. Future versions of Forum98 need to address this additional requirement. Though Forum98 attempts to create a networked environment, there are a few obstacles in effectively manoeuvring through this program. The overall culprit of this situation is the lack of consistent

interface design. There are some features that are inconsistent or are counter intuitive. For instance, when one opens a document, it is called an "activity." To close this "activity", one goes under the "article" menu, to close it. It is quite confusing to decide whether one is inspecting an "article" or an "activity" and it is unclear the differences between the two terms. Also, when one create a new "article", the user is prompted to indicate to the article is a "web" or a "graphic." Again, it is confounding to determine the differences between these two terms. There are also different colour links that one could use: green, yellow and blue. However, the difference among these three colours is not self-evident. How can users intuitively discriminate between a yellow and a blue link? These inconsistencies place a significant burden on users. Lack of feedback (either positive or negative) also is apparent in this program. Several times, I was automatically booted out of the program without any warning or explanation.

Besides this lack of effective interface design, there are other issues to consider. Though it is the wave of the future to provide a common networked environment, security always will remain an issue to combat. What happens when a malicious student deletes a commonly shared report? With full access, students become responsible or irresponsible for these commonly shared documents. Also, a networked environment is at the mercy on the actual network and server speed. If the network is down or slow, then a Forum98 or a similar environment is down or slow.

With full access, Forum98 users can become part of a networked environment that will become prevalent in future educational settings. However, with read only access, Forum98 actually is just another web page. The real power and value of Forum98 is the ability to create an environment where students and instructors can interact with and share a common document. Future versions of Forum98 need to address the ability to effectively navigate and interface with this networked environment and create a setting that represents this dynamic integration. For more information and to gain first-hand experience with Forum98, download the demo at <http://www.foruminc.com/>.