

Learning and Teaching with *CSU Interact*: how the tools can be used

Welcome to *CSU Interact*, Charles Sturt University's new online learning management system. *CSU Interact* is an open-source system that is being used and developed by a community exceeding 100 universities. It is hoped that the opportunities that *CSU Interact* provides for collaborative work, information sharing and communication prove valuable for learning and teaching in your subject/s.

This document has been designed to provide you with an overview and some pedagogical advice about your 'workspace' and most of the tools available within *Interact*. The framework for the information provided is a series of questions that indicate the focus of each section.

Information about the technical aspects of the tools available in *CSU Interact* is available within its Help section, and also through a compilation of 'how to' advice prepared by DIT. This information plus details of other support for staff is available from the [Interact Staff Support home page](#).

These materials were compiled by Greg Hardham and Lincoln Gill from CELT.

Acknowledgement: Much of the content within this document has been drawn from training materials developed by other universities using the same learning management system, mainly:

UC Berkeley: *Course Activities Supported by bSpace* (n.d.). Retrieved Jun 9, 2007, from http://ets.berkeley.edu/TrainingSupportCenter/bSpace/activities_list.htm

University of Cambridge: *CamTools: A quick guide for your desk* (30/1/07). Retrieved June 9, 2007, from https://camtools.caret.cam.ac.uk/access/content/public/camtools_2.2_generalrevised.pdf

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My Workspace

My Workspace is an individual online worksite that functions as a private workspace for each user. When you log in, *Interact* will display your **My Workspace**, which will show the **Message of the Day** and **My Workspace Information** windows. By default, these windows contain announcements and information from the system administrator.

A site owner can revise what appears in the **My Workspace Information** box by clicking **Options**, and then selecting options or amending details as required. Only a system administrator can modify the contents of the **Message of the Day** box, but a site owner can click **Options** to customise how announcements will display in the window.

Clickable links to each of your subject sites will also feature within your workspace.

What can I do with it?

Features: In **My Workspace** you can perform various tasks, including:

- Viewing sites you belong to and adding/removing yourself to/from publicly joinable sites with the **Membership** tool
- Viewing an integrated **Calendar** for all sites in which you participate
- Creating your own private **Calendar** items
- Printing a PDF file of all your **Calendar** events for the day, week, or month.
- Uploading/downloading and editing files in your own private **Resources** tool
- Viewing **Announcements** from all your sites
- Viewing a list of all sites you belong to in **Worksite Setup**
- Creating a new Project site using **Worksite Setup**
- Revising worksites you own by adding users or changing tools through **Worksite Setup**
- Choosing how you would like to be notified of new or changed items on sites you belong to using the **Preferences** tool

Announcements

What is it?

The **Announcements** tool could be thought of as a purely administrative tool, appropriate for keeping your students informed about assignments, rescheduled office hours, and class-related events, but it can be much more.

What can I do with it?

Use the **Announcements** tool to format and post class announcements. Recent announcements also appear on the subject site **Home** page. An added benefit of the Announcements tool is that lecturers can elect to advise class participants by email that an announcement has been posted.

Here are some ideas:

□ *Previewing/forward organiser*: Use the **Announcements** tool to get students to start thinking about upcoming class topics and activities.

Tips

- List resources that students may want to explore before the next class
- Create ungraded “mini activities” which students can easily complete before class

□ *Expectations & Encouragement*: Use the **Announcements** tool to inform students at certain points in the semester where you expect them to be in the subject, with regards to assignments, activities, and research. This is also an opportunity to motivate by offering words of encouragement on work they have done and participation in the site (or words of warning if expectations are not being met).

If there are to be a lot of announcements, users can choose to hide the body of the announcements via the options available in the Recent Announcements window in the Home page.

Why would I do this?

As examples above demonstrate, the **Announcements** tool can be used as a forward organiser that can help students to start thinking about upcoming lesson content or activities before they get there. If successful, much time in class can be saved getting everyone up to speed and learning time can be maximised.

What else do I need to consider?

With more communications avenues than have previously existed at CSU, consideration should be given to which option is best for a given purpose.

Where can I find more information?

For more information about this tool, see the *CSU Interact* help files.

Calendar

What is it?

The **Calendar** tool allows subject coordinators and others with authorisation to post items in a calendar format. All of your subject site calendar events also appear in your personal schedule in the **My Workspace** tab. The **Calendar** can be viewed in a range of formats within *CSU Interact* or it can be printed as a PDF.

What can I do with it?

Keep yourself and your students up to date by entering all class activities, assignments, and assessments from the syllabus into the Calendar tool.

Why would I do this?

Having all of this information in one place has obvious advantages for organising time.

What else do I need to consider?

Students will need to know how you intend to use this tool and how often they should check it. If you choose to insert assessment task times and dates, be very careful not to make any mistakes. Lecturers could be well advised to suggest that students do this for themselves within their own **My Workspace**.

Where can I find more information?

For more information about this tool, see the *CSU Interact* help files.

Chat

What is it?

Unlike the **Forum tool**, which facilitates asynchronous text-based communication, the **Chat Room** tool facilitates synchronous text-based communication. This means that chat sessions occur in real time, and thus special arrangements must be made to meet in the *CSU Interact* chat room at a specific time.

What can I do with it?

Here are some ideas for using this tool:

□ *Moderated vs. Unmoderated Chats:* Depending on the goal of a chat session, you will need to consider whether you would like it to be moderated or unmoderated. Moderated chats can be overseen by the lecturer, tutors, or even the students themselves. Moderated chats can be much more focused on a specific topic or activity than unmoderated chats, which tend to be better for more free-form, informal discussions.

Tips

- Because chats occur in real time, it is essential to give students specific instructions and time to prepare beforehand. This also includes publicising rules and expectations for the chat beforehand. This will result in much more well thought-out and well-behaved discussions.
- Chat sessions with more than 5 students can get confusing and disorganised quickly. Try to organise chat sessions for smaller groups of students, scheduled at different times. Since chats in *CSU Interact* are logged, groups can view each other's sessions after they have occurred.

□ *Virtual Office Hours:* The **Chat Room** tool can be used by a lecturer or tutors to hold virtual office hours (consultation time) to provide additional support to students. Since all chat sessions in *CSU Interact* are logged, other students can benefit from questions asked in previous sessions.

Tip

- Indicate virtual office hours next to regular office hours in your site's information area located on the **Home** page for your subject

□ *Virtual "Study Room:"* Just as times can be arranged for virtual office hours, daily or weekly times can also be arranged for students to get together and talk in a free-form, informal environment. This is an opportunity for students to talk about the class, ask each other questions, and form personal connections, which can increase motivation and comfort with collaborative activities.

Why would I do this?

- ‘E-learning research has shown that chat is an extremely valuable and vital tool that not only helps to socialise online learning experiences, but also has valid pedagogical uses in quizzing the students on content, brainstorming concepts and ideas, and debriefing students on activities. The transcripts can also be used as study tools for the students’ (Lieberman & Stovall 1999; Lujan 2002 cited in Tweedale *et al* 2005).
- ‘Synchronous conferences have the advantages of open access to the floor, interactivity, immediacy, and retention of a written record’ (Schallert et al. 1999 cited in Lapadat 2002).
- ‘Chat technologies foster not only event-orientated exchanges but also impromptu forums in which community members can reach out to one another’ (Adams & Freeman 2003)
- ‘Problem-based interactivity within the learning environment can lead to an enhanced sense of community’ (Cadieux, 2002 cited in McMurray 2003).
- ‘Song et al (2004) found that participants were able to form connections with their peers and the facilitator with the use of multiple chat sessions. This proved to be important as they assisted with the formation of a community within the online learning environment’ (Tweedale *et al* 2005).

What else do I need to consider?

- ‘The design of synchronous communication as part of the...[subject] requires careful planning, otherwise it can quickly become very chaotic’. It is important that ground rules are established prior to the chat session. It should be recognised, that synchronous discussions do not always ‘allow for careful and thoughtful contributions and [that] it poses problems of temporal coordination’ (DEST 2003).
- ‘Synchronous text has a number of disadvantages and is dependent on written language skills, typing speed, and experience with the technology. While many shortcuts or abbreviations are used by experienced chatters (for example SMS messages) these must be understood by all parties and present a significant learning curve for beginners. Text chat is inherently slow when compared to spoken language...[and can] disintegrate into simple one line contributions of minimal depth’ (Marriott & Hiscock 2002).
- Put simply, ‘text-based synchronous approach may preclude people with poor typing skills from the learning activity’ (Der-Thanq 2003).
- Also, in the case of Distance Education (DE) subjects, subject coordinators will need to be mindful of the potential for their students to be living in different time zones.

Where can I find more information?

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Forum

What is it?

The forum is an online asynchronous message/discussion board that enables students and teaching staff to post, read and reply to messages from other members of the subject site.

What can I do with it?

Teaching staff can use forums to:

- Increase interaction between students and students/academic in a supportive and encouraging way, thereby actively contributing to the student-content interaction;
- Raise a range of issues or insights in a discussion;
- Suggest new avenues for exploration or discussion;
- Extend students' thinking, questioning, problem solving, analysing and synthesising abilities; and
- Raise issues and debates in a subject area and have students draw on their various experiences, world views and backgrounds to present their perspectives on pertinent issues and debates.

Why would I do this?

If used effectively, forums can be used to significantly enhance the learning and teaching experience of any subject.

What else do I need to consider?

The Initial Posting

To effectively manage and operate a forum certain guidelines need to be established in the initial posting.

- You should post a message to the forum before or within the first week of the teaching session.
- This message should indicate to the students how postings will be conducted, when you will review postings, and why the forum will be used.
- The type of language used, particularly in early forum postings, has a large influence on how students respond to forum activities, thus you should try to convey a sense of enthusiasm on the forum.
- Sometimes a photo of yourself or a link to your personal website may be a valuable tool for setting up a non-threatening environment within the group.
- It is important to leave students with a task e.g. the initial posting could ask students to indicate their location (in order to form study groups), or could ask students about current work and life experiences that may relate to the subject.

Hint: Teaching staff can use the *email all* function in the management tools to ensure that all students are notified of the initial posting.

Engaging students

To actively engage students in discussion requires sound planning and management. If you merely intend to use the forum as a means of updating and informing your students of various curriculum oriented content, it may be unnecessary for you to engage students in lengthy debates. However, if your intention is to actively discuss and assess student understanding of subject concepts, consider using some of the strategies outlined in the [Guide to Managing CSU Subject Forums](#).

Where can I find more information?

For technical information on how to use the forums click on the 'Help' link within the main and management sections of your subject forum. The [CSU Learning and Teaching site](#) has a number of resources that provide advice on how forums can be used and [managed](#) in the learning and teaching context.

Acknowledgement: Content in this section drawn from the [Guide to Managing CSU Subject Forums](#).

Group Email

What is it?

The Group Email tool essentially functions as a list serve. It allows email to be sent to the entire class using a single email address.

What can I do with it?

The **Group Email** tool can be used as an alternative to the **Forum** tool to facilitate class-wide discussion and collaboration. Email sent using the **Group Email** tool is archived and searchable on the subject worksite.

- Lecturers can use **Group Email** to automatically update email groups for subject sites. As students drop or add the subject, they will automatically be dropped or added from the email group.
- Users who participate in more than one site can choose to receive email either as it is sent, or in digest mode, with all posts for the day sent in a single email message.
- Messages can be sent from any email program to the email address listed at the top of your Email Archive page.
- Clicking a column header (**From**, **Subject**, or **Sent**) will sort the messages by that header.
- When sorting by subject, clicking the up arrow will arrange the messages alphabetically. When sorting by date received, clicking the up arrow will order the messages from most recent to oldest. In both cases, clicking the down arrow reverses the order.
- The Email Archive uses plain text to format messages, even if their original format was HTML or rich text. Site participants can view a message in its original format by clicking the link provided in **Group Email**.
- The Email Archive uses links to handle attachments. Instead of receiving an attachment directly in the body of an email message, site participants can click a link to view the attachment.

Why would I do this?

Sending messages to students via email can help to ensure that the whole class receives important communications that could be missed on a busy or lengthy forum. The search and sorting capabilities of **Group Email** creates opportunity for information management and analysis.

What else do I need to consider?

By changing the tool permissions, lecturers can allow students to send messages to the class list. If this tool is to be used effectively, students will need to have their email address correct (and may need to redirect CSU email address to other account if it is used more frequently) and check their messages as often as is required.

Where can I find more information?

For more information about this tool, see the *CSU Interact* help files.

Modules

What is it?

Modules is a lesson builder tool developed for Sakai that allows teachers to publish and organise learning material to guide students through the learning process.

What can I do with it?

Teachers may create a module, unit, or chapter for each week. Many teachers organise their modules in topics or weeks, adding lecture notes, activities, links, and resources that relate to that week's content. This allows them to guide learners through the sequence of content/tasks in an organized manner.

Why would I do this?

The Modules tool allows teachers to integrate/embed/link digital learning resources that may otherwise be disparate with appropriate guidance and commentary. Teachers also have the ability to respond to student needs, and/or current events that relate to a given subject. The ability to link to web-based resources is also seen as an advantage.

What else do I need to consider?

Students must be online to view the content of modules. Modules containing audio, video and/or images may become quite large files to download which could cause access difficulties for some students (2-3MB max per module recommended). Replicating the print paradigm is not recommended; modules should be designed for the online environment and to complement other learning resources and activities.

Where can I find more information?

For more information about this tool, see the *CSU Interact* help files and other sources of support detailed in the [Interact Staff Support](#) page.

Acknowledgement: Some notes above have been adapted from the Melete 2.4 User Guide prepared by Foothill College, available for download from <http://etudesproject.org/release/index.htm>

OASIS

What is it?

The OASIS (*Online Assessment Submission Information System*) allows subject coordinators to create online multiple choice tests/activities for their subjects.

What can I do with it?

Teaching staff can create quizzes and tests for both formative and summative assessment purposes.

Why would I do this?

The ability to provide access to these tests at any time or date potentially provides significant flexibility to both staff and students. Although, designing good multiple choice tests tends to take time and effort,

they can be very effective when applied appropriately, and the ability of OASIS to generate a spreadsheet with all of the student names and IDs plus their results can even out this investment.

What else do I need to consider?

It is important that staff carefully consider the mode and type of assessment when designing their subjects. Online assessment (both formative and especially summative) brings up various issues including access and online security issues. Please use the [Protocols and guidelines for using OASIS 2.5 in online assessment](#) that have been developed when deciding on the appropriate use of OASIS in assessment for your subject.

Source: <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/resources/oasis.htm#upgrade>

Where can I find more information?

For more information about this tool, see the *CSU Interact* help files, the [OASIS website](#), and other sources of support detailed in the [Interact Staff Support](#) page.

Resources

What is it?

The **Resources** tool is predominantly a file management tool that facilitates the uploading and organisation of subject materials. It can also be used to create and/or edit HTML and text files.

What can I do with it?

Materials of various types can be uploaded to the Resources section of the site. Lecturers can opt to upload multiple files at once (max 10), manage files that have already been posted, and organise materials into folders. As with the Announcements tool, lecturers can notify students via email that new subject materials have been added to the site. Subject materials placed in Resources are not limited to files such as Word documents, PDFs, and PowerPoint slides, but may also include images, video clips, and even web links. This flexibility means that Resources can be used as more than just a repository for files. With a little creativity, this tool can be used to facilitate a number of engaging activities. As stated above, the Resource tool can also be used to create both HTML and text files.

Why would I do this?

- The Resource area is an ideal central point to organise and store resources.
- The ability to provide and share digital resources can add to the richness and diversity of the subject.
- If appropriate permissions are given, students can share and see each others' work and/or archive important documents, and allow only certain site participants to modify those documents.

What else do I need to consider?

Organisation: While the way in which you organise subject materials is not an activity in itself, it can have a direct affect on learning. Well-organised resources make it easier for students to find what they need when they need it, while disorganised resources can quickly cause frustration and loss of motivation. Consider the following ideas for keeping your *CSU Interact Resources* area effective:

- Clearly name folders and files. “Lectures” and “Images” are much better folder names than “Documents” and “Additional materials.”
- Add numbers to folders and files to guide students. For example, “1. Lecture – Native Flora,” “2. Lecture – Native Fauna,” “3. Lecture – Rare Species”
- Add dates to folder and file names. For example, “1. Lecture – Native Flora (Week 02/05),” “2. Lecture – Native Fauna (Week 02/12)”
- Don’t clutter the Resources area with unnecessary files.
- If possible, provide different types of materials, such as images, video clips, and sound. *CSU Interact* is an opportunity to accommodate different learning styles.

Sorting resources: You can sort the resources by title, size, resource creator, and last modified date. Those with the appropriate permissions can customise the order in which items appear.

File sizes and formats: if students need to download files, particularly via dial-up connections, it is advised that files do not exceed 2-3 MB in size each. Image file formats need to be chosen carefully as some formats result in large file sizes. To minimise image file sizes open the image in a program such as Microsoft Photo Editor, crop unwanted portions, reduce the image size to the desired display size, and then save in a compressed format such as jpg, png, or GIF with the desired quality specified. Please note that video and audio files can also be quite large.

Where can I find more information?

For more information about this tool, see the *CSU Interact* help files.

Web Content

What is it?

The **Web Content** tool allows you to display other websites inside your subject's *CSU Interact* frame.

What can I do with it?

You can use **Web Content** links for the most important or most commonly used online resources for your subject. Links to these sites will appear as buttons on the *CSU Interact* toolbar on the left side of the screen. These may include a link to the library reserves for the subject, or other important online resources. Online resources which are not needed as frequently can be placed in **Resources** instead of in **Web Content** items.

Why would I do this?

By providing these links you add value to your subject site, and also increase its level of integration.

What else do I need to consider?

Too many links to additional sites, say more than three, may make navigating your subject site more difficult or confusing for some students. As was suggested above, if you have a lot of links to provide, this is probably best done by creating a document and/or folder for this purpose. This would then be placed in the **Resources** area of your subject site.

There is an option to display additional sites within the *Interact* frame or to have it open in a new window.

Where can I find more information?

For more information about this tool, see the *CSU Interact* help files.

Wiki

What is it?

The **Wiki** is a tool that allows anyone to create, read, and edit web pages within online environments such as the *CSU Interact* workspace. (Open editing.) It is not necessary for a user to have had any previous experience with web page creation.

What is the difference between Wiki pages and normal web pages?

Wiki pages are editable – at least by the people that you choose to allow to edit them. By default, they are only available to members of your *CSU Interact* site. However, if you wish, it is possible to make your Wiki pages accessible to the outside world in the form of non-editable web pages.

What can I do with it?

The Wiki tool can be used to facilitate:

- collaborative learning
- group interaction

- sharing and distribution of knowledge and expertise
- exchange of ideas.

Why would I do this?

A Wiki page can be set up to allow a number of people to work on producing a document together. Students can use Wiki pages to work on projects as a team. A big advantage to the user is that Wiki pages can be quickly edited and saved, and the results seen straight away: there is no delay waiting for changes and page edits to be updated.

Tasks associated with a Wiki include:

- the straightforward creation of simple websites
- production of documents that reflect the shared knowledge of the group
- collaboration on a group report
- compilation of data gathered from different sources
- sharing of the results of research
- tracking of a group project.

The following list of ways that Wikis can be used has been adapted from Barton (2004):

- Any group project with a reference or encyclopaedic format, including instructions, manuals, glossaries, and the like.
- A group project with a bibliographic format. Students could gather websites related to a topic, then annotate, rank, and organise them.
- A letter, statement or report presented on behalf of a group. These documents occur often enough in the business world, where the "on behalf" basically means that everyone involved signed off on a draft. On a Wiki, such a project would offer everyone a better chance to make a contribution.
- A handbook, guide or review. Students could build a guide to advise, or a review to comment on a subject related topic. Thus, every student in a group would have opportunity for a stake in the project and would likely benefit from the instruction it contained.
- Any other project that does not require specified authorship or protected documents. Wikis are authored by communities, not individuals.

What else do I need to consider?

A Wiki may consist of more than one page. Links to new pages can be made from an existing page. A menu can be used to navigate through the pages.

Images can be included, and any type of file or document that can be stored in the **Resources** area of *CSU Interact* can be attached to a Wiki page.

The Wiki stores the history of the development of a page. It records all changes made and allows you to revert back to a previous version of your page. While editing, if you accidentally delete information, it is possible to get it back. The site can easily be restored to any earlier version. See the "heavy metal umlaut" video at <http://weblog.infoworld.com/udell/gems/umlaut.html> for an interesting illustration of the development of a webpage in Wikipedia.

Where can I find more information?

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