Why ICE works

My last post continuing the conversation about why online journals don't accept HTML, only PDF, has been picked up in a couple of people. One is Dorothea Salo, who seems to generally approve of the idea of the ICE content management system, but is skeptical:

> But from what I can tell, it looks generally to be the right idea—word-processi ng templates that, if used properly, do the right thing. (The big caveat is "if used properly." Authors do horrible things with word-processors. You really can't imagine until you've seen it. Unless it sharply restricts the host program' s functionality, no template on this earth will get decent results from all or even most authors.)
>
> http://cavlec.yarinareth.net/archives/2007/ 08/09/everything-old-is-new-agai n/

We hear this all the time. "Tried that. Didn't work. People do silly things and ignore the template."

So I thought I'd talk a little bit about why ICE works, when thousands of template systems fail.

1. Most important reason ICE works? There's a rapid feedback loop. You can write in the word processor, switch to your browser and hit refresh to see the results. This helps keep people on track. "Where's my table of contents? Oh, I see I need to use headings!"

    (We're adding ATOM Publishing Protocol Support too, which should really open things up.)

2. We have also targeted ICE at people who are used to working in a structured environment. We have 100+ users at USQ using it for courseware, some of which you can see at our open courseware site. These people know what USQ course looks like on paper and on the web, they're not there to muck around.

    The ICE-RS project is working with Research and Scholarshi p, where I'd expect the same attitude. If you're writing a paper or a thesis you know that there are guidelines and rules for publication.

3. ICE, so far at least, **hasn't got where it is by severely restricting** anything. We prefer to add useful tools and empower let the users use them. We're still consideri ng turning off all the unwanted buttons and so on, but it is all too easy to lose users by offending them. "Look how the university wants to limit my freedom by taking away the paintbrush tool in Word!"

4. We try to make the ICE interface more useful than the alternative. See the first screencast from ICE, put together by the project manager, Daniel de Byl. He shows how to use our new toolbar. The toolbar has familiar looking buttons for bullets, numbers, promote (un-indent) and demote (indent), but instead of applying direct formatting they apply styles, and they do so in a pretty smart and satisfying way.

Then there's this bit.

> Plus, such templates tend to be designed by someone with all the design sense of an eight-year-old.

Well maybe, I wouldn't know about that. I mean, look at my website.

The ICE templates used at USQ were designed by Electronic Publishing Services, to match

the USQ house style. They're good enough for us to print course books from. On the other hand, some of the ICE templates floating around may be a bit rougher, like the one I use for the blog here, which tends to get experimented on a bit.

To make design easier, we're just putting the finishing touches on code that allow you to create an ICE-ready template by designing one or two styles, then you click a button, and ICE generates all the rest for you based on your starting point. This will be enough for people to switch over to ICE and get free HTML for everything, while maintaining their house style. Even my seven year old could it. We had a eight year old, but she turned nine.

We will also show, by the end of the ICE-RS project in December 2007, how to set up a template where you can work in ICE, then export to something appropriate for a journal, which may want its own styles.

If anyone out there is hearing about ICE for the first time, via Dorothea or [Peter Suber](#) or [Peter Murray-Rust](#) we'd be happy to help you try it out for your research and/or scholarship. [Drop me a line](#).

We know that ICE is a bit daunting to install at the moment and we're working on that but we have resources to help you help us make it better.

(And this is my first ever post from a moving vehicle – somwhere near Goodna, on the way to UQ for a workshop on PDF)