



ShareLaTeX

Indiana University

The Challenge Of
Collaboration

About Indiana University

School of Informative and
Computing

The School of Informatics and Computing at Indiana University was founded in 2000 and was the first school of its kind in the United States.

It's now one of the largest and broadest schools of its type, with more than 2500 students enrolled across 2 campuses.



The Challenge of Collaboration

As in most academic institutions, LaTeX is widely used in the School of Informatics and Computing (SoIC) at Indiana University (IU) for preparing documents. Users include faculty members, researchers and students alike in a range of different settings. While some aren't sharing their documents, many are working collaboratively with multiple users adding and editing as they go.

For the SoIC, that collaboration is sometimes between students working on group projects, sometimes when writing papers in collaboration with others within the School and sometimes when working closely with other institutions. But they often ran into problems when people tried to share their work with others using a different LaTeX environment.

"Collaboration became difficult with users running different versions of LaTeX, having different packages installed and operating on a range of different devices," says Senior Systems Specialist Rob Henderson.

"Even when users weren't looking to collaborate or share their documents, people had difficulty when trying to access their work from a different environment - often a home computer."

Document Management Wasn't Enough

Although the School implemented version control to try and combat potential incompatibilities, the solution was far from ideal. Problems were even more exaggerated when working on collaborative projects with other institutions, who often had their own processes for document management.

"Document source was managed and shared using GitHub. Collaborators could share the code but core Git and LaTeX support across all platforms (mobile devices, Chromebooks, etc) was sometimes difficult.

This put the burden of installing and managing Git and LaTeX tools on each collaborator. Everyone's environment was different and source code might not compile properly for each person due to differences in the LaTeX environment, missing .sty files, etc."

And so the School began looking for a straightforward way for LaTeX users to collaborate and share documents more effectively.

Single Environment Solution

In the summer of 2015, after individual users had already tried out and experienced how powerful ShareLaTeX could be, the School took out a ShareLaTeX group license. Their intent was both to simplify the management and maintenance of LaTeX environments and, perhaps more importantly, enable more effective collaboration between users.

ShareLaTeX allows multiple people to work on a document at the same time. The live updates, which are visible to everyone working on the document as soon as changes are made, let users collaborate in real time.

There's no waiting around for documents to be updated, checked in and emailed around anymore. It's impossible to make conflicting changes to a document, so users can keep working even when they're waiting for a colleague to complete another section. And there's also no burden on each user to install and manage a local environment.

Since taking out the group licence, the number of ShareLaTeX users at IU has almost tripled and group working has become much easier.

"The primary users of ShareLaTeX are faculty, researchers, and students working on collaborative projects. This includes faculty writing papers in collaboration with others within IU and other institutions, students working on group projects, and also people who aren't sharing their documents but just want the convenience of a robust, cloud based LaTeX environment accessible from anywhere."

The group license has greatly increased adoption across a wide range of users since it can be used by faculty and students alike with no direct cost to the user. It's also made account management easy and prevents us from having to process lots of individual license purchasing requests, which can be time consuming.

The School has found that collaboration with other institutions who are not covered by their group license to be straightforward too.

"The ability to share a project with users outside of our organization who do not have a ShareLaTeX license themselves greatly lowers the bar for wide-scale collaboration."

As well as making collaboration with others easier, the adoption of ShareLaTeX group licence has removed the need for people to worry about their own LaTeX tools, local environment and installation. This has let users focus their energies on the documents they're producing instead of battling against incompatibilities, errors and missing files.

"The hosted, web-based environment provided by ShareLaTeX greatly reduces the expectations of the client. As long as they have a web browser, they can participate easily in the collaboration without needing to install and manage tools on their own device.

ShareLaTeX has proven to be a powerful and robust collaboration tool that is widely used in our School. The ease of use greatly lowers the bar for people new to LaTeX and has proven robust enough for LaTeX experts."



Do You Want An Easier Way To Collaborate?

If you're tired of maintaining different LaTeX environments and constantly battling to keep everything working, ShareLaTeX could be for you.

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