BLACKBOARD ALLY SANDBOX INSTITUTIONAL REPORT

Institutional Report

Abstract

The following document outlines the results of Blackboard Ally testing as part of a 9-month sandbox pilot project facilitated by BCcampus. The project ran from April-December 2018 and involved 5 BC post-secondary institution; UBC, VCC, Langara College, Camosun College, and North Island College. Each institution was asked to submit a report outlining the results of their user testing following the project.

BLACKBOARD ALLY SANDBOX

INSTITUTIONAL REPORT

INSTITUTIONAL DETAILS

Institution: University of British Columbia

Report Author: Kalev Hunt

Your Role: Project and Services Manager

Date Submitted: March 1, 2019

Your Institutional Learning Management System: Canvas

The Learning Management System you tested Ally on (if different than your institutional LMS):

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Did you experience any significant or unexpected technical issues during installation of the application? If so, please describe the issue and how the issue was resolved.

Initially we installed Ally at the beginning of the pilot period and everything went smoothly, although there were some concerns about the extent of the access the generic "Ally user" we had to create and configure needed to be granted for the tool to be functional. We were able to work with Ally's technical staff to restrict some of the initial permissions sought for this user, although the level of access the tool requires is still fairly broad and, in a full installation/rollout, would require careful review in light of UBC's need to be good stewards of institutional and especially student data.

When we later returned to Ally after the initial install, we realized its indicators were not showing up for any courses we switched it on for. We could not at first determine what the issue was as the configuration screens were available and functional and the LTI integration was still in place as expected. After some significant and stressful back-and-forth, it appeared that, for reasons we were never able to determine, the access token for the Ally user had stopped working and the Ally backend server was unable to access the course materials in the courses in Canvas for which we had activated Ally. The only resolution was to uninstall Ally and reinstall it, which resulted in a delay of several days as Ally had to rescan all materials in our Canvas instance before it could function as expected.

Overall, the installation was not as smooth as we had hoped and we would have liked better indications from Ally that it was facing challenges. From our perspective, it was installed, running, and enabled in several courses… but it

clearly was not functioning as intended. Having user-facing error messaging would have been very helpful in this case.

Did you experience any significant technical issues with Ally operation during the sandbox/pilot period? If so, please describe the issue and how the issue was resolved.

Yes, we had issues with a very unusual and non-intuitive server-wide Ally default setting. Shortly after our second installation of Ally, we started getting reports that a variety of users, none of whom were part of the pilot, were seeing Ally indicators in all their courses. This incident was potentially extremely problematic for us as UBC has a long tradition of academic independence and a culture of decentralized collaboration, so it was possible the unexpected and unintended activation of Ally among a variety of faculty and department units could have resulted in a significant negative impression of the pilot, where people felt they were being forced to use Ally and see its indicators even though they had not been briefed or consulted as to the timing or even the existence of the pilot, let alone been asked to participate.

We eventually discovered, again after stressful consultation with various parties, that Ally *by default* was permanently on in *all courses*—in a manner users could not opt out of—for any users who had administrative privileges to any subaccounts in Canvas. This meant literally dozens of staff members at UBC, responsible for managing various segments of the institutions' complex account hierarchy, were potentially being confronted by Ally indicators throughout all courses to which they had access. While some top-level admins had been informed of the Ally pilot, even those staff were not expecting to have Ally force-enabled for all their courses in a manner they could not turn off, even if they had agreed to participate in the pilot.

It is hard to emphasize just how ill-advised this default setting was and to be honest, we are still confused as to the thinking behind it. Perhaps in a very tiny setting with exceptionally few account admins, where those admins work closely with or are the same people who perform LTI integrations, this approach might make sense. But forcing Ally on in all courses for users in a particular class makes no sense from the perspective of any even slightly complex post-secondary institutions.

When we expressed our concerns over the situation, which resulted in us having to uninstall Ally for a second time as we could not immediately discover why it was showing up for people who were not involved in our pilot, we were asked to go vote in the Ally community for this "feature" to be changed. This did not fill us with confidence that the Ally developers had a good grasp of the needs of our (or any similarly-sized) institution. A far better response would have been for the vendor, once the issue was identified, to have fixed it without giving the impression that it was up for debate whether this was a highly problematic default. To Ally's credit, after we voted and recorded our comments, they did move quickly to change the default and make the ability to have Ally on for all admin users' courses an option rather than an unavoidable facet of the product. However, the speedy resolution was not what we expected; given we were asked to vote on the change as if the vendor may or may not have been planning to address it, it seemed like this change may have taken a significant time to implement or may not have been made at all.

USER TESTING

Ally comes with 3 sets of components aimed at different use cases within an institution; Student Tools, Instructor Tools, and Institutional Reporting Tools. For each of the components you tested, briefly outline;

- Describe who tested the tool?
- Did the tool work as they expected?
- If not, what was unexpected?
- Did the test users find the tools easy and intuitive to use? If not, what parts of the application did your users find was not intuitive to use?
- What did the users like about the tools?
- What did the users dislike about the tools?
- What kind of support did you provide, or was required, to support the tester during the testing session.
- Any general comments you may have about this specific component?

STUDENT TOOLS

Describe who tested the tool?

A variety of undergraduate students, with a few graduate students, from a wide variety of programs participated in drop-in demo and survey sessions. They were given a demo of Ally from both the instructor and student perspective, allowed to try out using Ally themselves and then asked to fill out a survey to capture their experiences.

Did the tool work as they expected?

There were no reports of unexpected behaviour from Ally.

If not, what was unexpected?

n/a

Did the test users find the tools easy and intuitive to use? If not, what parts of the application did your users find was not intuitive to use?

There were no reports of difficulty in using the tools. 85% of students surveyed felt that Ally would help instructors make their course materials more accessible for all students, including students with disabilities.

What did the users like about the tools?

Students felt that the ability to generate PDFs of their course materials provided by Ally would be the most useful feature, with a ratio of over 5-to-1 students feeling the availability of Ally-generated PDFs would be useful vs. not useful. Similarly, by a ratio of over 2-to-1, students felt Ally-generated audio files would be useful. Students were

nearly evenly split as to whether the availability of translated materials would be useful (1.2-to-1 useful/non-useful). The ability to generate HTML versions of files was deemed least useful.

What did the users dislike about the tools?

The two features seen as least useful were the generation of translated materials and HTML formats. We suspect the lack of enthusiasm with respect to translated materials is owing to the variable quality of machine-translated text.

What kind of support did you provide, or was required, to support the tester during the testing session.

Relatively minimal support was required. The demos, testing sessions, and surveys were all handled by student staff who were trained in Ally.

Any general comments you may have about this specific component?

Some students were particularly enthusiastic about the availability of Ally-generated audio files of materials. Some concern was expressed about file sizes for files that needed to be downloading but it was not clear whether that concern was specific to Ally-generated files (which we have found to be reasonably sized) or to files in their courses in general, where instructors may not be aware of how to optimize file settings and formats for ideal online consumption.

INSTRUCTOR TOOLS

Describe who tested the tool?

Instructors from various programs at the institution, along with a small number of instructional design and support staff, tested the instructor tools in Ally at UBC.

Did the tool work as they expected?

For the most part, Ally worked as expected, although there was more than one mention from users that it seemed focused mainly on assessing accessibility based on visual standards and there was concern other arenas where learners may face challenges were not as well-represented in its feedback. Users were impressed that, even when they considered themselves at least somewhat knowledgeable about accessibility issues, with Ally's help they were still able to discover other facets of accessibility of which they had previously been unaware.

If not, what was unexpected?

Other than the strong focus on visual accessibility, users expressed dismay that Ally did not provide its feedback on in-page text in Canvas items like Pages and Quizzes; instead its indicators only provided feedback on uploaded files. The fact that some guidance notes were still listed as "Coming Soon" was raised, with users saying those

should be completed before a full rollout of Ally was considered. One user indicated it would be helpful if Ally provided an overview of the various major types of accessibility issues. Positive unexpected facets of Ally that were highlighted by users included how Ally not only identified areas for improvement but also explained why those areas were problematic and then provided detailed guidance on how to address them.

Did the test users find the tools easy and intuitive to use? If not, what parts of the application did your users find was not intuitive to use?

Other than the fact that instructor-facing Ally didn't scan "native" textual material in Pages and Quizzes, etc., users found Ally very useful overall. More than 84% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Ally was easy to use, while the rest were neutral. More than 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Ally increased their awareness of accessibility issues. A few felt Ally could be more strict in its assessments and there were suggestions that it would be useful to be able to capture/save Ally's explanations of the issues it identifies, which slide out on a layer "on top" of the Canvas page.

What did the users like about the tools?

The most-liked features of Ally were the indicators, the feedback on the nature of the problems identified, and the instructions for correcting those problems. The ability to correct the issues in-place and to download accessible formats were less frequently listed as useful aspects of Ally.

What did the users dislike about the tools?

Very few items were highlighted as unappreciated. A smattering of users mentioned the ability to correct issues in-place, the instructions on how to correct issues, and the ability to download accessible formats as least useful.

What kind of support did you provide, or was required, to support the tester during the testing session.

Support demands were remarkably low and generally involved the initial missteps where Ally's tools were either not showing to people who expected to be able to use them or were showing all the time to people who were not participating in the pilot. The only notable support issue once we stabilized the Ally implementation and configured it as needed that we faced was explaining to users that Ally would not rate in-page textual materials that were natively generated using Canvas' rich-text editor. This issue was easy to address with a quick email and eventually we proactively explained this limitation as we onboarded pilot participants.

Any general comments you may have about this specific component?

Participants were decidedly positive about Ally's potential utility in their creation of better course materials. Indeed, many expressed being impressed that Ally's feedback provided them with learning opportunities and with the level of detail and clarity of Ally's information and guidance.

INSTITUTIONAL REPORTING TOOLS

Describe who tested the tool?

The institutional reporting tools were tested by centrally based learning technology administrators based in the University's Learning Technology Hub.

Did the tool work as they expected?

In general, yes, the tool performed as expected. There were a few interesting omissions or quirks, however.

If not, what was unexpected?

- The inability to filter out courses with no Ally score (i.e. "N/A") which in all cases seemed to be empty course shells, of which UBC has many since we create a Canvas shell for every credit course.
- The inability to group courses by academic year when using the "Courses" tab, which seemed unusual given you could view statistics by academic year in the "Overview" tab.
- No explanation given as to what constituted "Severe", "Major", or "Minor" issues.
- When viewed by term, the three main graphs provided comparisons to what Ally (or perhaps Canvas) deemed the "previous term". However at UBC, we have several term designations that are for different types of courses (distance vs. face-to-face) so the inability to choose the term that the currently viewed statistics were being compared against seemed like a strange omission.
- The paging system, with no ability to jump to a specific page, instead requiring repeated clicking of "Next" or "Previous", is wholly inadequate. This would be an easy fix so it is surprising it has yet to be implemented. Some tabs of installation had more than 100 pages, so better navigation controls are definitely needed.
- The inability to sort the table in the "Courses" tab by any of the column values.

Did the test users find the tools easy and intuitive to use? If not, what parts of the application did your users find was not intuitive to use?

In general, the institutional reporting tools are intuitive. Some unexpected rigidity, however, for instance in what two time periods are being compared when statistics are being presented, made for some head-scratching on our parts.

In addition, there is lot of "drilling down" required in various places to reach the desired elements that may need attention.

What did the users like about the tools?

- Very clean interface.
- Sensible overview graphs and charts.
- Ability to reach individual elements and address issues at a granular level.

- Categorization of issues as severe, major, or minor.
- Interactive interface with immediate responses.

What did the users dislike about the tools?

[most items covered in the section on how the tools did not perform as expected]

- Listing encrypted items as accessibility issues. There are many reasons why instructors could be providing encrypted items and counting these by default as inaccessible and rating them as severe issues seems inadvisable. At the very least, there should be a setting to control whether these elements are included by Ally.

What kind of support did you provide, or was required, to support the tester during the testing session.

None; users did not request any help.

Any general comments you may have about this specific component?

While the information provided is clear and helpful, there is clearly room to enhance how it is presented and the granularity of the controls.

ALLY SUPPORT

After testing Ally, what kind of support and/or training do you feel would be required to support students and instructors with using Ally?

Minimal support and training seems likely to be required for students. Use of Ally by instructors could, as indicated by some of respondents, be usefully paired with workshops or materials on broader accessibility considerations, after which the use of Ally could provide specific examples of the issues faced in terms of accessing course materials. A reworking of course design procedures to incorporate the use of Ally as either a formative or summative review tool would also be beneficial.

During the testing, did you visit the Ally community forums? Did you find the community forums were a useful resource for you?

We only visited the community forums to any great extent to register our desire to have the default behaviour of Ally adjusted.

Outside of the Ally forums, did you look for other sources of information for Ally functionality and/or support? If so, what did you find?

We went looking at the Ally website for examples of how Ally's feedback would appear on screen. We were surprised there was not a clear collection of example images or screencasts that demonstrated Ally's functionality and ultimately created our own small collection in order to better explain and promote our Ally pilot. Googling on this topic likewise produced scant if any useful materials.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Are there any features that you or your testers felt were missing from Ally?

As mentioned above, some instructor users desired some kind of "accessibility overview" from the tool. From an institutional perspective, it would be useful to be able to enable Ally in all courses on a per-user basis (rather than on a per-user-class basis, which is what we ran afoul of initially when Ally was forcibly on for all subaccount admins). This functionality would allow accessibility experts across campus to work to assess and improve course material accessibility across entire units or programs.

Instructor users indicated they wanted to see the overall accessibility scores for their courses, a value which we only found available to those who had access to the institutional reporting tool.

It would be useful if Ally's availability could be promoted to users; for instance, if there was a one-time pop-up message or setting where instructors users could turn Ally on in their course if that had been allowed by their subaccount administrator.

How would you compare Ally to the other types of accessibility tools you may be familiar with?

Ally is highly usable and provides extremely detailed feedback. Apart from not presenting feedback to individual users on in-page text, it seems very complete in terms of features. Overall we feel it compares favourably with other accessibility tools, especially with respect to how it engages instructors and course content creators.

What do you see as the top benefit for an institution to adopt Ally?

Given the results from our pilot, we feel the top benefit is how just the availability of Ally seems to raise awareness of accessibility in a positive and productive function, with a focus on empowering our users to increase the accessibility of their materials with timely and in-course guidance. Couple this with the extensive reporting features, which will allow the University to better react to legislative expectations and monitor our progress in improving students' access to course materials across the institution, and Ally would clearly be a valuable tool across a wide spectrum of educational users.

What do you think is the biggest challenge for an institution looking to adopt Ally?

For an institution like UBC, with a large degree of faculty independence, both in terms of the academic freedom of individual faculty members and the operational independence of faculties and units to manage their own affairs, the biggest challenge to adopting Ally is likely in ensuring clarity of intent and stakeholder education around why

Ally might be deployed. At UBC, at least, there is a fair amount of concern around maintaining academic independence and concern that some tools may be sought more to increase administrative oversight than to improve educational offerings. The existence of these concerns informed our apprehension when Ally was suddenly and unavoidably present in the courses of users who had not opted into the pilot. Clear messaging around the purpose of provisioning a tool like Ally—which is to improve the experience of learners by providing more inclusive course materials—would be crucial to ensuring the deployment of Ally is successful and its use is taken up by the widest range of faculty, students, and staff at the institution. The more granularity and choice provided in terms of administrative options and variety of ways in which Ally can be deployed at UBC will contribute greatly to the potential adoption of the tool in this kind of context.

What advice do you have for others who might be considering piloting this application?

Identify partners at your institution early and start a consistent messaging plan which clearly outlines the benefits of Ally. Perform rigorous testing after your initial install and reach out quickly to the vendor if unexpected behaviour occurs. If possible, consult with institutions, especially comparable ones, which are running or have run Ally before you "flip the switch".