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General

Where does the name Ally come from?

The meaning is twofold:

1. One of the frequently used abbreviations for “accessibility” is a11y. “Ally” is a play on that (hence why the logo looks like “A11Y”).
2. Ally is also trying to be an ally for the institution, instructor and student in providing access to more accessible content. It’s a companion that's always available inside of the context of where they’re doing their work.

Will Ally make my institution compliant?

No, Ally is NOT a compliance tool and will not automatically make your institution compliant. Accessibility of digital course content is a challenging problem and is very much a spectrum or continuum. Full compliance is a complex and nuanced statement to make, and is extremely difficult to achieve.

Ally will help move your institution towards compliance by automatically generating more accessible alternatives for content items, providing feedback and guidance to instructors and providing insight to the institution’s overall performance through the institutional report.

While this will help the institution improve quite a bit, it does not remove the need for further investment in accessibility at the institution. Active engagement from the institution and instructors will still be required to achieve the best possible result. This includes defining an institutional accessibility policy, organizing additional training, campus communication, tracking and targeting existing problems and individuals, licensing software, specialized content remediation, etc.

Note: We should avoid making any claims or promises around compliance at all cost. We do not want to be liable for making an institution compliant, nor do we want to be liable when an institution is faced with legal action.

What Learning Management Systems is Ally available for?

Ally is currently available for the following Learning Management Systems:

- Blackboard Learn 9.1 (Q2 2017 CU3+)
- Blackboard Lean Ultra
- Blackboard Open LMS
- Instructure Canvas
- Self-hosted Moodle (version 3.2+ / version 3.4+ recommended)

We currently don’t have a confirmed timeline for the D2L Brightspace integration. In order to support a full Ally integration into Brightspace, there are a number of Brightspace feature gaps that need to be plugged. Therefore, Blackboard and D2L signed an agreement at the end of December 2018. Blackboard will fund the development of these features, and the

agreement also sets up Blackboard Ally as a D2L Alliance Partner. While we don't have a confirmed release date for the integration yet, work is now in progress on both sides and we expect to see some substantial progress soon.

Integrations with other Learning Management Systems can be considered based on the size of the opportunity, but will require custom development and integration effort.

What languages is Ally currently available in?

Ally is currently available in the following languages:

- US English
- UK English
- Dutch
- Spanish
- French
- Canadian French
- Danish
- Portuguese
- Brazilian Portuguese
- Finnish
- Swedish
- Welsh
- German
- Italian
- Turkish
- Polish
- Catalan
- Norwegian Bokmål
- Norwegian Nynorsk
- ProEd

This includes the Ally User Interface, as well as the alternative formats (including the audio format)

What configuration options are available?

As an institution, it's possible to configure the following items for an Ally integration:

- The courses or terms that should be included in the initial institutional report. By default, all historical courses and terms will be included in the report. Following the initial institutional report, all courses with content activity will be included in the institutional report.
- The list of courses for which the instructor feedback and alternative formats should be enabled. It is also possible to enable this for all courses at once. This can be controlled by the institution through the Ally configuration UI (https://help.blackboard.com/Ally/Ally_for_LMS/Administrator/Configure).

What happens when a course is archived? Does Ally go with the archive?

Yes and no. Ally is a cloud service and will store the alternative formats on the Ally servers, which means that these are not pushed back into the LMS. Therefore, the alternative formats will not be stored inside of the course archive, but the reference from the course archive will continue to be available.

What happens when a course is copied? Does Ally go with the course copy?

Yes. When a course is copied, all alternative formats, instructor feedback, etc. will also be available in the new course. Note that there can be a bit of a delay before everything is moved over to the new course.

What disabilities does Ally provide support for?

Because of how visual digital technology is in nature, people with visual impairments tend to be amongst the most affected by inaccessible digital course content. Therefore, much of what Ally provides is targeted at people with visual impairments. Alternative formats such as Semantic HTML and ePub are formats that work well with screen readers, while formats such as Audio and Electronic Braille provide other means of accessing the content.

Ally also provides support for students with more subtle visual impairments. For example, Ally can benefit students with colour blindness, as it flags contrast issues and also strips out some of these contrast issues in its alternative formats.

Ally can also provide support for students with various learning disabilities. Formats such as semantic HTML and ePub tend to be simpler in nature and strip a lot of visual clutter. Ally also makes recommendations around the quality and usability of course materials, for example requesting that a quality heading structure is inserted in long documents. All of these can help students, especially those with learning disabilities, to more easily process the content.

Once Ally starts processing audio and video content more actively (see [Does Ally deal with audio and video content?](#)), Ally will also be providing support for students with auditory impairments.

Lastly, it is worth pointing out that improving the accessibility of course content will benefit all students, directly affecting the quality and usability of the course materials (see [What are some examples of how accessibility can benefit all students?](#)).

Does Ally provide support for students with dyslexia?

Ally currently doesn't offer any specialized support for students with dyslexia, although the cleaner nature of the semantic HTML version and the audio version can be very beneficial.

Going forward, we will also be making an alternative format available specifically for students with dyslexia. This will be using a special font called "Dyslexie" (<https://www.dyslexiefont.com/en/>).

What are some examples of how accessibility can benefit all students?

There are many cases in which improving the accessibility of course content will benefit all students, including those without a disability. Accessibility is often closely connected to the quality and usability of the course materials.

Example 1: Having a proper digital copy of a document instead of a scan will make the document more usable for all students. It might make the document easier to read, especially for low quality scans, and it will also allow students to search through the document and find specific content, copy and paste sections of the document, etc.

Example 2: The Semantic HTML alternative format is fully responsive and mobile-friendly and makes it easier for all students to consume content on their mobile device. The ePub alternative format makes it easy to change the visual display of a document and allows for annotations and highlighting to be added. The audio alternative format can be used during a commute, on a run, etc. The translated version alternative format can help second language students.

Example 3: Having a video with captioning or a transcript will make the video more usable for all students. It allows the student to search through the video and find specific parts, the video can still be watched in high-noise environment (e.g., commuting), etc.

Example 4: Having an image with a quality description can make the image more usable for all students. It can help clarify the content of the image and how it connects to the surrounding context, it makes the image searchable, etc.

Example 5: Providing a good heading structure to a long document will make the document more usable for all students. It provides additional structure, which makes it easier to work through and process the content. It also allows for a Table of Contents to be generated, which can improve the navigability of the document.

How can an institution pilot Ally?

Institutions can pilot Ally in the following ways:

- **Option 1 - Sandbox environment:** The institution is provided access to a shared sandbox environment (available for Blackboard Learn, Canvas and Moodle) on which they can create or import a few courses and evaluate Ally. Ally is also integrated into Blackboard Coursesites (<https://blackboard.coursesites.com>).
- **Option 2 - Paid pilot:** Short term discounted license integrated into their own LMS that converts to a full license if pilot is successful.

To request client access to one of the sandbox environments, submit a request to Nathan Cobb (Nathan.Cobb@blackboard.com).

Is Ally itself accessible?

For obvious reasons, accessibility testing is something that we pay a lot of attention to. We regularly go through independent 3rd party accessible audits of both the Ally User Interface

and the alternative formats with the UC Berkeley Web Accessibility Team and The Paciello Group. The Paciello Group is also responsible for providing the Ally VPAT documentation.

The latest version of the Ally VPAT documentation can be found at <https://www.yammer.com/blackboard.com/#/files/94065581>.

Is Ally going to replace people in the Disability Services Department?

Not at all. Ally might help with their workflow though:

1. Ally might make it easier to identify where the most significant problems are and help determine where training can be provided and who to target for that training.
2. Ally might make it easier to keep track of courses with students that have known remediation needs.
3. Ally may be able to take care of some of the low-hanging fruit remediations, providing more time for Disability Services to focus on complex remediations.
4. We're currently designing a feature to allow instructors to reach out for help with remediating their content and for students to reach out for help with content (via Ally), which has the potential of increasing demand.

Is there any end-user documentation for Ally?

The Ally end-user documentation can be found at <https://help.blackboard.com/Ally>. This contains information about the student experience (alternative formats), instructor experience (instructor feedback) and administrator experience (institutional report).

Who owns the data that is generated by Ally?

The institution owns the data generated by Ally. This data is available to the institution through the institutional report CSV export and the Ally REST API.

Ally for Learn

What versions of Learn is Ally available for?

Ally is available for Learn Ultra and the Learn 9.1 Q2 2017 CU3 release and above.

What hosting methods is Ally available for?

Ally is available for Self-Hosted, Managed Hosted and SaaS Hosted Learn institutions.

Is Ally going to be backported to previous Learn releases?

No. Because of the amount of PD resources that would be required to back-port the integration and QA it, the Ally integration will only be available for the Q2 2017 release and beyond. Most institutions should have upgraded to this version by now anyway.

What does the technical implementation process for Learn look like?

Ally for Learn is a combination of a Building Block (communication with the Learn REST API), an LTI tool (institutional report) and telemetry (sends events when content is added/updated/deleted).

The implementation process is the following:

1. The client needs to have upgraded to the Learn 9.1 Q2 2017 CU3 release and the telemetry "cloud connection" needs to be set up.
2. The Blackboard implementation team configures the Ally Building Block and the REST API integration.
3. We run the on-boarding process (process existing courses and content).

Is Ally available in the Blackboard mobile app?

No, Ally is currently not available in the Blackboard native mobile app.

As part of the Ally and Blackboard mobile app roadmap, we are planning to make the alternative formats available from the Blackboard mobile app. The mobile team is currently projecting that this work will happen in H1 2019.

Note that Ally is available when using the responsive Learn interface through a browser on a mobile device.

Is there a difference between Ally for Learn Classic and Ally for Learn Ultra?

Yes. The Ally integration for Learn Ultra is currently not as mature as the Ally integration for Learn Original 9.1. However, several improvements are planned for the Learn Ultra integration, with the intention for this integration to be the most seamless of all.

Does Ally scan all content in the content collection?

Ally currently only scans items that are attached in the course itself. This means that the reporting will only include items that can be accessed by the student. It does not include unused content.

Can Ally be integrated into a test or staging environment?

Yes, implementing Ally into a Learn test or staging environment is definitely possible and tends to be part of most implementations. The only caveat is that we are limited to integrating Ally into a maximum of 25-50 courses in a test/staging environment, as these environments are not provisioned to be able to handle a full Ally integration.

Does Ally work with the Learn Institutional Hierarchy?

Only partially. The Learn Institutional Hierarchy can be used to enable or disable the Ally UI features (instructor feedback and alternative formats) for a set of courses associated to a specific hierarchy node. In this scenario, the Ally UI features would be on for all courses from the Ally side in the course configuration UI, and control of UI features would be with the Learn course tool setting at the system, hierarchy node or course level.

The Learn Institutional Hierarchy can NOT be used to control what's included in the institutional report, as the institutional report will contain all courses.

As part of the 2019 Ally roadmap, we are planning to make Ally more Institutional Hierarchy aware, and offer departmental reporting based on the configured Institutional Hierarchy, include delegated access to departmental administrators.

Ally for Canvas

Is there a difference between the Canvas integration and the Blackboard LMS integrations?

No, we want to ensure that there are no feature differences between the Blackboard LMS integrations and the Canvas integration. As part of our commitment to accessibility, we want to make all of Ally available to as many students and institutions as possible.

What does the technical implementation process for Canvas look like?

The Ally - Canvas integration is a combination of LTI, a REST API integration, Canvas Live Events and UI injection. The integration process consists of the following 4 steps:

1. The institution needs to generate a REST API key and send this to us. This allows us to set up the underlying integration and process existing courses and content.
2. The institution needs to add the Ally Institutional Report LTI tool and the Ally Configuration UI LTI tool to their instance.
3. The institution needs to put in a request with Canvas support to authorize that Live Events are sent to Ally. This will inform us about new content/updated content/deleted content.
4. The institution needs to add an Ally javascript fragment to their global javascript include file. This will add the Alternative Accessible Format and Instructor Feedback options to the User Interface.

Can Ally be integrated into a Canvas test or beta environment?

Unfortunately, this is not a possibility. Because of the 3-week reset window, these environments don't provide a lot of time for testing before they need to be re-integrated. On top of that, some of the features that we rely on (e.g., Canvas Live Events) are not available in a test environment and therefore wouldn't deliver the full experience.

Therefore, we recommend integrating into the production environment straight away, and limiting the number of courses in which Ally is exposed while testing is taking place.

Is Ally available in the Canvas mobile app?

No, Ally is currently not available in the Canvas mobile app.

The Canvas mobile app is entirely controlled by Instructure, and they would need to build an integration with the Ally REST APIs and embed this into the core app. Therefore, providing Ally support in the Canvas app is not part of the immediate roadmap.

Ally for Moodle (and Blackboard Open LMS)

What versions of self-hosted Moodle is Ally available for?

Ally is available for self-hosted Moodle versions 3.2.5, 3.3.2 and 3.4 and all later versions. In general, we strongly recommend version 3.4 and above as this provides a much more complete integration.

Ally currently supports the following Moodle UI themes:

- Clean
- More
- Express
- Boost
- Snap

Other themes may be supported as well, but have not been tested.

Note that the Moodle WYSIWYG content checking feature introduced in Ally 1.18 (<https://usergroup.ally.ac/content/perma?id=12477>) is only available for Blackboard Open LMS institutions and self-hosted Moodle institutions using version 3.4.3 (or above) of the Ally Moodle plugin (https://moodle.org/plugins/tool_ally).

Moodle does not have the concept of terms. What does this mean for the institutional report?

The institutional report in Moodle still allows the institution to track the progress of their average accessibility by month and academic year. The report just doesn't have the "By Term" option.

Licensing

My institution already has a license for Learn/Bb Open LMS. Is Ally available to my institution free of charge?

There is a separate license fee for all Ally integrations, including Learn and Bb Open LMS (see price list at <https://www.yammer.com/blackboard.com/#/files/78628132>). Scanning and processing all course content goes beyond the current scope of the LMS and carries a significant amount of hosting, support, implementation and other costs. We also want to make sure that Ally is sustainable and can continue to be developed and improved.

Ally is not included in any bundles.

It is worth pointing out that Ally may very well help save money at the institution. It has the potential of reducing the cost of organizing accessibility training, it might reduce the cost of manual remediation and it can reduce the chances of legal action taken against the institution.

Note: In certain cases, Ally can be included in a deal or bundle free of charge for client retention purposes. If you have any questions about this, please contact Nicolaas Matthijs (nicolaas.matthijs@blackboard.com).

How much does Ally cost for my institution?

Ally uses student FTE band pricing. The pricing is the same for Learn and Bb Open LMS, and is discounted compared to the licensing for non-Blackboard Learning Management Systems (Canvas, self-hosted Moodle, etc.). A detailed price list can be found at <https://www.yammer.com/blackboard.com/#/files/78628132>.

Note: In certain cases, Ally can be included in a deal or bundle free of charge for client retention purposes. If you have any questions about this, please contact Nicolaas Matthijs (nicolaas.matthijs@blackboard.com).

What's included in an Ally license?

The Ally license fee is an all-inclusive fee that includes:

- Alternative formats, instructor feedback and institutional report for all courses in the LMS
- Implementation services:
 - LMS integration and technical integration support
 - 1 hour Tools Overview training session
 - 1 hour Institutional Report training session
- Hosting
- SLA
- Support
- Storage
- Use of 3rd party services used in Ally (OCR, text-to-speech, translations, etc.)
- Continuous product improvements and feature development

Is there an advantage to signing up for a multi-year license?

Definitely. As we start dealing with additional content types, start including support for audio and video content and continue adding additional new features, it is likely that the Ally license fee will increase going forward. The advantage of a multi-year contract is that you can lock in at the current rate.

How is support provided for Ally?

Support for Ally is provided through the standard Blackboard support channels. Support tickets are created and managed through Behind the Blackboard.

Note that institutions are responsible for providing Tier 1 support, and only institutional administrators are able to escalate issues to Blackboard support.

What happens when an institution decides not to renew their Ally license?

Whenever possible, Ally will push improvements provided through Ally (e.g., alternative description for an image, updated version of file) back into the LMS, so none of those improvements would be lost when deciding not to renew a license.

However, there are cases where we are unable to push an improvement back into the LMS because the LMS doesn't have support for the feature (e.g., a library reference for a file, an alternative description for an image in the Content Collection, etc.). These improvements are stored on the Ally side, and would therefore be lost when the integration is disabled (although those improvements can be provided as a data export).

Obviously, the alternative formats, institutional report and instructor feedback would no longer be available at that point either.

Hosting

Is Ally a cloud service or can my institution host it?

Ally is a cloud-hosted SaaS (Software as a Service) solution that is hosted in Amazon Web Services.

While it is possible to integrate Ally into a self-hosted LMS instance (e.g., Learn), it is not possible for an institution to host Ally themselves. There are no plans to create a version of Ally that can be self-hosted either.

Where is Ally hosted? Is Ally available in my region?

Ally is entirely hosted in Amazon Web Services. Ally is currently available from the following AWS data centers:

- US (North Virginia)
- Germany (Frankfurt)
- Australia (Sydney)
- Singapore
- Canada (Central)

Additional local deployments can be set up based on opportunities in that region.

What content and information is stored on the Ally servers?

Ally stores metadata about the available terms, the available courses and the course content present in a course.

When Ally processes a content item, it will download the item onto the Ally servers. Once processing has finished, it will discard the original item. However, Ally will store the alternative accessible versions that were generated for that content item.

Ally does not request nor store any student data, enrolment data, grade information, etc.

Roadmap

How often are new versions of Ally released?

Ally uses a true software as a service (SaaS) approach where new releases are frequently pushed to production. There is no fixed release schedule at this point, although on average a new release goes out every 1-2 weeks.

The only slight exception to the continuous is when a significantly user-facing change is coming up. In this case, the improvement will often be released behind a feature flag and the institution will be able to decide when to opt into the feature.

With this continuous release cadence, it is not possible to get access to an early version of a release on a test/staging environment.

The Ally release notes are posted to the Ally User Group (<https://usergroup.ally.ac/s/releases/>) and the Ally Help Site (https://help.blackboard.com/Ally/Whats_New_In_Ally).

How do I get the latest release of Ally?

That happens automatically. As soon as a new Ally release goes out, all institutions will automatically be upgraded to that release.

Note that there may be cases where new Ally features rely on (new) features inside of the LMS. The institution would need to be on an LMS release that supports those features to be able to use the corresponding Ally features.

Accessibility Checklist

Which content items does Ally check?

Ally currently checks:

- PDF files
- Office files (Word and PowerPoint)
- OpenOffice/LibreOffice files (Writer and Impress)
- Images
- WYSIWYG/VTBE content
- Uploaded HTML files
- YouTube videos

Going forward, Ally will also add support for additional video and audio content sources.

What accessibility issues does Ally check for?

Ally's accessibility checklist is based on WCAG 2.1 AA (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/>). This is an international accessibility standard, and most of the new legislation and legal requirements worldwide aligns with this standard.

Next to this, Ally also adds a number of additional checks on top of this that start to target the usability and quality of the course materials a bit more.

The full Ally accessibility checklist can be found at https://help.blackboard.com/Ally/Ally_for_LMS/Administrator/Institution_Report/Accessibility_Checklist. For every content type, it lists the different accessibility checks Ally currently performs, as well as the corresponding WCAG 2.1 rules.

How is the Ally accessibility score calculated?

Ally assigns an accessibility score to each individual content item. This is a percentage score that is intended to reflect how accessible an item is, and is a weighted average of the different accessibility issues that Ally checks for. The W3C did research into how to represent the accessibility of an item in a single score (see <https://www.w3.org/WAI/RD/2011/metrics/paper11/>), and this is used as a basis for the Ally accessibility score weighting.

A detailed explanation on how the different content types are scored can be found at <https://www.yammer.com/blackboard.com/#/files/114031301>.

Does Ally deal with audio and video content?

Ally has some basic support for audio and video content at the moment. The Ally 1.16 release introduced the ability to check YouTube content for captioning, which is then included in the institutional report.

Adding additional support for video and audio content is critical though and is high up on the roadmap. This will be added gradually using the following steps:

- Add support for additional audio and video sources in the accessibility checklist (e.g., Vimeo, 3rd party providers such as Kaltura) and include these in the institutional report.
- Provide tools as part of the instructor feedback that makes it easy for instructors to add improvements such as captioning, a transcript, etc.
- Look at integrations with existing 3rd-party captioning and auto-captioning providers. This would allow the instructor to request captioning from within Ally, which are then made available automatically within the LMS once available. Note that there will be an additional usage based cost associated to this though.

Is Ally able to check Apple Pages and Keynote documents?

Apple Pages and Keynote documents are currently not checked by Ally, as programmatically accessing, parsing and manipulating the content of Pages and Keynote documents is generally quite difficult. Having said that, providing support for these document types is part of our longer term roadmap.

Does Ally support SCORM content?

No, Ally currently doesn't have support for SCORM content. We do have a long term roadmap item to add support for SCORM, but this is not expected in 2019.

Will Ally also check external content?

Ally currently does not check any external content (except for YouTube videos). By default, Ally will only process content that's available inside the native Learning Management System tools (content collection, pages, discussions, assignments, etc.).

Going forward, we also want to include external content that's linked or referenced from the native LMS tools. For example, a link to an external web page can then also be checked, scored and included in the reporting.

Anything else, such as LTI tools, would require a custom integration and would need to be tackled on a case by case basis.

What does Ally do with content it can't check?

Ally will include content it can't check for accessibility issues (e.g., zip archive, XML file, etc.) under "Other" in the institutional report. This content will not receive an accessibility score, will not contribute to the institution's accessibility score and will not have an indicator or option to download alternative formats in the User Interface.

What is a contrast check?

Contrast checks verify whether there is sufficient contrast between the text color and its background color. Text with poor contrast can be difficult to read for everyone, but especially for students with visual impairments such as color blindness.

Ally follows the color contrast guidelines that have been specified as part of the WCAG 2.1 AA standard.

Alternative Formats

What alternative formats does Ally generate?

Ally currently provides alternative formats for the following file types:

- PDF files
- Word files
- Powerpoint files
- OpenOffice/LibreOffice files
- Uploaded HTML files

The following alternative formats can be generated:

- OCR'd version (for scanned documents)
- Tagged PDF (currently for Word, Powerpoint and OpenOffice/LibreOffice files)
- Mobile-friendly HTML
- Audio
- ePub
- Electronic Braille
- Translated Version (currently requires the institution to opt in)

What does the instructor need to do to generate alternative formats for a content item?

Nothing. Ally will automatically pick up on any existing or new course materials and will automatically run it through the accessibility checklist and make the alternative formats available to both the student and the instructor.

Is there a file size limit?

No, there is no file size limit. There may be cases where the algorithm fails to generate alternative formats for certain large files, but Ally doesn't enforce a maximum file size.

What languages are the alternative formats available in?

The HTML and ePub alternative formats are support for all Latin character-based left-to-right languages. Right-to-left or vertical languages are currently not supported.

The audio alternative format is available for all languages in which the Ally UI is available. When Ally can't determine the language of a document, or the language is not supported by Ally, we fall back to "the default language" for the Ally deployment:

- American deployments: defaults to en_US (US English)
- European deployment: defaults to en_UK (UK English)
- APAC deployments: defaults to en_AU (Australian English)

Ally relies on ABBYY FineReader for generating the OCR'd alternative format, and they support several additional languages. A full set of supported languages can be found at <https://ocrsdk.com/documentation/specifications/recognition-languages/>.

Where are the alternative formats stored? Will it contribute to my storage?

The alternative formats are stored on the Ally side and are not pushed back into the LMS. Therefore, the alternative formats do not contribute to any local storage or storage quota.

Are alternate formats generated when a request to download is made?

When a particular alternative format for a particular content item is requested for the first time, Ally will generate this on demand. In most cases, this completes within 1-2 minutes.

As soon as it has been generated, the alternative format will be downloaded. Ally will then also cache the result, so any additional requests for the same alternative format can be served and downloaded from cache immediately.

Note that we regularly clear out all stored/cached alternative formats (given that the generation algorithms are continuously updated and improved). We don't have a fixed schedule for this, but this happens roughly once a month. Therefore, we don't do any long term storage of alternative formats.

Are instructors able to edit and fix up the alternative formats?

We currently don't provide a workflow for editing the alternative formats for accuracy. That's deliberate as we want to avoid a scenario in which an instructor edits an alternative version and then updates the original and loses their original edits when the alternative format is regenerated.

However, the instructor could download one of the alternative versions, make changes to it and replace the original item with it.

Going forward, we do want to look into offering the ability to fix up the alternative formats through the Ally interface. We are planning some design and technical investigation work around this through the Ally User Group.

Can there be inaccuracies in the alternative formats? Is there any risk that Ally could accidentally change the meaning of content?

Ally cannot guarantee complete accuracy in the automated generation of alternative formats, and the quality of a conversion is usually dependant on the quality of the original content item.

The vast majority of conversion inaccuracies are related to the recognition of the document semantics (e.g., headings, tables, lists, etc.), which determines how the content is labelled but doesn't alter the meaning of the content.

There are also certain things Ally can't do without input from the instructor. For example, when a document contains an image without an alternative description, Ally is not able to automatically generate a quality description.

Accidentally changing the meaning of content is theoretically possible, but is an edge case caused by problems such as encoding issues in the original document. The one area where it is more likely is in the automated conversion of mathematical formulas to MathML.

Overall, the automatically generated alternative formats should be seen as a more accessible starting point that's available immediately to the student, but further (manual) remediation might still be required.

I have reservations about the complete automation of the remediation process. It can never be as good as manual remediation.

We agree. We want to be very clear that the Ally alternative formats are not a silver bullet that removes the need for all manual remediation.

Ally is trying to use automation to immediately provide access to a more accessible starting point for the student. In some cases, that will be sufficient to fulfil the student's needs, in some cases it will allow the student to ask for more targeted help with the content, and in other cases there will continue to be a need for completely manual remediation (which is where our upcoming feature that allows the student to reach out to the institution for help from the Ally interface comes in).

As part of the Ally 1.19 (<https://usergroup.ally.ac/content/perma?id=12722>) release, we also introduced the ability for instructors to disable the alternative formats for an individual content item.

Is it possible for a student to always get access to a specific alternative format by default?

Currently, the instructor's original content will always be the default for all students. There is no way for the student to indicate that they would like access to a specific alternative format by default.

Having said that, the Access4All standard is currently being developed as part of IMS. This will allow a student to express personal preferences around which format to receive by default. Blackboard is contributing to this standard, and would like to implement this standard in the Learning Management System as soon as a first implementable version of the standard is available.

Once this has been completed, Ally can then tap into these personal preferences and swap out the instructor's original for the desired format.

Does Ally support the conversion of hand-written documents?

We currently don't do much with hand-written work (other than flag it as scanned).

We have an item on our longer-term roadmap to try to detect handwriting and flag this as a separate accessibility issue. We have also started some preliminary conversations with Wiris (<http://www.wiris.com/>) to explore what we can do with their Math handwriting recognition technology.

Are there any copyright concerns caused by generating alternative formats?

Several institutions have expressed concerns about the fact that Ally generates alternative formats and makes these available to all students in the course, even when the content license may not allow this. Because of this, we have worked with inside and outside counsel to provide an official “copyright” statement, as well as a number of product features to support this. When institutions express concerns around copyright, the following statement should be shared with them:

...

Blackboard respects the intellectual property rights of others and we ask our users to do the same.

To that end, Blackboard has built the following features and capabilities into Blackboard Ally to help a school or user determine whether downloading an alternative format of a content item is permissible:

1. Blackboard Ally includes functionality that, prior to downloading an alternative format of a content item, requires an end-user to indicate that: (a) he/she is authorized to obtain an alternative format because, for example, he/she owns the copyright, has a license from the copyright holder, or has a print disability; and (b) he/she will not copy or distribute such alternative format.
2. In Blackboard Ally, a user who uploads content into a course can determine on a content item by content item basis or course by course basis to enable or disable the availability of alternative formats.
3. Blackboard Ally screens for password-protected files and pdf's with metadata restricting derivative works and does not permit creation of alternative formats for those files. Such protections have been put in place by many publishers to help avoid copyright infringement.

Finally, it is important to note that many jurisdictions have exclusions in their copyright laws that permit the creation of alternative formats of content for individuals with disabilities, and that many licenses for content items permit the creation of derivative works (i.e. alternative formats) for all users – for example, instructor-created content may be licensed to users with broad rights to create alternative formats.

We encourage users to follow this guidance when downloading alternative formats.

...

Any follow-up questions from the institution should be directed to the Ally Product Management team.

Does Ally generate alternative formats for student content?

Ally currently only processes instructional content; i.e., content added by someone with edit permissions in the course (instructor, instructional designer, etc.). Ally currently does not process student content or student submissions.

Before we can run student content through the accessibility checklist and generate alternative formats, there are a number of design questions that still need to be answered. Do we expose feedback to students? Will they think this is required as part of the course work? Will uploading improved versions of their content conflict with the existing LMS tools (e.g., what if they can only submit an assignment once)? Should student content be reflected in the institutional report?

We are planning to do some UX research with our User Group around these questions as part of our roadmap.

What technology does Ally use for Optical Character Recognition (OCR)?

Ally uses ABBYY FineReader (<http://ocrsdk.com/>) as its OCR engine behind the scenes. ABBYY FineReader is generally considered to be state-of-the-art in OCR and has generally good accuracy.

What format is the OCR'd alternative format?

The OCR'd version is made available as a tagged PDF.

What version of ePub does Ally use?

Ally currently uses ePub2.

Supporting ePub3 is on our roadmap, especially as there are several features in ePub3 (e.g., native MathML support) that we want to take advantage of.

What format is the Audio alternative format?

The audio alternative format is made available as a downloadable MP3 file. We also add some of the extracted semantic information into the speech, which adds additional structure to the audio and makes it easier to follow.

In the background, we use an integration with ReadSpeaker for this, which helps us generate very natural speech. A sample audio conversion can be found at <https://www.yammer.com/blackboard.com/#/files/102445115>. Note that the voice and pronunciation will change depending on the language of the original content.

Does Ally provide voice customization options for the Audio alternative format?

We currently don't expose any voice customization options (pitch, speed, gender, etc.) in the User Interface. However, as we use ReadSpeaker behind the scenes for the audio generation,

those options are available in the back-end and we are planning to expose them in the User Interface going forward.

What is the Translated Version alternative format?

The Translated Version alternative format provides a machine translated version of the instructor's original into a total of 50 different languages. This currently supports the following file formats:

- PDF (resulting in .rtf file)
- Word
- PowerPoint
- HTML documents

We believe this alternative format will be useful for several use cases, including the use by second language students.

Why am I not seeing the Translated Version alternative format?

The Translated Version alternative format is generally available, but requires an institution to opt in. Therefore, this alternative format is therefore not enabled by default. We are also planning to add the ability to disable this alternative format for an individual course as part of our roadmap.

Enabling this alternative format for an instance can be requested through a Behind The Blackboard support ticket.

What languages are supported in the Translated Version alternative format?

The Translated Version alternative format is currently available in the following languages:

- Afrikaans
- Arabic
- Bosnian - Cyrillic
- Bosnian - Latin
- Bulgarian
- Cantonese - Traditional
- Catalan
- Chinese - Simplified
- Chinese - Traditional
- Croatian
- Czech
- Danish
- Dutch
- English
- Estonian
- Finnish
- French
- German

- Greek, Modern
- Haitian
- Hebrew
- Hindi
- Hungarian
- Indonesian
- Italian
- Japanese
- Korean
- Latvian
- Lithuanian
- Malay
- Maltese
- Norwegian Bokmål
- Persian (Farsi)
- Polish
- Portuguese
- Romanian
- Russian
- Serbian - Cyrillic
- Serbian - Latin
- Slovak
- Slovenian
- Spanish
- Swahili
- Swedish
- Thai
- Turkish
- Ukrainian
- Urdu
- Vietnamese
- Welsh

What service is the Translated Version alternative format using behind the scenes?

Ally is using the the Xerox Easy Translator Service (<https://xeroxtranslates.com/>). This utilizes Microsoft translation technology behind the scenes.

Why am I seeing an “Unable to generate alternative format” error when generating an Audio alternative format?

The Audio Alternative format is currently limited to 100,000 characters. Going forward, we will be removing this restriction as we start splitting up the audio format into chapters.

Which Braille code does Ally use for the Electronic Braille Format?

Ally uses Braille Ready File (.brf) as the electronic Braille format.

What braille code is used depends on the language the document is in. For English documents, Ally uses Grade 2 Unified English Braille (contracted). See <https://www.ukaaf.org/braille/ueb/> for more information about Unified English Braille.

Can the Ally Electronic Braille Format be printed using a Braille printer?

The Braille Ready File (.brf) format can be used for both electronic braille displays and braille embossers (printers). Additional information about BRF can be found at <https://aimva.org/about-us/formats/braille-ready-file>.

Note that you will still need to check whether a specific Braille embosser/printer supports the .brf format though.

How does Ally handle password protected content?

Ally will detect password protected content, will give them a 0% accessibility score and will provide guidance to help remove the password through the instructor feedback. Ally does not generate any alternative formats for password protected content, as we can't get access to the actual content.

Is a Word alternative format going to be provided in the future?

Yes, as part of our roadmap, we are planning to provide an editable Word/RTF version as an additional alternative format. It is common practice for Disability Services to supply this in cases where control over font size, colors, etc. is required.

The ePub alternative format can be a good alternative for an editable Word/RTF version though by using its display customization and annotation functionality.

How does Ally deal with mathematical equations?

Ally is currently not doing any special conversion for mathematical equations and is just reading them as they would be read by a screen reader today. Ally does have a lot of functionality behind the scenes to try to identify where the mathematical equations in a document are and convert these to MathML (<https://www.w3.org/Math/>) in the alternative formats.

However, this functionality is currently not exposed as we need to make some additional performance improvements to allow us to do this at the scale that's required for Ally, but this continues to be an important roadmap priority.

Does Ally track the usage (views and downloads) of the alternative formats?

Ally tracks the following usage information about the alternative formats:

- How often is the alternative formats modal opened?
- How many alternative formats are downloaded?

- What format types are downloaded?
- How many courses are the alternative formats used in?
- How many unique students are using the alternative formats?

Ally will also track the following usage information about the instructor feedback:

- How often was the instructor feedback opened?
- What is the distribution by feedback flow type?
- How many content items are improved through the instructor feedback?
- How many alternative descriptions are provided through the instructor feedback?
- How many images are marked as decorative through the instructor feedback?
- How many library references are provided?

This data can currently be requested by institutions through a Behind The Blackboard support ticket. As part of the Ally roadmap, this data will be exposed directly in the institutional report.

Are there any plans to make the alternative versions more prominent?

Yes, given how much feedback we've received from students really liking the alternative formats, we are going to make the alternative formats more prominent for students as part of our roadmap. The “Alternative Formats” option will be removed from the content dropdown, and will become an “Alternative Formats” icon next to the content item instead, which will result in access to the alternative formats in a single click.

Next to this, we recommend that institutions send out some communication to students (and/or include this in the syllabus template) to make them aware of the existence of the alternative formats. The Ally Adoption and Communication Toolkit (https://help.blackboard.com/Ally/Ally_for_LMS/Administrator/Communication_and_Adoption_Toolkit) contains some messaging templates that can be used to raise awareness about the availability of alternative formats.

Instructor Feedback

What threshold is used for the color of the accessibility indicator?

We provide every document with an accessibility score, which is a percentage score that is supposed to reflect how accessible an item is, how many students it can affect, how severely it affects them, etc. To calculate the accessibility score for a document, we take a weighted average of the different accessibility rules/checks, as some rules are more important/impactful than others.

Within the User Interface, we use the following thresholds for determining the color of the indicator:

- Low (0-33%): Needs help! There are severe accessibility issues.
- Medium (34-66%): A little better. The file is somewhat accessible and needs improvement.
- High (67-99%): Almost there. The file is accessible but more improvements are possible.
- Perfect (100%): Perfect! Ally didn't identify any accessibility issues but further improvements may still be possible.

Accessibility is very much a spectrum where further improvements are always possible, so it's hard to provide a point at which the item becomes "accessible". However, as a rule of thumb, once an item is in the green zone it should be doing reasonably well.

Can the accessibility indicator thresholds be configured?

This is currently not configurable. Because of the benefits associated to this being consistent across all institutions, we are also not planning to make this configurable until we've identified a good use case for this.

Will directions for Adobe Acrobat be added to the instructor feedback?

The instructor feedback deliberately focuses on low effort improvements that an instructor can easily incorporate in their content creation processes. We think that trying to explain instructors how to manually tag a PDF in Adobe Acrobat is not going to be very successful (because of complexity and the need to have a license), so we have other items on our roadmap to try to address this more effectively:

1. Allow the instructor to easily reach out for additional help from the instructor feedback. This will connect them with the resources that are already in place at the institution to help them through these more complex remediation tasks.
2. We also want to provide a light-weight in-browser tagging experience as part of Ally. While this will never be as complete as Adobe Acrobat, it would allow instructors to easily to do some basic things such as indicate where headings are.

What if an instructor refuses to engage with the instructor feedback?

That's okay. We don't expect all instructors to engage fully or immediately. We understand that reaching instructors and changing their behaviour around accessibility is a process that needs time and patience. However, by consistently having the feedback and guidance be available in their workflows, we aim to maximize exposure and engagement.

Even if an instructor doesn't want to engage or doesn't have time to engage, Ally will still generate alternative accessible version for their content and the accessibility issues in their content will be flagged and reflected in the institutional report, allowing the institution to intervene if necessary.

Going forward, we will be working on additional engagement strategies. For example, we'll be providing an instructor-facing summary at the course level, where the instructor can get a course accessibility report that tells them how accessible their course is and helps them with prioritizing the items that need fixing.

Are instructors able to access the report for their own course?

We currently don't provide instructors access to the report for their own course, as we don't feel that the course report that's currently part of the institutional report is friendly and understandable enough to show to instructors with limited awareness of accessibility.

However, providing instructors access to an accessibility report for their course is part of our roadmap. We are planning to build a version of the course report that provides more information about what everything means and helps with things like prioritization around which items need to be fixed first.

What content types are in-browser previews available for?

In-browser previews are currently available for:

- Images
- PDF Documents
- Word Documents
- PowerPoint presentations
- OpenOffice/LibreOffice files (Writer and Impress)

These previews are then used to identify where in the document specific accessibility issues can be found. Highlights are currently provided for:

- Images without an appropriate alternative description
- Text fragments with insufficient contrast
- Tables without table headings

The instructor feedback for other accessibility issues will just show the content preview without highlights.

More information about these previews can be found in the Ally 1.24 release notes (<https://usergroup.ally.ac/content/perma?id=17492>).

Institutional Report

How frequently is the institutional report generated?

The institutional report is updated continuously, so should be up-to-date at all times. However, there can be a small delay between a content item being added and the Term/Academic Year/Month reports updating.

Can I export the institutional report data?

Yes, the Ally institutional report data can be exported to CSV format. This data export contains 4 separate CSV files:

- Overview data by academic year
- Overview data by term
- Overview data by month
- List of all courses

There is also a CSV export for an individual course. This data export contains a list of all of the content items in that course, as well as the different accessibility issues identified in those content items.

More information about these CSV exports can be found at https://help.blackboard.com/Ally/Ally_for_LMS/Administrator/Institution_Report/Export.

How are the accessibility scores rolled up to the course and institutional level?

Ally assigns an accessibility score to each individual content item. This is then rolled up to the course level and each course is assigned an accessibility score, which is the average of all items in that course. This is also rolled up to the institutional level and each month/term/year is assigned an accessibility score, which is the average of all content items inside that month/term/year.

Is it possible to view Ally reports per school or department?

The Ally course content accessibility report is currently available at the institutional level and at the individual course level. Ally currently does not provide accessibility reporting at the individual school or department level in the User Interface, although this could be achieved through custom reporting using the CSV data export.

Adding school or departmental reporting based on the configured Institutional Hierarchy with delegated access to school or departmental administrators is part of the 2019 Ally roadmap.

Does the report include content items and courses that were already in the LMS?

Yes. When enabling the Ally integration, Ally will process all historical courses and content items. This process can take several days to complete, but will result in an institutional report that includes all historical data and provides a much better overview of trends and evolutions.

