# Blackboard®

## Blackboard Ally Tour 2019
## Tales from the Road

### Mapping New Terrains for Student Learning:
The Ally Tour heads Down Under

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**From Songlines to Alternative Formats**

Known as "Songlines," the First Australians "mapped" their environment using rhythm and melody to identify resources like water and food supplies. In the absence of a shared written or spoken language, these representations of the land served as a mode of communication among nomadic groups traversing the harsh Australian terrain. Comparing these auditory maps to the high-fidelity satellite images and GPS tracking that guide our travel today illustrates how the tools that we use to mediate our relationships with other people and with the world around us directly shape how we access and process information.

The theory that tools and language mediate cognition (learning) was first articulated by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, and persists in the learning sciences today. Literacy and media scholars such as Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan theorized about the transition from an oral tradition to print literacy, and the

ways communication mediums affect learning and information sharing. With the dawn of the digital age, the shift from print text to multi-media experiences and continuous connectivity across multiple devices and social contexts is also creating new conditions for learning and development.

To account for this changing information landscape, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) research, drawing from cutting-edge work

in neuroscience, details how varied sensory experiences and modes of representation activate different neurological pathways in the brain. Similarly, an emerging field of literacy research called "multimodality" explores how digital reading and composing practices increasingly blend image and sound to create new kinds of meaning and understanding. Tools like Blackboard Ally's alternative formats that allow people to freely transform texts into different modalities and formats, as well as combine and engage different sensory representations of texts, therefore, play an important role in mediating learning in education today.

> **In the absence of a shared written or spoken language, these representations of the land served as a mode of communication among nomadic groups traversing the harsh Australian terrain.**



On the left, a map of Australia represented through Songlines called "Seven Sisters Songline" by Josephine Mick, Pipalyatjara (1994) and on the right, an satellite image from Google Earth

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## Alternative Formats as Learning Tools

During our first Blackboard Ally session at the TLC ANZ conference, we drew from these strands of research in detailing the learning benefits of the alternative formats. In contrast to "learning styles," where the student is narrowly characterized as cognitively oriented towards a single sensory modality (e.g. a visual learner or an auditory learner), with the alternative formats, students can instead choose the best modality or the best format for the given learning
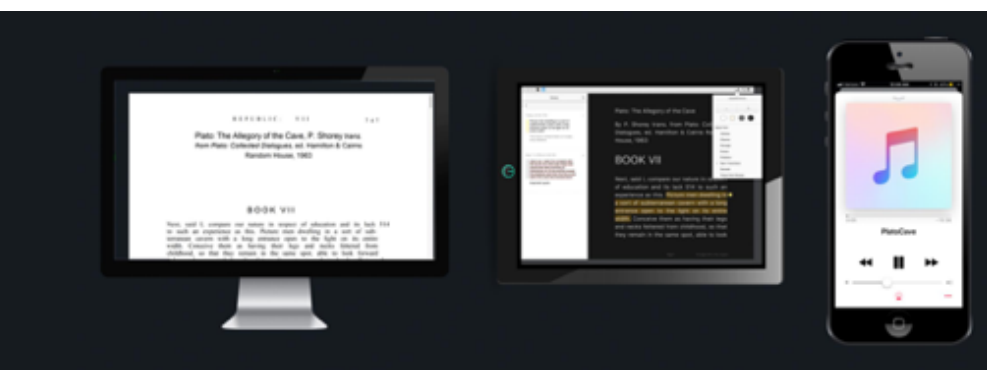
that can help learners with processing challenges. Further, students can use multiple formats in sequence to scaffold their understanding – skimming a Tagged PDF for high-level understanding identifying key areas of the text, then moving to the ePub for annotating, highlighting, and deep reading comprehension strategies, then finishing off their study sequence by listening to the MP3 to review the content with a different sensory modality.

Empowering students to actively choose how they engage with their

reflective practices and strategic decision-making involved in refining one's learner preference improves "executive functions," helping students improve their study habits through metacognitive awareness. For struggling students, academic challenges may have less to do with difficulty with the content and more the result of poor study practices and executive function. Offering students tools like alternative formats that support them with time management and options for learning strategies can help them towards content mastery.

> **The reflective practices and strategic decision-making involved in refining one's learner preference improves "executive functions," helping students improve their study habits through metacognitive awareness.**



Scaffolded learning with alternative formats from skimming a Tagged PDF on desktop to deep reading on ePub to reviewing with audio MP3

objective and learning context. Students can also combine formats, such as reading the HTML format while listening to the MP3 on their mobile – a comprehension technique

learning materials fosters "learner preference," where students develop an understanding about how they learn best, or the best learning strategy for a given context. The

When introducing Blackboard Ally to instructors, explaining how the alternative formats benefit student learning can help frame the conversation around accessibility, a topic we covered during our second session at TLC ANZ. In addition to research findings that demonstrate more accessible content improves information retention and speed of task completion among non-disabled users (Schmutz et al, 2017), accessibility issues can also impact the quality of the alternative formats. A document missing image descriptions and headings, for example, will be less useful to students who want to download that document as an MP3. Encouraging instructors to focus on accessibility issues that impact the usability of the materials and the quality of the alternative formats can help motivate them to take action through Blackboard Ally's instructor feedback.

**The Inclusion Van Tours Australia**

Following a great week at TLC ANZ in Sydney, we hit the road for Tour stops at five universities in Melbourne, Brisbane, and Hobart. Each visit included a UDL workshop focused on supporting the diverse needs of 21st-century digital learners, and a data review of the institution's accessibility scores, alternative format downloads, and instructor feedback engagement. Participants who hadn't yet seen their usage data were encouraged that so many students were discovering the alternative formats on their own and making them part of their learning experience.
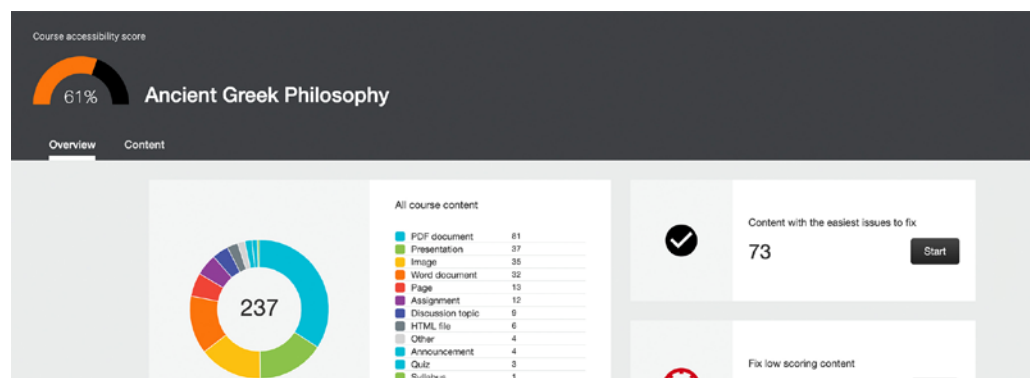
In the past 12 months, Ally users across Australia have downloaded nearly 100,000 alternative formats, eclipsing 27,000 downloads in August alone, as well as improved the accessibility scores of over 17,000 course files.

During our visits, we had the chance to learn more about how institutions in Australia have been rolling out Blackboard Ally to faculty and students. RMIT, for example, has taken a "Communities of Practice" approach by turning on alternative formats and instructor feedback in all their courses and allowing expertise and champions from the campus community to emerge and influence others. Over the past 12 months, RMIT has seen strong adoption of Blackboard Ally by students and faculty, with over 10,000 alternative formats downloads and over 3,000 files fixed through the instructor

feedback. As awareness about accessibility and alternative formats has grown from the ground-up, the team has been putting in place their "Digital Learning and Teaching Framework," which includes a good practice principle committed to "Inclusive" design. The principle takes a UDL approach that closely aligns with Blackboard Ally's capabilities,

Blackboard Ally's reporting insights, they have assigned a small team of resource developers to "renovate" courses and ensure that the HTML meets WCAG standards. Their efforts have improved course accessibility in several key areas, including reducing the number of images missing description by 20 percentage points. Moving forward, they want to grow

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Screenshot of the new Instructor-Facing Course report, designed to help instructors strategize and prioritize how they fix accessibility issues with their course content

focusing on supporting diverse learner needs by ensuring content meets accessibility standards to promote a more inclusive learning experience for all students at RMIT.

We also met with Ilona Van Galen, Digital Education Designer, and the team from GOTAFE, where they have taken a strategic approach to addressing accessibility issues in their courses, beginning with a focus on the HTML content in courses. Leveraging

faculty understanding about the benefits of accessibility for all learners, and focus on addressing accessibility issues with their course files.

GOTAFE has introduced an accessibility section in their online training course for faculty, and will take advantage of Blackboard Ally's instructor feedback and course report to provide their faculty with on-demand guidance to ensure their course files are accessible to all their students.