



## Using technology to more fully engage students – and instructors – in online learning

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Instructional Support Specialist,  
NOVA's Woodbridge campus

With more than 75,000 students, the Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) system is the largest public education institution in Virginia, and the second largest community college in the United States. For 40 years now, NOVA's Extended Learning Institution (ELI) has offered online learning and today, more than 9,000 students are enrolled each semester in one of their more than 300 totally-online courses. All of ELI's courses are available for “anytime, anywhere” learning as part of NOVA's commitment to supporting non-traditional learners, and with competition fierce for online students, NOVA wants to ensure that ELI's fully-online courses are as engaging as possible. They also want to fully support their faculty members by making it easier for them to create more engaging courses. In 2012, NOVA turned to Blackboard Collaborate to help them do so; in 2015, they adopted Blackboard Collaborate with the Ultra experience, which delivers even greater ease of use and opportunities for engagement for both faculty and students.

### Helping faculty make asynchronous courses more richly engaging

Dr. Bo Yang is an Instructional Support Specialist at NOVA's Woodbridge campus. In her role, she identifies new technologies, trains faculty and staff on application use, and keeps faculty, staff, and students informed on what technologies are available to them. The integration of technology in to teaching and learning is serious business at NOVA. In April 2015, the Digital Community Colleges Survey recognized NOVA's commitment, awarding them first place for the use of digital technologies to improve the services provided to students, faculty and staff of community colleges with 10,000 or more students.

Faculty were using a wide range of tools to add video and other engaging elements to their asynchronous courses - Microsoft Office Mix, Screencast, and Panopto – but what NOVA wanted to provide its instructors was a solution that would make recording a lecture as easy as delivering the lecture. “Our faculty are experts in their field,” says Yang, “Not necessarily in the use of technology. Collaborate is so easy to use, we're able to immediately remove this barrier. And the Ultra experience makes it even easier to use.”

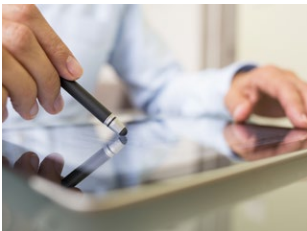
An Arabic language professor who had recently begun offering an online course was looking for ways to make it more engaging. Initially, his classes were static presentations augmented by language labs. But this was insufficiently engaging for the study of such a difficult language, and the professor felt disconnected from his students. He agreed to a “test drive” and recorded one of his lectures with Collaborate so that students could actually hear how words were pronounced. He found Collaborate with the Ultra experience so easy to use – and his students responded so positively to the personal touch of being able to hear his exact pronunciations– that the professor immediately started recording all the lectures in his course.



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## Ease of use with Blackboard Collaborate has multiple dimensions

One of the most important aspects of Collaborate Ultra's ease of use is that it's web-based, which sets it apart from other applications. "In keeping with the college's IT policy, our faculty members do not have privileges for downloading or updating software. So faculty members need to call IT staff to take care of things like Java updates." says Yang "It's great that Collaborate is web-based and nothing has to be installed or downloaded, so there's no need to involve IT. Our IT team is extremely responsive, but having a web-based application makes things so much more convenient. And it also gives faculty have the ability to instantly take advantage of new features."

NOVA uses Blackboard Learn as its college-wide Learning Management System (LMS), and, for Yang, Collaborate's integration with Learn is critical. "Our faculty members are using Blackboard Learn already, and they want to stay within this environment. They don't want to have to search around, asking themselves 'where did I save it?' If it's in Blackboard, they can easily find what they're looking for. From my point of view, having a solution like Collaborate integrated with our LMS is a must."

## Recordings. Prep sessions. Technical Training. Putting Collaborate to many different uses.

Adding lecture recordings to asynchronous classes is one of the foremost uses that NOVA puts Collaborate to. Faculty members (including the professor of Arabic) are increasingly recording their face-to-face classes so that students who missed a session, or wish to review materials, are able to easily do so. Other faculty members are using Collaborate to host virtual meetings in which they help students prep for exams, explain homework assignments, and answer any questions their students have. This is especially important for ELI learners, and for online instructors who teach remotely. Collaborate is also being used for faculty and staff technology training sessions, which saves time traveling to campus for face to face learning, and also makes it possible for adjunct faculty, many with full time jobs, to participate.

## The capabilities that matter, now and in the future

NOVA now has over 20,000 sessions recorded with Blackboard Collaborate – 2,300 of these with the Ultra experience. They value the ease of use of recording, and the application sharing feature. One capability that Yang sees as growing in importance is accessibility. "As a public institution committed to reaching all learners, Collaborate's support for accessibility – with features like captioning - is increasingly important to us. It's helping us be proactive, and not just wait for a student with a disability to request support." Another capability is mobile access. "We're seeing a growing demand for mobile, from students and, increasingly from faculty members. They're on the go, and, wherever they are, they want and need access."

Yang reports that faculty and students are enthusiastically embracing Blackboard Collaborate with the Ultra experience. "With Collaborate, our faculty members are able to create more engaging and enriched online classes, and forge closer connections to their students. And the students are responding very positively. I've also noticed that some faculty members who were more reluctant to use new technologies are now more open to it. I credit this to Blackboard's exceptional ease of use." Yang also gives high marks to Blackboard's responsiveness. "Blackboard really listens to their audience, and adds the features that their users are looking for. This level of responsiveness helps us better support our faculty and students. Technology is very important here at NOVA, and partnering with Blackboard is keeping us on the technical forefront."

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