Using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra with Basic Writers and in a Graduate Course on Teaching Basic Writing

Laura Gray-Rosendale and Haley Stammen

ABSTRACT: Two authors, a professor teaching graduate students in an online class about Basic Writing history, theory, and practice (Laura), and a graduate student tutoring basic writers online (Haley), share their experiences using a real time video component, Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, to work with distance students. They explain how they have witnessed this online tool aid teachers of basic writers as well as basic writers in online tutoring situations, contending that such a tool creates learner-centered engagement, collaboration, and connection between online students and their teachers/tutors as well as among online students themselves. They also provide a link to a video in which they show how Collaborate Ultra works and how they employ it with their own students, as well as offer feedback from their own students about their experiences with Collaborate Ultra.

KEYWORDS: Basic Writing; Blackboard; Collaborate Ultra; online education; technology

Laura has been teaching her "Teaching Basic Writing" graduate class at Northern Arizona University (NAU) for twenty-two years. Haley is a graduate student in the online Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies (RWDMS) Program in which Laura teaches. Talking one day about the problem of community-building in online environments, Haley mentioned her experiences using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra to conference online with basic writers and other students in NAU's University Writing Commons (UWC) and Interdisciplinary Writing Program (IWP), our writing center, explaining how helpful it had been to those students to see her in real time and to

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discuss their writing issues. Laura listened to Haley's excitement around this tool and decided that she would try it out in her graduate class that focuses on Basic Writing Theory and Practice, a course Haley completed as part of her RWDMS coursework. In this article, we describe the value of this online tool for helping both basic writers in online tutoring situations as well as teachers of basic writers, arguing that, in spite of some challenges it poses, it can foster learner-centered engagement, collaboration, and connection among students and between students and their tutors/teachers. We also provide a link to a video in which we show how Collaborate Ultra works and how we employ Collaborate Ultra with our own students.

Understanding Blackboard Collaborate Ultra

Before we get into the questions of how we have each utilized the Collaborate Ultra feature in Blackboard, we first offer some thoughts about what it is, how it works, where and why it can be effective, and the challenges and opportunities it presents. Collaborate Ultra is a video conferencing software that allows individuals to communicate in "real time" within this Learning Management Software (LMS). Using audio and video technology, users can see and speak with each other. It operates much like Skype or Google Hangouts, but is designed specifically for academic use and is contained within the LMS our campus utilizes, Blackboard. There is a whiteboard feature that is useful during appointments. Using the whiteboard tool, writers can upload their work as well as other sources into Collaborate Ultra, and we can review these texts together. Writers can use the pen or text tool to mark up the document. While the whiteboard feature does not allow users to save the marks permanently, writers can edit their documents using Word, Google Docs, or a hard copy throughout the session. Collaborate Ultra has a recording tool that captures audio and video, including document or screen sharing, during the session that can be downloaded by the writing assistant/instructor and shared with the student after the appointment. This can be quite useful, enabling the student to review the appointment and hear discussions again.

Of course, we have found that this tool poses some challenges as well. We outline these briefly here and then return to them in more detail at the end of our essay. Technology literacy in general can be challenging for students unfamiliar with new technologies. Collaborate Ultra does not allow edits on the screen to be downloaded as a document, so the feedback that students receive on their work has to be assimilated in real time as well. If the writing assistant/instructor records the session, the writer can view the

edits being made on the screen, but will still have to apply feedback to their own work. This can be difficult for L2 students or students who struggle with visual processing, though the audio component of the tool does help with this. Students with weaker internet connections may struggle with using Collaborate Ultra, as the software requires a large amount of bandwidth. Collaborate Ultra is also too powerful a program for a student to use with data on mobile phones in most situations. Additionally, as these conversations happen in real time, outside factors, such as children, pets, noise, or other disruptions, need to be negotiated. Finally, as with any real-time tool utilized for online students, often their schedules can make it hard to meet, especially in larger groups. Finding a common time when everyone is free can be difficult, and students may have other life and work obligations that keep them from taking part as regularly as they might like.

In our experience, however, the potential opportunities that Collaborate Ultra presents far outweigh these challenges. It offers an increased community within online courses, as online students are better connected with faculty, peers, and other components of the campus community. It can help to support online basic writers and other students with their writing through Writing Center Services. Collaborate Ultra is contained within Blackboard, so there is no additional cost to departments or programs who already utilize Blackboard. There is also 24/7 technology support for the program. The tool is relatively easy to use even for those who may not interact with technology on a regular basis. In addition, there are very helpful online tutorials that can aid online writing assistants and teachers should they encounter problems while using the various options offered by Collaborate Ultra. All these factors make Blackboard Collaborate Ultra a crucial tool for online tutoring and online teaching both at the undergraduate level with basic writers and other writing students, as well as for working with online graduate students.

Bringing Collaborate Ultra to the Writing Center (Haley)

I will begin by discussing the work I have done to incorporate Collaborate Ultra into my efforts with Writing Center students and in training other graduate writing assistants to do so. At Northern Arizona University in Fall 2017, 26% of enrollment came from online and extended campus offerings. At that time, neither NAU's Interdisciplinary Writing Program nor the University Writing Commons offered writing support for off-site and distance writers. The UWC and IWP received requests from a variety of departments to aid their undergraduate students. Graduate students from

across the university also requested online appointments. Both the UWC and IWP wanted to expand their offerings to include online appointments to address this unmet need on campus. We began a pilot program for online appointments during the 2018-2019 academic year. There was some funding available to support this project in NAU's UWC and IWP budgets, enabling graduate writing assistants to be paid per hour for appointments and scheduling. Five online graduate writing assistants tutored an average of four hours per week with one hour of continued training for the semesters. In order for online tutoring at NAU to expand beyond these offerings, the UWC and IWP is currently seeking additional funding.

With limited funding, selecting a program with no or limited additional cost to the department was important. Graduate writing assistant Megan Brown and I tested out several different software options; we ultimately decided that Collaborate Ultra was the ideal tool for the online writing center appointments that we were trying to conduct, since writers and writing assistants are able to see and hear each other, as well as share writing. We favored Collaborate Ultra over similar software programs, such as Google Hangouts or Skype, because of the ease of document and screen sharing, the ability to use a cell phone for audio, and the recording feature to save and download videos of a completed session. Google Hangouts, for example, required that a student open Google Docs in a separate browser and share the document with the writing assistant, which felt clunky compared to the more streamlined Collaborate Ultra (see figure 1). Another benefit to using Collaborate Ultra is that we have access to 24/7 Blackboard technical support and online LMS support through our campus at no departmental cost.

Since the pilot effort was on a smaller scale due to budget constraints, there were twenty one-hour appointments available per week for Fall 2018, Spring 2019, and Summer 2019. The only cost included the wages for graduate writing assistants. For this pilot, all online appointments were piloted in one-hour slots; most of NAU's UWC and IWP appointments are thirty minutes, but we felt this extra time would be important to account for potential technological issues. During the piloting process, however, I found that many students had limited technological disruptions and used the entire hour to discuss their writing, and they often scheduled another appointment to continue working with their writing assistant. Going forward, appointments will continue to be scheduled for one hour.

Using Collaborate Ultra requires training graduate writing assistants to use this software and work with online students. Throughout the pilot program, the importance of training became increasingly clear. I created a
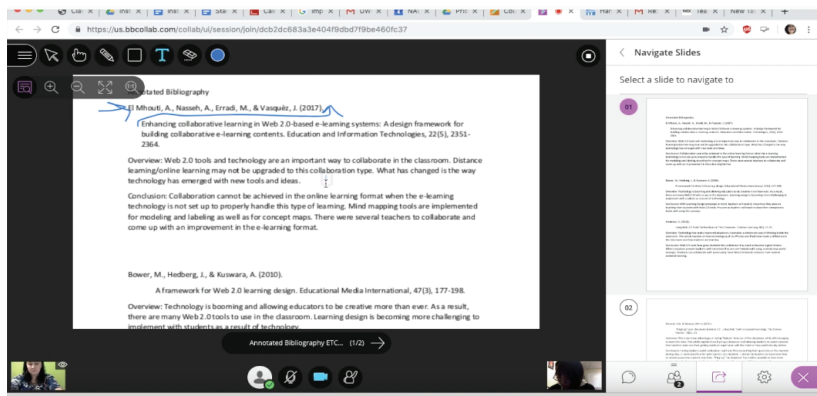
Figure 1. Collaborate Ultra has a streamlined interface that allows users to discuss writing while utilizing the audio and video components, unlike comparable software.

series of training materials as a project for one of my Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies graduate courses at no cost to the UWC and IWP. The training that I developed required that online writing assistants go through ten hours of initial training (including writing center theory, shadowing appointments, sample scenarios, and training with Collaborate Ultra), and an hour of reading per week throughout the first semester of working online. I allocated one hour for writing assistants to learn to use Collaborate Ultra. During this time, the writing assistant and I conducted a mock appointment from the student's and writing assistant's perspectives. We also discussed and used the document sharing, screen sharing, mobile audio, and recording features. We realized that one hour is plenty of time for this training to be completed. Additional training materials, including a handout that I made that provided an overview of the basic functions of Collaborate Ultra, are housed in Blackboard and designed so that on-campus and distance graduate students can serve as online writing assistants (see figure 2).

We added graduate writing assistants to a non-credit course dedicated to online appointments and training. Students receive an appointment confirmation email with instructions and a link to the session the day before their appointment. To access Collaborate Ultra, a student will click on the link in their appointment confirmation and enter a video-conferencing session dedicated for their appointment (see figure 2). Writers are prompted to turn on their microphone and webcam as well as enter their names. Since the writers are all enrolled in different courses, they receive a guest login link

unlike writers in Laura's class who are able to access Collaborate Ultra directly through Blackboard. This guest link removes the need to enroll writers in a course to conduct one-time appointments, which I found to be incredibly useful, and it eliminates administrative work for UWC and IWP staff.

Instructions for Accessing Blackboard Collaborate for Online Writing Commons Appointments with Haley

Before your session:
Your computer must be connected to the Internet.
You must have Adobe Flash installed on your computer and grant access to your webcam and microphone.

At the start of your appointment time:
Important: Do not enter BB Collaborative before the start of your appointment time unless invited by your writing assistant to join early. Another session may be concluding.
Go to: https://us.bbcollab.com/guest/d1fa75943bd341fe917a964aeace9a61
Join with browser.
Enter your name.
Follow the prompts to share audio and video, if you desire. Sharing video is optional.
    If your computer says you don't have permission to share audio/ video: Click "learn
    more" on the pop up. Scroll to Audio and Video Issues. Follow directions. Refresh after
    changing computer settings.

If you do not have a microphone or audio doesn't work, you may use your cell phone for audio.
Click the black icon with three lines in the upper left corner.
Click use "Use your phone for audio"
Dial the number and use the pin number (the phone will ask for a conference number: this is the pin number provided to enter the Blackboard Collaborate shell.
You should be able to hear your writing assistant and respond through your cell phone.

To chat/ instant message:
Click purple arrows in bottom right corner.
Click everyone.
Click the moderator's name.
Type your message and hit enter to send.

If you are using a tablet and need to flip your camera,
Purple arrows
Setting
Audio Video Settings
Set up your camera and microphone
Use drop down menu to select proper camera settings.

To upload your assignment,
Save your assignment as a .PDF

Figure 2. Haley created a handout that students receive prior to their online writing appointments with basic information about how Collaborate Ultra works. Using the blue hyperlink, writers are able to access Collaborate Ultra when they are not enrolled.

Using Collaborate Ultra in an Online Writing Center Environment (Haley)

As these appointments took place during the course of an entire academic year, I learned that Collaborate Ultra is an ideal tool for this type of collaboration. Online writing center work facilitated by Collaborate Ultra incorporates the same practices as f2f appointments. Since Collaborate Ultra includes both audio and video technology, my students and I communicate synchronously. For example, in my f2f appointments, I always begin by asking students when we work together for the first time where they are working from, what program they are in, and a little about their lives (family? employment?). By communicating synchronously using Collaborate Ultra, I am able to ask clarifying questions and get to know my students much as I would in a f2f appointment. For basic writers, sharing their work using a new technology with a stranger can be daunting, so establishing rapport is very important to conducting a successful session.

As part of f2f and online training, writing assistants read excerpts from ecocomposition, literacy studies, multicultural/feminist studies, and writing center pedagogies as well as discuss how these concepts impact their work prior to and while taking appointments. I emphasize an ecological approach based on works by Marilyn Cooper, Lisa Ede, and Bonnie Devet. In "Redefining the Writing Center with Ecocomposition," Devet uses the term *ecocomposition* to identify factors that influence student writing, such as place, environment, and social categorization, including race, age, gender, ability, and the like. Devet draws upon the work of Ede and Cooper to show the importance of social interaction between students and writing assistants. Due to the fact that these writings tend to focus on f2f interactions, writing assistants are trained to examine the environment within which writing is generated and to adapt their tutoring practices accordingly so as to situate writing within the diverse "ecosystems" in which online students write. This approach is particularly important for basic writers who may still be negotiating and defining their places within academic discourse while not being fully immersed in academic culture.

After getting to know each of my students, I move to a conversation around what an individual student is working on and how this student is doing with their assignment and the course. Being able to share files and documents such as prompts, rubrics, and drafts is an important element of f2f appointments; Collaborate Ultra's document sharing tools facilitate this for online appointments. Students can upload PDF versions of important

documents to be reviewed with their writing assistant. Online basic writers often reach out for help after they have had negative experiences, such as receiving a failing grade or negative feedback from their instructors. Reviewing important documents for the assignments, a crucial element of a f2f meeting, can be replicated in Collaborate Ultra.

For example, Faith[1] was working on a criticism of readings from her criminal justice textbook and struggling with this new genre of writing. In her first assignment, Faith received a failing grade due to not understanding the directions and conventions of this style of writing. During our appointment, Faith shared the directions/ rubric, her first assignment with instructor feedback, and her in-progress draft of her second assignment. The only text associated with her project that I was unable to view was her print textbook. Being able to contextualize Faith's assignment fully helped me to facilitate her learning process. Using Collaborate Ultra, Faith and I were able to alternate among the three documents (see figure 3) to talk about her second assignment while paying careful attention to the instructor's directions, expectations, and feedback. Meeting with Faith over three sessions, I saw a significant growth in her ability to evaluate texts critically and compose a stronger argument.
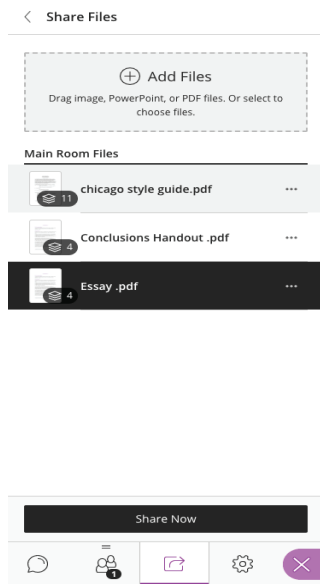

Figure 3. Using Collaborate Ultra, writers and writing assistants can examine a variety of documents together.

Using Collaborate Ultra to discuss instructions with basic writers, like Faith, helps support the writing process, which can be really helpful for writers who are struggling. For example, I worked with Frankie who had a lengthy writing project and, about twenty pages into it, she began to doubt if she was completing her assignment correctly. I always encourage online students to reach out to their instructors. In some situations, we draft an email together using the screen share feature on Collaborate (see figure 4). To do this, I give a student a few minutes to draft an email independently, though I am happy to answer any questions that have emerged during the composing process. Then, the student reads the email they wrote out loud to check for any errors in syntax or clarity. In a f2f appointment, this exercise would run the same way; with Collaborate Ultra, the only difference is that the interaction is mediated by the software. Encouraging writers to reach out to their instructors can also help students to be more successful in their coursework. There are online students who have never met their instructors; for me as an on-campus writing assistant, there are times that I may know their instructors and am able to tell the writer a little more about them, which further helps connect online writers to campus.
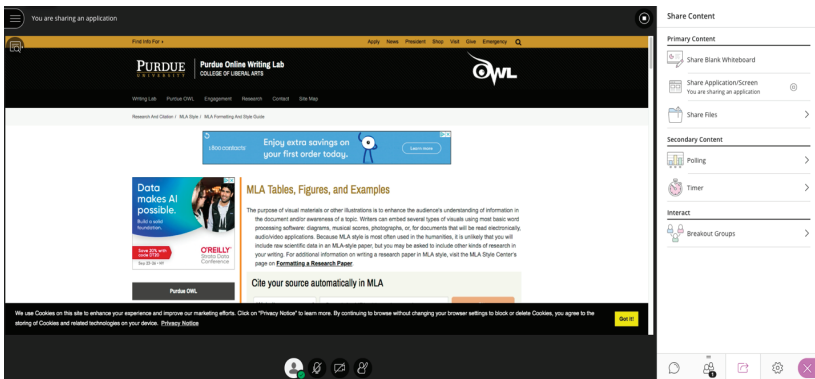

Figure 4. Students and writing assistants can share screens to review websites and discuss writing during appointments.

I learned from Chase Edwards, UWC coordinator for the first year of this pilot project, not to go into appointments with an agenda or expectations; I've found this advice particularly important with online appointments and working with basic writers. A difference between f2f and online environments is the control over the environment. Since f2f appointments are conducted in a dedicated environment, there are limited distractions from children, pets, etc. Due to the fact that Collaborate Ultra has audio and video components, a writing assistant gets a more intimate glimpse at students' personal lives. Working with a basic writer who has children playing in the background, who is squeezing a quick appointment in during their lunch break, who is struggling to get Internet access at home, or who has had a negative experience with past online coursework, can be daunting for both novice and experienced writing assistants. These writing students are simply trying to get help with their writing in a way that fits within their lifestyles, and by expanding online tutoring offering using Collaborate, the UWC and IWP have reached over 40 students than otherwise would have been possible during the first semester of our pilot program.

With online writing center appointments, adapting tutoring practices and helping students negotiate situations that arise are key approaches. Collaborate Ultra can be utilized to aid almost any writer in any situation. I've worked with a writer who got stuck in traffic and was unable to make it home before our appointment time and had an essay due the next day. This student emailed me in a panic, worried that she would not do well on her assignment because she had to cancel. I emailed the student back and had this student find a Starbucks near her location. She used their free Wi-Fi for our appointment.

Optimizing Collaborate Ultra—Some Take-Aways (Haley)

Before beginning to use Collaborate Ultra at NAU, I had also worked with online students through the Disability Services Office at Eastern Oregon University. I conducted these appointments largely over the phone and would often provide students with written feedback, usually in a Google Doc or Word Document. Collaborate Ultra makes conducting appointments more streamlined and structured. In the past, I spent a significant amount of time reading and reviewing student work before our meeting time since sitting through and reading someone's work without seeing that person felt awkward for me. While I did often speak with students directly over the phone, the majority of the assistance I was offering students was asynchronous, since

I did not want them to sit in silence while I reviewed their work. I've found that using Collaborate Ultra significantly reduces the workload for me as a writing assistant. The document-sharing tool on Collaborate Ultra allows me to review a student's writing and synchronously offer them feedback, which mimics a f2f appointment. Writers upload their work at the start of a session, requiring no preparation time for me since we read through their work together. In f2f appointments, writing assistants do not review a student's writing before her or his appointment. While a comparable program, such as Google Docs, will allow a tutor to offer feedback synchronously, the audio and video tools of Collaborate Ultra mimic a f2f appointment and add an important human element that using Google Docs simply does not. Online appointments, though mediated by Collaborate Ultra, operate similarly to f2f appointments. I have found this to be successful throughout my experiences: my workload was significantly reduced while adding in a synchronous component to benefit students. Each appointment time was an hour without adding additional time for providing written feedback. This also allows more students to be served by the online UWC; as NAU offers limited appointments, this is an important consideration for our program.

I've found that online students enjoy being able to communicate with writing assistants, particularly appreciating the writing assistants' ability to look through their writing and give instant feedback using a synchronous tutoring model. Faith, the writer whom I mentioned earlier, said, "I enjoyed using Bb Learn Collaborate [because] it was extremely convenient and easy to use! I found it beneficial to have the ability to upload a writing document, and see the edits being made on the screen." Using Collaborate Ultra, students can see any marks or revisions that I suggest for their papers since we are both able to mark and view their documents (see figure 5). I am also able to assist writers with formatting since the screen sharing feature allows me to watch writers as they edit their papers. Another basic writer, Charles, noted this as well, describing that being able to see his work on the screen "has helped me catch errors or formatting mistakes I would have not caught by myself." I can direct students how to format MLA and APA papers properly in "real time." Another basic writing student named Heather said, "Not only did I received [receive] feedback on my paper, I was also taught a few things about formatting my paper the proper way and more. I would recommend Collaborate to anyone whom [who] needs someone to proofread your paper, edit and give feedback." Writers reported that they were highly satisfied with the ability to see their edits appear on the screen in Collaborate Ultra.
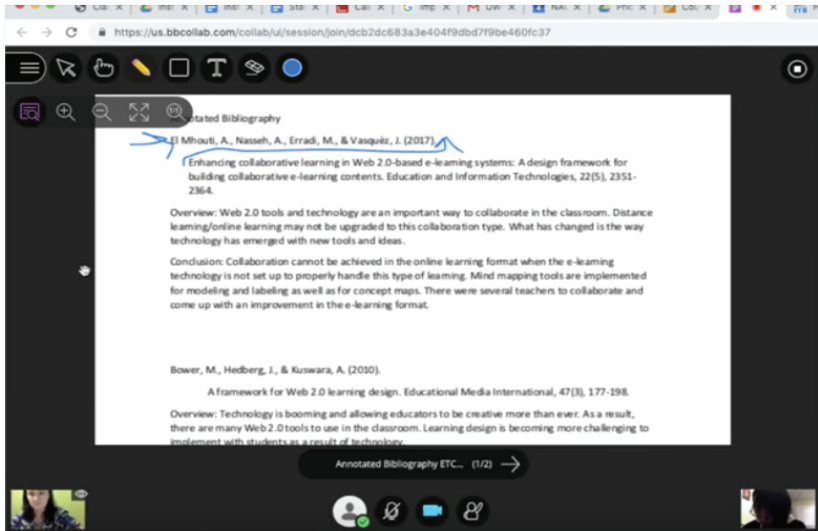
Figure 5. Writing assistants can use pen, shape, text, or pointer tools when working with students.

In addition to seeing edits, writers are also able to see their writing assistant and seem to enjoy being able to communicate with members from the NAU campus community. Heather also noted that "I like that Collaborate allows me to have a private one on one session. I also like the fact that Collaborate enables the option of having an online session for those who don't live in Flagstaff. This really helped me because I decided to move back home to finish my last year off campus." Charles had a similar view, and said, "I like how personal it is and the 1-on-1 time you get with a tutor is very helpful for learning how to not only improve your writing for that specific paper, but all future papers as well!" One student reported that working using Collaborate Ultra felt similar to being on campus and working face to face. In this initial pilot, the UWC and IWP met a major goal for this project since students noted that our online writing tutoring feels similar to on-campus tutoring, despite being mediated by technology.

NAU's UWC and IWP offer recurring appointments for writers needing assistance on a weekly or biweekly basis. My graduate writing assistant colleague Megan reported a positive experience working with Enrique on a weekly basis for a semester and noticed a significant growth in his writing. Using Collaborate Ultra, Megan and Enrique were able to communicate in real time. Megan said, "Throughout the semester, Enrique had slowly been implementing my feedback into his writing, and I noticed [his growth] all

at once. Since then, we've been able to shift our focus from sentence-level meaning to overall ideas, and his organization and paragraph structure have since improved." Megan noted that "consistent online meetings using Collaborate Ultra have really made a difference in his writing skills." Using Collaborate Ultra, as well as meeting consistently, allowed Megan to support Enrique's growth and address global and local errors in his writing using the document sharing, screen sharing, and audio/ video technologies. Another graduate writing assistant, Fain Robert, worked with Diana for the duration of the semester, despite Diana's preference for working without the camera feature. Diana said, "[Using Collaborate] has been very helpful. I like how I *talk* to my tutor using the Collaborate" (emphasis added). There may be students or even writing assistants who do not have a webcam or prefer not to use the camera feature. All Collaborate Ultra features work even in the instances in which a student or writing assistant is unable to or chooses not to utilize the video function. Of course, the writer and writing assistant will not be able to exchange nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions or gestures, factors that can be important when working with basic writers. While not necessarily detrimental to the session, encouraging writing assistants and students to use the video feature will help them most closely replicate the f2f environment.

Overall, I have enjoyed using Collaborate Ultra to work with basic writers over the course of the pilot program. I'm looking forward to seeing NAU's UWC and IWP continue to expand the use of online tutoring to more writers across more programs and geographical locations. As Blackboard updates fairly regularly, it will be interesting to see how this software develops over the next several years. One update that I would like to see is for document sharing to become more interactive and to contain more of the features of word processing; the ability to add comments or track changes within Collaborate Ultra would help writing assistants and students to engage comments in a more collaborative manner. Had it been available to me when I was an online undergraduate student, this resource would have been invaluable in connecting me with campus from a distance.

Future Considerations and Final Impressions for Online Writing Center Help (Haley)

In the future, it would be interesting to study how online tutoring impacts retention and student satisfaction with their experience of online learning. One area of retention that warrants further study is how infrastruc-

ture can serve as a gatekeeper for writers needing to access online writing center services. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks discusses how class status can be a barrier to success in higher education, as students from lower-economic categories and the working-class must overcome additional barriers to success. Time is one of the biggest constraints for online writing students. Most students who take online courses do so for a reason— the flexibility offered by distance courses fits into their lifestyles. I've worked with a teacher during her preparation period, only for great work to be interrupted by the bell releasing her forty second-graders back into her classroom. Another student did not get to eat lunch since she scheduled our appointment during her lunch break because she works full-time as a respiratory therapist. Another writing assistant reported to me that a student was falling asleep during a session because he worked twelve-hour night shifts and scheduled an appointment before going to bed for the day. When offering Collaborate Ultra meetings to online students, it is imperative for those who handle scheduling for appointments to take working students' situations into account and to offer hours outside of a traditional 9-5 workday. Over the course of the academic year, the majority of the appointments that I held were between 4-7 p.m. Most of the writing assistants taking online appointments at our institution are graduate teaching assistants, who teach and take classes during the day. Having hours outside of the typical work day provides graduate students with the opportunities to work five additional hours outside of the obligations of their assistantships or fellowships. Having evening hours has made writing support available when many students are especially in need of assistance.

While sessions should operate similarly to f2f sessions, writing assistants conducting these appointments need to be independent, quick thinkers so as to adapt to technological challenges and writer needs when they arise. Writing assistants also need to be attentive to how a particular student is negotiating the technology and provide direction as needed. Additionally, writing assistants need to commit to using Collaborate Ultra, as writers pick up on apprehension and doubts towards the interface. For example, one of the writing assistants who was a part of the pilot program chose to use Collaborate Ultra for audio and video while working with his student in a Google Doc and using the screenshare feature to locate research material. It can be frustrating for students to navigate between three different programs during one appointment, as the student's feedback on the session reflected. Writing assistants should instead make full use of Collaborate Ultra, as all of the technologies are available in one interface versus attempting to recreate

the same experience using other software. Since writing assistants often work remotely, a thorough and careful training is of the utmost importance to ensure that writing assistants are comfortable and confident working with online writers using this program. Through the use of Collaborate Ultra, distance basic writers can become connected to campus and receive invaluable support for their writing endeavors.

Teaching Teachers of Basic Writers and Other Graduate Students Using Collaborate Ultra (Laura)

In an online tutoring environment, students want and need to feel a deep connection with their tutors. The same holds true for our online graduate classes. Collaborate Ultra can help build that sense of connection within online graduate seminars as well.

As Anthony Picciano notes in *Online Education Policy and Practice: The Past, Present, and Future of the Digital University*, "During its Fifth Wave (2021-2029), online education will mature . . . Students will come to expect every course to have online components that provide access to content and tools for interacting with faculty and fellow students. Colleges and universities that carefully plan, develop, and integrate online education will do well in this environment. Those that do not will struggle" (181). Understanding how to use online tools effectively will become increasingly more essential. I teach in the RWDMS online graduate program at NAU. Our graduate program went completely online fifteen years ago. It is now recognized as one of the strongest online MA Rhetoric and Composition Programs across the United States. We place our students in teaching jobs in the U.S. and internationally, in professional writing jobs of various kinds, and in top doctoral programs around the country.

In this program, students take several introductory courses on Literary Criticism and Theory, an Introduction to RWDMS, and an Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition Theory. Then they take topics courses at the 600-level—Topics in Historical and Contemporary Rhetoric, Topics in Narrative Studies and Creative Rhetorics, Topics in Public and Disciplinary Writing, and Topics in Digital and Social Media Studies. They also enroll in a 500-level class called Introduction to Research Methods in Rhetoric and Writing Studies as well as a 600-level Research Projects or Capstone class.

I outlined my 7.5 week online graduate course in Teaching Basic Writing—which I teach as a 600 level topics course—in a recent special issue of *JBW* (Volume 37.1) in an essay titled "Re-examining Constructions of Basic

Writers' Identities: Graduate Teaching, New Developments in the Contextual Model, and the Future of the Discipline." For those of you interested in a fuller overview of the class than I briefly describe here, I orient you to that article and/or invite you to contact me directly. But, suffice it to say, I have been perfecting this class for over twenty years in different iterations—face-to-face, online, blended, full-semester and half-semester versions. Now, of course, the Teaching Basic Writing class is only taught online. The students in the class are increasingly RWDMS students as well. Some students live on campus and have Graduate Teaching Assistantship positions and Writing Center appointments like Haley. These students will take most of their RWDMS classes online but may take a couple of required classes or electives face-to-face.[2] Other students live across the country or around the world and are totally online. Increasingly, these students include those who have taught Basic Writing students for some time in community colleges and high schools and are only now getting a chance to take a class in Basic Writing Theory and Practice. As I note in that essay published in *JBW*, I have designed my Teaching Basic Writing graduate course around a series of specific shifts that I have witnessed in constructions of basic writers' student identities over time. These shifts include developmentalist and grammar-based models (1970s), academic discourse models (1980s), conflict models (1990s), and contextual models (2000s).

In the main, I have been quite happy with the history and theory we cover in the class as well as the opportunities students have to apply what they are learning to teaching situations they may be encountering. I update the readings and the assignments each year as new publications come out and as I want to shift prompts and ideas. The course is composed of discussions, short writing responses, a Final Project Proposal with a literature review, and a Final Project. I respond carefully via written responses to everything that the students write. The students respond to each other in the discussions through written responses as well, often with very detailed feedback.

However, as Whiteside et al. write in *Social Presence in Online Learning: Multiple Perspectives on Practice and Research*, "Many online instructors feel disconnected from their students, and many online students feel disconnected from their classmates, and this perceived separation leads to disengagement and loss of learning" (3). In order to fight this, they suggest among other things that we ought to "Design an intuitive, organized learning environment, cultivate connections to build community, connect content to applied and authentic learning experiences, understand a variety of tools and media, harness reflection and prior experience, provide early

and continuous feedback, design with assessment in mind, [and] encourage change in small steps" (181-82). My course keeps these things at the forefront of how the course operates.

As Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt assert in *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*, community in online classes also needs to include the following:

- Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication
- Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily student to student than student to instructor
- Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning
- Sharing of resources among students
- Expressions of support and encouragement exchanged between students, as well as willingness to critically evaluate the words of others. (Palloff and Pratt 31)

The graduate student instructor's role online becomes one of carefully facilitating and fostering collaboration, not one of mainly directing students' learning. The sorts of concerns about fostering online communities that Palloff and Pratt mention are pre-built into the assignments I construct as well as the discussions we have and the projects students produce. When utilizing the asynchronous elements of an online classroom, for example, I am able to create intriguing discussion prompts about Basic Writing theory, history, and practice that encourage collaboration and interaction such that multiple students are responding to one another's posts. This enables crucial dialogue. Of course, though, this dialogue does not happen in real-time so there can understandably be lags between students' comments, and certain elements of comments and lines of questioning might get missed as a result. I also take seriously Marjorie Vai and Kristen Sosulski's suggestion in *Essentials of Online Course Design* that "collaboration encourages the sharing of information and perspectives, and requires both independent responsibility and cooperation" (87).

In this course, the Final Project Proposal and Final Project should relate to some aspect of Basic Writing theory, history, and/or teaching. The student's project will likely have relevance for Rhetoric and Composition, generally speaking, too. Ideally, it centers around a topic that students feel very passionate about. As a result, there is quite a bit of latitude in topic

selection. In some cases, what my graduate students develop in this course will tie directly into what they do for their capstone project in the larger RWDMS Graduate Program. In this course, this semester, Haley herself is working on a project involving basic writers, utilizing art and multimodality to best reach them. Other projects coming out of the class this semester include examinations of basic writing students and plagiarism, analyses of how the concept of "contact zones" has functioned in Basic Writing Studies historically, vertical alignment of writing in a K-12 school based on Basic Writing theory and practice, how to use social media literacy to teach basic writing students, establishing voice in the writing of basic writing students, and the like.

Historically, I have been pleased with how the short assignments in the course function. And I have thought that our discussions worked well asynchronously given my graduate students' busy schedules and the time differences we encounter working across time zones. However, the class was always missing the real-time, collaborative function that we can find in face-to-face classroom settings as well as my full presence as a teacher. I enjoy what a face-to-face environment affords us as teachers and feel that there is a dynamic aspect to real-time learning that has been missing from this course, and I simply have not known how to approximate this. Beginning to use Collaborate Ultra in this course is filling in this missing piece. Since Collaborate Ultra is a relatively new tool, there are just a few studies available about its effectivity and most of them have been conducted about courses outside the humanities. But, as Louisa Hill notes in her article "Resource Review: Blackboard Collaborate Ultra: An Online, Interactive Teaching Tool," it can be a particularly helpful tool for increasing students' engagement, enabling student-centered learning, and creating greater flexibility that further aids students' knowledge and "can be applied to different types of online teaching methods including lectures, seminars, tutorials and drop in sessions" (2). My hope is to integrate Collaborate more fully—as it continues to develop and becomes a yet stronger tool— in the future.

Future Considerations and Final Impressions for Instructors of Graduate Students (Laura)

For the first time since I began teaching this class online, I am watching graduate students think through their project ideas with one another fully, get real-time feedback from each other about their ideas as those ideas occur to them, arrange ways to share sources and trade papers to offer feedback,

engage in light banter, laughter and spontaneous thought, as well as see each other and hear each other's voices. These Collaborate sessions have also served to shape and inform the online discussions, making students feel more comfortable with one another. With the use of Collaborate, no longer are we anonymous people behind screens (see figure 6). There's an immediacy and a deep connection between us all as individuals. We have, in essence, become realer, fuller, and more whole to one another. Our online presences have essentially expanded in multiple ways.

This first time trying Collaborate I have made these sessions voluntary because I see this as an experiment. About a half to three-quarters of the students in the class chose to engage with Collaborate in some capacity. In the future, I will certainly offer more such sessions to better accommodate people's schedules and make them part of the course grade as well. One problem that may still arise is that oftentimes not everyone can participate because coordinating schedules is nearly impossible given where everyone lives and how busy everyone is. But having multiple sessions throughout the semester at different times gives more students a greater chance of being able to do this and connect with one another. And many of my students who cannot participate are watching the recordings at their leisure so that they get to see our exchanges at a time that works better for them.

Figure 6. Using Collaborate Ultra, students and instructors can communicate synchronously, which builds community in online classes.

I have also been experimenting with using Collaborate to do one-on-one conferences with the graduate students about their Final Projects, much as Haley does with her students in the Writing Commons. Again, I have been piloting this approach and it seems to be working well. It gives us a chance, not only to talk through their project ideas, but also to articulate next steps that need to be taken in the drafting process. Not only do they see my written feedback on their papers. We get the opportunity to go through this feedback in real-time together as we would in a face-to-face conference, and they can ask me questions about it as they occur to them. In addition, I can offer additional feedback as more related issues occur to me on the whiteboard feature (see figure 7). I can share resources that will help them in moving to the next steps in their projects, not only in written form, but also through real-time conversation and through sharing materials in the chat feature (see figure 7). All of these tools help to foster a one-on-one conferencing experience that it is often lacking in online graduate classes.
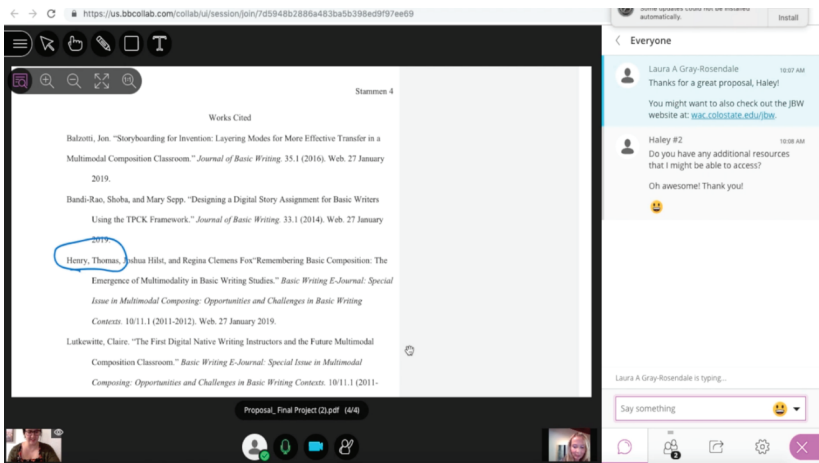

Figure 7. Instructors and students conference in "real time" which allows for instructors to offer feedback and share resources with their students.

As a result, I am witnessing a high level of student-centered learning and student collaboration. In particular, graduate students often use the chat feature to share resources for each other's research as well as to share their Final Projects with one another. Though students did mention running into some technology issues and occasionally having scheduling conflicts that prevented them from taking part in our Collaborate sessions, by and large

the feedback has been very positive. To complete my considerations at this point, I will share the actual impressions of my graduate students:

- Katie Anderson: "As I progress in my online MA program, I realize the part I miss the most about traditional classes is the sense of community that's established by weekly face to face interaction with other students. Collaborate allows us to have a common experience, which creates that sense of community, in a way that feels authentic. I especially enjoyed the real-time aspect of it and the ability to put faces to names. I think, too, that sometimes when we're writing in discussion posts, we tend to use a more formal tone. It was nice to have a more relaxed conversation about our content. I liked that you were there to facilitate the conversations too - that kept it organized and focused."

- Vance McCormick: "I have really appreciated having the opportunity to use Collaborate as a learning tool. The conversational aspect of Collaborate made me feel more connected to and engaged with my classmates. Since the class is online and we don't meet face-to-face, the chance to bounce ideas off of each other in real-time is very valuable. It can be difficult to find a time that works with everybody's schedule, but the chance to use Collaborate has been a great learning opportunity."

- Rachel Spangler: "The advantages of online classes are well-known: convenience, flexibility, discussion boards where every voice is heard. I chose to take courses in the RWDMS program for those reasons, along with the unique focus this program has to offer. However, academia—especially online—can be a lonely pursuit. Typed names on a screen are so impersonal. And even the professor's name can be intimidating. Using Collaborate personalizes the course and makes it much more meaningful. Laura's emails and announcements have been warm, but seeing her face and speaking with her on Collaborate makes her human and certainly more approachable to me. I feel much more likely to seek her out with questions. I'm a visual learner and it helps seeing a person's face in my mind as I type my discussion posts and responses."

- Stacy Pierce Tejel: "Online learning has opened up new possibilities to enhance my education; however, I have missed interacting with classmates as well as my professor. There is an element of camaraderie and collaboration that cannot be reproduced via email or exchanging posts on a learning platform. Thankfully, Dr. Gray-Rosendale realized there was a way to fill this need and she incorporated Collaborate into our class. Being able to see other students and talk to my professor in real time has heightened my focus and given me more structure for my work. There is a certain aspect of seeing someone's facial expressions and hearing their voice that adds to the learning experience. Also, having a discussion in real time allows for much more ground to be covered and is definitely more efficient."

- Haley Stammen: "Utilizing Collaborate Ultra in the Teaching Basic Writer Course has really developed a community within the Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media program. As a graduate teaching assistant on the Flagstaff campus, having the opportunities to interact with experienced teachers and professionals across the United States and even the world, is amazing for professional development and networking. Meeting with Laura online was great as well, as coordinating our schedules can be difficult, even being on the same campus. Throughout online courses I took as an undergraduate at another institution, I was able to interact with peers and my instructor only through discussion boards and emails. Getting this feedback in real time versus negotiating them through email exchanges seems more effective for the teacher and us, as students. Being able to ask questions to clarify assignment expectations is one of the most difficult parts of being an online student for me and many of the online students I tutor. I also enjoyed sharing materials and information with classmates. Using Collaborate added a richness to online courses that I have been missing."

Overall Recommendations for Online Writing Assistants and Instructors of Graduate Students of Basic Writing (Laura and Haley)

More and more, working with basic writers as well as teachers of basic writers requires that we utilize technology—whether online conferencing, online workshops, or online classes—because our students can be anywhere in the country or the world and may not have ready access to educational opportunities near them or a community of other students.

While we've both seen a lot of advantages to using Collaborate Ultra to work with basic writers and teachers of basic writers, it's important also to close our essay by revisiting some challenges that need to be negotiated, especially in regard to document sharing and addressing varying levels of technology literacy.

One challenge with using Collaborate Ultra is that edits on writers' papers are not permanent using the interface. Since Collaborate Ultra is set up as a teaching interface versus tailored for more individualized work, the document sharing functions as a "white-board" where edits using the pen or text tools are erased when moving to the next page. Some of our student writers have expressed frustration with this. While this can be a challenge for some writers, there are opportunities associated with this as well since not having permanent written feedback requires writers to take on a more active role in sessions. If writing assistants and instructors make a point of encouraging their students to take notes and make edits as they receive feedback on their writing, this can lead to increased engagement. When working with students, for example, Haley instructs them to take notes about their papers while talking about their writing. She presents this as an opportunity to engage during their appointment and revise during the session rather than as simply a limitation of the software.

Another challenge is negotiating a new form of technology in a short period of time. For some writers, Collaborate Ultra was fairly straightforward to navigate, but others reported challenges navigating this software initially. This was particularly the case with undergraduate basic writing students. For example, one writer with whom Haley worked struggled to discern what the icon symbols meant throughout the software. To address this challenge for future appointments, Haley adapted the instruction sheet writers receive before their appointments to include images of the icons, so that writers

could more easily identify them during their appointments. Another one of Haley's student writers said, "The first time I had used Collaborate, I would like to have known more about navigation before my session." As a result, Haley plans to incorporate this feedback into training materials she continues to adapt as she gets more experience working with online writers using Collaborate Ultra. Also, Haley discusses the importance of familiarizing writers with the software during their first meeting when training new writing assistants.

Some writers—both at the undergraduate and graduate levels— also noted that sometimes Collaborate Ultra can cut out or be a little spotty in areas with weaker internet connections. On occasion, audio can be challenging. However, Collaborate Ultra has a terrific feature where a writer can use her/his cell phone for audio by calling a phone number listed within the software. The rare, but peculiar, audio issues we have experienced were addressed by using a cell phone rather than the typical computer microphone.

Special considerations and adaptations should be made to enable Collaborate Ultra to be more accessible, including closed captioning for recorded sessions and an ability to screen capture within the program, but our experience does not show such options within the whiteboard feature or negotiating new technology to be detrimental to the effective use of the software for online tutoring and teaching purposes. Overall, Collaborate Ultra worked effectively for both our basic writing undergraduate students and our graduate student teachers of Basic Writing.

Closing Thoughts (Laura and Haley)

In writing this essay, we wanted readers not only to learn about how we use Collaborate Ultra with basic writers and teachers of Basic Writing. We also wanted to *show* readers exactly what this looks like in action. If you would like to watch a video that features us both interacting with students using Collaborate, please follow the this link: youtube.com/watch?v=4axuciI--vw&feature=youtu.be. In addition, if readers are interested in discovering more about our graduate program in which Laura's graduate course on Teaching Basic Writing discussed in this essay is taught, you can go to the Northern Arizona University website and look for our online English Program in Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies. Please see nau.edu/english/programs/masters-degrees/ma-rhetoric-writing-dms.

Collaborate Ultra will inevitably continue to grow and develop in the upcoming months and years. As it does, we very much look forward to trying out its new features and incorporating them into our tutoring work with basic writing students as well as into our teaching of graduate students who are training to teach Basic Writing.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. All student names are pseudonyms.
2. Since even our on-campus RWDMS graduate students (a relatively small number of students) take mainly online classes, they too benefit a great deal from our classes utilizing Collaborate Ultra. While our on campus RWDMS students are more likely to also seek us out during office hours and have face-to-face meetings that way, they have also found it helpful to use Collaborate to interact with one another in real-time across substantial geographic distances. They have also appreciated watching me interact not only with them but also with them and their classmates.

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