



# Virtual Institute: Assessments and the Common Core: An Overview

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# Virtual Institute: Assessments and the Common Core: An Overview

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## *Abstract*

Recorded at the 2013 International Reading Association annual conference at San Antonio, TX, the purpose of the Virtual Institute on Assessments for the Common Core State Standards is to support educational leaders in becoming knowledgeable about the Common Core assessments. The institute focused on the new assessments that will be administered in grades 3 to 12 in the majority of American states, beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. The presenters included the primary architect of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (David Coleman), leaders in national assessment and reform efforts (P. David Pearson, Peter Afflerbach, & Karen Wixson), and leaders in national projects on the assessment and instruction of English Learners (David Francis & Kenji Hakuta). A *Frankly Freddy* column, in which Elfrieda H. Hiebert summarized her interpretations of a presentation's primary themes, has been released for each video. This eBook is a collection of those summaries.

February 2014

**TextProject, Inc.**  
SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA

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# Introduction

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) mean that the assessments of many states will be replaced by those developed by two state-led consortia—PARCC and Smarter Balanced. The CCSS include some departures from previous state standards, such as an increased emphasis on evidence-based comprehension, addition of a standard devoted to students' capacity with complex text, and a balance of narrative and informational texts. As well as new directions in content, the new assessments may represent a shift in the tasks from many previous state assessments. PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments are modeled after those of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The passages of the NAEP are more extended than texts of many state assessments. Further, the NAEP includes open-ended response questions, not simply multiple-choice questions.

Many educators have questions and apprehensions about the new assessments. In this Virtual Institute on Assessments and the Common Core, educators get to view the presentations of national experts who were involved in the design of the CCSS and others who have been involved in the design of assessments, including PARCC and Smarter Balanced.

These presentations were originally given as part of an institute at the International Reading Association in May, 2013. The National Council of Teachers of English generously paid for the presentations to be videotaped. I facilitated the Institute presentations and also have written summaries of the presentations to serve as overviews for viewing.

In viewing the presentations, participants are encouraged to follow the sequence of the Institute. Frequently, a speaker refers to comments made by previous speakers. Opportunities to interact with colleagues about ideas in the Virtual Institute presentations are strongly encouraged (breakout discussions were a feature of the original Institute).

These presentations are intended to support implementation of the CCSS in educational units and to prepare students for the new assessments. As these presentations indicate (as well as other resources on assessment at [TextProject.org](http://TextProject.org)), educators don't have to wait for the assessment results in 2016 to understand the content and tasks of the new assessments.

## Summary of David Coleman on Assessments That Support the Goals of the Common Core State Standards

It is most appropriate that the first presentation in TextProject's Virtual Institute on Assessment and the Common Core begins with the vision of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) from the document's primary architect—David Coleman (now the president of the College Board). In his presentation on CCSS assessments (available on TextProject's YouTube channel), Mr. Coleman began by describing the vision of the standards: an emphasis on reading across the curriculum and, within this focus on disciplinary literacy, attention to using texts as a source of evidence to validate conclusions and perspectives.

In describing assessments that truly capture the vision of the CCSS, Mr. Coleman made four points.

First, anti-testing rage should not be directed at the CCSS assessments because of their visibility or role as high-stakes assessments. High-stakes tests have been a reality in American education long before the CCSS. Indeed, the design and intent of the CCSS assessments promise to produce higher quality assessments than current high-stakes assessments.

Second, it is time for a breakthrough in the quality of texts on assessments. Typically, tests use texts that were written or chosen to meet specifications. Often, this process of text selection on tests has resulted in mediocre texts. Mr. Coleman advocates assessments where students engage in high-quality and worthy texts.

Third, assessments need to include opportunities for students to display their proficiency at using texts as a source of evidence. Next-generation assessments need to move beyond multiple-choice responses to tasks where students use evidence to support a point of view.

Fourth, if the next-generation assessments are truly to measure college- and career-ready literacy, the texts of content areas need to be part of the next-generation ELA assessments. Literature has a key role in instruction and assessment but this role is not diminished by the inclusion of texts that emphasize science and social sciences content. In particular, Mr. Coleman stressed that source documents by our nation's founders need to be part of assessments, if students are to engage fully in the civic life of this nation.

Mr. Coleman also recognized several points of tension within the education community regarding the content and processes of the CCSS.

The publisher's criteria, Mr. Coleman recognized, have been one source of tension. He asked that educators refer and quote the most recent version of the publisher's criteria, describing it as stronger than the original one. In particular, he described the revised criteria as more careful on topics such as background knowledge and pre-reading. These changes, he stated, are based on feedback,

including that of members of the literacy research community, to the original criteria.

Views of background knowledge have been another source of tension. The need for background knowledge needs to be recognized, Mr. Coleman stated, but he cautioned against indulging in pre-reading activities designed to develop background knowledge to the point where the text is no longer a source of information, pleasure, and excitement.

Motivation was the third source of tension identified by Mr. Coleman. He questioned the assumption that close reading and careful study of a text results in boredom or a lack of motivation. An over-emphasis on close reading could have such an effect but he also noted that a sustained and deep involvement in something difficult could be a source of great pleasure.

In closing, Mr. Coleman called for collaborative discussions on specific texts and questions. Such collaborative work could lead to productive outcomes for students and their teachers.

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## Summary of P. David Pearson on Will Our Tests Support or Subvert Our Vision of Deeper Learning of English/Language Arts?

P. David Pearson's presentation as part of TextProject's Virtual Institute on Assessment and the Common Core addresses the role of the new generation of assessments in supporting deeper learning in English/Language Arts, rather than acquisition of simplistic objectives. To provide a perspective on the new Common Core-aligned assessments Professor Pearson gave a brief overview of literacy assessments over the past five decades.

- 1960s: Tests were present in classrooms and schools but they had few consequences for students and teachers. During this time, however, the Title I Act of 1967 was passed and set the stage for the use of assessments for accountability.
- 1970s: Behavioral objectives became prominent and were the basis for criterion-referenced tests. These objectives and tests were used to create state-wide assessments. Skills management systems based on the behavioral objectives also meant the breaking-down of literacy into small grain sizes. For example, beginning readers were pretested on knowledge of individual consonants. If they did not reach a level of mastery, they were taught and assessed again until reaching the designated level of mastery.
- 1980s: This was a period of consolidation of skills-based learning, with an increasing emphasis on assessments in districts and states.
- 1990s: Models of performance assessment were promoted, including portfolio assessments through state (e.g., Vermont, Maryland) and national projects (e.g., New Standards Project). The efforts died away because of is-



sues related to psychometrics (e.g., reliability), cost (e.g., teacher time), and politics (e.g., values).

- 2000s: During the No Child Left Behind era, assessments focused on specific standards. The most prominent assessment of this era—DIBELS—illustrates the return to a small grain size of literacy proficiencies. As in the earlier era, such assessments had a heavy influence on directing instruction to the bits and pieces of literacy.

Next, Dr. Pearson moved to the assessments of the 2010s—those of the two consortia (PARCC & Smarter Balanced) that are developing Common Core-compliant assessments. Dr. Pearson identified these unique features of this new-generation of assessments:

- There is an increased weight given to open-ended responses and complex performance tasks. In that students are to be take assessments on-line, even selected responses can require more reflection than standard multiple-choice items. For example, technology-enhanced items allow students to highlight sentences or words from a text in response to a question.
- Performance tasks have external validity (in that they are connected to the tasks of college and careers). They also have curricular validity in that they promote higher-order thinking.
- To be successful on the assessments, students require regular practice with complex text and its academic language.
- The assessments require the use of evidence from within the text.

Could these new assessments present an opportunity for students' progression to the desired goals? Dr. Pearson's answer is: "Students who have learned how to read and write in curriculum that requires constructed responses and real writing will perform well on PARRC and SBAC assessments. They will have developed some transferrable practices that will serve them well in these new circumstances." Since developing transferrable knowledge and skills is the goal of instruction, Dr. Pearson concluded, the new assessments do present an opportunity for students to progress to desired goals of literacy.

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## Summary of Peter Afflerbach on Formative Assessments and the Common Core: Text Complexity to Task Complexity

When teachers, students, and parents are asked to identify assessments, most are likely to name end-of-year state assessments or college entrance exams. These are examples of summative assessments. Summative assessments describe students' achievement of proficiencies represented in standards such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Summative assessments provide information on "the products" of the educational system. Are students able to



comprehend grade-appropriate text? Are students able to summarize the content of two texts on the same topic?

Summative assessments have a firm place in the educational system. Students, parents, teachers, and community members need to know about students' progress toward critical milestones in the learning process. But, as Dr. Peter Afflerbach states in his session in TextProject's Virtual Institute, it is formative assessments that will determine whether students show growth on assessments that capture the goals of the CCSS. That's because formative assessments occur within everyday instructional life and are the means whereby teachers get the information on students' strengths and needs to design and implement appropriate learning experiences. Formative assessments describe the processes or progress along the way to the outcome or product. For example, if a goal for a particular grade is recognition of inferences in texts with increasing complexity, teachers need to be gauging the quality of students' inferences and also the complexity of texts over the school year. Unless teachers recognize that students are not progressing in understanding inferences in narrative texts, for example, students will not receive the specific feedback that they require to develop more sophisticated ways of interacting with texts. Formative assessment is indistinguishable from good instruction. As teachers question and observe students, they are collecting information on students' strengths and needs. Setting goals and keeping records loom large in the formative assessment process.

The first wave of work on assessments, within PARCC and Smarter Balanced, has been on summative assessments. But each of the assessment groups is committed to providing school systems with assessments that support teachers in ensuring that their students are on track to mastering CCSS standards. Smarter Balanced, for example, plans to provide a digital library of professional development materials, resources, and tools aligned to the CCSS. PARCC also plans to provide assessments for use by teachers to determine instructional choices that support their students' mastery of grade-level standards. Professor Afflerbach's presentation brings to the forefront the critical role of formative assessments in teachers' creation of the learning experiences required by students to attain the proficiencies represented in the Standards.

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## Summary of David Francis on CCSS Assessments and Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners

The presenter in the fourth session of TextProject's Virtual Institute series is David Francis. Dr. Francis is internationally known for bringing expertise in psychometrics and statistics to empirical investigations of critical problems in education, including the assessment of students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs).

In this column, I am going to focus on Dr. Francis's comments on what the new-generation of assessments means for students with disabilities and ELLs.

But the presentation also includes a comprehensive review of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments. Since Dr. Francis is a member of the both the Independent Review Panel for the National Assessment of Title I and of Technical Advisory Group of the What Works Clearing House, his review merits attention. I strongly recommend that educators study his “list of things to like” about the new assessments (on Slides 7-12, which correspond to minutes 5:30 to 13:50 on the video).

Over the remainder of the presentation, Dr. Francis makes numerous critical points about the new assessments in relation to the strengths and needs of students with disabilities and ELLs. Beginning around the 14th minute of the video, he describes the need to attend to variations in text difficulty as a function of reader and text characteristics. Dr. Francis and his colleagues found that effects of text difficulty can be student specific, even after reader characteristics are controlled (e.g., gender, proficiency).

Dr. Francis then goes on to describe the plans of the two consortia for accommodations for students with disabilities. The PARCC accessibility policies have three levels: embedded supports, accessibility features, and accommodations. Embedded supports (e.g., audio amplification, highlighting) can be activated by any student at his or her own discretion. Accessibility features (e.g., background/font color) are also available for all students but these features need to be activated by a school-based educator prior to the assessment based on students’ personal needs profile. For the final level of accommodations for students with disabilities, four types of accommodations have been identified: (a) presentation (e.g., assistive technology), (b) response (e.g., Braille note-taker), (c) timing and scheduling (e.g., extended time), and (d) setting (alternative location). The information for accommodations on the Smarter Balanced has been more limited and continues to be developed (at the time of the presentation on April 19, 2013). But the Smarter Balanced consortium has stated that there will be support for ELLs, students with disabilities, and other students with special needs, including visual, auditory, and physical supports. The aim, according to the Smarter Balanced consortium, is to ensure that all students can demonstrate what they know and can do.

After a comprehensive review of assessment features for students with disabilities, Dr. Francis turns to issues involved in assessments of ELLs, especially the limitations of research on accommodations for ELLs. A study conducted by Dr. Francis and his colleagues examined the available research (approximately 20 studies with 65 effect sizes). This study showed that three accommodations significantly influenced the performances of ELLs: English dictionaries/glossaries, simplified English, and extra time.

The subsequent slides of this presentation are available on the video as well as the PowerPoint but, with time limitations, Dr. Francis could not complete the narrative. The final eight slides of this presentation are important to study, however, in that they give Dr. Francis’s conclusions about the new generation of assessments. Most importantly, he makes an important proposal regarding

online assessments (which will be part of the assessments of both consortia). His proposal is that online assessments could provide added value by giving students three scores for one testing event: (a) one estimating ability if all items had been administered without accommodations, (b) one estimating ability as if all items had been administered with accommodations, and (c) one estimating ability under the tested conditions. Such a strategy, Dr. Francis states, would provide different information about students, mastery, and language ability in relation to content and yield information on the impact of accommodations for individuals and for given groups.

The concluding statement of the PowerPoint presentation is worthy of note, from a scholar with the international stature in psychometrics and statistics of Dr. Francis: “I am optimistic because I have great confidence in the teams and in the value of setting high expectations for all students.”

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## Summary of Karen Wixson on Assessment and Instruction in the Era of the CCSS in English Language Arts

Karen Wixson’s session in TextProject’s Virtual Institute on Assessments and the Common Core should be on the top of the list in any teacher education or professional development course for providing pre- and in-service teachers with an overview of the new generation of assessments. Dr. Wixson provides a succinct but comprehensive overview of the key aims, tasks, and implications of the assessments being developed by the two consortium—Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

First, Dr. Wixson describes the key shifts in assessment and instruction emanating from the CCSS: complexity of text and academic language, evidence from text, and knowledge-building through content-rich text. These three shifts, Dr. Wixson observes, call for texts worth reading, tasks worthy of engagement, and integrated ELA.

Next, the presentation focuses on the overall design of the two assessment systems, including item types. The assessments of both consortia have three types of items, although they are given different labels in each assessment: multiple-choice items (some of which are technology-enhanced), items requiring open-ended responses, and performance assessments. Dr. Wixson includes sample items from released items from each consortium in the presentation. With respect to the length of texts and their difficulty, SBAC calls for texts at grade-level for the multiple-choice and open-ended responses, while texts for the performance assessments can be one grade below level. PARCC calls for texts that range from “very complex, moderately complex, or readily accessible.” The implications for instruction of the item types and length and difficulty of texts, Dr. Wixson notes, mean that students will need strategies for dealing with

texts if they cannot read them independently and that students will also need to have sufficient stamina to participate independently in the assessment sessions.

In the third and final section of the presentation, Dr. Wixson goes into considerable detail as to the structure and content of performance tasks, which figure prominently in both the SBAC and PARCC assessment blueprints. In each consortium, performance tasks involve writing after getting information from multiple sources. The SBAC assessment stipulates that this information might come from texts, video or audio clips, or visuals and that the minimum number of sources of information is two at Grade 3 and five at high-school grades. In the SBAC performance assessment, a classroom activity provides an orientation to the topic and then students devote time to research (gaining information from the various sources). The information gained from these sources is then used in a writing activity. For example, after reading an article and watching a video about how animals defend themselves from danger, fourth graders are asked to write an article about an animal described in the sources for the purpose of inclusion in a museum display on animal defenses.

PARCC performance assessments are not limited to research but also include literary analysis. For example, after reading Ovid's "Daedalus and Icarus" and Sexton's "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph," tenth graders are asked to write an essay that provides an analysis of how Sexton transforms Daedalus and Icarus in her poem.

There are some differences in the tasks and item types of the two consortia. But, as Dr. Wixson concludes, both require that students have rich classroom literacy experiences that include reading different types of materials, integrating ideas and information from multiple sources of information, and writing for different purposes.

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## Summary of Kenji Hakuta on English Language Learners and the Common Core State Standards

In that many English Language Learners (ELLs) are among the students in the lowest two quartiles on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, increased demands for text and task complexity within the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have particular consequences for this group of students. Dr. Kenji Hakuta is the nation's expert in studying the relationship between students' oral language and learning. He has been—and remains—one of the most well informed and vocal scholars and contributors to policies and conversations about the challenges and possibilities of schooling for ELs.

Currently, he directs the Understanding Language Initiative at Stanford University. The Understanding Language aims to heighten educators' knowledge of the role of language in the CCSS and Next Generation Science

Standards. In particular, the Initiative aims to increase attention to the uniqueness of the language demands in each academic discipline.

Dr. Hakuta's thesis in the presentation is that content acquisition—a goal of schooling (and highlighted within the CCSS)—is highly related to language proficiency in English. He demonstrates the critical nature of this relationship in his introduction, which consists of presenting a summary of several sets of data, all of which show a close relationship between how students perform on content-area assessments and their English language proficiency. Students who learn school content are the students who have a high level of proficiency in English.

Despite this close relationship between language and content in students' learning, policies at the national level have often treated school programs for supporting students' acquisition of English proficiency and their learning in content areas separately. For example, Title I programs have dealt with content-area remediation and instruction, while Title III programs have provided funding for ELL support. No Child Left Behind was an exception in that the legislation focused on the attainment of challenging academic content by ELLs. The new standards, Dr. Hakuta observes, raise the bar even higher for the learning of all students, including ELLs. No accommodations or modifications are suggested in the English Language Arts (ELA) standards themselves for ELLs. They are to be held to the same high standards as other students.

The higher standards have particular implications for ELLs, first, because of the greater emphasis on content and, second, because of the increased demands for language within content areas. Within the CCSS, language is no longer seen as separated from content, connected only by surface-level skills. Rather, language and content are viewed as integral to one another. Higher levels of classroom discourse need to occur across all subject areas, such as argumentation in social studies and the humanities. The shifts in mathematics and in science (Next Generation Science Standards) are especially demanding. In mathematics, students are expected to make conjectures and to build a logical progression of statements in exploring the truth of their conjectures. Next Generation Science Standards place a heavy premium on constructing explanations and in engaging in argument based on evidence.

These demands pose many challenges for ELLs that, Dr. Hakuta argues, can only be solved through collaborations. All participants in the educational enterprise need to be part of these collaborations. At the local level, these include students, families, teachers, and school and district leaders. Those at the state and federal level--state leaders, university and in-service instructors, test-makers, publishers, and federal leaders--need to collaborate with one another and with those at the local level. These collaborations need to address instructional practices, assessments, and materials and resources. Dr. Hakuta concludes by recognizing the challenges of the new standards as well as the opportunities that the new standards offer to ELLs.

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