

HOW PRACTUTOR ALIGNS WITH PARCC ELA ASSESSMENTS



I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to NLCB(2002) most English teachers approached English language teaching with emphasis only on the final product. The instruction emphasized imparting knowledge of sentence structure and grammar and improving reading and writing skills. With the advent of 21st-century, this emphasis has now shifted to preparing students for application of knowledge in real-life situations through higher-order skills.

This shift fueled the development of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which subsequently led to the introduction of new-age assessments like PARCC and SBAC. These assessments of English Language Arts(ELA) learning are more than checking students' level of lexicogrammar understanding. These assessments will thoroughly test students for the goal of college and career readiness(CCR). This spring when students take these standardized tests, they need to be prepared for a new age of learning and assessments. Their success will be a result of high-quality common-core aligned instruction and rigorous practice.

In this paper, we study one of the online K-8 learning programs, PracTutor, with the goal of improving student preparedness for standard-based assessments. PracTutor is a web-based, Common Core mastery program that provides a genre-based learning environment for ELA to ensure student achievement via online assessments, practice and instructions. PracTutor's unique interactive learning format enables the students to master English Language Arts based on Common Core Standards in an interesting environment. Students master one standard after another by taking tests that are based on PARCC framework and common-core standards. Their progress is guided by a personalized learning-path, which is continuously adjusted as per the assessment feedback. PracTutor's data-driven approach allows teachers and parents to guide student achievement in the right direction.

In the following sections, first, we will review PARCC framework and then we will study PracTutor's claim that it assists students prepare for ELA standardized tests, and how PracTutor integrates best English learning strategies with genre-based pedagogy to strengthen student learning outcomes. We will also study how its interactive environment and inbuilt interventions ensure that all the students, whether primary learners or language learners can improve their English language skills in alignment with Common Core State Standards and meet CCR criteria.

II. PARCC

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) represents a fundamental shift in how students are assessed for learning. It is based on the idea that testing should be a tool to help improve learning and teaching. PARCC assessments are designed to provide teachers, students, schools, and parents with evidence on the progress that students make on their way for careers and college. It is a state-led effort to administer students with a computer-based student testing program aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for a common set of college and career ready (CCR) learning standards in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics.

Goals of PARCC assessments:

1. Determine student progress in terms of career and college readiness;
2. Assess student learning in sync with Common Core State Standards (CCSS);
3. Measure student performance and their strengths and weaknesses;
4. Provide data during the academic cycle to inform instruction, intervention and teacher-training programs.
5. Provide data for accountability, in accordance with NCLB requirements.

III. Components of PARCC

Design principles of PARCC ELA/Literacy Assessments:

- The PARCC assessment design focuses on measuring student knowledge, skills and understanding of essentials of reading and writing practices that ensure their career and college readiness;
- Reading and comprehension of complex literary and informational texts; i.e. domains of science, history, autobiographies, social studies and instruction manuals
- Student's engagement with short and extended, complex, literary and informational texts;
- Close, careful, analytic reading and skill of comparing and synthesizing ideas across texts;
- Focus on words that matter most, and grasp of academic words that pervade complex texts.
- Rigorous citing of evidence from texts throughout the assessment;
- Writing effectively, which includes write-to-source, evidence-backed statements, responses that demonstrate understanding gained from reading skillfully;
- Rigorous narrative skills with accuracy and precision in writing(of appropriate level);
- Strong command over Grammar and written English.

IV. PARCC Summative Assessments:

PARCC suggests that students should take the two assessments described below:

The Performance-Based Assessment (PBA) is administered after approximately 75% of the school year. While some tasks are computer-scored, 68% of the assessments require students to solve real-life problems and to provide reasoning/explanations to support their work.

The End-of-Year Assessment (EOY) is administered after approximately 90% of the school year. Students demonstrate their ability to understand and use skills identified in the PARCC Model Content Framework. These assessments only have computer-scored tasks.

V. Overview of PARCC ELA Task Types, Claims, PLDs, and item-types

PARCC tasks are based on pre-defined grade-level task models, which define the focus of each task and the standard measured. Following is the list of PARCC ELA Task types:

- 1. Literary Analysis Task:** these tasks provide students an opportunity to show their understanding of literature. Students are tested to answer questions about the text and key ideas or elements in the texts.
- 2. Research Simulation Task:** Students have to mirror the research process by answering questions about the provided texts and write an extended response about some aspects of the related texts.
- 3. Narrative Writing Tasks:** Students are tested for their creative skills. They have to answer narrative questions.

ELA/Literacy Claims(Reporting Categories):

A claim is a statement about student performance based on how a student responds to the test questions. PARCC tests are designed to determine if students are achieving the claims. Each claim uses a combination of standards for students to demonstrate their understanding of the texts. Within PARCC ELA/literacy, there are three types of claims:

1. Master Claim: They measure the overall goal of “on-track” for CCR. The Master Claim ensures that students have the literacy skills and understandings required for success in multiple disciplines.
2. Major Claim: They identify the extent to which students are “on-track” for CCR.
 - Reading: close, analytic reading and the comparison and synthesis of ideas that are at the heart of understanding complex literary works and informational texts,
 - Writing: write effectively when using and/or analyzing sources.
3. Sub Claim: Additional skills and understandings included in the Major texts.

MASTER CLAIM

Students are “on track” to college and career readiness in ELA/Literacy.

MAJOR CLAIM

Reading

MAJOR CLAIM

Writing

SUB CLAIM

Vocabulary interpretation and Use

SUB CLAIM

Reading Literature

SUB CLAIM

Reading informational Texts

SUB CLAIM

Research

SUB CLAIM

Written Expression

SUB CLAIM

Conventions and Knowledge of Language

SUB CLAIM

Research

Performance level Descriptor:

ELA/Literacy performance level descriptor or PLDs are drafted for both the Major Claims of reading and writing. For Reading Claims, these descriptors are distinguished by three factors:

1. Text complexity;
2. The range of accuracy;
3. The quality of evidence.

For Writing Claims, PLDs are drafted for Sub-Claims, written-expression and conventions and knowledge of language. The PLDs are distinguished by the following factors:

1. Consistency with development of ideas;
2. Organization of text;
3. Command over grammar and language use.

How PracTutor Aligns With PARCC Assessments:

1) PracTutor strictly aligns with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS):

Common-Core State Standards for ELA shift instructional objectives of the classroom towards:

- Building knowledge using content-rich non-fiction;
- Reading, writing and speaking skills grounded in evidence from text;
- Regular practice with complex texts and their academic language.

PARCC assessments measure student-achievement as per the objectives of:

1. Complexity: Students should be comfortable with complex texts and its academic language;
2. Evidence: Can students draw and use evidence from text(literary and informational)?
3. Knowledge: Are students at-ease with non-fictional texts?

PracTutor learning environment is based on the genre-based pedagogy. It provides students with a large bank of texts from a wide variety of genres. These texts have been collected as per two sections: Literature and Informational Text. The 'informational text' section provides students ample exposure to non-fiction and academic text. Each text is associated with its own questions; these questions are designed to develop the skill of evidence collection. It's smart scoring system ensures that students receive practice passages only from their chosen genre and of difficulty at par with student performance.

2) PracTutor allows students to master PARCC task-types and achieve the claims:

PracTutor's genre based-pedagogy model helps students to develop higher cognitive abilities. As per Hyland, K. (2003), writing skills cannot be distilled down to a set of cognitive processes. Genre knowledge is important to develop students' understanding of their environment, and crucial for their success in real-world scenarios. Moreover, Malakul, K. and Bowering, M., (2006) point that students studying in a genre-based model not only wrote better abstracts, but make greater improvement in grammar and in overall understanding of what it means to write a particular genre.

PARCC assessments test students for three task types: literature analysis; research simulation and narrative writing. To master such complex tasks, students need to know the lexicogrammatical patterns which typically occur in different stages of a text. Teachers need to assist students towards a command of this through an awareness of target genres and an explicit grammar of linguistic choices. Fundamentally, a genre-based program like PracTutor offers students a clear understanding of how texts are structured and why they are written in the ways they are.

This model of pedagogy allows students studying on PracTutor to:

1. Model text, deconstruct and analyze the text,
2. Learn independent construction of ideas,
3. Practice with their choice of text and with variation in their selection, developing their creativity.

It also allows students' different points of entry, enabling teachers to expand the meanings that students can create. Thus, a student studying on PracTutor is well-prepared for performing analytic, simulation and narrative tasks necessary for success on PARCC assessments.

3) PracTutor provides practice for PARCC ELA/Literacy Item Types

PARCC ELA/Literacy End-of-Year and Performance-based-Assessments include two different types of test items.

1. Evidence-based Selected Response (EBSR):

These questions ask for one or more correct answers. They combine a traditional selected-response (multiple-choice) question with a second selected-response question that asks students to provide textual evidence that supports the answer to the first question. These item types have two parts:

- A. Students have to show their understanding of the text;
- B. Students have to provide evidence for their understanding.

PracTutor has created unique EBSR item-types for each of its text items. Students can practice with a multiple-choice, multiple-select and a variety of technology-enhanced test items like re-sequencing, drag and drop and more. The questions are designed to test understanding of the text and encourage drawing of evidence from the text or their previous answers.

2) Prose Constructed Response (PCR):

These tasks ask students to create an extended and complete written response. They elicit evidence that the student has understood the text and can communicate it well, in terms of written-expression and knowledge of language and conventions.

Along with EBSRs, each text item has a PCR associated with it. Unique tasks are associated with every Text. For each PracTutor PCR, students have to either, write detailed responses to provide evidence, give analysis, research, or summarize, or create narratives.

These PCRs are followed by a self-evaluation sheet, where students need to grade themselves as per comprehension, written expression and knowledge of language and convention rubrics. This further enforces their confidence with written, essay type answers.

4. PracTutor provides the function of administering Timed-tests

As per Axtell, McCallum, Mee Bell and Poncy, (2009), the ability of a student to respond automatically to a stimulus can free cognitive resources, which could be applied to solve more complex problems. This could be applied to time limited tests and assessments too.

Research also confirms that timed-tests benefits students by improving their fact fluency and challenging mathematics (Woodward, 2006). PracTutor provides the function of conducting timed-tests with the intention of improving students' fact fluency preparing them for a timed-test environment.

Teachers can use this function to simulate PARCC testing environment. This could help them detect possible technical problems, and increase their confidence in the technology. A computer glitch during testing can cause panic for most students, not to mention frustration and any resulting confrontation if they result in a lower score than anticipated. Once students practice timed-tests on PracTutor, there are stronger chances of fewer complaints about assessments not working in the course. Moreover, students new to the system can use this function to learn how the tool works without the pressure and concerns surrounding high-stake testing.

Another purpose that timed-tests serve is to let students experience what it's like to run out of time. New-students can try these tests as often as they want to and develop their confidence with real-testing environment.

How PracTutor helps students prepare for assessments:

According to Muir, Manchester, and Moulton (2005), technology can accelerate, enrich, and deepen skills; it can motivate and engage students in learning; and technology can connect schools to the real world. Valdez et al. (2000) found that in addition to making learning enjoyable and interactive, technology also improves student attitudes toward subject matter.

PracTutor offers the following advantages to teachers and parents who want to prepare their students for high-stake math assessments:

1) PracTutor Provides authentic and diverse texts for practice:

ELA teachers frequently complain about unengaged students. At the same time, students complain that they read but fail to comprehend what they read. Standardized tests are meant to expose students to challenging texts.

The only way to succeed in such a scenario is to develop a wide range of learning abilities. PracTutor ELA module provides a large bank of genre-segregated texts to assist the students. PracTutor exposes students to a variety of reading-material that students can and want to read.

PracTutor's collection of Multi-genre texts allows students to:

- Build prior knowledge necessary for assessments with more easily accessible texts,
- Learn to make text-to-text connections. Judge their own understandings, and question them.
- Recognize text organization, identify and understand vocabulary, evaluate ideas and synthesize information,
- Enjoy the learning process.

2) PracTutor ELA module is based on genre-based learning pedagogy:

Genre-based pedagogy ensures achievement of common-core goals of ensuring career and college readiness. Moreover, genre study can also catalyze success on PARCC assessments. It ensures student achievement by:

- Promoting learning via analysis;
- Stimulating students to improve their knowledge about language and context;
- Promoting awareness among students to know the purpose for writing.

Students studying on PracTutor practice on multiple genres. As students explore for interesting content, it increases their engagement in appropriate language-learning activity. Furthermore, exposing students to diverse genres, develops student knowledge-base and skill-sets. This promotes universal development of ELA skills among PracTutor students. This further ensures that they are prepared for standardized tests.

3) PracTutor ensures a personalized Learning Path for students:

PracTutor is a learner-centered instruction program. Students master the standards by doing, and are actively engaged in the learning process. PracTutor allows students/ teachers the choice of the genre they want to use for learning/teaching purposes. Further ahead, next passages/texts are personalized as per the student performance on their last passage/text. This is done by continuous monitoring of the student-performance against the desired Lexile scores as specified by CCSS. Thus learning becomes automatic. Moreover, students do not depend on the teacher to direct all their learning or to be the source of all learning. As per Simmons and Page (2010) in the current climate of standardization and testing, such an environment is important for ensuring student success.

4) PracTutor provides instructional scaffolding to facilitate learning:

On PracTutor, students can study at their own level. They can spend more time on those topics that are more difficult for them. Results can be reviewed, and practice can occur until the student is confident enough to move on to the next topic. As per Naiman et al. (1978), such control over learning promotes students to take responsibility and encourages self-learning.

To further support ELA learners, PracTutor provides instructional scaffolding to the students. Not only does PracTutor provide a bank of genres to choose from, it also provides learning videos. Students also have the option of listening to the text and the questions.

Graphic-organizers allow students to form mind-maps. Text editor, highlighter, text select-and-drop and text-size adjustments are a few PracTutor scaffolds that train students for taking on high-stake standardized tests.

5) PracTutor supports data-based decisions with reports and immediate feedback:

Neri, et al., (2001) suggests that swift feedback is beneficial for the learner. In a traditional classroom setting, it is impossible to provide instant feedback to every learner.

PracTutor generates feedback and detailed test reports immediately, and teachers can access them directly from the teachers' dashboard. Students can test their knowledge and learn from their mistakes. PracTutor users have access to a host of reports like performance report, growth reports and class reports. This allows them to make important learning decisions.

Along with reports, another noteworthy PracTutor function is immediate feedback. PracTutor reports provide students with a detailed analysis of their replies. It displays their correct and incorrect answers, and shares correct answers with proper explanations. It thus allows errors to be corrected before they are converted into part of a student's language-knowledge.

Conclusion:

As per Rubin & Bruce, (1985, 1986), it is through feedback from others, peer tutoring, and sharing ideas that reading and writing skills develop.

Success with Common Core State Standards requires students to think deeply about conceptual relationships, language patterns and the structure of their ideas. Not only do students need to be prepared to construct models of language-structure and learn their use; they should be prepared to work with any genre, or mode of discourse. In short, along with fiction, students need to develop an appreciation for the complex, structured and data-intensive texts.

Among the available tools, PracTutor, displays a promise of allowing teachers to change ELA instruction in a variety of ways. It can aid where teacher time and attention are insufficient and support improvement of the classroom instruction program. PracTutor scaffolding facilitates the process of generating and organizing ideas. Not only does it provide students with immediate feedback; it also allows students to judge their own constructed responses. By automating assessment and testing processes, and a remarkable user-friendly environment, Practutor has created a unique window for teachers to get involved with essential aspects of writing processes, and devote more time on struggling students to ensure classroom success with high-stake standardized tests.

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