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Competitive debate as competency-based learning: civic engagement and next-generation assessment in the era of the common core learning standards

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ABSTRACT
As the adoption and execution of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have steadily increased, the debate community is presented with an opportunity to be more forward thinking and sustainable through the translation to curriculum planning and next-generation assessment as a movement towards Performance-Based Assessments. This paper focuses on how these relate to the development of civic education and utilization of the CCSS through a competency-centric perspective on learning and the mastery of skills. Coaches, teachers, and judges in developing debate programs were interviewed, with an emphasis on those from the New York area. We found that teachers who are not otherwise involved in the debate programs will confirm community and personal changes in debaters as an important part of debate’s potential as an assessment tool. The implications of these and additional findings are discussed.

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Performance-Based Assessment; argumentation; policy debate; competency-based learning; civic engagement; Common Core State Standards; critical thinking; community; curriculum; urban debate league(s); social responsibility

In the United States, as the adoption and execution of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have steadily increased, the debate community is presented with an opportunity for growth. At this time, the potential relationship between the debate community and the adoption of the CCSS represents an invitation to the activity to be more forward thinking and sustainable, but a number of next steps are needed in order to create real change, particularly through the translation to curriculum planning and next-generation assessment as a movement towards Performance-Based Assessments (PBA). The purpose of this paper is to establish a better understanding of the ideologies behind the utility of debate as a curricular tool, identify areas for growth within the activity and existing community, and suggest possible solutions to those issues deemed problematic. Specifically, this paper focuses on how these skills relate to the development of civic education and utilization of the CCSS through a competency-based perspective on learning and the mastery of skills and knowledge.

Briscoe (2009) states,

Anecdotal evidence suggests that debaters are much more likely to take a meaningful role in the community as well. Through debate, they learn the importance of ordinary citizens taking an active role in the society in which they live and gain a greater understanding of cultures.
and governmental systems, thereby increasing their ability to play a meaningful role within these contexts. (p. 48)

This paper confronts the current view of debate as a competitive game, with civic learning often described merely as an ancillary benefit gained from long-term participation in the activity. Specifically, we respond to the belief by educators who are not otherwise involved in the speech and debate community that the activity is educationally bankrupt and divorced from real-world skills. This analysis examines the middle school as a potential site for exploring permutations of debate to meet the demand of a competency-based progression of knowledge and skill mastery.

We believe that debate at all levels should be revolutionized to promote change within the communities in which they exist in real time—starting within the school community, spilling over to the students’ lived community, as well as the competitive debate community. As debate is reaching younger and younger populations within the educational system, it is time that the speech and debate community make some much-needed adjustments to the way we present debate to our students. Rather than solely emphasizing the future benefits of increased college acceptance and financial aid, political involvement, and training to become future lawyers and politicians, it is the responsibility of coaches and teachers to transform debate into something that touches, cultivates, and restores the communities of our debaters in the present moment, while also providing a context to assess the translation of knowledge and skill along a continuum of differentiated mastery of multiple competencies.

For this project, we interviewed coaches, teachers, and judges in developing debate programs, with an emphasis on those from the New York area. Consistent with our expectations, we found that the existence and growth of these debate programs has increased community engagement and leadership skills on the part of the students. In addition, our findings also supported our prediction that teachers who are not otherwise involved in the debate programs will confirm these community and personal changes as an important part of debate’s potential as an assessment tool. The implications of these and additional findings are discussed below. Our argument is an invitation for schools to consider community engagement and civic competency as an integral part of a progressive educational curriculum. In an effort to meet the challenges posed by the CCSS, we argue for curricular innovation through a methodology based on Webb’s Depth of Knowledge, which provides a critical framework for evaluating the competencies associated with civic education.

Growth of debate opportunities across New York City

The number of students participating in debate has steadily risen over the past decades; however, it is only recently that the demographic push has begun to incorporate diverse recruitment efforts. Historically a haven for middle class white suburbanites, the student body of debate has been changing nationally. Additionally, as schools have begun to adopt debate across the curriculum frameworks to meet CCSS demands of developing pathways for ideation and argument develop, debate continues to provide a pathway to think about how it can exist outside the realm of competition as a performance-based assessment of the mastery of different competencies. This pathway falls directly
in line with Mitchell’s (1924/1991) assertion that, as educators, we need to foster this sense of personal geography: “They must themselves be experimenters; they must hunt for sources and study relationships; they must analyze the culture of which they are a part” (p. 19).

Over the past few years, debate has grown exponentially at middle and elementary schools. The development of intensive competitive debate in middle schools is a relatively new occurrence, which has uniquely mirrored ways to approach the implementation and assessment of the CCSS. Only six cities in the United States have competitive middle school policy debate programs (Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, Atlanta, Jersey City, and New York City). A primary obstacle to the growth of this type of debate has been the tremendous amount of resources that were once needed (access to journal articles, copious amounts of paper, research, etc.) and the lack of trained and willing educators to start debate organizations. On the other hand, a social justice emphasis in urban centers has helped contribute to the rise of debate as a way to equalize the playing field in areas of concentrated poverty. Cochran-Smith (1999) adds,

Working for social justice explicitly rejects transmission models of teaching and instead operates from the twin premises that knowledge is fluid and socially constructed and that curriculum is co-constructed by teachers and students through their interactions with one another and with a variety of texts, materials, and experiences. (p. 122)

Unfortunately, millions of students still struggle just to read or articulate ideas. A recent analysis by the Pew Research Center articulated the importance of these communicative capacities for our nation’s students. In information-driven economies, the ability to distill complicated public policy issues for public consumption is a foundational aspect of our democracy (Goo, 2015). The recent shift to the CCSS has highlighted this growing disparity in the acquisition of literacy skills. An element of the literacy shift has been an emphasis on speaking and listening skills, both of which are integral to a competency-based perspective on debate as civic education. Trends from the same Pew study also articulated the stark contrast between perceived skill gaps and individuals immersed in the new economy. Older cohorts of surveyed adults emphasized core content acquisition in math and science over communication and literacy, particularly when compared with younger respondents in the workforce. Logic and communication were identified as the most important skills by this latter group.

Examining the fact that current educational trends posit that half of urban students will not graduate from high school, we are put in a precarious position. Optimism and hope in urban communities is on a downward spiral, as is active participation as informed citizens in our democracy. Hansen (2007) reflects on why this trajectory poses a problem for the future of our democracy: “Democracy is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoining communicated experience. Democracy comes into being through expanded communication, shared experience, and an abiding disposition to seek interaction with others rather than to shun them” (p. 27).

This perspective on democratic education calls for developing new methods for teaching young people to articulate ideas and get involved in their communities. Evaluating the ability of curricula to foster democratic discourse in schools can be correlated through examinations of how secondary schools prioritize debate within the curricular scope and sequence. Debate coach Mark Vargo argues that
whatever the future of West River debate is—academic, extra-curricular or both… students will continue to benefit from their hard work… It’s the ability to understand why facts matter and frame things where people understand and can see something from the other side… how much better would discourse be if everybody could do that? (Gahagan, 2015)

The benefits of debate include skill development in critical thinking, public policy and values research, proficiency in computer-assisted research, public speaking, political advocacy, and conflict resolution. A recent study asserts that African-American students who participate in debate programs earn better grades, are three times more likely to graduate from high school, and are better prepared for college success than similar students who do not debate (Anderson & Mezuk, 2015). In Schultz’s (2005) article on “resistance” as a framework for classroom activity, he argues that even preschool students can begin to develop the critical thinking skills essential to democratic life.

Successful individual resistance has varying effects upon the group. Some of these events result in individual children’s simply being able to do things that other children do not or cannot do as part of the activities of the group. … In other events, however, the actions of individual children do have an impact on the rest of the group. (p. 10)

While Schultz focuses on the preschool, Pingatelli (2005) elaborates on how the same framework of “resistance” has the potential to help older students to understand power dynamics in the larger, adult world of politics:

Resistance not only has the potential to spark a deeper understanding of how power in schools works and how this power both reflects and reproduces dominant socio-political arrangements that circulate throughout our society, it also speaks to a moral-imaginative undertaking between students and educators that strives to revitalize agency—“the capacity to frame and effectively act towards one’s goals.” (p. 54)

Debate as a civic engagement vehicle also provides opportunities for students to travel across the country, engaging in active discourse with students from diverse communities. Melissa Wade, one of the founders of the Urban Debate League, explains how that benefits the underserved students in our major cities:

Urban debate organizations generally will cover fees for schools ranging from transportation, food, and lodging to entry fees and judges. The debaters’ travel to other parts of the country exposes them to the “educational apartheid” in this nation. They go back to their schools and start demanding that the asbestos get removed from the ceilings and that a more advanced math classes be offered so they can compete for specialized high school and college admission. They want to be lawyers and politicians and activists, and go back to their community and demand changes. (Houppert, 2007, p. W12)

This type of progressive educational practice is not without its challenges, particularly as curriculum is bridged between competition and the classroom. Pignatelli (2006) reflects on one of the challenges to such an approach:

Progressive practice not only struggles to maintain its identity … it also risks being reduced to a “narrow emphasis on child-centered education ….” For Dewey, democratic community life as a pedagogical task had to be grounded in face-to-face associations that stressed cooperation, solidarity, and social responsibility. (pp. 11–12)
As urban debate expands to bring civic education to new schools, its reach is moving from a program that significantly affects a small number of students to one that changes graduation rates and test scores on a school-wide and even district-wide scale.

Renewed efforts to promote civic education are part of a burgeoning national movement to bring debate to inner-city students, with similar programs launched in more than 20 cities over the past decade, from Detroit to Chicago to Kansas City to Washington. Hansen (2007) has observed how such programs have invigorated formal education in the language arts:

A few years back, you could walk into some of the language arts classes here in New York and kids would literally have their heads down on the desk, asleep. Then you walk into a debate class, and the kids would be on their feet, totally excited, strategizing about putting an argument together and arguing over how to back it. It was like night and day. (p. 28)

However, there are still big challenges to bringing the benefits of debate to underprivileged students, who through debate are learning to study, think, write, and present their ideas with the best of them. In our current culture, when budget crunches have forced many urban schools to eliminate “extraneous” programs such as art, drama, and speech, debate is in danger of becoming an exclusive bailiwick of affluent private and suburban public schools. Pingatelli (2005) suggests why this situation creates another rationale for an emphasis on resistance in urban debate programs:

Teacher/administrator site-based research can capture in vivid, compelling ways the grievances, concerns, pain, and anger students express in the range of resistant actions they undertake. It can convey how power, position, and perspective exist in a school, and how they can spark student resistance. (p. 59)

If debate is to truly serve a mission of civic education, we need to reform the debate community, providing opportunities for education and literacy for all students and approaching debate as a forum for empowerment for both students and educators, particularly in our urban schools. With the recent addition of middle school programs to the effort to bring debate into urban schools, the scope of civic-oriented debate has limitless potential. In the words of a recent fifth-grade debater’s poetic performance, “Education is a starting point—for changes.” Poverty and the lack of quality education is systemic, and both students and teachers need to be the agents for change.

A closer look: research methods and findings

Participants in our survey of debate educators responded electronically to a series of seven questions related to the value of debate as a form of civic education, a tool to promote leadership and community involvement, and a pathway to high school readiness. Questions were open-ended, and responses were written (with the exception of two participants who were interviewed on camera). Respondents included coaches, former debaters, parents, teachers, or some permutation of each. The results of the survey were as follows.

Of the eight coaches we surveyed who reported the number of years they had been coaching \((n = 6)\), there was an average of 24 years of experience. Half of the coaches \((n = 4)\) had competed in debate prior to becoming a coach. When asked if debate supports
civic education, seven said yes. When asked if debate supports the CCSS, all six who responded were affirmative. When asked if debate helps prepare middle school students for high school, all seven who responded were positive. When asked if debate encourages students to become more involved in their community, four said yes, with one neutral response and one nonresponse. When asked if debate causes students to be more likely to be leaders, six out of seven said yes.

In addition to feeling that debate is a beneficial form of civic education, the teachers we surveyed also believed it is a powerful tool that supports the CCSS. Debate was valued for enhancing the skills of analysis and information processing which are aligned to the lexical demands and analytical skills identified by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC). At the same time, more than one respondent commented on how the debate community needs to do a better job helping students understand the civic value of debate. One question asked: “Do you think participation in debate encourages students to participate more in their communities? Why or why not?” One participant answered, “I think it can encourage students to participate more in their communities but would first require teachers to show students how their debating skills can be used to impact change in their communities.”

These results have several important implications. First, they suggest the need for a more interdisciplinary approach to debate. If civic education has to do with the knowledge and skills needed to be a citizen, the focus of debate needs to be expanded to include such concepts as technological literacy, service learning, and advocacy-based community leadership. The debate community also needs to do a better job of incorporating its vision into the educational outcomes of the schools within which it operates. Teacher and administrator buy-in are just as important to its sustainability as the activity’s ability to grow and respond to student needs.

The demand for the debate community to change is coming from multiple directions. If the community is to expand to include younger and more diverse populations, teachers and administrators have to be invested in the educational and community value of debate at every level. On the other hand, if debate coaches desire to create potentially enriching opportunities for their students, the focus of student learning also must shift from the classroom to the community, with students gaining a better understanding of their role as citizens and activists in their own communities.

**Educational reform and the “space” for debate curriculum as civic education**

Innovation in debate education is a process; it is not static or constant but fluid. In the educational reform mantra to create new standards, develop new accountability systems, and raise student achievement, there has been a reciprocal loss in the methodological examination of the systems that create civic spaces for engagement in civil society. Viewing debate as a site for looking at the norms embedded within civil society—including those that perpetuate toxic influences within communities—means seeing beyond policy issues and imagining the possibilities for a better civil society in the future. This also requires that we look beyond the limitations placed upon debate by tradition.
**Competitive debate experience: a fixed location of learning**

Consider this question: why do schools give credit for students taking a speech or communication class but not to those on the debate team? Research indicates that one year of competing on the debate team provides as much learning in writing, reading, critical thinking, teamwork, and presentation skills as an undergraduate thesis (Minch, 2006); thus a case could be made that students should receive academic credit for these efforts. Additionally, students who participate in debate activities are also more likely to get involved and “give back” to their local communities—a worthy goal for civic education.

Also consider: what happens when a school lacks a forensics squad, but there are community sites that might provide the same opportunities to learn new skills and engage in civic advocacy? Why not allow students to get credit for those sorts of experiences? A student who works on water cleanup efforts in the local community can learn about environment standards and the public controversies surrounding a sustainable environment, just as a student working with a museum curator at the Smithsonian learns about history or the natural world. While some educators have concerns about the academic standards embedded within such experiences, the skills and learning that happens through engagement in the community have the potential to be as valuable as those taught in the classroom. The role of the debate educator should be to facilitate these kinds of experiences—experiences that help students understand their communities and the impact of learning advocacy skills. This understanding of civic education moves the conversation beyond the Carnegie Unit—a late 19th-century system for awarding academic credit based on how much time a student spends in direct contact with a classroom teacher—to a model defining “civic education” as the mastery of certain competencies of social interaction.

**Competency-based civic learning**

*Competencies* are defined in this context as a debater’s ability to transfer content and skills across subject areas related to participation in a deliberative democracy. Standards are the *what* in learning, while competencies are the *why* of learning. For example, in a unit of history about the creation of the Constitution of the United States. In a traditional setting, fifth-graders would begin their study of this moment in U.S. history as they explore the founding of our nation. A “civic engagement competency” related to this unit might be: “The student will understand the conflict and cooperation among the founders during the creation of the U.S. Constitution and how it shapes our ability to participate in our democracy.” This learning outcome goes far beyond memorizing the dates, locations, historical figures, and events that led up to the founding of our nation. It requires a more active engagement with the drama of the nation’s founding.

Debaters often study the democratic process and the importance of the U.S. Constitution in the context of today’s political controversies. In the process, they develop competencies synonymous with the enduring understanding that Wiggins and McTighe (2005) discuss in their seminal work *Understanding by Design*. Competency-based learning also undergirds the pedagogy of civic education designed to reinvigorate toxic or dysfunctional communities. Competencies for a debate as civic education curriculum are
uniquely designed to meet the needs of one’s own community. Each competency is measured by a four-step process based on:

1. the competency’s enduring nature;
2. Common Core State Standards;
3. accessibility;
4. cognitive demand.

Using Chappuis, Stiggins, Chappuis, and Arter’s (2009) metarubric and the Competency Validation Rubrics developed by the New Hampshire Consortium of competency-based learning, the competencies we have designed for each experience are vetted and redesigned based on feedback. These tools have been tested through reliability metrics and provide a valuable tool for competency validation.

**Understanding competency mastery in debate**

When we change the way educators measure concept mastery (which usually exists in the form of tests, projects, papers, etc) to encompass the skills developed through debate, students are able to have a more individualized assessment of the skills that they have mastered or are working on mastering. Mastery is an advanced level of proficiency in a learner’s ability to apply skills and knowledge. When debate is seen as a medium to prompt social change in one’s community, mastery may look as simple as teaching students how to effectively advocate for changes to failing transportation systems in areas of poverty as part of a nationally debated policy topic.

**Formative and summative tasks**

Formative tasks become tools the educator designs for students to acquire learning. Through a civic-oriented debate lens, this may be seen as deeper questioning into the structural areas of inequity that limit the restoration of basic transportation in regions experiencing systemic poverty, such as the restoration of public transit to the Far Rockaways in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. Summative assessment demonstrates that the student has mastered the required competencies. When a student has mastered a competency he or she is prepared to move to the next level of work. Furthering this perspective on the design of civic engagement debate curriculum may mean actually researching the problem and presenting solutions to a community issue.

Civic education vis-à-vis debate redefines mastery through both qualitative and quantitative metrics. Webb’s (2002) Depth of Knowledge is used with a core set of performance indicators for each competency in order to measure this progress, including summative assessment at Levels 3 and 4 (representing 80% of a debater’s progress towards mastery). Finally, formative assessments represent 20% of the process toward assessment of debate effectiveness to influence broader social change.

The Depth of Knowledge (DOK) chart allows for a method and supplies criteria for “analyzing the alignment between standards and standardized assessments” (Hess, 2013, p. 4). The process and the criteria assist in reviewing curricular alignment for competency-based learning. Like Webb, this essay “offers the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) model
employed to analyze the cognitive expectation demanded by standards, curricular activities and assessment tasks through a civic engagement perspective” (Hess, 2013, p. 4). The following tables (Tables 1 and 2) reflect a modified version of the model that guides the framework for this unique civic engagement assessment methodology.

Grading and evaluation

Grades communicate student achievement or mastery of the experience competencies. They are not entered based on the format of the assessment (e.g., test, quiz, or project) but rather by the competency for which the assessment was designed, thus creating a more holistic method for capturing student achievement. The student learning experiences become opportunities to combine the place-based learning capacities of the public system with lived experiences.

Because of the nature of the urban landscape we work in, we believe that an education for our student-citizens would be inadequate without engagement in our community’s civic life. Thus, community involvement is at the forefront of a competency-based rubric for debate. Students and their families bring such rich experiences, voices, and perspectives to the community, and debate as civic education provides them with a broad range of opportunities within their own community. This involves providing debaters the opportunity to advocate for themselves on issues that are important to them, challenge current and future policies that affect their communities, and create lasting changes that improve the lives of everyone they touch.

Debaters giving back to the community allows them not only to learn but to care for others and find beauty in their own communities. Debate as civic education provides a mentorship model in which students can develop their own individual goals and strengths under the guidance of a debate teacher or coach. As a place-based form of education, debate pedagogies offer students the opportunities to shape their own political and cultural environment through democratic discourse and to develop useful citizenship skills (Goo, 2015). As we engage with members of Congress at local ballets or gardening projects in our neighborhoods, our student-citizens begin to realize the significance of how they are contributing to the larger community.

Debate as civic education

The question of how best to provide a free and appropriate public education for all people is an underlying tension that debate as civic engagement addresses directly. Cognitive research posits that some learning styles work well in traditional applications, but for many those same styles simply do not work (Tokuhama-Espinoza, 2010). If 95% of our educational delivery model occurs in a traditional debate setting, we have essentially

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Title of level</th>
<th>DOK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Recall and Reproduction</td>
<td>80% of the progress towards mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Skills and Concepts</td>
<td>20% of the progress towards mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Short-term Strategic Thinking</td>
<td>80% of the progress towards mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>Extended Thinking</td>
<td>20% of the progress towards mastery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
conceded that we have a system that favors some students but disadvantages others. Not all students learn well in traditional school settings. If we truly aspire to provide a free and appropriate education for all students, we must adapt to the needs of all of our students.

Debate as civic education seeks to reclaim public education by making education a fluid entity that takes place not just in schools but in public libraries, museums, arts centers, fitness centers, science centers, and our communities. This is the locus of a civic education pedagogy, where these existing institutions are transformed into even more valuable assets that foster citizenship. Some key elements that guide a civic education-based pedagogy are:

(1) To facilitate the process of learning anytime, anyplace, anyhow, and at any pace.
(2) To motivate all debaters to dream and achieve beyond what they would have on their own.
(3) To be formal advocates for one’s community in order to help reach long- and short-term goals for the betterment of that community.

These tenets do not enumerate “debating” as a primary end of civic education, but rather suggest how debate might be used as a tool to promote civic learning that not only cultivates civic knowledge and skills but also directly impact one’s community.

**Next steps: curricular implications and next-generation assessment**

Assessment has become an increasingly important part of the United States educational system. With the growing conversation on how to evaluate student learning and teacher metrics for evaluation, the impending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has deepened the controversy around the role of standardized testing for the future of mandated assessment and accountability for all states. The adoption of the CCSS for English Language Arts and Mathematics has created a need for next-generation assessment protocols, in addition to highlighting the presently waning focus on humanities in the classroom. Additionally, the opportunity for systematic, comprehensive methods to ensure students are developing capacities for strategic thinking, writing, and presentation is at the forefront of major reforms in the educational landscape. Assessment design is one of the key levers in need of this innovation and divergent thinking in two distinct spheres:

**Table 2.** Experiential learning opportunities and competencies samples of experiential, competency-based learning opportunities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Students will study a particular aspect of federal government policy and the mechanisms for change that could be implemented if that policy were to come to fruition and defend their work at weekend competitions for the New York City Urban Debate League.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forensics</td>
<td>Public television will engage several dozen students in television production, building competencies in videotaping, technology usage via Final Cut Pro editing software, and concept creation as small teams of students produced small short features, interviews, and stories for the StoryCorps repository at the Library of Congress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Sited in the American Museum of Natural History, students will develop a capacity for historical understanding through museum curation around how choices are made to retell the specific historical events and identify which events are left out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **Contention 1:** Formative assessments have the potential to dramatically change the instructional delivery systems in our schools but have not been seen as the future of assessment due to the burden they place on teachers to create and implement in the classroom through real-time analysis and feedback. The CCSS expectations have changed the conversation to performance-based assessment as the next step of applying real-world problem solving to the classroom. Debate as performance-based assessment dramatically opens up the conversation and shifts its focus from seat-time to experience as a measure of DOK progression.

• **Contention 2:** Technological advancements in debate including, but not limited to, virtual debate, electronic exchanges of argumentation, progress in file storage and access (e.g., Verbatim, Open Source Caselist, Skype debating, etc.) have enhanced the prospect of memorializing performance-based assessment for a wide range of competencies. The transition to a blended learning model of face-to-face debate with competitive debate undeterred by space and time is directly aligned to the demands of the Common Core. These technology-fueled tools have opened up the possibility of assessment of cognitive demand and DOK in ways never thought possible.

**Traditional assessment criticism**

The legacy of assessment for the CCSS has received mixed success over the past several years. Over the past two years, the “opt-out” movement has grown in the northeast, protesting the CCSS as a reflection on the inability of standardized assessment to fully capture the deep mastery of skills and to provide the appropriate feedback loops necessary to use real-time data assessment to guide and differentiate instructional practices. Several different domains highlight this tension in the current assessment framework, which exists in the cycle of internal school assessment and state-mandated assessments of English Language Arts and Literacy. These include:

• **Tangential data collection.** Current assessment practices are not providing the needed data to truly capture and gauge the mastery of concepts learned in the classroom through practical application. While the instructional shifts of the CCSS have placed a premium on the staircase of increasing complexity in the skillsets that must be learned over time, there is a lack of tools that tie the mastery of those standards to actual classroom practice. The types of information collected in the classroom do not pair well to the necessary pedagogical shifts for deep mastery and translation of those skills to a sufficient work product.

• **End-point data signifiers.** Current data frameworks presented by the states capture a single end-of-year assessment as the indicator of mastery of content and skill. This approach has been criticized for its lack of adaptability to the individual levels of assessed students. These nonperformance centric assessments are reminiscent of the Carnegie Unit of instruction, characterizing knowledge as fixed and static.

• **Testing validity and replicability.** Testing in the world of criterion-referenced assessments has been largely devoid of culturally relevant approaches that are sensitive to the diversity of individuals being assessed. More broadly, this harms the validity and replication of assessments. Further, as states attempt to refine these CCSS-aligned assessments, the tests have changed drastically over the years, limiting the ability
compare the assessments’ reliability year-to-year. An excellent example has been the 2015–2016 rewriting and reformatting of the New York State’s grades 3–8 assessments in response to traditional systems.

- **Equity.** Testing has long been criticized for the lack of alignment with what is actually taught in classrooms. As the issues and pedagogical approaches to communicating and practicing content vary widely from classroom to classroom, there is a lack of a static space for discussion. This disconnect significantly affects our views of student achievement because these types of assessments become distanced from the methods both educators and coaches can seek to improve instructional practice, as they do not accurately reflect student mastery and depth of understanding.

- **Testing conditions.** Assessment-normed environments are essential to examining next-generation testing results in terms of scale. Interpretation of those data has been obstructed by the methods in which testing is implemented with fidelity; attempts to create data-driven plans to meet the needs of individual scholars have met the same problem. For example, in New York State, after tremendous criticism from testing critics, the state changed the end-of-year assessment from timed assessments to untimed assessments, further complicating the nature of the testing conditions.

### Debate as the next generation of assessment

Debate provides a unique opportunity to challenge assumptions that have been codified into the status quo modes of knowledge and skill translation. With the rise of performance-based assessment requirements, the desire to have real-time responsive data, and to foster critical thinking across multidisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning, debate presents a unique opportunity for next-generation assessment of the CCSS.

- **Multitiered depth of competency.** Measurement tools used in schools by educators have always struggled with the translation to the real world, especially when considering application and articulation of skill and knowledge for a diverse range of audiences. The movements proposed by PARCC indicate this trend towards performance-based outcomes as guiding the mastery of complex competencies such as civic learning and engagement. Proving multipathways to demonstrate this mastery is a crucial aspect of competency completeness.

- **Alignment.** Assessment must provide trajectory that is upward bound—from summative assessments to classroom-based formative assessment and also aligned development across age groups. The CCSS provide a model of student learning that can create consistency across summative and formative assessments.

- **Fluidity.** Debate as a competency assessment also must be fluid and adaptable based on teaching, learning, educators, and scholars involved in the assessment. Framing the application of skill and knowledge must also guide the personalized trajectory of every student through the complexity of learning tasks as related to the DOK framework.

### Potential added value of debate as assessment

Debate as assessment could offer additional sources of evidence to support educational practice and decision-making. In a coherent assessment system, competitive debate as a means of assessment would be grounded in the same underlying model of student learning
as other assessments. Debate assessment, like most technology-enhanced assessment, has several potential advantages:

- **Speaking and listening.** Debate can be an important method to progress next-generation learning into the twenty-first century, as educators are able to assess in a consistent and coherent manner the complexity of classroom discussion and outputs related to context through the responses and dialogue of students.

- **Mathematical practice.** The emergence of mathematical practice standards has opened the latitude for debate concerning how we model and view the world through the lens of logic and reason. The attribution of those standards, such as Mathematical Practice Standard 1, specifically provides opportunity to gauge and assess students’ abilities to critique and support their arguments with evidence and logic.

- **Real-time feedback and dialogue.** Debate technology has the potential to ease the logistical demands and complexity of providing formative assessment feedback by making collection, interpretation, and reporting simpler and less time-consuming. Competitive tabulation technology can provide timely, informative feedback during learning, while the use of Google Docs has transformed the potential dialogue between educator and student through their writing.

- **Data to examine learning progressions and mastery and improve teaching.** By monitoring students as they engage in the process of learning, debate-based assessments can help refine learning progressions to more accurately guide instruction.

It is time to use the limitless, even revolutionary power of debate to create a better system of education for our students while simultaneously reinvigorating our communities and, ultimately, our democracy.

**References**


