Defining the Literacy Agenda: Results of the 2013 What’s Hot, What’s Not Literacy Survey

by Jack Cassidy & Stephanie Grote-Garcia

This is a crucial time in literacy education, a time in which the impending U.S. presidential election, combined with continuing financial turmoil and the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), has many educators and policy makers deeply concerned about the future. Consequently, it is also a ripe time for taking the pulse of the profession and getting a read on the issues which literacy educators consider to be their most critical challenges.

The annual What’s Hot, What’s Not survey directed by IRA Past President Jack Cassidy has been a Reading Today tradition for 16 years. It takes a highly informed but informal look at the present thinking of 25 literacy leaders from around the U.S., as well as leaders in Canada and outside North America. The list of this year’s participants is set out in the sidebar on page 11.

Results are determined by interviewing. (The specific methodology can be found in Reading Today Online.) Respondents are asked to apply the term “hot” to those topics receiving more attention in the field; those receiving less attention are “not hot”. If all the respondents are in agreement, a given topic is assigned the designation as “extremely hot” or “extremely cold.”

If 75% of the respondents are in agreement the topic is “very hot” or “cold.” If at least 50% of the respondents were in agreement, the topic is listed as “hot” or “not hot.” Respondents are also asked if the topic “should be hot” or “should not be hot.”

The chart on page 10 lists the 27 topics for the 2013 survey and the degree of heat they generated. Two topics are new to the list: formative assessment and text complexity. In reading the chart, it is important to remember that the term “hot” is not synonymous with the word “important.” Many of the topics in the “not hot” column probably would have been classified as important had respondents been asked to do so.

The returning “Six”

This year six literacy topics were found to be “very hot”:
- adolescent literacy
- Common Core State Standards
- college and career readiness
- comprehension
- high-stakes assessment
- informational/non-fiction texts

All six of these topics were also classified “very hot” for 2012. However, last year two other topics were also awarded the “very hot” rating: new literacies/digital literacies and response to intervention. Some respondents stated that the new literacies were no longer new and that there is a lack of definitive research to support the various response-to-intervention models.

Much like last year’s survey, the coming year’s “very hot” issues tend to focus on students age nine and older. For the first decade of this survey, the hot topics

“The Common Core is hot because, though it maintains a strong emphasis on basic literacy skills (e.g., phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary), it introduces many exciting changes to literacy teaching including new or renewed emphases on writing about reading, disciplinary literacy in the upper grades, the use of informational texts, and critical reading, along with new takes on reading comprehension lessons. Taken together the changes will be breathtaking.”

Timothy Shanahan
University of Illinois - Chicago
tended to focus on younger readers. The adoption of the CCSS (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, www.corestandards.org), however, shifted the emphasis to preparing students for college or the workforce.

The “Hottest” Topic of 2013
The hottest of the hot topics for 2013 is the CCSS with 22 out of the 25 respondents agreeing that they are hot. With the adoption of the standards in 45 states and 3 U.S. territories, it is the first time that standards have been commonly shared across state lines in the U.S. The standards define the knowledge and skills that K-12 students should be gaining in the classroom if they are going to graduate from high school prepared for college or to compete globally in their chosen careers.

Developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the CCSS Initiative is not a federal mandate, but instead a state-led effort. The English Language Arts standards outline the skills needed in reading, writing, speaking and listening, language, and media and technology. They call for students to not only read text of increasing complexity, but to also grow intellectually as they construct knowledge,
“Informational text should be ‘very hot’ not only because of college and career readiness, but for what informational text can do for children and adolescents more immediately: informational text can address topics of great personal interest to individual students, can help students learn about the world around them, and can provide a tool students can use to effect change in their communities and beyond.”

Nell K. Duke
University of Michigan

explore possibilities, and broaden their perspectives.

The IRA website has a whole section devoted to resources for educators related to the CCSS at www.reading.org/elacommoncore.

The CCSS are not only this year’s hottest topic, but also appear to be the high-impact issue directing attention to the remaining five topics on the “very hot” list—adolescent literacy, college and career readiness, comprehension, high-stakes assessment, and informational/non-fiction texts. Metaphorically, the standards are the glue to which all the other topics are adhering. However, one respondent complained that “the laser-like focus on Common Core Standards” has shifted the field’s attention away from other attention-worthy topics such as literacy coaches, preschool literacy instruction experiences, and motivation.

Adolescent literacy has been receiving attention for more than a decade, but the emphasis on the CCSS and college and career readiness has intensified the focus. The Alliance for Excellent Education (www.all4ed.org), a policy group dedicated to reforming middle and high schools, has helped push the topic to the forefront. In 2012, IRA revised its 1999 position statement on adolescent literacy and that paper and many instructional resources on the topic are available on the IRA website at www.reading.org/adolescentliteracy.

Experts have long agreed that comprehension is a key goal of reading. Today, the topic is receiving the attention it deserves.

The importance of informational/non-fiction texts was ignored for many years particularly at the primary levels.

The Other “Very Hot” Topics

Obviously, college and career readiness is closely related to the CCSS. In some of the few states not adopting the CCSS (e.g. Texas), college and career readiness is receiving even more emphasis than the CCSS. Some studies suggest that in the U.S. nearly four in ten college freshmen must take remedial courses. This situation highlights the need to prepare students with higher-level skills such as the ability to critically engage in texts, to synthesize information from multiple sources, to think comparatively, and to distinguish the quality and reliability of the information they encounter. These and many other skills are important because students will use them in a variety of learning experiences after they leave high school.

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“The topic of high stakes assessment is hotter than ever, and that’s not a good thing for teachers OR the children they teach. No educational decision should ever be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score....”

Susan B. Neuman
University of Michigan

Participants in This Year’s Survey

Richard Allington,
University of Tennessee
Donna Alvermann,
University of Georgia
Diane Barone,
University of Nevada
Heather Bell,
Rosebank School, New Zealand
Mary Lou Benesch,
Howells-Dodge Public Schools, NE
Karen Bromley,
Binghamton University, SUNY, NY
Carrice Cummins,
Louisiana Technical University
Nell Duke,
Michigan State University
Douglas Fisher,
San Diego State University
Rona Fippa,
University of Massachusetts Boston
Virginia Goatley,
University at Albany, SUNY, NY
James V. Hoffman,
University of Texas
Donald J. Leu,
University of Connecticut
Marsha Lewis,
Duplin Schools, NC
Jill Lewis-Spector,
New Jersey City University
Barbara A. Marinak,
Mount St. Mary’s University, MD
Susan B. Neuman,
University of Michigan
P. David Pearson,
University of California at Berkley
Shelley Stagg Peterson,
University of Toronto
Timothy Rasinski,
Kent State University, Ohio
D. Ray Reutzel,
Utah State University
Victoria J. Risko,
Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, TN
Misty Sailors,
University of Texas-San Antonio
Timothy Shanahan,
University of Illinois, Chicago
Dorothy Strickland,
Rutgers University, NJ
The English Language Arts standards, however, have highlighted literacy in history/social studies, science and technical subjects – all of which rely heavily on informational texts.

High-stakes assessment has been a hot topic for the last decade, undoubtedly stimulated by the No Child Left Behind legislation of the Bush era. Unfortunately, high stakes assessment in the U.S. has become synonymous with a single standardized test developed and administered by individual states. Critics charge that too many important decisions about students, teachers, and schools are often made based on this one assessment.

What Should Be Hot
The yearly publication of the What’s Hot list invariably causes much discussion about the topics that are “hot” and those that are “not hot.” Usually, not enough attention is given to the topics that “should be hot” and “should not be hot.”

It is encouraging that for 2013, the literacy leaders agree that, with the exception of high stakes assessment, all the “very hot” topics should be hot. Also, most of the literacy leaders agree that many of the topics that are “cold” or “extremely cold” are deserving of their placement.

References

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“The Common Core State Standards represent a step in the right direction for reading comprehension in a number of ways. First, they emphasize the need to increase attention to informational text reading. Second, they emphasize a need for students to attend to the craft and structure of text in order to facilitate text understanding. Finally, they require teachers to teach and students to learn several of the evidence-based reading comprehension strategies recommended by the NRP (2000) rather than learning the antiquated comprehension skills of the past.”

D. Ray Reutzel, Ph.D.
Emma Eccles Jones Endowed Chair Professor of Early Literacy Education Utah State University

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Using the What’s Hot List

The What’s Hot survey was developed to give readers insight about some of the major topics in literacy in the hopes that such mention would stimulate further research. Many schools and universities use the list in exactly that way. School-level learning communities of teachers are using it as a basis for staff development. As an introduction to professional development, teachers are asked to identify the topics from the survey that are most relevant to their classrooms. Universities often use the list as an introduction to foundations courses or courses dealing with literacy trends and issues.

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D. Ray Reutzel, Ph.D.
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