WHAT’S HOT
IN 2016
Recognizing new trends and celebrating 20 years of data

By Jack Cassidy, Stephanie Grote-Garcia, and Evan Ortlieb

Literacy trends and issues emerge from governmental entities via educational policies, as well as from classrooms via schoolwide literacy programs and passionate educators who seek to improve their students’ literacies.

In this 20th year of the International Literacy Association’s What’s Hot in Literacy survey, multiple influences have shaped the 2016 agenda. Reading for meaning in both print-based and digital environments across the curriculum remains center stage. As such, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are still a major focus, according to the 2016 literacy leaders interviewed. The standards have been a hot topic since first appearing on the list in 2011.

However, unlike last year, there was not unanimous agreement (“extremely hot”) that the CCSS were even hot—perhaps a reflection of the growing trend of focusing more on the globally relevant practices within the standards rather than on the term Common Core itself.

A chart on the following page lists the overall results from the survey. Topics listed as “hot” or “not hot” indicate the degree to which they are receiving attention in the field of literacy education. Remember that these classifications do not represent their relative importance—merely the attention they are receiving.
<table>
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<th>What’s Hot in Literacy Survey Topics</th>
<th>What’s Hot</th>
<th>What’s Not</th>
<th>Should Be Hot</th>
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<td>Adolescent literacy</td>
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<td>Close reading/deep reading (→)</td>
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<td>College and career readiness</td>
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<td>Critical reading and writing</td>
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<td>Digital literacies/new literacies/media literacy</td>
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<td>Disciplinary/content area literacy (+)</td>
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<td>Early intervention (K–3)</td>
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<td>Fluency</td>
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<td>High-stakes assessment/CCSS assessment</td>
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<td>Informational/nonfiction texts</td>
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<td>Literacy coaches/reading coaches/reading specialists</td>
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<td>Motivation/engagement</td>
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<td>Oral language*</td>
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<td>Phonics/phonemic awareness</td>
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<td>Political/policy influences on literacy (→)</td>
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<td>Preschool and pre–K literacy instruction/experiences</td>
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<td>Struggling readers (grade 4 and above) (+)</td>
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<td>Summer reading/summer loss (→)</td>
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<td>Teacher evaluation for literacy*</td>
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<td>Teacher preparation and certification*</td>
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<td>Text complexity</td>
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<td>Vocabulary/word meaning (→)</td>
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<td>Writing—academic, argumentative, and based on sources (→)</td>
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<td>Writing—creative</td>
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● or ○ Indicates more than 50 percent of the respondents were in agreement (hot or not hot)
●● or ●●● Indicates at least 75 percent of the respondents were in agreement (very hot or cold)
●●●● or ●●●● Indicates all respondents were in agreement (extremely hot or extremely cold)
(+ ) Indicates the topic was hotter for 2016 than 2015
(→) Indicates the topic was less hot
* Indicates a new topic for 2016
Survey specifics
The What’s Hot in Literacy survey began 20 years ago as a means to
gauge the attention that various topics were receiving in the field of reading
education. Since then, the survey has been done with 25 literacy leaders
(23 the first year) throughout North America and the world.
Respondents are asked which topics are currently receiving attention
(“hot”) and which ones are not (“not hot”). Topics that receive 100% agreement are labeled “extremely hot” or “extremely cold”; those with more
than 75% agreement are classified as “very hot” or “very cold.” Those
receiving more than 50% agreement are labeled “hot” or “not hot” topics.

The changing topics
Over the years, topics have shifted considerably along with the trends in
reading and literacy. As always, topics included in the What’s Hot list are
recommended by the literacy leaders who were interviewed the previous
year. The previous year’s panel is asked what additions, modifications, and
deletions should be considered for the new survey.
This year, there were two totally new topics: **oral language** (rated “very cold” by this year’s respondents) and **teacher evaluation for literacy** (rated
“hot” by the 2016 panel).
Several topics were modified.
**Teacher education for reading** was changed to **teacher preparation and certification**. This change was considered significant enough to report
the topic as new.
Two topics from the 2015 survey were eliminated: **formative assessment and genre knowledge and instruction**.

This year’s results
Most of the “very hot” topics for 2016 were also “very hot” last year, with
the exception of disciplinary/content area literacy, which was considered only “hot” last year but moved up to the “very hot” list this time around.
Other “very hot” topics this year are as follows:
- Close reading/deep reading
- College and career readiness
- Common Core State Standards
- Digital literacies/new literacies/media literacy
- High-stakes assessment/CCSS assessment
- Informational/nonfiction texts
- Text complexity

Though these “very hot” topics were almost identical to last year, they all have been additions to the list in the last 10-15 years. So, in
the years to come, new topics will emerge and others will become “hot.”
Political and educational leaders will inevitably shift the focus of the field,
as will the emergent needs of students and teachers. For now, though, it is
apparent that the “very hot” topics are

“Text complexity has always been an issue in teaching reading.
Sequencing text complexity to promote growth among younger
students or helping older students learn to make sense
out of texts that are just beyond their grasp—those have been
key curricular goals for decades.
I just worry that now that we have made the close reading of
exceptionally challenging texts our major goal, we have
elevated its importance well beyond its rightful place. I just
hope it doesn’t become another excuse for attributing failure to
students.”

P. David Pearson
University of California, Berkeley

“We have to communicate what
we know to be effective in
measuring literacy, and ensure
that tests designed for large-
scale use as a means to measure
and improve student and school
performance are sound, scored
properly, and used appropriately.”

Marcie Craig Post
International Literacy Association
closely connected to the elephant in the classroom—the CCSS.

All of the elements of CCSS are globally relevant, however, such as college and career readiness and high-stakes assessment.

Addressing text complexity is also at the root of successful approaches in disciplinary/content area literacy. With the decline in the number of literacy coaches, there is an increasing expectation for all teachers to be literacy teachers. Whether studying historical civilizations or scientific principles, all disciplines rely heavily upon print and nonprint materials. Initially grasping an understanding and solidifying a depth of content knowledge are accomplished through reading and interacting with informational/nonfiction texts.

“Close reading is a complex instructional routine that builds students’ habits. The questions that students and teachers ask about the text are a critical aspect of this approach. We’ve come to realize that there are phases of deep, close, analytic reading that begin with a literal interpretation and then move to structural analysis and inferential analysis before resting on actions that the reader can take based on his or her understanding of the text. I use the question, ‘What does the text inspire you to do?’ as this final phase, inviting students to make choices about what they are compelled to do based on the text.’

Douglas Fisher
San Diego State University

These tenets are equally as important in 1st grade as they are in 12th grade.

We are reminded that one educational trend stands the test of time—that it is the teacher who makes the difference. Standards are content objectives, not a prescribed set of teaching practices. Teacher autonomy, collaboration, inquiry, and reflection are always the most valuable components of successful literacy instruction; thus, there is significance in both teacher preparation and certification as well as teacher evaluation for literacy.

Reversing course

This year, the topic writing—academic, argumentative, and based on sources dropped from “very hot” to “hot.” Its association to the CCSS is unquestionable, as it is integrated in both the curriculum and high-stakes assessments. More broadly, writing seems to be losing attention across educational contexts in its relation to testing.

In 2005, the College Board (whose president also co-wrote the CCSS in mathematics and literacy) opted to add an essay component to its SAT college admission test to assess students’ writing abilities and critical thinking. Just nine years later, that portion of the test was withdrawn from being mandatory for all students. Critics purported that longer, formulaic, and wordy pieces rendered higher scores regardless of their factual nature or merit, adding to the existing skepticism of their appropriateness for partially determining college admission.

“Common Core is a generational change in our approach to educational standards. Instead of minimum requirements, we are reaching for aspirational goals; instead of accepting what’s easy, we’re striving to accomplish what’s hard.”

Timothy Shanahan
University of Illinois at Chicago

A literacy summit next February will help commemorate the 20th anniversary of the What’s Hot in Literacy survey.

The Specialized Literacy Professionals Special Interest Group (SIG) of the International Literacy Association (ILA), the Texas Association for Literacy Education (TALE), and the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW) in San Antonio, TX, will be hosting an international summit for all of those interested in reading and literacy on February 12 and 13 on the UIW campus entitled Literacy Research and Practice—2016, Celebrating 20 Years of What’s Hot.

The Friday keynote speakers are former ILA presidents and Reading Hall of Fame members Jack Cassidy, Linda Gambrell, and Victoria Risko. Other keynote speakers are up-and-coming scholars Estanislado Barrera IV, Stephanie Grote-Garcia, and Evan Ortlieb. All six presenters have been involved as respondents or coauthors of the annual What’s Hot in Literacy survey.

Some of the topics to be discussed are Common Core State Standards/Texas Standards, close reading, motivation, literacy coaching, and writing.

The Saturday keynote speakers are What’s Hot respondents Marcie Craig Post, executive director of ILA, and Reading Hall of Fame member and former ILA board member Donald J. Leu.

The conference concludes with noted children’s author Guadalupe Garcia McCall.

In addition to the keynote speakers on Friday and Saturday, there will be dozens of sessions, roundtables, and poster presentations on a variety of topics. Contact summit chair Stephanie Grote-Garcia (grotegar@uiwtx.edu) for more information, or visit http://literacysummit.weebly.com.
"To develop college and career readiness, I suggest the concept of ‘close learning,’ where learners are focused on what counts the most. Close learning refers to the pursuit of connections in content learning through analytical and critical practices, with openness to future revisions based on new information. The idea is that students, especially those in grade six through the first year of college, should be encouraged by their teachers to become ‘close learners’ in order to succeed in their subject areas, their life, and their college and/or career pursuits."

Rona F. Filippo
University of Massachusetts Boston

It appears that unlike reading, writing is still not being given the attention it warrants.

**The coldest topics**

Several of the hottest topics from the first decade of the 21st century are now among the coldest for 2016. Fluency, phonemic awareness, and phonics were among the hottest issues during the era often defined by the No Child Left Behind legislation. They were among the so-called “five pillars” of literacy research identified by the National Reading Panel as having a strong research base.

Most of the 2016 literacy leaders agreed that too much attention has already been paid to these first three “pillars.” Comprehension and vocabulary/word meaning were the other two pillars and the literacy leaders surveyed for 2016 generally agreed that these were still deserving of attention.

To help implement these five pillars in schools, millions of dollars were allocated to schools that often used the funds to hire literacy coaches/reading coaches/reading specialists to support classroom teachers. Unfortunately, many of these positions were eliminated when the funds were redirected. Regrettably, attention also shifted away from early intervention (K–3) for those students most at risk for difficulties in reading and writing.

**Lasting thoughts**

Over its 20 year history, the What’s Hot survey has garnered its own degree of attention. With modifications, the survey has been replicated in Denmark, Romania, and the United Kingdom, as well as many states. Routinely, it is used as a basis for staff development and to introduce college and university courses in literacy.

“In my research course, we discuss the annual What’s Hot [survey] as an example of a wonderfully thoughtful approach that can be used over multiple years to explore trends and changes in literacy research and practice,” says Donald J. Leu, longtime respondent, Reading Hall of Fame member, and a professor of education at the University of Connecticut. “We also discuss how so many people look to the results each year to add to their own understanding of how our field is thinking about central areas.”

“Students are skilled with social networking, texting, video, and gaming. Unfortunately, they are not as skilled with reading online information. Fewer than 4% of seventh-grade students could fully evaluate the reliability of a website in science. Other research shows a large and separate achievement gap for online reading based on income inequality. At a time when income inequality is increasing, we have important work to do with new literacies in our classrooms.”

Donald J. Leu
University of Connecticut