Content Reading Instruction

A COMMUNICATION APPROACH

Mark W. Conley

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Mark W. Conley
Michigan State University

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About the Author

Mark W. Conley is assistant professor of teacher education at Michigan State University. He was an English and reading teacher at the middle-school and high-school levels prior to earning a Ph.D. in secondary reading from Syracuse University. Dr. Conley taught courses in content area reading and secondary reading at the University of Alaska–Anchorage and Eastern Michigan University before going to Michigan State, where he teaches courses in content area reading to beginning and practicing teachers. He also teaches English to middle-school students in an urban professional development school. Dr. Conley is the author of many journals, articles, and book chapters. He coedited and wrote *Research Within Reach: Secondary School Reading* published by the International Reading Association. He was named Researcher of the Year in 1990 by the Michigan Reading Association, and, in 1991, he received the Elva Knight research award from the International Reading Association.

To Teachers
and Our Kids

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Preface

Content Reading Instruction: A Communication Approach is designed for courses in teacher education variously labeled Content Area Reading or Secondary Reading. Its purpose is to help you teach your students to read and communicate more effectively in whatever subject area you happen to be teaching. To accomplish this goal, I have produced a text with the following characteristics.

CONTENT COVERAGE

Because students from so-called nonprint subjects such as art, music, physical education, and industrial arts face many of the same problems of comprehension, motivation, and limited knowledge as students from the print-dominated subjects, this text covers all the content areas. By showing how reading strategies can be integrated with other language modes (listening, speaking, writing, and observing), it is possible to improve comprehension in any subject area. This attention to both print and nonprint subjects is what most distinguishes this text and has led me to title it a *communication* approach.

INSTRUCTIONAL EMPHASIS

The word *instruction* appears in the title to highlight the emphasis on what teachers think and do to help students become more literate. Each of the instruction-oriented chapters (5–11), which are the heart of the book, has a common format: setting goals, planning for instruction, and teaching a lesson. They not only describe specific teaching strategies, but also develop students' sense of how, when, and where to adapt these strategies to various contexts and subject areas.

PEDAGOGICAL FEATURES

An abundance of subject-specific examples, including sample dialogues, have been scattered throughout the book. In addition, cases illustrating instructional decision-making are provided toward the end of each of the teaching chapters (6–11 and 13). All of these examples, dialogues, and cases have been gathered or created in collaboration with real content area teachers. Finally, chapter-opening objectives, rationales, and concept maps are provided so that readers can quickly sense both the direction and justification for studying the information presented.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people contributed to the preparation of this book. Harold Herber is originally responsible for my interest in content reading. A number of school district curriculum specialists, including Kathy Wilson of the Anchorage school district and Joan Lessard of the Fairbanks North Star School District, made it possible for me to try out many of the ideas in the book with classroom teachers. Bill Mester, Superintendent of the Mead (WA) School District, and Fran Mester, a teacher in the Spokane School District, are responsible for much of my current thinking about teacher decision-making and the role of content reading in schools. Many classroom teachers in my undergraduate and graduate

classes have helped me grow and have contributed to the examples that appear throughout the text.

The following reviewers have contributed thoughtful critiques that have improved the final version of this text: Patricia Anders, University of Arizona; Barbara Guzzetti, Arizona State University; Ann McCourt, University of Delaware; David O'Brien, Purdue University; Laura Roehler, Michigan State University; and Dixie Lee Spiegel, University of North Carolina.

Special acknowledgment goes to Laura Roehler and Gerry Duffy from Michigan State University, who gave me the original boost and confidence to write a book. Thanks to Lane Akers who gave me patient encouragement and guided me wisely from the start. Finally, I owe a great deal of thanks to my wife, Sigrid, and to the kids, Brendon, Kelly, and Erin. While working for three years in the basement writing this book, I could always count on one of them to pull me out of writer's block, make me forget how tired I had become, or help me remember what it is all about.

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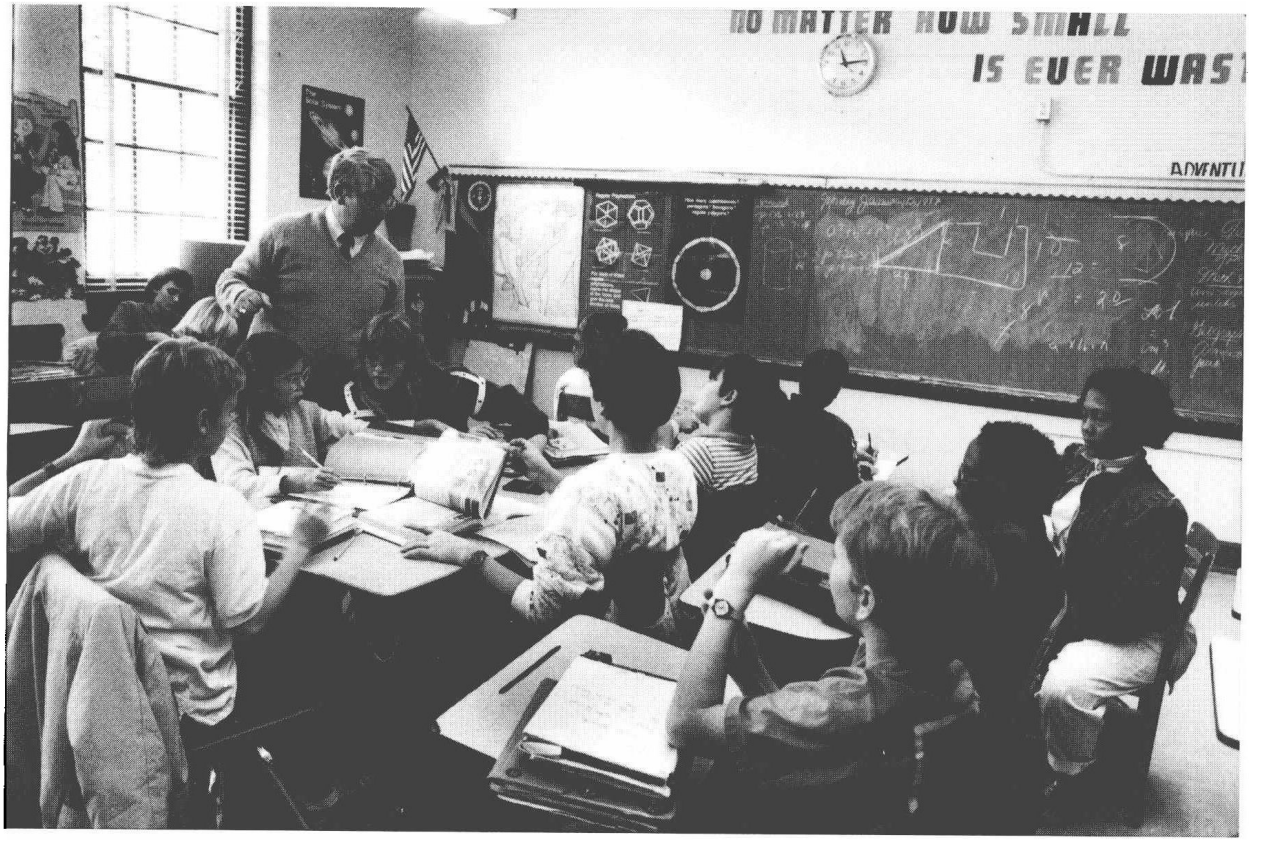
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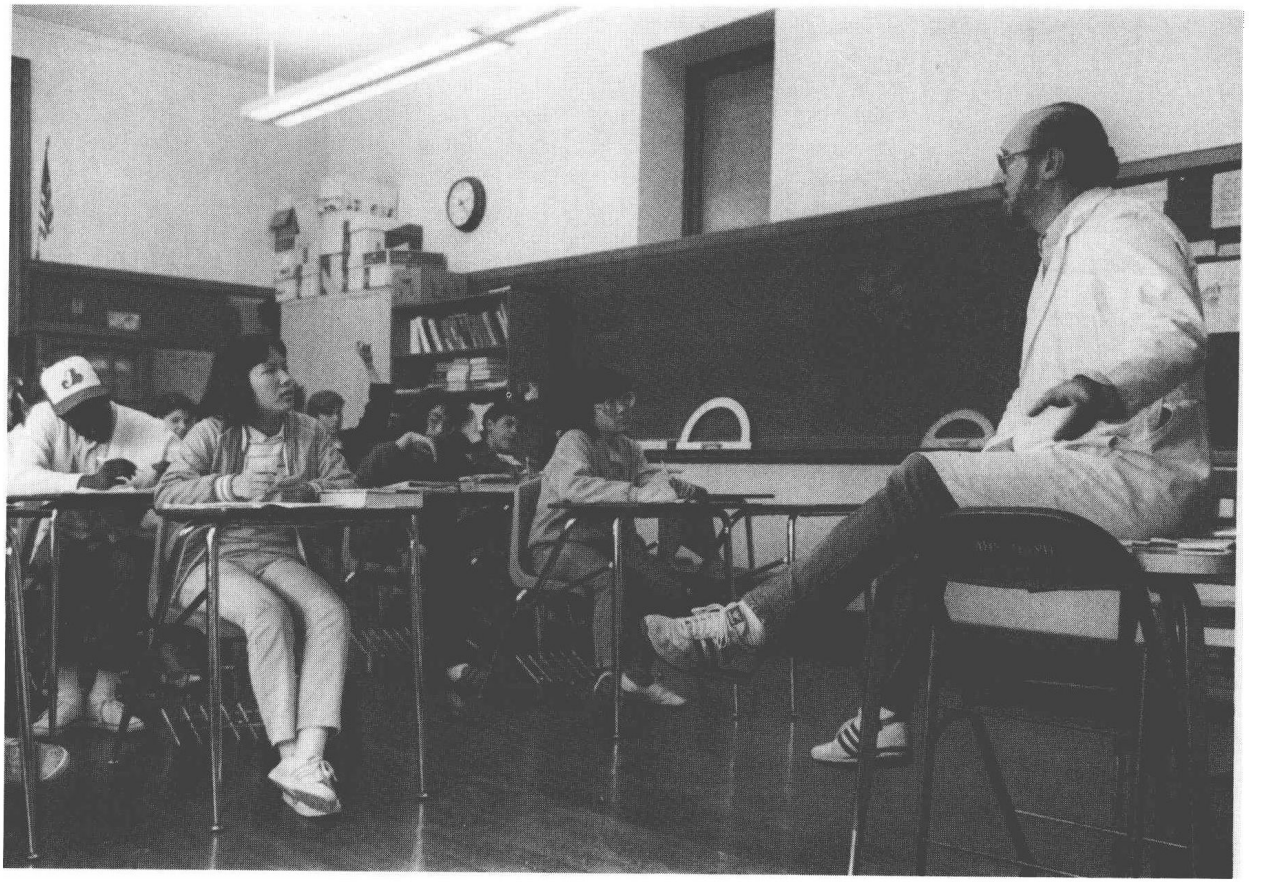
Section I

Introduction

Section I contains a single chapter introducing you to the goals for a communication approach to content reading instruction. At the end of this section, you should be able to understand the purposes and themes that appear throughout the book and be able to answer questions such as:

1. What is content reading?
2. What is a communication approach to content reading?
3. What kinds of instruction make up a communication approach to content reading?



"No longer will it be sufficient to teach some facts of geography, a little algebra, or the mechanics of language. The school subjects will become means for learnings that transcend them."

From J. Goodlad (1984). A place called school *(p. 244). New York: McGraw-Hill.*

1

Content Reading and Communication

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Understand the goals for instruction for helping students learn effectively from their reading.
2. Explain what it means to take a communication approach to content reading instruction.

RATIONALE

For many years, news about students and reading has not been good. Students leave school without knowing how to perform simple reading tasks: many cannot scan a phone book to find emergency numbers or read an employment application. Equally disturbing are recent declines among all students in the ability to understand whole passages of text (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988; NAEP, 1986). Solutions to the crisis in literacy are no longer restricted to teaching basic reading skills and using remedial readers. All students require instruction in reading. Without the ability to use reading to engage in a variety of ways of thinking, our students will be incapable of communicating and surviving in our print-based society.

Too often, responsibility for solving these problems is placed solely on elementary and remedial reading programs. *Elementary reading programs* (programs designed to teach beginning readers) are sometimes expected to teach students everything they should ever need to know about reading by the time they enter the middle school level. This expectation is unrealistic because the reading and communication needs of students change dramatically as they progress through school and eventually into the outside world. The reading curriculum for most elementary students focuses mostly on *learning-to-read strategies* (such as pronouncing words or comprehending paragraphs and stories). Learning-to-read strategies offer students a broad foundation for learning, but not the specific kinds of strategies that are necessary for reading in subjects like mathematics, science, English, social studies, vocational education, or music. For example, some students experience increasing difficulty with reading in the upper grades as the reading demands become more complex and specialized.

Students who are unsuccessful with reading are often placed in *remedial reading programs* (programs designed to help problem readers improve). Remedial instruction

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