Stratenotes

A CLC Primer

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During the 2006 International SIM Conference, we organized a series of sessions related to the Content Literacy Continuum, our framework for evaluating and developing school-wide literacy programs. The sessions themselves presented a continuum of information. At one end of the spectrum, we provided information to allow SIM Professional Developers who were novices or unfamiliar with CLC to speak knowledgably about the CLC at a basic level. At the other end of the spectrum, we addressed advanced topics related to CLC professional development for those who have been working with CLC for some time.

Our emphasis on the continuum during the conference should not be construed as a mandate that all SIM Professional Developers must shift toward conducting CLC professional development. Rather, we want to make sure that *all* SIM Professional Developers can answer basic questions that arise during their sessions. You may find yourself in a situation in which a school wants to get ready or believes it is ready to consider whole-school improvement through CLC. In that case, being able to address basic questions will increase your value to that school.

This article follows the story presented by Keith Lenz and Patty Graner in a session called "Content Literacy Continuum: What Do I Need to Know?" It begins with the founding of the KU Center for Research on Learning and continues through the development of the Strategic Instruction Model, explores the changing needs of society, and gives a brief overview of the Content Literacy Continuum. The pieces of the story are likely quite familiar to you, but it is essential to pull them together coherently to lay the foundation upon which successful CLC initiatives can be built.

A PowerPoint presentation to accompany this article is available on SIMville under the Content Literacy Continuum link.

Back Story

KU-CRL came into being in 1978 as the Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities, with the goal of improving the learning experience for students with learning disabilities at the secondary level.

Our first set of studies investigated the demands placed on students in secondary schools, comparing students with learning disabilities, students who were low achieving but did not qualify for special education services, and normally achieving students. From these studies emerged a set of demands students face in secondary settings. Our belief was that if we could help students meet these demands, they would graduate and probably do well academically in postsecondary settings. As a result, we developed the Learning Strategies Curriculum to help students learn the skills they need to acquire information (reading strategies), remember information (storage strategies), and express themselves in writing and on tests.

> **Web-Enhanced**
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> For More background Information:
> - "The CRL Story" at www.kucrl.org/story
> - "the CRL History Project" at www.kucrl.org/history

Next, we began to question how a general education teacher could teach content in ways that compensate for the fact that not all students have those skills. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, we completed a study on how general education teachers plan for academic diversity in their classrooms. We worked alongside history and science teachers and asked how they planned for and made accommodations for specific students in their classes who had learning dis-

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abilities. These teachers were honest with us: They were indeed concerned about those students with LD, but they needed ways of teaching that they could use to reach the whole group of students as well as that one student.

Based on this feedback, we began looking at planning routines, encouraging standards-based instruction, and focusing on curriculum content. Results from this and other studies led to development of the Content Enhancement Series. General education teachers use these routines to plan and organize their instruction; present concepts; explore text, topics, and details; and increase student performance.

We also have developed a host of supporting programs to enable cooperative learning, social skill development, self-advocacy, and problem solving, among other skills.

Societal Changes

In presenting the Content Literacy Continuum as a framework for school improvement, it's important to touch on the changing needs of society as underlying the urgency for schools to evaluate whether their literacy programs prepare their students for the future.

In their book, *The New Division of Labor: How Computers are Creating the Next Job Market*, Frank Levy and Richard Murnane contend that technology is changing our expectations and resulting in the need for more expert thinking skills and more complex communication skills. Employers value employees with the proven ability to be strategic,

to solve problems, and to engage in higher-order thinking skills. Schools must respond to these needs and foster development of these skills in students, or employers will look elsewhere for new hires.

In light of these societal demands and our findings over the years, the message for schools is this: If you really want to pursue literacy-centered school improvement at the secondary level, you must change the culture of the school. By this, we mean substantial change that is more complex than any infrastructure change, such as block schedules or small learning communities. If schools don't approach content

and complex thinking skills differently, they probably won't succeed in improving literacy and preparing students to be competitive in postsecondary settings and future employment.

Enduring Gap

Another facet of the realities within which schools must operate is represented by the performance gap. As SIM Professional Developers, you are very familiar with this gap, which we identified as a challenge in our earliest studies. Essentially, the gap shows that students who have not mastered the needed literacy skills begin to struggle with content by fourth grade. As they continue in school, the gap between what teachers expect them to accomplish and what they are able to do widens. The

assumption in secondary education is that if schools "raise the bar," or increase expectations for student learning, students will naturally develop the literacy skills they need to meet this challenge. We have found that does not happen. Instead, the skill level these students have attained when they enter high school is the same level they will exhibit when they leave high school.

The adoption of SIM Learning Strategies and Content Enhancement Routines has made a difference—closed the gap—for individual students. Likewise, infrastructure supports such as block scheduling and after-school programs have addressed some difficulties for some students. System learning supports—progress monitoring or instructional coaching, for example—also contribute to some gains. We have found, however, that the biggest difference in academic performance across whole schools comes from focusing increased attention on the instructional core. The Content Literacy Continuum provides a framework for analyzing and improving that core.
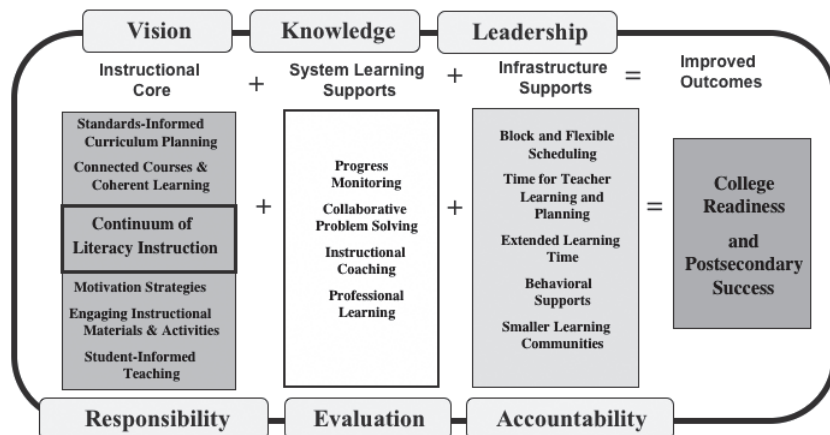
Successful Systems Change

After making the case for the need to launch whole-school improvement efforts, it's important to establish expectations for how the change process will work most effectively. We've found, for instance, that mandating change in a top-down fashion rarely works in the long term. Instead, each

Critical Values for System Change

Shared…

Vision	Knowledge	Leadership

Instructional Core + **System Learning Supports** + **Infrastructure Supports** = **Improved Outcomes**

Instructional Core		System Learning Supports		Infrastructure Supports		Improved Outcomes
Standards-Informed Curriculum Planning Connected Courses & Coherent Learning **Continuum of Literacy Instruction** Motivation Strategies Engaging Instructional Materials & Activities Student-Informed Teaching	+	Progress Monitoring Collaborative Problem Solving Instructional Coaching Professional Learning	+	Block and Flexible Scheduling Time for Teacher Learning and Planning Extended Learning Time Behavioral Supports Smaller Learning Communities	=	**College Readiness and Postsecondary Success**

Responsibility	Evaluation	Accountability

Slide 1 **…that respects the individual in the system.**

school must create its own set of goals and activities based on research-proven methods and interventions within a comprehensive framework, such as the CLC.

Successful change involves honoring the work the school has already done and building on its accomplishments. In doing so, strive to balance the following critical values:

- A shared vision that allows individual contributions
- Shared knowledge that leads to individual learning
- Shared leadership that seeks the voice of individuals
- Shared responsibility that shapes individual planning and action
- Shared evaluation that guides self-assessment
- Shared accountability that motivates individual action

Slide 1 depicts these values wrapped around the other factors we have identified as components of literacy-centered effective school improvement efforts. These components—instructional core, system learning supports, and infrastructure supports—work with the critical system change values to result in college readiness and postsecondary success for students. Note the central placement of the Content Literacy Continuum in the instructional core component. The crucial message of this slide is that *all* of the components of school structures, systems leadership, and values must work together and build upon each other to create a continuum of literacy instruction.

Content Literacy

A final foundational point in introducing the Content Literacy Continuum is a discussion of just what content literacy means and why it is important for students and teachers. Content literacy refers to the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and strategies necessary to learn in each of the academic disciplines.

Slide 2 on page 4 lists five key ideas related to content literacy, first among them that an important application of literacy is to learn critical information.

As every classroom teacher can attest, the amount of time teachers have to teach has remained steady for decades. The amount of content they are expected to cover in that time, however, continues to grow. Teachers can get through that content and make it to the end of the year, but the real concern is whether all students in their academically diverse classes will make it, too, and more importantly, whether the students will master the critical material along the way.

The key ideas listed in Slide 2 echo themes we have emphasized for years, and there are obvious connections to SIM. The *Word Identification Strategy*, for example, is our tool to help students decode fluently (key idea No. 2). SIM's Content Enhancement Routines can help teachers focus on and present content that is really critical for students to know.

However, a school may already have a program or intervention in place that addresses decoding or another aspect of content literacy. If so, it is important to acknowledge that when introducing the CLC.

The ideas that all teachers must teach and reinforce common strategies and that all students must master some critical content often

raise warning flags among teachers. One concern that arises early in professional development related to CLC is that content teachers don't have time to be reading teachers in addition to all of their other responsibilities.

Our answer to this concern, first, is that the content teacher's role in literacy development is limited and focuses on building the background knowledge and teaching the vocabulary that students need to master the content of that course. All students must acquire some degree of content to function successfully in society. It is not acceptable to assume that *most* students understanding the content is good enough. The content teacher's role, then, is to identify that critical content and concentrate on presenting it in learner-friendly ways to ensure all their students understand.

The second part of our answer is that content teachers must explicitly demonstrate—through modeling, reinforcement, and clear expectations—that literacy skills

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Key Ideas Related to Content Literacy

1. A major application of literacy is to increase the learning of critical information.
2. Content literacy requires fluent decoding.
3. Common strategies are taught and reinforced by all teachers.
4. Responsive and systematic instruction is provided on a continuum of intensity.
5. Students must master critical content regardless of literacy competence so that they acquire the background knowledge required to connect and understand new information.

Slide 2

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and strategies are valued. This helps combat one of the main reasons students don't maintain skills: They don't have sufficient opportunities to practice strategies in relevant core areas. The benefit to students is increased ability to learn and understand the information presented in class; the benefit to teachers is increased success of their efforts to teach.

Enter the Continuum

The Content Literacy Continuum is our answer to how you put together everything we've learned over the years in a whole-school model. The information in the preceding sections of this article paints a strong rationale for improving literacy programs and establishes the continuum as a framework for evaluating and planning improvements in those programs. Now, your audience will need more information about the continuum and how it helps schools respond to the challenges we've outlined.

The Content Literacy Continuum consists of five levels of increasingly intensive literacy support. You will find several handouts on SIMville that will help you present the CLC. It is important to emphasize that the levels refer to how a school delivers instruction and the intensity of instruction. They do not refer to student ability. Students are not "Level 1 students" or "Level 3 students."

Level 1: Enhanced content instruction. All students must learn the critical content

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CLC MATERIALS ON SIMVILLE:

- CONTENT LITERACY CONTINUUM: Adolescent Literacy: Ensuring that No Child is Left Behind (pdf)
- SMARTER PLANNING: Considering curriculum in light of standards-based reform, by Keith Lenz

ALSO SEE SIM ARTICLE ARCHIVES: Strategic Content Literacy Initiative: Focusing on Reading in Secondary Schools, by Keith Lenz & Barbara Ehren, at WWW.KUCRL.ORG/ARCHIVES

required in the core curriculum regardless of literacy levels. Even students who are not fluent readers should master a certain amount of content before they leave their ninth-grade history class, for example. Teachers compensate for limited literacy levels by using explicit teaching routines, adaptations, and technology to promote content mastery. The CLC PowerPoint presentation that accompanies this article (available on SIMville) contains a series of slides to help illustrate the thinking at this level of the continuum. The series begins with defining a unit of content, then depicts how units are held together by critical ideas, and how to focus on what content is critical for students to understand. Once a teacher has identified the truly critical information, he or she should focus direct instruction on that. Students can explore related, but not critical, information through independent learning, homework assignments, or group work, but those should not be the sole means for students to obtain critical information.

To build your own background knowledge of content enhancement and teacher planning related to critical content, we refer you to *Teaching Content to All,* edited by Keith Lenz and Don Deshler. Some of the chapters deal specifically with identifying critical content, the concept of less is more, and SMARTER, standards-based planning. Chapter four, especially, talks about the planning process.

Level 2: Embedded strategy instruction. Teachers embed learning strategies in core curriculum courses through direct explanation and modeling and require the application of these strategies in content assignments. For example, a biology teacher may instruct students to use the *Paraphrasing Strategy* while reading the biology text and may reinforce this expectation by modeling how the strategy applies in the science classroom.

Level 3: Intensive strategy instruction. Students who have significant deficits in key areas or have difficulty mastering strategies presented in core classes are taught specific strategies through specialized, direct, explicit, and intense instruction. Support personnel such as resource teachers or reading specialists deliver this instruction, often in small-group settings.

Level 4: Intensive basic skill instruction. Schools provide more intensive interventions for students who need work on basic literacy elements, such as foundational decoding, fluency, and comprehension skills. Reading instruction is specialized, direct, and intensive. Intensive instruction in listening, speaking, and writing is often a part of these services.

Level 5: Therapeutic intervention. This level provides for intensive clinical options for students with underlying language disorders to learn the linguistic, related cognitive, metalinguistic, and metacognitive underpinnings they need to acquire content literacy skills and strategies. Speech-language pathologists become integral to the literacy work of the school and must understand what components are in place at levels one through four so they can engage students in curriculum-relevant therapy.

CLC and SIM

The Content Literacy Continuum is a framework for evaluating and developing schoolwide literacy programs. We developed the continuum because we believed, based on our research and experiences, that this framework addressed the very serious needs of schools struggling to improve literacy among all students. As such, the continuum stands apart from SIM. Clearly, SIM interventions may be part of a school's comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, especially at levels one, two, and three. However, it is important for schools to examine what they are already doing that fits this CLC framework and to consider what research-based programs or interventions—SIM or other—are needed to supplement existing programs.

Content Literacy Continuum Resources

In addition to the information and handouts available on SIMville, the following resources can help you increase your knowledge of the Content Literacy Continuum, some of the research at the heart of CLC principles, and the educational challenges the continuum is designed to address.

1. *Teaching Content to All*, B. Keith Lenz and Donald D. Deshler with Brenda R. Kissam (eds.) (2004) Published by Allyn & Bacon.
2. *Teaching Adolescents with Disabilities*, Jean B. Schumaker and Donald D. Deshler (eds.) (2006) Published by Corwin Press.
3. *SIM in Support of Secondary Literacy*. This collection of resources has been part of the packets distributed at the International SIM Conference and regional conferences for several years. It also is available by contacting KU-CRL's order desk at 785.864.0617.