

Language Acquisition and Writing Ability

Stephen Bernhardt

The influence of James Moffett's writings is widespread within the English teaching profession. Most teachers, especially in the elementary and secondary grades, have had their classroom practice affected by his ideas, whether or not he is acknowledged as the source of the ideas. Moffett draws upon ideas from cognitive psychology to develop a theoretical rationale for a student-centered, individualized approach to language learning which departs dramatically from the traditional subject-centered orientation toward literature, composition, grammar, and speech in the English classroom. For Moffett, the student's own languaging experiences are regarded as central to the English curriculum; beginning with them the student is led from a narrow, egocentric view of himself outward toward increasingly decentered, abstracted views of the world. In Moffett's words, "The teacher's art is to move with this movement, a subtle art possible only if he shifts his gaze from the subject to the learner, for the subject is the learner" (TUD, 59). The shift is revolutionary, demanding that the teacher leave behind textbooks, tests, and predetermined, full-class instruction in subject matter.

In Moffett's student-centered classrooms, the notion that English represents a certain core of content which all students benefit from learning and studying together gives way to English as a workshop in language use which draws other subjects and other "real-life" activities into its ken. Many teachers (and many school boards) would question the assumptions of instruction in an open classroom, with activity centers, resource materials, and a facilitator/teacher who encourages students to choose what, when, and how they will learn. This issue is critically important in gauging the acceptability of Moffett's ideas about writing, calling into question as it does traditional conceptions of the nature of the learner, the role of the teacher, the ends of education, and the student's decision-making power. I will leave the questions unanswered, however, as I examine more specifically Moffett's ideas on writing instruction.

Moffett's pedagogical recommendations are consonant with the ideas of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bernstein, all of whom



Van Boerijder's Aquisition Model, Stage 1:
"Garbage In" (Misthaufen Paperbacks,
Whole Child Foundation, JHS, SJ 7.)

postulate a developmental sequence of language growth in the individual from self-centered (language-for-oneself) toward decentered (language-for-others). Such a view treats self-expressive (language-for-oneself) as the starting point of development. Other positions, of course, can be cogently argued. For instance, one might posit a functional basis of language development, arguing that language develops as the child learns to get things done. From this viewpoint, language is from the start not an egocentric activity, but a tool for getting other people to behave in certain ways. With such a change in perspective, learning to use language is less a matter of increasing one's capacity to convey the full range and complexity of one's thoughts and more a matter of pragmatic efficiency. The question of language effectiveness changes, then, from "Did I fully express my ideas?" to "Did my words accomplish my intended effect?"

Moffett's Perspective is Developmental

The spectrum of written discourse which Moffett proposes follows from his developmental perspective. That is, suggested assignments follow a sequence from subjects close to the writer's personal experience, beginning with writing to and for oneself, and gradually moving to writing about abstract content for remote audiences. The problem is that even if one accepts a model of cognitive and linguistic growth moving outward from egocentrism, such development presumably takes place early in an individual's life. A child soon learns that his world is not the world, that other people and extenuating circumstances must be considered. Certainly by the middle grades, students have decentered sufficiently to operate within the objective constraints imposed by other people and the physical world. While some students may have difficulties in decentering their writing in order that it be understood by others, this is only one difficulty among many, worthy of attention, yet not sufficient to determine a whole course or curriculum.

To base a writing curriculum on a recapitulation of linguistic or cognitive stages already transcended by the learners seems misguided, even assuming there is some psychological validity to the theory--that

it corresponds to some real goings on in children. The modeling of such a curriculum presupposes first the reality of those stages and secondly the validity of attempting to devise a curriculum which reflects them in sequence. As Moffett himself notes, "This whole theory of discourse is essentially an hallucination" (TUD, p. 54). Such a curriculum, which seeks its motivation in a model of language or cognitive development, further risks confusion because it equates the process of linguistic or cognitive development with the development of writing ability. Croake's paraphrase of Britton on this topic (fforum, p. 9) applies to Moffett as well; the implications of both may be construed as their belief that writing, speech, and cognitive development are activities of a kind.

The result of this confusion is seen in the sequence of writing assignments recommended by Moffett. The initial steps typically call for reproducing interior monologue through detailed sensory description or freely imaginative recording of thoughts. The assumption is that writing is motivated internally and that we must help students get in closer touch with personal sources. It may be, however, that these sources are, for some students at least, the most difficult to tap. It might well be easier for students to begin with situations in which the writing is to accomplish a clear goal--request for information, a justification for one's actions, an act of praise or thanks, or an attempt to convince. Internally motivated forms of writing--description, narration, personal statements--may be difficult because they lack a context which gives them a purpose. Most of our own writing is externally motivated, derived from imposed rather than felt needs. Moffett's assignments are peculiarly unlike anything that passes for language activity outside the English classroom. Where but in school would anyone record random, on-going sensory impressions, then revise them so someone else might understand them? In the absence of imaginable contexts for narrative, descriptive, or personal forms of writing, Moffett's assignments are simply more school-type exercises which assume a transfer of writing ability from personal to purpose-

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ful. Whether such transfer occurs, whether, for instance, practice in writing dramatic episodes will help the writer control other, less personal writing, remains an open question.

The question will not be answered, but support for such transfer will be assumed; for Moffett, like other good cognitivists, believes in the value of creative play with the forms of language through non-directed, individual exploration in a non-threatening environment. In these days of competency testing, explicit objectives, and the general homogenization of curriculum under the cry of "the basics," Moffett's ideas about teaching English appear even more radical than when they were first proposed in the late sixties. I would advocate a rational balance of his speculative, exploratory activities with content-oriented formal instruction. But whatever position we finally adopt, reading and thinking our way through the wealth of ideas in Moffett's books can only help us understand our own behavior better as we go about our day-to-day teaching.

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Mark E. Smith (cont. from p. 22)

of text after text; all you had to do was look at the table of contents. So, for five or six years, I methodically plotted out and plodded through separate units on these four modes. But then I read Moffett: there were not just four modes, but a universe of modes, infinite in number. And more importantly, they all have a place in the English classroom. So now I offer my students a much broader scope of writing assignments than those in the four traditional modes. They write papers ranging in point of view, from subjective to objective; in content and concern, from immediate to remote past or future; in topic, from simple to complex; in style, from unedited transcripts of speech to polished, formal essays; in audience addressed, from intimate to public; and so on. Now, instead of assigning a comparison and contrast or process paper, I ask students to think of a topic or issue that strongly interests

them and then to write a paper which says what they want to say about that topic. Moffett quotes one teacher who says, "You can't write writing." But you can write ideas and feelings, which is what my students do more often now, and with stronger motivation.

To paraphrase Jacqueline, if you use journals, small group work on drafts, and assignments from a universe of discourse, you will find you have made better writers and "glad of it."

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Two Schools (cont. from p. 27)

But I didn't know if I could afford to let this muscled creature knock my ego around.

"We were just..."

"Just what?"

"Sheeuit," I mumbled, making my way to the end of the line, looking like a scolded puppy with its tail tucked between its legs.

Gary Robertson, '81

Matisse

I dreamed last night that i was chasing a butterfly through a crowded city and when he flew too high i sat down and cried because i think that that butterfly was you

Anita Mantey '78



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