

Prime Movers: Britton and Moffett

Toby Fulwiler

Moffett and Britton are movement makers. Their books influence entire elementary, secondary, and university curricula as well as individual classroom teachers. To be more specific, James Moffett's "sequence assignments" form a critical component of the National Writing Project while James Britton's research provides the theoretical foundation for the movement known as "writing across the curriculum"--in Canada, England, Australia and the United States. Both authors are respected among writing researchers for their work in discourse theory, and few theorists have had more immediate practical implications for the teaching of writing.

Moffett's Spectrum of Discourse

In 1968 James Moffett published Teaching the Universe of Discourse. The universe Moffett describes expands the traditional four rhetorical modes-- 1) narration, 2) description, 3) exposition and 4) argumentation--into a broad **spectrum of discourse** that more accurately accounts for the variety of rhetorical situations found in the real world. Moffett's spectrum ranges from egocentric speaking before an immediate known audience to abstract theorizing before a distant unknown audience. He suggests that as student writers move from the subjective bands of the spectrum toward the more objective bands, more rigorous demands are placed on their thinking and writing skills; thus, a writing curriculum designed to move students progressively from

the easier narrative modes toward the more difficult theoretical modes will enhance writing skills as it promotes cognitive growth.

Moffett insists that as student writers are guided from mode to mode, their writing tasks should be kept as realistic as possible. Teachers should assign whole pieces of discourse--rather than sentence and paragraph exercises--as only in a whole context do sentences and paragraphs make sense. Students should write as often as possible and use classmates, in addition to the teacher, as an audience for their writing. In Moffett's words: students need to be "taught naturalistically, by writing, and the only texts [should] be the student productions themselves" (TUD, 210).

Moffett's beliefs about writing are central to the National Writing Project, directed by James Gray of the University of California. The NWP includes over sixty sites throughout the United States; each site conforms generally to the model Gray developed in the San Francisco Bay area in 1974: a five-week Summer Institute for 25 teachers with a regular rotation of daily activities including 1) teachers teaching each other their best practices and 2) small groups of teachers writing for each other, varying the mode from week to week according to Moffett's sequence. The general philosophy of NWP is eclectic; however, Gray provides handouts on Moffett to project directors, and he requires the Moffett writing

sequence of all participants. When I co-directed the Upper Peninsula Writing Project (NWP) during the summer of 1978, most of the participating teachers spoke of the Moffett-inspired groups as the strongest single part of the Summer Institute. Since teachers return to their home schools to begin regular in-service programs for colleagues and work on curricular change in the teaching of writing at the conclusion of a NWP Institute, it is not surprising that many NWP teachers reform the curriculum according to Moffett.

Britton's Function Categories

James Britton's work in England complements Moffett's work in the United States. Britton's research team at the University of London Institute of Education began a major research project in 1966 to examine the kind of writing required of British school children. The results of this study were published in The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18. Like Moffett, Britton was dissatisfied with the modes of discourse as traditionally formulated; he too fractured them, seeking more accurately descriptive categories, and arrived at **function** and **audience** as the prime determiners of rhetorical mode. Following is a brief summary of Britton's reformulated function categories:

1. **Transactional writing:** "the language to get things done; to inform people to advise or persuade or instruct people...where the transaction demands accurate and specific reference to what is known about reality." Reports, proposals, term papers, and most school writings are examples (DWA, 88).
2. **Expressive writing:** "the kind of writing that might be called 'thinking aloud on paper.'" This is writing "intended for the writer's own use," and is often found in diaries, journals, and first drafts of formal papers (DWA, 89)
3. **Poetic writing:** "language as an art medium...a verbal construct, an object made out of language." Fiction, poetry, and drama are examples (DWA, 90).

In studying school writing, Britton discovered that **expressive** writing--the language of "thinking aloud"--was ignored by most teachers, especially in science and social science, while **transactional** writing dominated the curriculum. The fact that students were seldom required to write in the **expressive** mode suggested to Britton that writing was taught almost exclusively as a means to communicate information rather than as a means to gain insight, develop ideas, or solve problems. Britton writes: "The small amount of speculative writing certainly suggests that, for whatever reason, curricular aims did not include the fostering of writing that reflects independent thinking; rather, attention was directed toward classificatory writing which reflects information in the form in which both teacher and textbook traditionally present it" (DWA, 197).

Britton's hypothesis is that students who learn to use **expressive** writing to explore and discover ideas gain an important learning edge over those who do not; furthermore, regular practice with **expressive** writing should actually enhance cognitive growth. Therefore, Britton wants "to claim a developmental role for writing in school" (DWA, 201). **Expressive** writing is a tool with which to sharpen one's own mental abilities as well as a first step toward more public forms of writing.

Writing Across the Curriculum

The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18 is a report of the Schools Council Project based from 1966 to 1971 at the University of London Institute of Education. In 1971 the Schools Council approved a three-year development project called "Writing Across the Curriculum" to investigate the practical application of Britton's research; work on this project, now unfunded, continues in England. In the United States, Britton's work has received increased attention since 1977, when NCTE published The Development of Writing Abilities. In universities, as well as secondary schools, programs in "writing across the curriculum" have developed as one comprehensive way to combat poor writing. For example, at Michigan Tech, where we are actively promoting writing

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Robert Root (cont. from p. 16)

 , and Betty J. Wagner. Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13: A Handbook for Teachers. 2nd Edition. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1976.

Although originally the Interaction program was an attempt to overcome the limitations of this book, first published in 1968, the limitations of educational resources in most school districts has compelled Moffett to continually revise his initial classroom-practice-oriented book, expanding, and where possible, freeing the text from the constraints a one-book program imposes. Still a concrete and sound source of ideas to implement in pursuit of Moffett's concept of learning.

Reeves, Ruth. "Interaction in Review-- Perspectives from Supervision," English Journal 63 (May 1974), p. 104.

Rosen, Lois. "An interview with James Britton, Tony Burgess, and Harold Rosen," English Journal, 67, 8 (November 1977), 50-58.

An arresting interview with three members of the Schools Council Project, synthesizing, expanding, and elaborating on their work, and, interestingly, corroborating the work of Moffett.

Sarke, Fred H. "Interaction in Review-- Perspectives from the Classroom," English Journal, 63 (May, 1974), 104.

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across the curriculum, we regularly conduct workshops for colleagues in disciplines other than English to explore with them how they might use writing more actively in their daily classroom instruction. Many of the ideas suggested at these workshops, such as journal writing, freewriting, and brainstorming, are grounded in Britton's notion that speculative writing plays an important part in the learning process.

Britton's work provides the theoretical base to the common-sense principle that writing is not the sole province of the English department any more than numbers are the sole province of the math depart-

ment or speaking of the speech department. Writing activities must occur "across the curriculum" as a regular part of student life if such activities are to have a strong and lasting impact. Britton's work--along with that of Americans Daniel Fader, Janet Emig, Lee Odell, and James Moffett--has given rise to a genuine interest in writing as an interdisciplinary activity, something practiced in all areas of the real world by real people.

Both Britton and Moffett have had a significant influence on how we view writing at the beginning of the 1980's. They have helped us to see the developmental potential of good writing instruction, and they have provided us with personal and programmatic guidelines to carry out that instruction. By challenging the prescriptive--and proscriptive--rhetorical modes with which most of us grew up, and by suggesting more comprehensive alternatives, Britton and Moffett demonstrate that writing can be taught humanely and realistically. They show us, along with our students, a universe inhabited by human beings as well as English teachers.

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