

# Jim Moffet Is Alive and Well, Stir Frying Vegetables in Mr. Chiang's Kitchen

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Many of us, especially those with a stylish touch of gray amid the brown and blonde, cut our philosophical teeth on the theories and teaching practices of James R. Moffett. We marveled at his irreverent good sense in *A Student Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) to see how thinking and language might be meshed in classrooms. We read the much reprinted chapter, "Learning to Write by Writing," and nodded as Moffett explained that groups of children, coached by a competent teacher, were the best source of response to classroom writing, and textbooks, fraught with models and rules and badly written dummy sentences, were self-defeating. We fretted when we heard Moffett was going commercial, but with the appearance of Houghton Mifflin's *Interaction* program in 1973, we were relieved. Digging through activity cards and marvelously conceived little books of readings, we decided good theory was indeed translatable into sound practice. With *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), we welcomed Moffett's coauthor, Betty Jane Wagner.

The late seventies reared a conservative head, but the Moffett in us lingers on as well. Almost every English department has teachers who know English should be something to do, not learn about, and young people should be making choices about activities, collaborating, and sharing, and adults rank no better than second-place as audiences for student writing. Better yet, these teachers can explain *why* they embrace such outlandish ideas.

A fresh approach to the design of student-centered instructional units, the "Chinese Menu

System" by teachers in the Columbus, Georgia, area, illustrates the usefulness of Moffett's ideas. When you first went to a Chinese restaurant, you found it made more sense to order as a group. You could load the table with a marvelous range—seafood, beef, chicken, noodles and rice. Wise old Mr. Chiang, the owner, forced you to make your selections his way. For six, the menu explained, you could order two from Column A (expensive ingredients like lobster and filet), two from Column B (chicken, pork), and two from Column C (lots of vegetables). Tea, white rice and maybe a soup came no matter what.

Students participating in a Chinese Menu System unit go through the same process of guided choices. At the outset, an English teacher announces categories (columns) of learning activities, such as (1) personal reading followed by written response, (2) projects with one other student, and (3) research involving interviews with parents or other adults. All activities center around a single theme or topic (poverty, violence, or—why not?—the New England Renaissance), and students select so many activities from each category to work toward the grade they want to earn.

In one Menu unit, "If You Became a Family," high school seniors choose from among twenty activities about early marriage and its consequences. The unit was inspired by a popular health course offered in several parts of the country, a marriage-and-family elective which paired male and female students, took them through marriage preparation and counseling, taught budgeting and other drabberies of adult life, and ended in divorce, infidelity, unexpected children, or even happily-ever-after.

Here, then, are a few of the twenty activities that comprise "If You Became a Family."

1. "So You Want to Get Married, Huh?" (PARTNERS)  
Many young people believe that getting married is not much more complicated than saying "I do." Ministers, rabbis, and counselors, though, usually put a young couple through a bit of counseling first. For this activity: (a) Interview one or two ministers about their counseling of those who plan to marry soon (prepare a list of questions first, so you cover all important areas). (b) Ask your minister about his or her view of early marriage. (c) Share your findings with the class during the "Sharefair." *Follow-up Option:* Try setting up a mock counseling service for students in your class. You can play the counselors; others can pretend to be on the brink of marriage.
2. "In-Laws—Myth vs. Reality" (ALONE)  
Collect cartoons or jokes illustrating the "in-law problem." Then interview your parents or other adults about whether common beliefs about in-laws are valid or not. Finally present your conclusions in a brief oral report.
3. "Mom's Apple Pie" (ALONE)  
Not everyone marries a good cook, and not everyone learns to cook well in a short time. For this activity, spend some time collecting your favorite recipes from your mother or other family members (10–15 recipes will be enough). Then assemble these into a booklet, which you might want to illustrate. Share your booklet with others. *Follow up option:* Trade recipes with another student and make one of the dishes indicated. Tell the class about what happened.
4. "Who's in Charge of What Around Here?" (GROUP: 8–10 STUDENTS)  
A group of eight to ten is needed for this activity. Individually, each member divides a sheet of paper into two columns labeled "husband" and "wife." Then list what you believe should be the basic responsibilities in the home for each. (Include cooking, cleaning, laundry, paying the bills, and at least five or six other duties.) Then, with the others, compare your individual lists. As you do, find points of greatest agreement and disagreement. Discuss the following: how are role expectations of husbands and wives changing in contemporary America? Are these changes good or bad—or just inevitable? *Follow-up Option:* Ask a group of your parents to engage in the same activity. Compare their ideas with yours. Then try grandparents.
5. "Write a Wedding" (ALONE OR WITH A PARTNER)  
Many young people today are discovering a special meaning in writing the lines for their own wedding ceremony. Either on your own or with a partner, try writing your own wedding. You may want to include poetry or Biblical quotations or even song lyrics. *Follow-up Options:* If you're pleased with

your script, you might try staging a mock wedding ceremony for the class.

6. "That Wasn't Me Talking. It Was My Parent" (WITH A PARTNER)  
Ever heard of transactional analysis? Or the book, *I'm Okay—You're Okay*? Many people today are using "TA" as a means of better understanding themselves and those they are close to. For this activity, you and your partner should read enough of *I'm Okay—You're Okay* to get the basic idea of transactional analysis (50 or 60 pages is enough, though you may want to read more). Then start analyzing your communication patterns to determine whether your *child*, your *adult*, or your *parent* is in control. *Follow-up Option:* transcribe the conversations of other students, parents, etc., and, together, analyze the "transactions."
7. "Trial Marriage: Yes and No" (SMALL GROUP)  
With a group of four participants, research and present a formal debate on this issue: "Resolved, that the 'trial marriage law'—which would require a couple to live together for one calendar year before marriage—be adopted by the legislature in this state." (If you need help with procedures for a formal debate, ask me.)
8. "Soap Opera" (SMALL GROUP)  
Create your own soap opera which focuses on some aspect of the problems of early marriage. Be ready to perform up to about 20 minutes worth, with or without scripts in hand. Some possibilities: (a) young wife of six months is bored with homemaking; she misses secretarial work she once did; (b) husband wants to be "liberated" and stay home while wife works; (c) in-laws want son-in-law or daughter-in-law (either one) to come to work for the family firm; (d) husband or wife wants to go out more; spouse wants to save money for the future.

Which activities go in which column? This depends on objectives teachers stress. Some want to make sure that students take on some research activity; others want students to share a language product—script, interview transcript, or report; still others want each student to work alone part of the time. But teachers' definitions of columns A, B, and C might take strikingly different twists.

The exact definition of columns is not critical *per se*, but it is critical that some scheme be established. Otherwise, as Mr. Chiang put it, kids will load up on lobster (a few popular activities), and the noodles (worthwhile choices with less immediate appeal) will be left stewing.

How should this or other Chinese Menu units be implemented? The first consideration is time. Somewhere between two and three weeks is about right. This particular unit is for older high school students. As the unit develops, at least three days

are set aside for sharing or “going public,” time for presenting projects, skits, papers, and other language products.

One teacher would introduce the topic through a discussion of young marriage depicted on television, in movies, or in literature. Students will want to discuss high schoolers who’ve married before or instead of graduation. One teacher uses an anonymous poll to introduce the topic, with students indicating whether or not they’d like to marry when they are 18, 21, 25, 30, or never. She has students complete this statement: “If you ask me, marrying young is like \_\_\_\_\_.” Results from the survey are tallied and shared another day. During the latter half of the period, she explains that early marriage will be the study topic for about two weeks, and students will choose from activities dealing with different aspects of the topic. She then introduces the columns.

A key feature is the “sharing sessions.” During the first or second day, when students review activity cards and identify partners or groups to work with, they also learn to reserve time during one of these sessions.

Moffett and Wagner argue for three essential ingredients of student-centeredness— individualization, interaction, and integration. Each lies at the heart of the Chinese Menu System.

A language arts/English teacher may achieve individualization through *variation* (no two learners will build language skills the same way), through *choice* (students can make educationally sound choices of learning activities), and through *multiple structures and personalized sequencing* (objectives will vary from one learner to the next and will be accomplished in sequences that are *psycho*-logical as much as they are logical according to “the structure of knowledge”). Units like “If You Become a Family” offer a framework for such individualization.

Language learning should be interactive. Where teachers value interaction, students review and select learning projects, clarify for each other instructions on the cards, form and reform learning groups, display and report surveys and interviews, and offer honest response to skits, papers, and points of view expressed in debate.

Moffett’s third component, integration, is apparent in Chinese Menu materials. Moffett points to the need for integrating school and home for integrating ability levels within classes, for integrating traditional school subjects, and for integrating language arts with other media. “If You Became a Family” meets the needs of integration in multiple ways. The tie between in-school and out-of-school learning is supported by selecting a topic that matters to adolescents. Students of varying skills can participate. Some activities are clearly easier than others, but a strong student and a weak student can participate in identical activities in unique ways. And Moffett explains, English shouldn’t be about itself. It should be used as a means for understanding real topics that matter to real learners. This approach meshes best with student-centeredness when it cuts across conventional subjects to include sociology, history, fine arts, psychology, and literature. English is built into each activity in skills that must be learned and used to reach a goal *beyond* skills-learning and skills-using. Finally, through broadening language products, a teacher approaches cross-media integration.

The Chinese Menu System is student-centered. Built from individualized activities and objectives, interaction of people and materials, and integration of content and process, it is a theory whose time has finally come.

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