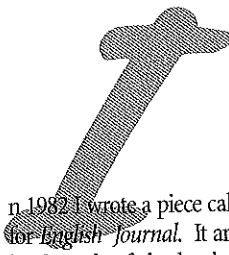


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Look, Ma! We've Been Moffetized

by James M. Brewbaker



In 1982 I wrote a piece called "Jim Moffett Is Alive and Well" for *English Journal*. It argued that, despite the conservative backwash of the back-to-basics movement, a sturdy minority of teachers had been Moffetized and were thus courageously swimming up the language arts stream while virtually everyone else went with the flow of skill-and-drill, non productive individualized instruction that too often - as Jim Moffett pointed out - meant *isolated*, not individualized, and curriculum dominated and defined by minimum competency tests.

Remember 1982? Janet Emig had published her groundbreaking research on the writing process a decade earlier, but process based composition instruction was more the stuff of earnest NCTE publications than what teachers actually did with kids. Whole language was up and running in New Zealand and Australia and had established a beachhead in British Columbia, but it was all but non-existent on the American mainland, where liberal educators were still reeling from the collapse of the open classroom. Don Graves had written "Balance the Basics: Let Them Write" in 1978, but his characteristically simple, straightforward notion was outside the mainstream and would remain on the fringe until elementary teachers became excited by *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983). In 1982, Nancie Atwell was simultaneously struggling with the inherent problems of teacher-centeredness and testing the notion that English might best be conceived as a studio or workshop subject complete with mini lessons, conferences, and portfolios. *In the Middle*, the professional book read most widely by teachers of the nineties, was published in 1987.

Moffetized teachers of the early eighties, those swimming up the language arts stream, embraced both the logic and psycho logic (Moffett's term) of student-centeredness and would not abandon such ostensibly radical approaches as activity-based learning, small groups, games of strategy, composition classrooms centered on writing and student choice as a frequent departure point for planning. Portfolios? Assessment based on actual work kids did and collected over time? With some exceptions, teachers of the early eighties had never heard of such things.

With some exceptions - for example, the Georgia teachers of "Jim Moffett Is Alive and Well." They had vitalized their classrooms by marrying two sound but underused strategies: the *literature based thematic unit* and *activity cards* modeled after those Moffett had published through *Interaction* in 1973. In their classrooms kids selected their own readings, then picked their own solo and/or small group short or long term activities and projects for sharing with classmates at the conclusion of the unit. Themes ranged from racial prejudice to early marriage and getting along with parents.

We must credit Moffett with affecting the most innovation-minded among an earlier generation of teachers to the point that they became exceptions to the rule. Evidence suggests that these teachers, the sturdy minority of

1982, influenced those entering English teaching afterwards in the intervening years to the point that minority has become majority; the Moffetized teacher, the nineties Moffettizer. If the 1996 NCTE/IRA *Standards for the English Language Arts* represents the current state of the profession's thinking, this is the case.

Think about the *Standards*, what they include and what they leave out. This is Moffetized stuff. His theories and perceptions regarding enlightened practice permeate this statement of teaching and learning principles, and - for all their eclecticism - the *Standards* include remarkably little he would have found unpalatable. Cases in point:

First, *Standards for the English Language Arts* presumes that ours is a K-12 subject. Revolutionary? Not exactly, but recall that, not so long ago, *language arts*, which took place in grades 1-6 or K-6, meant reading, spelling, too much grammar, and a little bit of writing. In the same era, **English** cranked up in grade 7, where teachers asked children to put away their basals and spellers and introduced capital L literature and capital C culture in the guise of long-departed American and British authors, with the balance of classroom time devoted to vocabulary study (in place of spelling), too much grammar (a constant), and a little bit of writing (another constant). Even a cursory examination of curriculum guides and textbooks of the past proves this point: educators too often acted as if there was no relationship between what happened in grade 5 and grade 8 - between language arts and English. None whatsoever.

Moffett helped the profession see the artificiality of *language arts* in elementary schools followed by *English* in secondary. He may not have coined the term *English language arts*, but he did make it respectable. The fourth edition of *Student Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-12* (Heinemann, 1993) is as useful to prospective first or third grade teachers as it is to veteran AP teachers, and it is dynamite indeed when primary, middle, and high school language arts teachers gather together to build on their understanding of their common pedagogy.

Second, *Standards for the English Language Arts* defines our subject as a developmentally governed process first, a body of content second or even incidentally. To Moffett the great flaw of English curriculum design was the presumption that it was a *what* subject rather than a *how* to subject. With other participants in the Dartmouth Conference in 1965, he recognized that English should be perceived as a set of classroom events - language events - through which seven-year-olds and eleven-year-olds and college freshmen engage in reading/writing/ listening/ talking/ thinking for real reasons with real audiences in an increasingly complex manner. Simultaneously, Moffett pointed out that these events might look, might *be*, strikingly similar from one year or level to the next: both little kids and big kids would read and write "real stories" - each according to their own cognitive maturity. Why? Because reading/writing/listening to/telling/thinking about "real stories" are essential modes of discourse that men and

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women have engaged in since they gathered around their cavefires and will continue to engage in when their cavefires are on Mars rather than on earth.

The *Standards* consistently reflect this insight, most emphatically in Standard 4 ("students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language ... to communicate ... with a variety of audiences and for different purposes") and Standard 12 ("students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes").

Third, *Standards for the English Language Arts* muddies or ignores the traditional lines between literature and non-literature, between adult work and student work, between high culture and low, between texts that are "Englishy" and everything else. Return to the example of "real stories". What are these? To Moffett, the stories children should read ranged from newspapers to *Guideposts* to *Walden* to literary biography. The real stories they wrote spanned, in like manner, diaries, journals, accounts of childhood memories, and reportage of unfolding events. Whether the writer is a byline reporter for the local newspaper or Thoreau or Boswell or Suzie Smith and other fifth-graders creating a class book of pre-school memories was, to Moffett, largely immaterial.

The *Standards* reflect this Moffettized perspective. True, literature/culture retains much of its traditional place, particularly in Standard 2 ("...a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres..."), but elsewhere in the *Standards* there is a vision of classrooms where kids, members of numerous literacy communities (see Standard 11), read/view (Standards 1 and 3) and create/compose (Standard 6) print and non print texts. (The latter term *non print texts* grates, but it is vital if one is to grasp the legitimacy of, for example, choreography, collage, and role play).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, *Standards for the English Language Arts* embodies Moffett's perception that valid language arts assessment is based wherever possible on real language products rather than indirect measures. Moffett would be pleased with the generality of the *Standards*, the implied disinclination of NCTE/IRA to prescribe assessment nationally. In 1968 he wrote, "I suggest a particular way of arriving at marks. A folder . . . is kept and passed on yearly from teacher to teacher. [The] teacher . . . makes a general assessment . . . [and] adds in his observations" then assigns a grade if he/she must. He went on to observe that ". . . the administrative need for tests and marks has tampered with educational processes . . . even more than most of its critics have ever asserted" (1968(1), 7). This point of view is now widely embraced by English language arts teachers.

Thus, from a perspective very similar to Moffett's, NCTE/IRA started in 1992 to resist turning the *Standards* into prescriptive benchmarks bordering on test items. The Office of Education wanted, for example, such statements as "every fourth grader identifies the topic sentence in a paragraph" or "every tenth grader paraphrases soliloquies in *Julius Caesar*." NCTE/IRA knew that this attitude derived from naive notions of language learning, that it could do mischief in the hands of curriculum makers and publishers. Instead, they argued that states and communities needed Standards that detailed in concrete language the ten or twelve essential qualities of best practice in English language arts classrooms. Broad Standards, in turn, could be used well in planning assessment. Many states and communities are now taking this tack. NCTE provides enlightened approaches to

the task through its *Standards Exemplar Series* (1997), which offers rubrics to use - in designing and scoring both on demand student performances and model portfolios at low, middle, and high achievement levels.

When I wrote "Jim Moffett Is Alive and Well," it never occurred to me that there would come a time when the man that personified the theoretical underpinnings of my personal English pedagogy wouldn't be around. (*Okay, damn the euphemisms! He died.*) To me, Moffett was an elemental force, ageless, eternal, tougher than cancer and Communism combined. He was leonine, his shock of graying - eventually bleachy white - hair brushed straight back. He was bronzed from the California sun, lean, calm and wise in the manner of those who meditated and did yoga and Tai Chi, exotic stuff that he integrated somehow into his teaching and learning theories - and vice versa. As a green assistant professor in 1973, I took my turn to shake his hand over wine and cheese at the NCTE convention in New Orleans, as awed by the experience as I would have been chatting with Marlon Brando or John Lennon. Over the years, at one NCTE convention after another, I watched him carefully pushing back, pushing outward, the boundaries of our understandings of language, mind, and schooling - and how they ought to work together. In 1993, I jammed into a low-ceilinged Portland ballroom along with hundreds of Moffett devotees celebrating his quarter century of thoughtful scholarship on behalf of naturalistic teaching practice.

But he is gone now, dead. Yet more than the memory lingers on. The fact is his ice cold logic regarding how kids learn and learn *with* language has sneaked up on the mainstream and subsumed it. Reading *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* and the first edition of *A Student Centered Language Arts, Grades K-13* in graduate school, I was mesmerized and Moffettized early on. Since 1972, I have been doing Moffett unto others - that is, *Moffettizing* teacher education students. From now on, though, through the work of the followers of this seminal thinker, it is more than individuals, more than the sturdy minority. In fact, it is a profession that can say, "Look Ma! We've Been Moffettized." ■

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