

THE INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTION

Words on World: Defining English as an Interdisciplinary Subject

by Column Editor
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It was James Moffett—along with personal experience as a teenager and young teacher—who taught me to define English as an interdisciplinary subject. In my adolescent lit class the other evening, my graduate students visited and critiqued web sites they might use as they taught or helped kids write poetry. You know how, on the web, one link leads to another and yet another. One group of students, following such a path, ended up at a site where someone had quoted *me* of all people. “At its best,” I intoned, “my literature class is about life first and literature second.”

Deep Thought 71. Yes, life first, everything else second. School comes divvied up into subjects. Life comes all mixed up in themes, topics, and worries.

Familiar though Deep Thought 71 was, I hadn’t the foggiest idea where the quote came from. This is not because my publications are so extensive but because they are a bit modest for someone whose first *English Journal* article is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary. Well, I suppose I have shared the idea frequently enough to pre- and in-service teachers that it stuck in someone’s consciousness. Good for them. Good for me.

How did I get to this point? How, for that matter, does any teacher decide what her English class—her literature class—is about? What does the curriculum dictate? What about standardized tests? What will teachers across the hall and in the teachers’ lounge think about what I do my classroom? How do I translate into practice what I believe about kids and language and learning and the rest of it?

In our own fashion, each of us answers these questions. Our answers are apparent in units and lesson plans, in classroom discussions, in the questions we pose to kids. Here as elsewhere, what you and I do reveals more than what we say.

Episodes from my own schooling laid the foundation for my growing into the English teacher I became thirty-five years ago. They also whetted my appetite for the theories of Moffett and others that I absorbed in the late sixties and early seventies.

The first episode is this: I am an eighth grader at Jefferson Junior High School in Arlington, Virginia. I take Core, an interdisciplinary mix of social studies and English that meets in a double period. In Core, Mrs. Matheny’s class puts the final touches on its dramatization of the Constitutional Convention. We’ve researched the Convention for a week or more, and we’ve written a script based on our research. It’s time for

the fun part now. Randy Blackman, playing old, tottery Ben Franklin, brings an ornate carved cane with a brass handle to use as a prop. Betty Robinson, the tallest kid in the class, plays George Washington with fatherly forbearance. Other kids clump into state delegations—South Carolinians, Rhode Islanders, New Yorkers, and others.

My role, that of Virginian George Mason, is simple enough. Early on, maybe on the second day, I will become angry (“What about our rights? Our religious freedom? Our free speech?”) and, in an aristocratic huff, storm out without signing the document. Later, we eighth-graders learn, Mason’s Bill of Rights, the ten amendments he co-wrote with Thomas Jefferson, will become part of the Constitution.

Fast forward four years to senior year at Washington-Lee High School. This memory—most of it, anyway—is less vivid, more a blur of small events than one or two big ones. Among other classes, I take civics (heterogeneously grouped) and English. We in the latter group are rumored to be the English hotshots in a big school that is eighty percent college bound, a school that routinely sends its brightest and best to the Ivy League, the service academies, and the most selective publics.

From time to time, we in Miss Stephens’ English class drag out the literature anthology, the umpty-third edition of *Literature and Life*. In class, or when I read the assignments at home, I fail to see the connection. Literature and life? Life and literature? No, literature in Miss Stephens’ class is Shakespeare and Tennyson, research on serious Englishy topics, and lists of poems (just the titles) and British poets single-spaced on purple-ink dittos. Our final exam consists of matching up more long purple lists of novelists, dramatists, and poets and their works—works we hadn’t read but knew about, sort of. All year long, Miss Stephens earnestly doses us with cultural literacy decades before E.D. Hirsch coins the term.

To me, though, life is somewhere else, something else, most assuredly not anything in English class. Life is fishing, planning for college, first love, school desegregation, rhythm and blues, Elvis, politics. My father is a lobbyist, and at home we breathe politics. We also breathe other things, ugly things we don’t talk about much at home or school, things like alcoholism and mental illness. My reading—my out-of-school reading, the real stuff—follows predictable lines: political thrillers, World War II non-fiction, mysteries, the Kinsey Report (in

Life magazine), history and historical fiction, science fiction.

Life is also what we do in Mr. Book's civics class. It is a Presidential election year. Mr. Book requires us to choose a candidate on any level—national, state, or local—and work in that candidate's campaign. We stuff envelopes, we put up signs, and (best of all) we distribute campaign literature at the polls on election day. And we write real pieces for real readers, other kids mostly—opinions about the issues of the day and various Constitutional amendments, among others. We read some of these aloud in class. Most interesting to me, we research and write a demographic profile of the precinct we live in, describing the kind of people that live there, what they do for a living, and their tendencies as voters. I feel like an investigative reporter.

Six years later, BA in hand, I become a teacher, an English teacher, an untrained English teacher. I've never heard of NCTE or a methods course, much less completed one, and I am subject to the same pressures all new teachers experience. For the first year or two, I serve up a diet of lit crit terminology, I teach the canon for the canon's sake, and I rely on end-of-chapter questions that budding English majors may grasp but that most of my kids find pointless. Most of all, I take comfort in the familiar—that is, in the detailed notes, the *explication de texte*, the Deep Thoughts of the English professors who taught me.

But I sense that something is wrong, or maybe I sense that something is missing. I relate well enough to the kids, and they do what I ask most of the time. They pass my tests. Other teachers think I'm okay. I fit in. But something is still wrong.

Then—as I contemplate what to do with my ninth-graders and *Great Expectations*—my librarian gives me a copy of *English Journal*. Not only are there teaching ideas in this red little journal, but (of all things) ideas about teaching Dickens! A week or so later, while browsing through a table of used books near the University of Miami, I stumble onto a much-used third or fourth edition of J.N. Hook's *The Teaching of High School English*. The following summer, I enroll in graduate school at Virginia, my alma mater. I keep coming back each summer until I decide in 1969 that it will take full-time study to complete what I had begun, a transformation of sorts.

As I said at the outset, it was James Moffett who helped me understand that English should be an interdisciplinary subject. In graduate school, under the gentle direction of Richard Meade, I read about the early days of NCTE, about the development of *An Experience Curriculum in English*, published by NCTE in 1935. I read the romantic critics, among them Postman and Weingartner's *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Kozol's *Death at an Early Age*, Herndon's *The Way It Spozed to Be*, Holt's *How Children Fail*, and Fader's *Hooked on Books* and *The Naked Children*. Collectively, I draw two main ideas from these works: first, that student-centeredness is not a new idea (NCTE, in fact, had been promoting it since before I was born); second, that conventional schooling is frequently no better than innocuous and far too often lethal. In a gentlemanly way, I become radicalized.

In the late sixties English education is astir with talk of what came to be called the Dartmouth Conference, the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English (1966). The Dartmouth Conference, a slap in the face to conservatives in the teaching of English, serves as a catalyst for a number of books, the most influential of which are Dixon's *Growth Through English* and Muller's *The Uses of English*.

Among the participants at Dartmouth is James Moffett, who seems to have both shaped what went on there and been shaped by it. His two books published soon thereafter—*Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968) and *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers* (1968, 1976, 1983)—become the theoretical core of my beliefs as to how kids learn English and how language arts teachers at all levels should structure school learning.

This is not the time for a full elaboration of Moffett's ideas in either of these books in their various editions. To attempt to do so would be an injustice. But two ideas bubble to the surface when one applies his thinking to the shape of the curriculum.

First, Moffett argued that English is different from other school subjects. It is, he stressed, a communication system, not a body of content similar to history or biology. In this sense, he insisted that English resembles mathematics more than any other discipline. "Language arts or English," he wrote, "should be a kind of intellectual homeroom." By this I envisioned an English classroom where kids brought language to bear on history, science, and other subjects. Moffett went on to say that much that goes on in English classrooms—language study, academic analysis of great works of literature, conventional research—would be just as well tossed out. He also believed that English, after Sputnik in 1958, became distorted by efforts to align it with linguistics or contemporary literary theory, neither of which had what he called "psycho-logic." Anticipating teacher concerns that, without literary criticism, vocabulary drills, and grammar, they might be out of work, Moffett went on, "You need not fear you have no subject and try to manufacture one by making kids read about writing and write about reading. Words on words strengthens nothing but doubts, because they merely shadow what you're trying to teach, which is words on world" (Moffett 1976, p. 23).

Words on world! Get it? A powerful idea. That's what Mrs. Matheny has us do when we wrote a play about the Constitutional Convention. That's what we did in Mr. Book's class, use words to make sense of the world we were growing into in the late 1950s.

And words on world is a powerful mechanism for learning.

Thirty years after eighth grade, in fact, I visited Independence Hall. The whole scene came back to me. I recalled what Ben Franklin, cane in hand, said about the rising-sun design of the chairs delegates sat in. "This is a rising sun," he had said, or words to that effect—"not a setting sun. We are at the beginning of something here, not the end."

That leads me to a second major idea of Moffett's, which is this: school—inevitably an artificial place in many re-

spects—should promote naturalistic learning to the greatest extent possible. Bring real events into classrooms—real talk for real purposes, real inquiry into topics that matter to learners, real games, real books, real writing. Thus Moffett simultaneously echoed the progressives and anticipated the whole language movement. Children learn most of what they know out of school, not in it, and they learn without instruction. Consistent with his belief in natural learning, Moffett also favored heterogeneity—that is, the more diverse the group or class, the greater will be its human resources. He argued for student choice about both what to study and how, with skillful teacher modeling and guidance, to study it. He believed teachers should use trade books illustrating different modes of discourse, not textbooks. Finally, he compared children and adolescents to chess players who know all the moves (in terms of language patterns and communication skills) but haven't played the game very much. "What they need is massive practice," he insisted.

As I wrote in *California English* following Moffett's death, I was, in addition to being radicalized in graduate school, *Moffettized*. When I became a teacher educator, I set out to Moffettize everyone else. Interdisciplinary curriculum had to be in the foreground of Moffettization.

In one class, I asked graduate students—working teachers for the most part—to envision what English might be like were Moffett's ideas widely adopted. Together we developed a series of interdisciplinary teaching units built around core readings, individual and small-group inquiry and activities kids selected from cards, and presentations to class members. One of these units—focusing on early marriage, was spotlighted briefly in *English Journal* in 1982.

With this background—these instincts and experiences affirming the power of words on world in English classrooms—I couldn't resist Sissi Carroll's invitation in 1998 to be an occasional contributor to *The ALAN Review*. Interdisciplinary Connections Editor? Sure. I've been practicing since junior high school.

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