We've Been Moffetized

by James M. Brewbaker

Look, Ma! We've been Moffetized

in 1982 I wrote a piece called "Jim Moffett is Alive and Well" for English Journal. It argued that, despite the conservative backlash 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, nonproductive 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 Theme 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. Portfolio 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 marry ing two sound but understressed 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 Moffetizer. 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 I 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.

Moffet 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 dynamic 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
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 "English" 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 Theroux or Boswell 
or Sufi Smith and other fifth-graders creating a class book 
of pre-school memories was, to Moffett, largely inmaterial.

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 tempered 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 grade identifies the topic sentence in a 
paragraph" or "every tenth grade 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 
esential 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 
occed 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, 
darn 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 
bleach white - hair brushed straight back. He was bronze 
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 share 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 
lower-ceiling Portland ballroom 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, 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!"

WORKS CITED


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Brewbaker teaches in the School of Education at Columbus College in Georgia.