

# Two Views for Teaching Writing

Edith Croake

When I began teaching my first composition classes at a community college, I did not question the text, The Norton Reader, which had been ordered before I was hired. After all, it closely resembled the one I had used when I was a freshman. However, I quickly learned that the needs of my community college students were not met by reading, discussing, and writing about the works in this text. Unfortunately, neither my experience nor my training provided me with knowledge of alternative ways to teach the course. This marked the beginning of a vigorous and wide-ranging search for more suitable goals and methods. The work of James Britton and James Moffett provided an unusually helpful source of ideas and information.

**Perhaps Britton and Moffett discovered at the Dartmouth conference, which they both attended in 1966, that the degree of agreement between them was striking. Four similarities had an especially strong impact on my teaching.**

First, the theories of both men recognize and respect the innate linguistic capacities and resources of each individual. For example, they remind their readers to acknowledge the language development which occurs before a child enters school as well as the on-going use of language outside the classroom. Britton asserts that "...in school we cannot afford to ignore all that has gone on before. So often in the past we have tried to make a fresh start, at the risk of cutting off the roots which alone can sustain the growth we look for. It is not only that the classroom must more and more merge into the world outside it, but that the processes of school learning must merge into the processes of learning that begin at birth and are life-long" (Language and Learning, 129). This aspect of their theories helped me to affirm my intuitions that my students had the potential to write effectively and that my role as a teacher was to discover ways to facilitate and extend their native language capacities.

A second important similarity is that they look beyond the writing tasks usually assigned in school to those required in life. When I first started teaching

composition, I thought I was supposed to train students to write clear, correct, polite arguments for an impersonal, educated audience. The purpose, audience, and standards of evaluation remained constant. However, the works of Britton and Moffett convinced me that this concept was far too narrow. Rather, they argued, students should be taught to perform many kinds of writing tasks, that is, pieces with different purposes, produced for a variety of audiences, and evaluated by variable standards. (These tasks would include, but extend beyond, the two types of writing discussed previously in this newsletter: the biographical narrative of the Macrorie school and the careful argument of the Corbett school.)

A third influential similarity in the theories of Britton and Moffett is that they identify the usual patterns of linguistic and social maturation, relate these patterns to the development of writing skills and insist that these patterns be a significant factor in determining what happens in the English classroom. As I will explain later, these aspects of their theories caused me to revise both the sequence and content of my composition courses.

Finally, Britton and Moffett agree on some of the means for implementing their theories on the necessity, for instance, of a supportive educational environment and the importance of students working in small groups. These likenesses also influenced the revision of my courses. In order to better understand the effect the work of these men can have on what happens in the classroom, it is useful to discuss each in greater detail.

In his delightfully instructive book Language and Learning, James Britton discusses his assumptions about human language use as it develops from infancy through adulthood. He wrote it for "anybody who for any reason wants to listen with more understanding to children and adolescents and who has for any reason a concern for what becomes of them" (Language and Learning, 7).

**Britton theorizes that there are two kinds of language-using behavior: participant and spectator. As participants, we use language to**

**interact with others and get things done. As spectators, we use language to contemplate what has happened to ourselves and others, or what might conceivably happen.**

As a child learns to talk, he develops his ability to use language both ways. However, he always speaks expressively; that is, he uses speech which reveals a great deal about himself and relies heavily for its interpretation on the situation in which it occurs. When language is called upon to achieve some transaction, the child's speech changes from **participant-expressive** to **transactional**. When language is called upon to create a satisfying shape, a verbal object which is to be enjoyed in and of itself, the child's speech changes from **spectator-expressive** to **poetic**.

Britton applied his theories to research on writing in British schools. The most notable and accessible of these efforts is the massive British Writing Research Project conducted from 1966-1971, described and analyzed in The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18. The three types of language behavior which Britton identified in Language and Learning--expressive, transactional, poetic--became the basis of a system used to classify over 2,000 scripts produced by five hundred 11-, 13-, 15-, and 17-year-olds.

Even though Britton and his colleagues caution that the sample of writing examined in this project was too small and unrepresentative to allow confident generalization about what goes on in schools, (Rosen, 54), the analysis of these scripts yielded some thought provoking results:

1. Ninety-five percent of scripts were written for a teacher audience, especially for the teacher as examiner (Development of Writing, 131).
2. Writing to get things done (**transactional** writing) predominated with a steady increase in this kind of writing as students get older; it constituted 84% of the writing done by 17 year-olds (163-65).

3. The amount of **expressive** writing was low (5%), but constant (165).
4. **Expressive** writing was done only by students in English and religious education classes (170).
5. The examination of **expressive** and **poetic** writing for all four age groups revealed that to some degree older students wrote for more finely differentiated purposes and wider audiences than younger students. This result offered some confirmation of a basic research hypothesis: development in writing ability is a process of progressive differentiation (190).

The authors conjecture cautiously about the implications of these results for the teaching of writing:

1. Students should engage in an increased range of writing tasks and write for a greater variety of audiences, particularly audiences who are interested in them personally. Too much writing for the teacher as examiner inhibits growth in such areas as writing for a public audience and writing to share independent thinking (192-93).
2. Students should produce more **expressive** writing at all levels. Britton contends: "**Expressive** writing whether in the **participant** or **spectator** role, may be at any stage, the kind of writing best adapted to exploration and discovery. It is language that externalizes our first stages in tackling a problem or coming to grips with an experience. Moreover, it represents...the move into writing most likely to preserve a vital link with the spoken mode in which...a child's linguistic resources have been gathered and stored" (197).
3. The content and sequence of courses should reflect the fact that certain writing abilities generally develop before others (55).

Britton and his colleagues see their categories as possible means towards understanding both what goes on in writing and

what might go on. However, they do not want to impose the order of variety by turning these categories into a sequential program and teaching them. Rather, they believe variety will emerge if an environment is created which encourages teachers to be much more sensitive to children's interests and meanings and which allows various kinds of learning (53).

A final point which deserves emphasis is that Britton feels the emotional atmosphere of the learning environment is crucial: it must be stimulating and supportive. Also, the teacher's role is critical: while remaining professional and responsible, he or she needs to be responsive and genuinely respectful. Britton contends that "with the least articulate writers it may well be that all progress depends upon having a teacher who assumes the role of a sympathetic reader" (Language and Learning, 259).

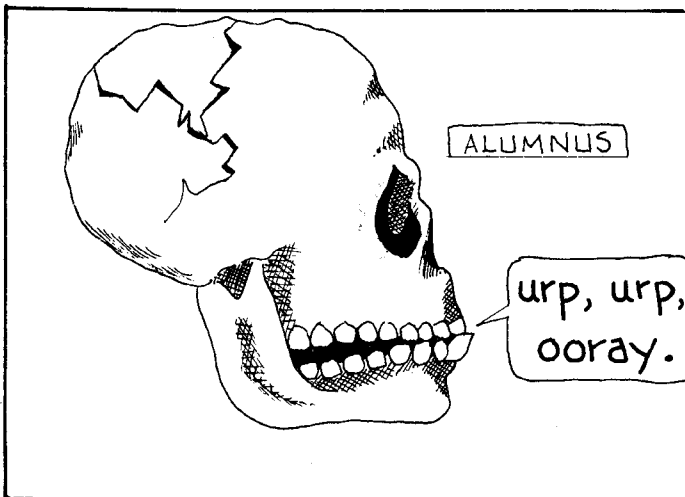
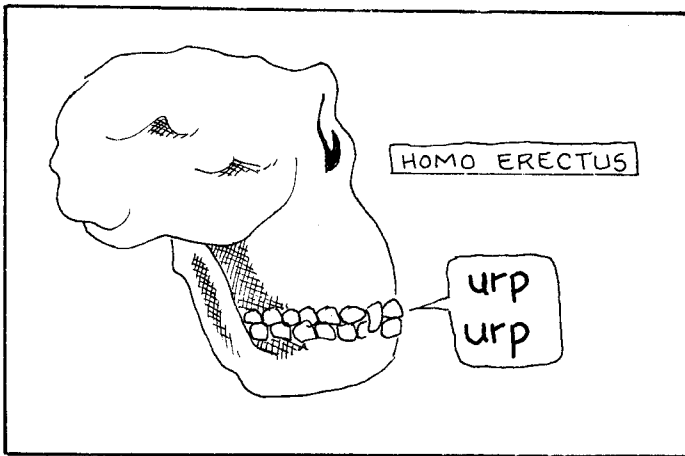
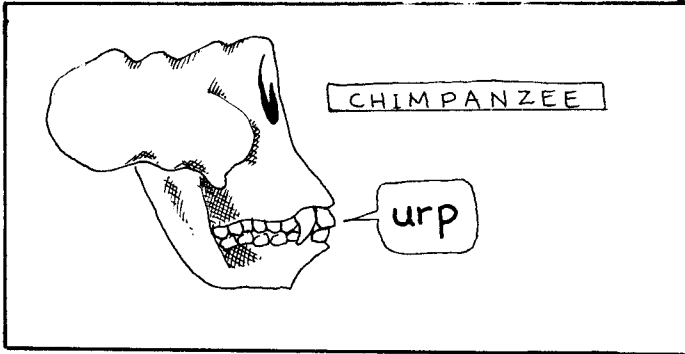
**Although the work of Britton and Moffett is similar, important differences exist between them also.**

As noted, Britton addresses a general audience in Language and Learning. One advantage of his designated audience is that it allows him to stress his concern for human beings, especially young ones. However, the reader must not be misled into thinking that this is a book of casual reflections on language growth. Rather, Britton approached the formulation of his theory as a scientist would. He studied noted scholarly works on language (mentioned frequently in Language and Learning) as well as his extended experience as a teacher and parent. He developed his theory and then began the ambitious and difficult task of testing it while doing research in schools. Even though he had reservations about the sample size in the British school research project, he concluded that this study was helpful: among other things, it offered tentative confirmation for some aspects of his theory. Moreover, Britton feels additional research into the composing process(es) would be worthwhile. In a recent essay, he calls for more investigation of the stages of incubation and articulation ("The Composing Processes," 27).

The origins of Moffett's theory are more

closely related to teaching than Britton's. For Moffett the practical reality that schools existed which taught language arts inadequately came first; his theory was a response to this problem. He wrote his major theoretical work, Teaching the Universe of Discourse, to sketch "a pedagogical theory of discourse" which could provide a fuller rationale for the curriculum and help advance the task of reconceiving education in the native

language (xi). Moffett approached the formulation of his theory as an astute teacher would. He emphasized the pragmatic: he analyzed and articulated what was happening as his students used language; he believed in students' natural linguistic capacities and created materials which would extend those capabilities; he observed what helped students and revised accordingly. All of his major works are written for professional educators, especially English teachers who want to improve instruction for their classes.



Britton and Moffett differ not only in the origin of their theories, but also in what they have done with them. Moffett has taken more elaborate steps than Britton to facilitate the application of this theory in the classroom. In this light, it is especially interesting that he has not undertaken any research to test his theory or the application of it. In contrast to Britton, he warns vigorously of the limitations of research in schools:

*No school program can truthfully claim to be proved by scientific fact. It is impossible to control scientific experiments in school....Proof, then, of the effectiveness of methods must come from massive accumulation of experience in and out of school (Student-Centered, 44-45).*

In Teaching the Universe of Discourse, Moffett hypothesizes that verbal communication is composed of a series of discourse types, "a 'discourse' being defined as any piece of verbalization complete for its original purpose" (10-11). The elements of discourse are a speaker, a listener, and a subject. Different discourse types are created by shifts in relations among these three elements. Moffett identifies four major types: **interior dialogue** (or egocentric speech), **conversation** (or socialized speech), **correspondence**, and **public essays**. Earlier discourse types are closer to speech, written for a familiar audience, and usually about a recent experience. Hence, these types are easier to produce and a natural place to begin teaching writing. Only later should a student be expected to produce types which require the author to write for an unknown audience.

From B. Schammbackler, The Phourteen Phylogenetic Phases of Phootball: A Theory of Recapitulation (Misthaufen Paperbacks Whole Child Foundation, JHS, SJG.)

of Stevens's taxonomy

As a student grows older, not only does he become less egocentric and more aware of a wider range of social relationships, but also his ability to abstract increases. Early on, a student is more comfortable writing about particular, personal experiences. As he matures, he is able to make generalizations, sometimes original ones, and support them.

The intersection of discourse types and levels of abstraction forms a taxonomy which indicates both the range of discourse types and the sequence in which most students develop the ability to produce these types. Moffett recommends that the content and order of the curriculum be based on this taxonomy.

The categories of writing tasks and the sequence in which writing abilities develop as proposed by Moffett are similar to those suggested by Britton. Indeed, Britton and his colleagues recognized that Moffett's work helped them in defining the categories used to classify scripts (Development of Writing, 15). Furthermore, their research indicated "corroboration of Moffett's developmental categories" (Rosen, 55). And thus it is that Britton confirms the intuitions that they have in common with methods that Moffett would not.

Moffett's subsequent work is directed primarily toward facilitating the application of his theory. A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers, a companion book to Teaching the Universe of Discourse, contains specific, highly imaginative, and seemingly enjoyable language activities for implementing Moffett's ideas in a single classroom or a curriculum for an entire school system. The suggestions for such things as dramatic presentations, writing workshop activities, games, writing memoirs, stories, and essays are arranged according to four levels which increase in difficulty and correspond roughly to skills students should be expected to perform at certain grades. Regardless of the activity, Moffett insists that most classroom learning should occur in small groups. "The teacher's role must be to teach the students to teach each other" (TUD, 12).

Because teachers requested more help in carrying out Moffett's ideas, he directed the development of a new, comprehensive, and expensive program of school materials entitled Interaction: A Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading Program. In this program, the diverse suggestions of the Handbook provide concrete materials. Interaction consists of more than 1,000 items such as activity cards, cassette listening libraries, and games arranged according to the same four levels outlined in the Handbook. The use of these materials increases the amount of individualization possible to the extent that different students can now do different things at the same time more easily. Traditional texts are unnecessary, and the teacher is freed from planning lessons and giving directions "to do all the things that really make education work--coaching, counseling, and consulting" (Student-Centered, xiv).

Moffett's ideas and the implementation of them, particularly as contained in the Interaction materials, offer a dramatic alternative to the traditional English classroom. Although change may be urgently needed, it does not occur easily for either teachers or students. Some of the initial reactions to Interaction reflect the frustrations of change. Some critics believe that teachers did not have the training to use these materials well: "And who, Mr. Moffett, is to teach the teachers--not just the few with whom you have collaborated so successfully to prove that it could be done--but the hundreds and thousands of others?" (Ruth Reeves, 104). Also, a teacher who used the materials commented:

*Although extremely well-received, Interaction has given many a teacher more than one headache: 1) Children are too often overwhelmed by too many choices. 2) Children can too easily disregard those activity cards that require a high level of reading or writing. 3) Teachers find themselves constantly repeating general directions in such things as writing mechanics (Fred Sarke, 104).*

Moffett's Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13 - A Handbook for Teachers co-authored with Betty Jane Wagner and published in 1976 differs from

the 1968 edition of the work in several important ways. First of all, discussion of the theory and the means for applying it are fully treated in one book in the 1976 edition, not two. Consequently, it is easier for the reader to see the relationship between theory and practice. Key concepts such as the need for individualized learning and the importance of small groups are discussed persuasively and numerous suggestions for implementing these concepts are provided. Another change is that the suggestions for specific classroom activities are no longer arranged according to age levels but according to activities: Basic Processes (talking and listening, dramatic inventing, performing texts, reading, writing); Literacy - "The Basic Skills"; Developmental Reading, Speaking and Writing; Aims and Assessment. Because some reference is made to Interaction items in this 1976 edition, it is helpful to a teacher using Interaction materials. However, the book can be used independently also.

### **How Britton and Moffett Changed My Teaching**

Many changes have occurred in my teaching of freshman composition as a result of what Britton and Moffett have said, but three stand out. First, I sequence writing assignments more carefully. The initial assignments are more personal and written for a familiar audience even though the emphasis of the course is on composing argumentative essays for an unknown audience.

Second, I have varied the purposes and audience for writing assignments more. For example, in the first essay of the course, the student is asked to describe an experience which caused him to change his mind about something important to him. The audience is a sympathetic friend or family member with whom he wants to share this experience, perhaps because he wants the audience to know the author better. In the second essay, the student is asked to share an insight gained from his personal experience. However, the audience is a friend or relative whom the author cares about but who will doubt an insight or conclusion based solely on the author's experience. Hence, the writer must include additional evidence for his

insight, usually the experience of someone else which led to the same conclusion. Subsequent essay assignments are arguments written first for a familiar audience and later for an unknown audience.

A third change is that I include an exercise early in the course to help students consciously experience the changes in moving from telling an experience to a familiar audience to writing about it in a formal essay to an unknown audience. This is the exercise entitled "Four voices," the "FreeB" (p. 42) of this issue of forum. Among other things, the assignment introduces students to one useful approach for working through the immobilization which can occur when staring at a blank page; for instance, they can imagine writing or telling the subject to a friend if they get stuck. In addition, the completion and discussion of this exercise helps students better understand why it is difficult to write formal essays.

More subtle changes in my teaching include more discussion of the relationship between speech and writing, more demonstration of student's intuitive knowledge of language, more work in small groups. Certainly this does not exhaust the possibilities for how the work of Britton and Moffett could improve what happens in the English classroom.

Although I have no research results to prove it, these changes seem to have been helpful to my composition students. They appear to get started more easily, to retain more of their own voice in a final paper, to better appreciate the considerable resources they bring to a writing situation, and to respond more sensitively to the needs of a particular audience.

For reasons I have discussed, Britton's and Moffett's work can be invaluable, especially to the teacher planning the content and sequence of an English course or program. They make an additional contribution: they remind us of the significance of our work as teachers of writing. Britton and his colleagues are confident that the importance of writing will not decline, regardless of the sophistication and efficiency of telecommunication systems. Writing will continue  
(cont. on p. 46)

**James Moffett** (cont. from p. 6)

pediast's judgment on such a writer as Browne is nothing but smart-ass chauvinism: permitted to poison basic information sources, it makes "science" as deadly a censor as ever the Church was during its Inquisition.

We can avoid producing Brownes in our school system by having all youngsters read and write the same things--a goal we have closely approximated--and then their approach will not be unscientific, their assemblage odd, their facts obscure, nor their erudition haphazard. And we will have ensured that no one will be able to emulate the great essayists we hold up as models (or even read them with any comprehension). Real essaying cannot thrive without cultivation of the individual. Who would have any reason to read anyone else? (And I want to know how Browne's style could be worth so much if he were merely raving.)

The second example is personal. When I received the edited manuscript of the original edition of Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13 back from the publisher, I was aghast. "My" editor had re-written sentences throughout the whole book to eliminate first-person references and other elements of the author's presence and voice. This included altering diction and sentence structure at times to get a more anonymous or distanced effect. Faced with the appalling labor of restoring all those sentences, I called the editor, furious. She said righteously, "But we always do that--it's policy." It never occurred to her to exempt, or even to warn, an author who wouldn't be publishing the book in the first place if he weren't regarded as some kind of expert in writing.

#### **Remove the Double Standard**

You can't trust your encyclopedia, your publisher, your school administration. And you can't trust yourself until you learn to spot how you too may be spreading the plague, as Camus calls it. The double standard in "Look at the greats, but don't do what they did" naturally goes along with our era of Scientific Inquisition, which is really technocratic plague. Teachers stand in a fine position to spread infection. If you let yourself be

convinced that "personal" or "creative" writing is merely narcissistic, self-indulgent, and weak-minded, then you have just removed your own first person.

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#### **Two Views** (cont. from p. 9)

to play an important **developmental** role in schools because certain more complex mental abilities are best developed by the practice of writing (Development of Writing, 201-02). In addition, while class size remains high, writing has to substitute for a great deal of interpersonal speech. As Moffett insists and as Britton's research seems to confirm, English teachers perform important educational tasks not accomplished anywhere else. To summarize, their remarks and research add considerable strength to our belief that despite its enormous demands, our profession is humane and worthwhile.

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#### **James Britton** (cont. from p. 5)

people we are'. In participant activity it is the construction we place upon the **new**--the current encounter with actuality--that we attend to: as spectators, it is essentially the **total**--the accumulated view of the world that makes us the sort of people we are--that we are concerned with. Thus, though we have assigned a function, a use, to the language of spectatorship, it is a use which is clearly distinguishable from that of a participant. 'Language to get things done' remains intact as a criterion for the one role, and the language of being and becoming may roughly describe the other.

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