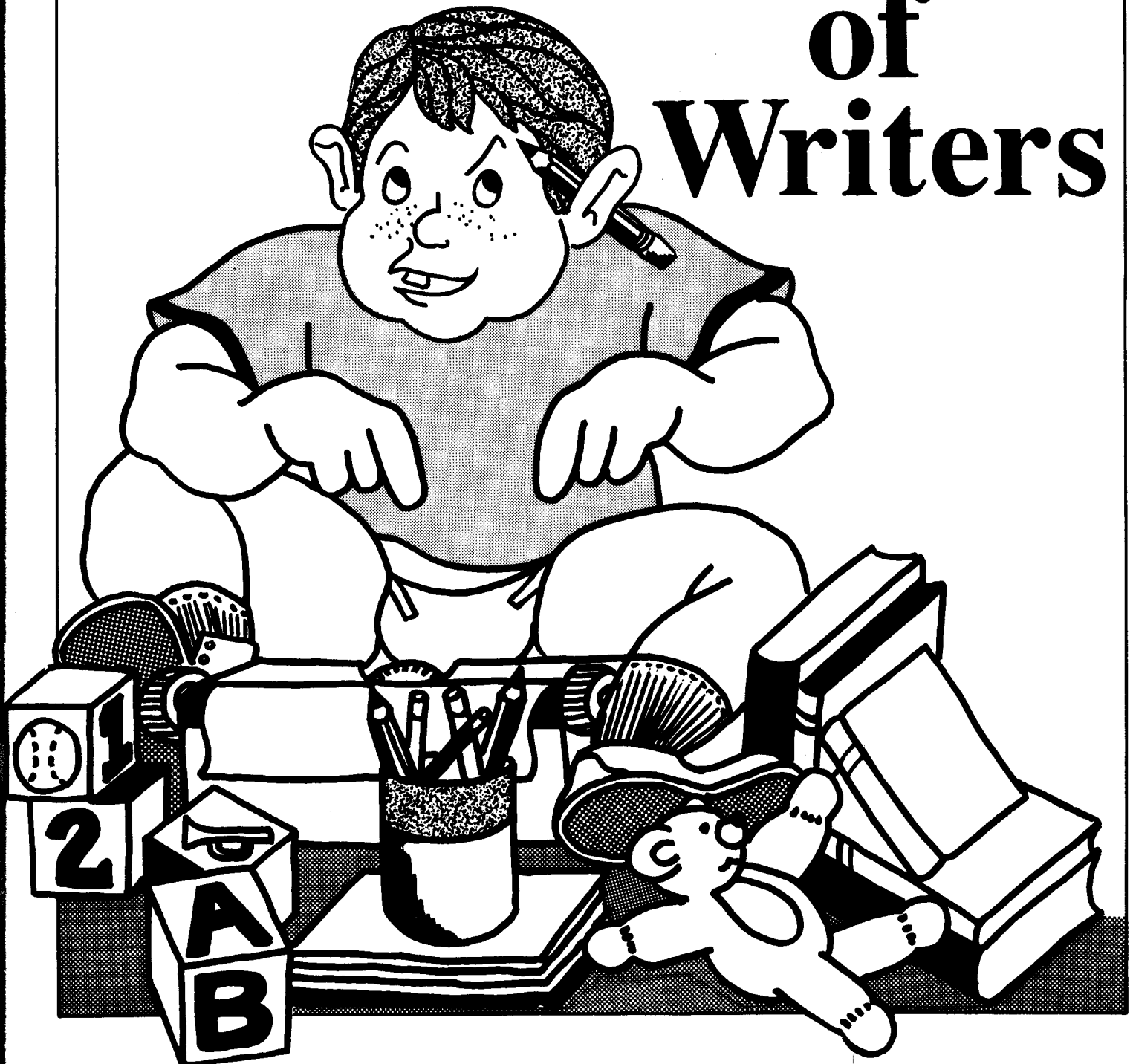


FFORUM

A Newsletter of the English Composition Board, University of Michigan

The Development of Writers



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Editor's Note: From the very first issue of fforum, I have emphasized my interest in publishing personal letters and institutional news and views from all teachers and schools in Michigan. As they appear, letters and reports such as those featured in the article "fforum Looks at Two Schools" (p.23) and in the article "From a Reader's View" (p.33) are of course the freely expressed views of their authors; and these--along with everything in fforum--are, in turn, subject to readers' written responses.

Participant and Spectator

James Britton

Editor's note: Of James Britton's numerous insights in Language and Learning, none seems more important to teachers of writers at all levels than his distinction between people's use of language as **participants** and **spectators** in the affairs of living. In the following excerpt from his book, Britton describes the distinction between these two uses of language. Later in this issue, Edith Croake relates Britton's distinction between **participant** and **spectator** language use to his corresponding distinctions between **transactional**, **expressive**, and **poetic** modes of speaking and writing. (Useful definitions of Britton's modes appear in Toby Fulwiler's article on p. 17). The significance of these distinctions to every assignment we make as teachers of writing is immeasurable.

Because James Britton's book Language and Learning has recently become available in the United States through Hayden Publishing Co., Inc., I am especially pleased to introduce Britton's valuable insights to

readers for whom they are new and to review them for those for whom they are already familiar.

We are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce the excerpted material from Language and Learning:

James Britton

Penguin Books, Ltd., London, England

Hayden Publishing Co., Inc.
50 Essex Street, Rochelle Park
New Jersey 07662.

Hayden is offering Language and Learning (\$4.95, list price; \$3.96, net price to teachers) as well as other books arising out of the London Institute of Education's **British Writing Research Project** (1966-1971) and the **Schools Council Development Project** begun in 1971. Those books which are available through Hayden are asterisked in the "Select Bibliography" in this issue on page 15.

From time to time a friend and neighbor of mine catches the same train as I do in the morning. We meet on the platform and the whole body of past experience of each of us offers to each of us a vast area from which to choose a topic to start the conversation. Since neither of us is a complete bore, we shall not choose what currently preoccupies us unless it happens to be something that would be likely to interest the other. Initial silence probably indicates that our individual preoccupations were not in an area of common interest. In that case we are likely to cast our minds back to the last time we met: as a result of this, he may say to me, 'How did your date with X go? Did you find him in the end?' and I shall then embark on the story of my meeting with X, perhaps bringing out all the difficulties and frustrations I had in tracking him down. If it is anything of a **cause celebre** for me I may have told the story often enough before to other people, but tell it again with relish and feel better for having done so. Further, as I retell it, I may find I have altered my perspective on it a little and especially so if, as I relate it for this particular listener, my relations with him and my conception of the sort of person he is, influence me in the way I construe it. As I finish my story and we arrive at our destination, that altered perspective, that new construction of the event, might constitute what any recording angel would have to record as the outcome of my narration and my encounter with a neighbour.

On the other hand, we can suppose a different situation with a different outcome. Suppose I have failed to track down X and am still concerned to do so: and that I therefore recount all my frustrated endeavours as a deliberate way of working up to saying, 'Well look, you've been in touch with X more recently than I have. Do you think you can do anything to help me?' Tracking down X is my concern, it is something I want to get done, and in narrating my past experience in this case I am using language in an attempt to 'get things done'. As a member of the human race I could claim that my concerns are a part of the world's concerns and that in pursuing them I am participating in the world's affairs. (It is helpful to think in this conglomerate way of 'the world's

affairs' in order to distinguish in general between getting things done and its converse--in spite of the anomaly that ten people trying to grab a single seat in the train must be seen as all participating in the world's affairs!)

In the first hypothetical case, on the other hand--that is, when I recount how I did see X--whether or not I find a new perspective in the telling, I tell the story for the pleasure of it. I go back over the experience, not in any way to get things done, not participating in my own and the world's affairs, but as a mere **spectator**. Moreover, in offering the story for my friend's enjoyment, I am inviting him to be a spectator of my past experiences.

This last observation extends the area of application of the distinction beyond the one I started with. If someone listening to me takes up the role of spectator of my experiences (just as, in agreeing to help me make contact with X he would be **participating** in that particular experience) then I am similarly in the role of spectator of **other people's** experience when I tell the story of how my grandfather, with thousands of others once watched for the appearance of a notorious 'ghost' on the banks of the Trent, or of how Columbus discovered America, or Newton sat under an apple tree.

But not so fast. Imagine a party--and the party is over: you and your fellow-hosts sit around discussing the behaviour of your guests in order to deduce who it might have been that left a ring by the wash-basin. This is helpful--it is part of the world's work, it is being useful to somebody. But you would probably find that the conversation soon drifts from the participant to the spectator role: you begin discussing the behaviour of your guests in order to **enjoy** it in a way you could not while they were still behaving. This is not useful--but it is very enjoyable. Most groups that have undertaken any joint enterprise--producing a play for example--will be familiar with the quite characteristic kind of pleasure they derive from going over it all when the enterprise is finished. In talk like this after the last performance, even the gross blunders and ensuing panics, looked back on, are tremendously entertaining.

On such occasions, the members of the group take up jointly the role of spectators of their common experience. In going back over it, as we have already noticed (p. 19), they enjoy it, savour it, interpret it. Indeed it seems to be part of the nature of man's experience that both in prospect and in retrospect he can respond to the quality of events in a way he is unable to do at the time of their happening. Some people particularly seem to measure out their lives in remembered rather than ongoing occasions. Perhaps this is a part of what Piaget meant when he said that the sharpest division to be made in experience is that which divides the whole of what has led up to a moment from that moment of experience itself.

The distinction we are making between participant and spectator roles can now be further extended to cover prospect as well as retrospect. I may take up the role of spectator of my own future as well as my own past. Day-dreaming is a common form in which to do so. If I **plan** a future event, on the other hand--say a camping holiday--then I am in the role of participant: if I talk to you about the coming event, in order to find out what you know about good sites or good routes or in order to borrow a Primus stove from you, then I am bringing you in as a participant. But if I relax and describe how marvellous I think it will be to lie in the shade of pine trees on the edge of the sunburnt beach--then we are both in the role of spectators of my future. Part of your pleasure may arise from anticipating with me the delights in store for me, but no doubt--since the pleasure of such day-dreaming is in any case not very closely related to the probability of realization--you will change the roles from time to time and see yourself in the centre of the picture.

This leads us to the final extension of the area of application: if I may take up the role of spectator of my own past or future experiences, of other people's experiences, past or future, then I may also become spectator of events that have never happened and could never happen. I do so, in fact, whenever I read--or hear or tell or write--a fairy story or its adult equivalent. The satisfaction I have in the story is the kind of satisfaction I

derive, not from having an experience, but from looking back on one I **have had**: it is as though I were to go back over an experience I have **not** had!

.....

When we use language in the participant role we select and order our material according to the demands made by something outside ourselves, something that exists in the situation: information may be true or false and independent observation of all the circumstances could be used to determine which it is: instructions may be precise or vague, clear or confused and their usefulness to people carrying them out provides the basis for determining which they are: argument may be proved illogical, persuasion may prove ineffectual. But in language in the role of spectator we operate on a different principle. We select and arrange our material first to please ourselves: and secondly, not to please other people but to enable others to share our pleasure--which is not the same thing. (Imagine that as I walk on the sea-shore I pick up a pocketful of shells and come home and arrange them. I could select them and arrange them according to two different principles. The unlikelier one shows me to be a biologist: I have picked up shells I needed to complete my showcase and when I get home I arrange them as part of an exemplification of related species of marine life. If you were a better biologist than I was, you might come up behind me and say, 'You've got that wrong--you should put **this** one in **that** place'. The more likely situation--in which I am myself again--is one in which I come home and arrange the shells on my mantelpiece. My principle of arrangement is to make a display, a pattern, that pleases me. You could not then come up and say, 'You've got that wrong', because there is no right and wrong beyond the pleasure or displeasure I feel. My criterion is one of 'appropriateness'--the appropriateness of each item to the other items and to the whole of the design as it **appears to me**.)

D. H. Lawrence said, 'It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives'. Let us broaden that for our present purposes to: 'we act and decide in accordance with the sort of

(cont. on p. 46)

On Essaying

James Moffett



Having read Pseudodoxia Epidemica, student ponders pre-writing control over variables in recently assigned spontaneous, expressive, non-scientific, developmentally based task-- and glad of it.

From C. von Burr-Rider, The A-B-C's of Cognitive Science (Misthaufen Paperbacks, Whole Child Foundation, JHS, SJ 13)

While doing summer institutes on writing I have frequently encountered teachers who will call every kind of writing that is not book-report, term-paper, essay-question stuff "personal" or "creative" writing (the two terms being interchangeable) and hence put it in a big bag that goes up on the shelf. Priority goes of course to "exposition," which is equated with "essay," which is equated in turn with forced writing on given topics from books, lectures, or "current issues." In these institutes with teachers I break a class into trios in which members help each other, over several weeks, to develop subjects and techniques by hearing or reading partners' writing ideas at various stages of working up the material. Some of this material is gleaned from memory, some is information obtained fresh by interviewing or observing, and some is feeling, thought, or imagination elicited suddenly by a stimulus such as a tune or other in-class presentation. The material may take the form of stories, dialogs, essays, or songs and poems. It soon becomes obvious that ideas stem from all kinds of material and take all kinds of forms and that the very limited sort of exposition used for testing enjoys no monopoly on intellectual activity; participants can see, often with astonishment, how loaded with ideas is this rich variety of writing they have produced.

When schools narrow the notion of essay to fit it to editing, they are violating the whole tradition of the genre from its very inception to the present. College composition instructors and anthologists of essays have doted for years on George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," which they hold up to students as a model of essay or "expository writing." Please look closely at it even if you think you know it well; if a student wrote it, it would be called "personal writing," that is, soft and non-intellectual. Orwell narrated in first person how as a British civil servant in Burma he was intimidated by villagers into shooting an elephant against his will. But so effectively does he say **what happens** by telling **what happened** that the force of his theme--the individual's moral choice whether or not to conform to the group--leaves us with the impression that the memoir is "expository,"--that is chiefly cast in the present tense of generalization and in

third person. What we really want to help youngsters learn is how to express ideas of universal value in a personal voice. Fables, parables, poems and songs, fiction and memoir may convey ideas as well as or better than editorials and critiques. Orwell does indeed provide a fine model, but teachers should not let prejudice fool them into misunderstanding the actual kind of discourse in which he wrote "Shooting an Elephant" and other excellent essays, for this leads to a confusing double standard whereby we ask students to emulate a great writer but to do it in another form.

The Essay: An Attempt

Orwell wrote deep in a tradition of English letters, honoring the essay as a candid blend of personal and universal. It was resurrected if not invented during the Renaissance by Montaigne, who coined the term *essai* from *essayer*, to attempt. From his position of philosophical skepticism ("What do I know?") he saw his writing as personal attempts to discover truth, what he thought and what could be thought, in exactly the same sense that Donald Murray or Janet Emig or I myself might speak of writing as discovery. From Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy and Browne's Urn Burial; Addison's and Steele's Spectator articles; through the essays of Swift, Lamb, Hazlitt, and DeQuincey to those of Orwell, Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer, English literature has maintained a marvelous tradition, fusing personal experience, private vision, and downright eccentricity, with intellectual vigor and verbal objectification. In color, depth, and stylistic originality it rivals some of our best poetry. Look back over Hazlitt's "The Fight" and compare it with Mailer's intellectual reportage of the Ali-Frazier fight in King of the Hill or, "On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth" or, "On Familiar Style"; DeQuincey's "Confessions of an Opium Eater" or "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth," which begins: "From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in Macbeth"; or Lamb's "The Two Races of Men," "Poor Relations," or "On Sanity of True Genius." Consider too a book like Henry Adams' Education of Henry Adams for its simultaneous treatment of personal and national or historical.

Some essayists, like Montaigne and Emerson, tend toward generality, as reflected in titles like "Friendship" or "Self-Reliance," but tone and source are personal, and we cannot doubt the clear kinship between essays featuring memoir or eyewitness reportage and those of generality, for the same writers do both, sometimes in a single essay, sometimes in separate pieces; and Lamb and Thoreau stand in the same relation to Montaigne and Emerson as fable to moral or parable to proverb. The difference lies not in the fundamental approach, which is in any case personal, but in the degree of explicitness of the theme. "I bear within me the exemplar of the human condition," said Montaigne. Descending deep enough within, the essayist links up personal with universal, self with Self.

Writing About Reading

These essayists frequently write about their reading, and they love reading. They set, in fact, a model for writing about reading that is very different from writing-as-testing, because they have selected what to read according to their own ongoing pursuits, and, because they cite ideas and instances from books in **mixture with** ideas and instances drawn from everyday experience, thus fusing life with literature. Many openly framed assignments that I have long advocated will elicit from students exactly the kinds of essays that constitute our fine heritage in this flexible form. They call for the writer to crystallize memories, capture places, "write a narrative of any sort that makes a general point applying beyond the particular material," "put together three or four incidents drawn from life or reading that all seem to show the same thing, that are connected in your mind by some idea," or "make a general statement about something you have observed to be true, illustrating that truth by referring to events and situations you know or have read of." The point is to **leave subject matter to the writer, including reading selections**. Any student who has done such assignments will be better able, strictly as a bonus, to cough up some prose to show he has done his homework than if he has been especially trained to write about reading.

Transpersonal, Not Impersonal

Schools mistreat writing because the society suffers at the moment from drastic misunderstandings about the nature of knowledge. Applying "scientific" criteria that would be unacceptable to most real scientists making the breakthroughs out there on the frontier, many people have come to think that subtracting the self makes for objectivity and validity. But depersonalization is not impartiality. It is, quite literally, madness. Einstein said, "The observer is the essence of the situation." It is not by abandoning the self but by developing it that we achieve impartiality and validity. The deeper we go consciously into ourselves, the better chance we have of reaching universality, as Montaigne knew so well. Transpersonal, not impersonal. It is an undeterred faith in this that makes a great writer cultivate his individuality until others feel he speaks for them better than they do themselves. Teachers should be the first to understand this misunderstanding and to start undoing it, so that schooling in general and writing in particular can offset rather than reinforce the problem.

Here are two examples of what we're up against--one from a famous current encyclopedia and one from a leading publisher, typical and telling symptoms. Most English majors probably sampled or at least heard of Sir Thomas Browne, a very individualistic seventeenth-century master of an original prose style, a writer's writer much admired by successors. Of his Pseudodoxia Epidemica Funk and Wagnalls Standard Reference Encyclopedia says, "Its unscientific approach and odd assemblage of obscure facts typify his haphazard erudition," and then concludes the entry: "Despite Browne's deficiencies as a thinker his style entitles him to high rank among the masters of English prose." What this verdict tells me is that the writer of that entry felt overwhelmed by all the books Browne had read that he had not and that he knew far less than he should have known about the enormously important and complex networks of thought and knowledge, called esoteric, that after several millenia of evolution still had great influence on Newton, Bacon, and Descartes (who displayed at times equally "irrational" intellectual behavior). The encyclo-

(cont. on p. 46)

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