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MOFFETT'S CORNER

Why Moffet Matters Now

Stephen Lafer and Jonathan Marine

James Porter Moffett (1929–1996) was a ground-breaking teacher, author, and theorist of language learning who had a profound impact on the fields of English Education, Language Arts, Composition, and Educational Psychology in the mid to late 20th century and was the first member of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL). In the inaugural Moffett's Corner, Steve Lafer and Jonathan Marine discuss how they came together, why they wanted to start this column, and what they hope to accomplish.

STEVE LAFER: Out of the blue, Jonathan Marine reached out to ask me if I was willing to be interviewed about my thoughts and experiences with James Moffett. Jonathan identified himself as an academic working with others to study and, as he puts it, sponsor the “uptake” of Moffett’s ideas in order to, ultimately, influence language instruction in the classroom. Jonathan was encouraged to reach out to me by Tom Gage, Professor Emeritus at Cal Poly Humboldt, who was my advisor while I was a member of the first class in his Master’s in the Teaching of Writing program at (then) Humboldt State University. Tom was a colleague and close friend of James Moffett, and in his courses (and in our many conversations over the years) James Moffett was the central animating force which guided our conversations and beliefs about teaching, learning, and pedagogy. Though I graduated long ago and am now retired myself, Tom’s and Moffett’s voices continue to resonate loudly in my head.

In fact, when Jonathan wrote, I was still citing Moffett in my writing, and he was still a central figure in my thinking. However, having retired from my position in the College of Education at the University of Nevada after 28 years, I was a disappointed academic and, worse, becoming more cynical as time wore on. And I remain skeptical that students can be exposed to the types of educational experiences that might help them develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions I believe characterize thoughtful and truly literate human beings capable of contributing positively to create and maintain a sane and humane society. I corresponded with James Moffett throughout the latter days of his life and knew him to be profoundly disappointed, too.

So when Jonathan reached out to me asking for an interview, I gladly agreed. And during our two-hour-long (at least) conversation, I was overjoyed to discover a new generation of scholars, thinkers, and teachers dedicated to reviving the same interest in Moffett that had been the central quest of much of my life’s work. The wonderful editor of this journal, Wendy Ryden, has graciously agreed to our request for a small space in *JAEPL* to instigate thinking and spark discussion of James Moffett’s work and how it can be used to influence the way in which students are educated, around the world. And

our focus will be on Moffett's educational philosophy, the theory that emanated from it, and pedagogy he described and worked so hard to implement in his lifetime. Further still, we hope for this space to be an ongoing site of encounter with the many new and exciting initiatives at work by Moffett scholars the world round.

We introduce the Moffett's Corner with the conversation that follows, an article that is a dialectic I-to-you-about-it interaction by two people thinking about similar things and doing their best to "get it right" along the way, constantly redefining "it," confusing matters for one another in a way that inspires ever deeper levels of thought, a discourse of the kind that is essential to Moffett's influential *Universe of Discourse* (1968), where the human mind is used to make sense of what was and is in order to contemplate what should and could be and make decisions that can lead to the sane and humane world that should come of a society governed by and for the people.

JONATHAN MARINE: My own discovery of Moffett came through the same lineage as Steve's; another of Tom Gage's students in the Master's in the Teaching of Writing program, Paul Rogers, was teaching a Composition Theory class which I decided to take on a whim. We read "Kinds and Orders of Discourse," the 2nd chapter in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, and it was like having my innermost thoughts as a teacher articulated for me in plain language. All my beliefs about effective teaching—that students should write about what they know and care about, learn from interacting with one another, and that literacy was an integral part of how they conceived of their existences—were encapsulated in Moffett's theories, and once I finished the book I wanted more! I was lucky to get tapped into a deep network of Moffett figures, including Tom Gage, Sheridan Blau, and Don Gallehr, and quickly realized not only how important Moffett's work was and the potential value it posed to the field, but also the opaqueness of his oeuvre and the difficulty in navigating, or even locating, his many works and the works about him.

For me, at the risk of sounding hagiographic, Moffett is the most important thinker of the twentieth century when it comes to language learning, literacy, writing, and educational assessment and policy. He provided a Platonic aggregation of what we learned about learning in the twentieth century which surfaced the role of the cognitive and mindful in language learning and pushed the field of Language Arts and English Education fifty years forward. In the second half of his career, he increasingly turned his attention toward the role of educational policy and assessment while broadening his conception of education to encompass the ultimate civilizing mandate he felt lay at the core of democracy and society: the right for each person to follow *their own* path, make *their own* meaning and pursue what *they* find meaningful as a part of their own efforts to achieve a fully realized existence.

Yet, the fact is that Moffett's nontraditional career, which bucked academe in favor of supporting teachers directly through independent consultancies and working with organizations like NCTE, the NWP, and AEPL (among others), has made the uptake and pushing forward of his work all the harder. All of his books are now out of print, and in a very real way, he's all but forgotten by all but the old guard (many of whom

knew and worked with him). For all of these reasons, it is a critical time to reconsider and reconceptualize what the field of Moffett studies is, should, or could be.

My view is that we can best support this effort through big tent thinking; through attending to the entire ecosystem of thought which undergirds his work. As always, it begins and ends with teachers. Moffett's entire career was dedicated to serving teachers of English and Language arts by pushing forward a student-centered view of education where students could learn from one another and, in doing so, perpetually discover the limitations of their understanding. But how do we get to the teachers?

First of all, through making his work available. The fact that all of his books are out of print is the single largest hurdle we face in getting the word out about James Moffett's role in the historical development of our field and the many potential contemporary applications of his ideas. Dwindling used copies inch up in price on eBay and Amazon as fewer and fewer are available. For that reason, we recently worked with the WAC Clearinghouse to republish five of Moffett's canonical works (<https://wac.colostate.edu/books/landmarks/moffett/>), including *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, *Student-Centered Language Arts*, and *Coming on Center*. We've also started a Moffett Reading Group, hosted by the National Writing project, (for more info, download the NWP's WriteNowStudio app, which can be found here: <https://studio.nwp.org/>). Lastly, we're working to digitize the Moffett archive at UC Santa Barbara in order to make his personal correspondences, drafts, and unpublished works available to scholars and researchers.

And that's the other part of the puzzle: new scholarship. On top of making *his* work available, we also need others to take up and push forward his ideas through the publication of fresh scholarship which either empirically tests his ideas or attempts to translate them into functional classroom practice. The day that graduate courses in teacher education are assigning articles which cite Moffett (or, better yet, his own work) is the day that we will have regained the crucial ground lost since his untimely passing in 1996.

I am trying to offer a multi-level conception of how to elevate Moffett studies both for scholars and teachers. But it is the teachers who ultimately matter because they, as Moffett knew, will be the ones to lead the charge in changing education in our country for the better. It is a primal belief in the timeless principles and edicts which Moffett's work provides along with the immense sense of privilege I feel to have had the chance to work with many who knew and worked with James Moffett—like Steve—which fills me with the motivation requisite to pushing his ideas forward for this generation, the next, and beyond. As Moffett said, “paradoxically, the way to bring everyone together is to let them go their own ways—together, in the same communal learning network.” That's gawddamn right.

STEVE LAFER: That word, “hagiographic,” (which, I admit, I had to look up) and which means, in essence, a pronouncement of saintliness, scared me, as it did Jonathan, who recognized the risk involved in using it to describe the strength of his understanding in the value of James Moffett's work. My affinity to Moffett's theory, its effect on my thinking and on my work as a teacher and professor of teacher education, is something I have questioned the longer I have held on to it. I used Moffett's work, in whole or part, in every course I taught over a thirty-year career as an English teacher, in almost every

paper I wrote, and in a good many of the conversations in which I participated. Even if I did not mention his name explicitly, I was applying Moffett's theory implicitly. And this enduring influence has remained with me for so long because Moffett got so much right concerning the fundamentals of language learning, literacy, and writing.

Moffett did in many ways move, as Jonathan says, the field forward, but the effect was not long lasting, in good part because, as Jonathan also notes, he bucked academe. And one of the reasons that Moffett now needs resurrection is that, as the fact that his works are no longer in print shows, his name has faded from attachment to many of the lasting changes he fomented. Further still, I believe that much of the real change in education and language learning that Moffett inspired has either been heavily muted in its application and effect or undermined by subsequent changes in a field that has now rejected or moved past the insights that Moffett offered. What Jonathan calls "gawd-damn right", to my mind, is not. Moffett's work, outside the box, was paradigm shifting, but only outside that box. So, the "box" must be affected this time around, in order to allow for the theory and best practices derived from Moffett's work to have institutional effects that in turn lead to changes in the way that people are educated in our society. And the first order of business is to begin a discussion of truly sensible goals for education.

To incite that conversation, I offer my sense of the framework in which they need to exist so that they lead to valid and worthwhile outcomes for education in democratic societies. The basic properties of democratic society are the rights of citizens to participate in the decision-making processes about rules for society that, at once, serve the needs and the desire of each and all at the same time, as best as can possibly be done—which reflects the same paradox which Jonathan notes concerning the need to bring everyone together to decide on how to best make it possible for everyone to go his or her own way. I would add, in so far as where one goes interferes as little as possible with where anyone else can go, as little as possible in closing opportunities for individual exploration, invention, creation, and application of where individuality might take one.

Yet, for a society to truly sponsor individual freedom it must also educate citizens in how to decide on what is right and good for the one as well as for all. Moffett's belief, especially near the end of his life, was that curriculum and methods should be shaped to help student citizens develop the capacity to serve their native curiosity and to explore and invent and create and apply; to use their minds to make the conditions of life ever better for themselves and, in the context of the good of society, better for all. It is my deepest hope that we can find a new and realistic way to achieve the fantastic vision that Moffett believed possible, and that he could not achieve on his own during his own life time, by finding a sufficiently large number of others with which to do so together.

JONATHAN MARINE: It actually wasn't me (or, at least, it wasn't *only* me) who argued that Moffett pulled the profession of the teaching of English "fifty years forward"—it was John Hartley, editor of the *McGill Journal of Education* (Moffett, "Eighties" 102). And many other notable scholars since that time, such as John Warnock (2000), Sheridan Blau (2011), and Russell Durst (2015), have quoted, paraphrased, or cited that same idea in order to continue to discuss the

incredibly unique legacy of James Moffett. And while I agree with you (and lament) that in some ways that impact has been impermanent, it bears reminding that Moffett confronted a field in the form of the language arts of the mid-twentieth century that valued most of all grammatical correctness and obedience to the teacher. Students all sat in neat rows facing the teacher, raising their hand to talk, being drilled continuously on the finer points of participles and gerunds, punished verbally (or worse) whenever they made an error. That we now recognize, however muted, the extraordinary import in language learning of social interaction with peers, of trying out new ideas without fear of punishment, and the vital role language learning plays in our conceptions of identity, understanding, and collective belonging speaks to the tectonic shift which Moffett's ideas about cognitive development and growth had, and continued to have, on our field and education at large.

So, we find ourselves at a crossroads; Moffett's ideas and influence remain like the haze of spectral illumination which dense fog brings about a star; you can sense it's there, but only faintly. Hopefully, through this continued conversation, we may find others interested in discussing, reviving, and applying Moffett's ideas and, in doing so, uphold the ultimately civilizing edict at the core of all his thought and work: the dire need for all of us to understand one another well enough to get along in a world where it is far too easy to fall into what Moffett termed "agnosia"—the rejection of alternative perspectives, which in many ways has been the founding and guiding principle of AEPL itself.

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