

12-2025

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Recommended Citation

Marine, Jonathan M. and Lafer, Stephen (2025) "James Moffett's Basic Principles," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 30 , Article 4.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl30f5Hj>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol30/iss1/4>

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MOFFETT'S CORNER

James Moffett's Basic Principles

Stephen Lafer and Jonathan Marine

Jonathan

The tricky part about trying to distill James Moffett's basic principles is that there are so many of them. In literature, the "major" poets are separated from the "minor" for a number of reasons, but one critical criteria is development; major poets have to *develop* across the span of their careers, either writing in new forms, or about and with new ideas or themes. Suffice to say, Moffett developed a great deal across his career, from a focus on pedagogy to a focus on spirituality and mindfulness along with increasing consideration of educational assessment and policy. Of course, I'm overgeneralizing here; grasping at "a strategic gain in concept," and Moffett's career and interests were far more complicated, interrelated, and kinetic than this paltry encapsulation can offer (Moffett, *Discourse* v). However, my point is that a discussion of his core principles threatens another overgeneralization; Moffett means different things in different contexts to different types of people, and moreover and more importantly, he has *many* core principles.

To me, there is one core idea which fundamentally conveys across his oeuvre. However, first, it's important to remember that Moffett offered one of the only fully formed L1 language learning theories in our field by centering on the concept of abstraction because he believed it was one of the only analytic and theoretical constructs capable of conveying *across all languages*. That's a shockingly ambitious notion, but one that Moffett was able to pare down to a relatively parsimonious schema. He proposed a dual-axis model of discourse splayed across two axes of increasing abstractive distance. The longitudinal axis plots the I-you spectrum, or the distance between speaker/writer and listener/reader. Starting with reflection, defined as "intrapersonal communication between two parts of one nervous system," onto conversation ("two people in vocal range"), correspondence ("interpersonal communication between remote individuals"), and "publication" ("impersonal communication to a large anonymous group, extended over space or time") (Moffett, *Discourse* 33). Conversely, the latitudinal axis plots the I-it spectrum between the speaker/writer and their subject, from what is happening (describing/recording), to what happened (reporting/narrating), to what happens (generalizing), to what may, could, or should happen (arguing/theorizing).

what is happening—drama—recording
 what happened—narrative—reporting
 what happens—exposition—generalizing
 what may happen—logical argumentation

Moffett's I-It Spectrum

Reflection	Intrapersonal communication between two parts of one nervous system
Conversation	Interpresonal communication between two people in vocal range.
Correspondence	Interpersonal communication between remote individuals or small groups with some personal knowledge of each other.
Publication	Impersonal communication to a large anonymous group extended over space and/or time.

Moffett's I-You Spectrum

For English, Language Arts, and Writing teachers, Moffett's discourse schema provides not only a way of translating all of these different forms of communication into an almost limitless amount of different ways of writing (and it's worth remembering how narrow and provincial the range of classroom writing was in the 1950s and 60s), but also a way of overlaying types of thought onto types of writing that encourage us to think about the loss of fidelity that transpires as we process raw experience into thought and then express it to others. As Moffett puts it, "to abstract is to trade a loss of reality for a gain in control" (Moffett, *Discourse* 23). And Moffett's many pedagogical efforts to design writing and language arts curriculum (including 1973's *Interaction*, four editions of *Student-Centered Language Arts*, and the four volumes of *Active Voice*) in essence parlay varying transmissions across these levels of abstraction with and against one another in order to demonstrate and inspire in readers further awareness of the abstractive spectrum which he contends undergirds all human communication. Whether that's first recording an experience as it happens and later turning it into a historical account, work of fiction, or drama (going from *what is happening* to *what happened* or *what may well or could happen*) OR rewriting a reflection as a letter to another person or group of people (going from reflection to correspondence or publication), Moffett's discourse schema allows us all to see

the many different ways communication takes place and how they interact with, bind to, and incarnate one another.

In conversations with colleagues, when the notion of “student-centered” arises, in my experience it often devolves into trite discussions of student choice; advocating for letting learners do, read, or write what they want in the classroom (something that is more Montessorian than Moffettian, to my mind). Sometimes, a daring Brahmin will even go so far as to suggest (often in a tone that indicates they believe they’ve discovered a new element on the periodic table) that student writing be *authentic*; that they write as they do in the real world (which, again, to me, has more to do with Peter Elbow or even Kenneth Bruffee than Moffett). It’s not that these notions don’t align with the student-centered, or that Moffett didn’t consider them or value them or account for them in his ideas and theories. However, what strikes me as the core tenant of student-centeredness which runs throughout all of Moffett’s work is the connection across his abstractive scales *back* from any form of writing *to* our own experience.

To Moffett, all language is egocentric; bore out of the understandings, or generalizations, which our experience has exteriorized for us. Accordingly, growth and development are hinged on decreasing egocentrism; “awareness that meaning resides in minds, not in words, and that different people may see the same things differently, verbalize the same ideas differently, and interpret the same words differently” (Moffett, *Detecting* 20). To be student centered presumes student choice much as it presumes authentic discourse (what would be the point of writing inauthentic discourse, exactly?), but it also goes beyond those elements to the invaluable realization that we only understand the world around us *through* our own experiences, and in that way, Moffett’s core principle of student-centeredness helps us to bind thought to language as anchored in the understandings wrought from our own experience; to never lose sight of ourselves in the vast, monochromatic mist of abstraction which language threatens to foment all around us. “To see a leaf is not to incorporate it, nor literally to transform it (the leaf remains the same), but rather to create in our body a representation of it that is structurally similar to it” (Moffett, *Discourse* 20). Moffett’s core principle of student-centered learning is about letting student’s experience become the sextant with which they navigate the universe of discourse, and beyond.

Steve

Abstraction, as Moffett argues, is ever-present in how we make sense of the world. And as Jonathan reminds us, what we know is always filtered through our own perceptions, generalizations, and sense of self. In this way, becoming a literate citizen requires an awareness of both our own perceptual filters and an ability to engage with others’ perspectives. For Moffett, education is not merely

about transmitting knowledge but about exploring the conditions that make understanding possible. As a life-long educator, I've long believed that a good education is rooted in helping students learn to measure distance—between people, the different ideas we may have, and between the expression of those ideas and meaning.

Jonathan aptly outlines Moffett's discourse schema, his two-axis model charting abstraction in relation to audience (from intrapersonal to public) and subject (from recording to theorizing). This model is more than a taxonomy, it's a map for navigating language and experience. It urges us to attend not just to what we say, but to the layers of distance (personal, temporal, conceptual) that shape how meaning is made.

In my own teaching, I've found Moffett's ideas most powerful when enacted in project-based classrooms; that is, spaces where students move among rhetorical roles and test their ideas in real exchanges. For instance, dramatic performances invite students into the "what is happening now" mode of discourse. Theater also demands empathy and perspective-taking. It forces students to see how thoughts become actions that shape character, drive conflict, and advance the plot. This kind of active, multimodal engagement fosters dialogic critical thinking in the Vygotskian sense: thinking about thinking through the voices and experiences of others.¹

Once students have experienced the immediacy of drama, they can begin to shift into narration by reporting *what has happened*. This introduces distance and abstraction. Reporting requires memory, reflection, and the ability to represent reality from a position of separation. This space can also help students see the difference between being present in a moment and recalling it; between experiencing something and communicating it effectively.

Generalizing, the next level of abstraction, asks students to spot patterns and theorize beyond individual cases. This is where students learn to distinguish strong from weak claims, test ideas against evidence, and refine their grasp of what holds across contexts. And this type of thinking is absolutely essential for civic reasoning and decision-making. A classroom organized to facilitate generalization *must* allow students to compare texts, perspectives, and experiences, and in doing so it must foster an environment where patterns can emerge and be discussed.

Theory-making, the apex of Moffett's schema, is about imagining what could be. To theorize is to build frameworks that extend beyond what is or even what has been. It is where abstraction reaches its full potential. Theory, grounded in

1. It should come as no surprise to readers that Moffett draws heavily upon Vygotsky (as well as many other notable thinkers of his era, including Piaget and Bruner). Some examples of comments on Vygotsky by Moffett can be found on page 17 and 64 of *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968, 1983).

generalizations tested against experience and evidence, is the foundation for invention and creativity. Whether in fiction, social analysis, or scientific hypotheses, theorizing enables students to propose futures, anticipate outcomes, and build new possibilities.

Moffett's schema doesn't just describe how communication works, but gives students a framework for participating meaningfully in discourse communities. And that requires educators to build classrooms where students both climb *and* descend the ladder of abstraction. That ladder, in turn, depends on language-rich environments. That is, places where students are constantly composing and comprehending with real audiences and real stakes.

To support this kind of development, instruction must be dialogic. Moffett's model thrives when students are immersed in purposeful activity: writing letters, scripting plays, producing podcasts, staging debates, and composing essays. The classroom becomes a space for experimentation, collaboration, and reflection. And the teacher's role shifts from dispenser of content to architect of experience. Teachers can and some be engaged in designing conditions where thought and language grow together.

What unites all of these modes of discourse is the idea that literacy is not about finding the right answer, but about navigating the distance between the self, the other, and the world. Students need classrooms where they climb (and descend) Moffett's ladder of abstraction with purpose, engage in inquiry, and produce language that matters because it is rooted in experience. The aim is not to simplify, but to help students manage complexity and locate themselves within it.

As Jonathan notes, Moffett's notion of student-centeredness is often reduced to discussions of choice or authenticity. But at its core, it's about epistemology. It's about recognizing that knowledge begins in the self, and that growth depends on seeing through the eyes of others. This is not simply a method, it is an ethical orientation, and one that is as important in today's socio-political climate as ever. To be student-centered in Moffett's sense is to respect that all understanding begins in experience, and that the goal of education is not the abandonment of egocentrism but the mindful movement beyond it.

In future columns, I hope to explore how Moffett's model can inform classroom design through discussion of class assignments and environments that cultivate abstraction, empathy, and critical thought. Writing, literacy, and disciplinary learning can, and should, be interwoven into a pedagogy rooted in abstraction and student agency. For now, it's enough to say that Moffett gives us a theory of literacy that is also a theory of humanity. And in this moment, we need both.