

12-2024

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Sheridan Blau

Teachers College, Columbia University, blau@tc.columbia.edu

Sondra Perl

Lehman College at City University of NY, sondra.perl@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Blau, Sheridan and Perl, Sondra (2024) "Remembering James Moffett: An Interview and Dialogue with Sondra Perl," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 29 , Article 6.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl29bzef>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol29/iss1/6>

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Remembering James Moffett: An Interview and Dialogue with Sondra Perl

Sheridan Blau with Sondra Perl

Introduction to Sondra Perl

Sondra Perl is Professor Emerita of English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where she directed the Ph.D. specialization in Composition and Rhetoric. She is also a founder (with Richard Sterling and John Brereton) and former Director of the New York City Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project, at Lehman College, CUNY. In 2006, she founded the Holocaust Educators Network which was modeled on the National Writing Project. In 2015, that project was renamed The Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights (www.toli.us), where she now serves as the Senior Director for National Programs in the United States.

As one of the most influential scholars of the first generation of modern composition researchers, Perl produced a series of research studies in the early 80s that helped to uncover and describe the mental and embodied experiences of student and adult writers as they engage in the writing process. She also conducted seminal research on classroom teachers in their teaching of writing, and published that research in 1986 (in collaboration with Nancy Wilson) in their powerfully influential book titled *Through Teachers' Eyes: Portraits of Writing Teachers at Work* (Heinemann: reprinted in 1998), a volume that served as a model for a generation of researchers who sought to provide ethnographic accounts of classroom teachers in their daily work of teaching.

In her teaching and her composition research, Sondra Perl has emphasized the importance of a writer's "felt sense" as the pre-verbal source for the ideas that activate a process of discovery and articulation in language. Her 2004 book, *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body* (Boynton/Cook) remains an authoritative and widely consulted guide for helping writers discover and make available to themselves their own most creative and potentially influential ideas. (For a digital copy of the book and a short video of Perl discussing its history, go to <https://compcomm.commonsgc.cuny.edu/feltsense/>)

Perl's attention to the non-verbal sources for a writer's ideas was of particular interest to Jim Moffett who often spoke about it to colleagues, although in the interview transcript below, she does not recall speaking with Moffett about that work when she first met and collaborated with him. In the interview here, Perl tells the story of how she and Moffett spent a week working together in the summer of 1979, providing a professional development seminar on the teaching of writing for teachers in the Shoreham-Wading River school district on Long Island, NY. During this summer institute, Sondra participated in workshops led by Moffett, and in this interview, she describes in great detail a few of the methods he employed. Moffett's practices were so engaging and successful, in fact, that Perl adopted them for use in her own classrooms when teaching writing to undergraduates and graduate students at CUNY and in her workshops with teachers in the New York City Writing Project and with other educators across the US and in the

EU. Teachers reading these descriptions of Moffett's teaching are likely to find in them models they too will be inspired to adapt for use in their own writing classrooms, wherever they teach.

The Interview

Sheridan Blau: Let's talk about Jim. As you know, we are collecting essays and other materials by and about Jim for a volume that will introduce a new generation of English teachers to his thinking and influence on the teaching of English.

Sondra Perl: Let's do it. This is a great project honoring a great man.

Sheridan Blau: Can you tell me about how you knew Jim personally and professionally and in what context and during what period of time?

Sondra Perl: You know, ever since you've asked me to do this interview, I've been thinking about my history with Jim. And it begins not so much with Jim himself as with my living at home in New Jersey on leave from college for a semester in the late 60's. I didn't think I was going to be a teacher, but I decided I would enroll at a local college and take a course in teaching. The professor assigned the first edition of Jim's book from 1968. [Shows Student Centered Language Arts: K-13, 1st edition (SCLA)]

Sheridan Blau: I have that book, the same edition!

Sondra Perl: If you had told me then, as an undergraduate, that I would have a role to play in the field of composition and rhetoric, and that I would come to know Jim Moffett, I would not have believed you!

Sheridan Blau: What college did you come home from?

Sondra Perl: I went to Simmons College in Boston. I came home for a semester because my sister was ill, and since I had always taken a lot of credits, I could afford some time off. I'm not even sure what led me to take this course; it was at Montclair State with a young professor, who said, "This guy [Moffett] is going to go places; this is someone you should all read."

Sheridan Blau: Do you remember who the professor was?

Sondra Perl: Nope. But I kept the book. I've looked at what I underlined back then and, not surprisingly, found ideas that still resonate today. But after that course and as my sister was getting well, I put it aside. When, a few years later, I enrolled at NYU to pursue a doctorate in English education, Moffett's work eventually became a part of my background reading. During graduate school, I also began teaching writing at the City University of New York. That is when I understood that the standard textbooks being assigned for basic writing and freshman composition tended to be formulaic and that Moffett's SCLA was so much richer.

Sheridan Blau: In the meantime, at NYU were your professors confirming your earlier sense of the importance of Moffett?

Sondra Perl: They must have been.

Sheridan Blau: Who were you working with?

Sondra Perl: Gordon Pradl and John Mayher.

Sheridan Blau: And you don't remember them emphasizing the contributions of Moffett?

Sondra Perl: We're talking 1970, 1971, 1972 ...They were very influenced by Louise Rosenblatt, by transactional ideas of reading, and the London Schools Council with Jimmy Britten and Nancy Martin. Gordon had been an undergraduate at Amherst and was also influenced by Theodore Baird who founded the Amherst school of writing. Although Moffett's work, including *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, must have been on our reading lists, I don't know that Moffett himself was visibly on the scene yet.

Sheridan Blau: Well, he was, and was already widely influential in California, but not so much, I suppose, in New York. And was Louise still at NYU when you were there?

Sondra Perl: Yes, she interviewed me, but I think I was in the last cohort that she accepted before she retired.

Sheridan Blau: So, you never had a course with her?

Sondra Perl: I never had a course with her, but I did with Mitchell Leaska who was very close to her.

Sheridan Blau: Leaska himself was an important literary scholar who, by the way, wrote about Virginia Woolf, as did Moffett. You know, Moffett wrote his prize-winning senior thesis essay at Harvard on Woolf, specifically on her narrative point of view, which led directly to his interest (which he called his "obsession") with perspective and the thinking of writers in relation to audiences.

Sondra Perl: Fascinating! But strangely, I don't recall anyone talking about Moffett in my early days at NYU. But then I got involved in writing research, and I did a dissertation focused on the composing process. So, I must have read more Moffett in that period. But to talk about when I really got to know him, we have to jump to the National Writing Project. You know, Richard Sterling, John Brereton, and I started the New York City Writing Project in 1978. In 1979 and 80, Richard and I were contracted to bring the writing project model to the Shoreham-Wading River School District, which employed some forward-thinking administrators. They decided to devote a portion of their summer budget to a three-week Writing Project Summer Institute designed exclusively for teachers in their district. They asked if there was anyone we wanted to invite to work with us that first summer, the summer of '79, and we came up with the idea of inviting Jim for a week.

Sheridan Blau: That's terrific.

Sondra Perl: It was fabulous. We had three weeks, and reserved one of those weeks for working with Jim. It also happened that the superintendent of schools for the district was traveling during the week that Jim would be doing the instruction, and he offered us his house so that we could avoid a long commute from Manhattan. So, Jim and I shared the superintendent's house and made the short drive together back and forth to the seminar every single day. At the seminar, Jim demonstrated everything he believed in. He didn't talk to us about good teaching; he embodied the spirit and the work of a good teacher. The teachers and Richard and I sat with him and read and wrote and laughed and shared and did group work, really engaging in all of the amazingly rich and complex activities that Jim understood to be the most powerful and generative way to teach writing.

Sheridan Blau: How terrific.

Sondra Perl: That's how I got to know him well. I also learned that he only used the name "Jim" in public and professional settings but at home he preferred to be called "Prana."

Sheridan Blau: I didn't know that.

Sondra Perl: You didn't know that?

Sheridan Blau: No, I got to know Jim and his wife well in his late years, but I don't think he ever told me that, though now that you say it, I am starting to remember something they may have told me about it.

Sondra Perl: He always referred to himself as "Prana" and Jan, his wife, called herself "Yamuna." I have been thinking about his chosen name because the meaning of "Prana" is "breath." Jim was a practitioner of yoga and meditation, practices which are grounded in breathing. It occurred to me recently that the name he chose for himself is so fitting because in so many ways Jim breathed new life into the field of English studies. In fact, in the 50s and 60s, if writing was taught at all, it was, as Janet Emig often said, both a 'limited and limiting' affair, based on a linear model with strict steps leading to the creation of the five-paragraph essay. In other words, for decades, the teaching of writing was focused on products, not processes, and Prana was one of the scholars in the field who worked to enlarge our understanding of writing and literacy, really breathing new life into the curriculum for so many teachers and for their students.

Sheridan Blau: I am now remembering that I did know about Jan's name, because they used to come to Santa Barbara every summer, so Jim could do a presentation at my Writing Project site, and they always chose to come when they could stay over for her birthday weekend, and I'd spend time with them during the weekend, and he would refer to Jan as Yamuna. But I didn't remember him telling me about his own name, until just now. He told me that he had the name, but didn't ask me to call him by it, and I never did, and never heard Jan do it either. I would expect that he used his Hindu name more

in the early years when they were running the Ashram in their house in Berkeley. But by the time you worked with him, were they already living in Mariposa?

Sondra Perl: That's right. I went to Mariposa at one point, and he also stayed with us in Manhattan at one point. But it was working with him, day in and day out in Long Island, and watching the way he worked with teachers that showed me the richness of what he had to offer. The Writing Project, as you well know, has changed the practices of thousands of teachers across the country as it changed my practice, but it was Jim who got me to understand how the methods he developed work in a classroom. I can say more about that, but...

Sheridan Blau: By all means, say more!

Sondra Perl: Well, you mentioned that you would be asking me about what ideas or practices I used that came from Jim and which texts or ideas were most influential for me. And the answer is definitely material in the first edition of *Student-Centered Language Arts: K-13*. Just the idea of adding the "13" shows that he understood that really powerful generative teaching, while it may need to be adjusted for level and cognitive ability, can be based on the same ideas and principles from kindergarten through university. Good practice is good practice.

Sheridan Blau: He was the first to try to cover so many grades with his theory and practice, and maybe the only one who actually did it in a book. I can tell you from experience that publishers don't want to do books that go across too many grade levels.

Sondra Perl: I think that's right. So, what I would really say about Jim, or Prana, is that he was ahead of his time. He understood so well that composing is a meaning-making activity and it happens when we read and when we write and when we listen and when we sing and when we dance, and when we share the sense we make of the sensate world. There are so many ways in which he was far ahead of his time. What he invited us to do that summer in Long Island— which was such a simple, simple thing—was free writing, which he called "spontaneous flow of thoughts." He told us to just go and write. "Don't worry about punctuation," he said. "Don't worry about spelling." We all know the practice from Peter Elbow's work, but Moffett was writing about this in his K-13 methods book, even before Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* was published. Moffett invited us to move around the school and record the spontaneous flow of our experience and impressions of everything we encountered -- everything we were seeing and hearing and smelling and feeling. And then he suggested that we do this on different days and at different places, or even return to the same place at a different time to see what's different. Moffett then asked us to stop and to label the record of our stream of consciousness according to what was immediate and sensory— like smells and sights and sounds -- and what we were thinking about in memory – images and feelings and thoughts from the past.

Sheridan Blau: I didn't know he did that. That's just brilliant! And he was playing with having people write what he called their "spontaneous flow of thought," before Peter

Elbow introduced freewriting? When did Peter do that? 1973, I think. But Peter says that Macrorie really invented free writing. That must have been 1970 or 71.

Sondra Perl: That's right. I almost forgot. I always credited Ken Macrorie as one of the folks who introduced free writing to get us away from what he called "English." I was introduced to his work at NYU and I loved *Uptaught* (1970). But Moffett describes essentially the same process in his original 1968 methods book for teachers. So, Moffett needs to be acknowledged as the inventor of free writing as a teaching practice. That 1968 volume is filled with amazing classroom practices and ideas and suggestions, many of them, as I said before, ahead of their time. And what I just described to you was only step one. Then there are many other things you can do. You can look at your spontaneous writing for tense to see if you are recording a present experience or a memory, or for whether you're merely recording what's happening, or possibly generalizing, or reflecting, noticing when and why you might have moved into a more or less abstract level of thinking.

What Moffett also introduced to us in Shoreham-Wading River which I have continued to use in almost every writing class I have ever taught, is something he called a "memory chain." I remember being astonished by the writing it generated. If I were planning a sequence for a 15-week writing course, memory chain would usually come somewhere in the third or fourth week. It works like this: You're in a classroom and you look at an object in the room and ask yourself, what does that object remind me of. It will be simpler to grasp if I demonstrate it right now for you. So, I'm going to look at the artwork that is behind me which consists of several different kinds of flowers. I'm going to ask myself: what does the artwork remind me of? And that might take me on a memory chain that leads me into museums and my love of still life paintings. Or I could ask myself what do flowers remind me of? And that would take me into my love of gardens and gardening. So, you start by using an object to generate a memory. You write a little bit of what that memory is: I might describe what it feels like to be on my knees, planting dahlias, wondering if I need fertilizer. But then you don't stay with that memory; instead, you ask: what does that in turn remind me of? The word 'knees' might remind me of the time my partner needed knee surgery and I'd be off jotting down memories of his recovery. In other words, in a memory chain, you use one memory to elicit another... in a chain.

You do this focused free writing for about 15 or 20 minutes, but what is so surprising is that when you start you have no idea where you're going to end up. And every one of the little constellations of memory that emerge could be the kernel for a piece of writing. Moffett wanted writers to start with lots of material not with a blank page, material you can go back to, that you can shape. And how do you shape it? You bring it to a group. So, Moffett also modeled that with us. We wrote our memory chains and then we shared them. We laughed out loud so often! Some people produced memory chains on a single theme; others jumped all over. I remember once this really clever guy wrote about all the shoes in the room. Someone else wrote about Italian food. The memories come from whatever is elicited by the object, and if you choose a different object you'll

go in a different direction. And then after sharing these in groups, you select one of the memories and you do more free writing on that.

Sheridan Blau: That's just so terrific. I feel embarrassed that I never knew about this because I never read Moffett's methods text. I've read almost all of his other books, but I thought, "Not that one – that's not for college teachers," though I remember that its title refers to K-13. I'm afraid my snobbishness blocked me from discovering writing activities that could have enriched my teaching and workshops over the past 50 years!

Sondra Perl: To this day, Jim's memory chain and freewriting exercises are among the most reliable, generative, and fun activities I use in writing classes, helping to create the kind of community and relationships that Jim would say need to be part of a writing classroom.

Sheridan Blau: That's another way Jim was ahead of his time – in recognizing that play and a playful attitude need to be part of the experience of composing, partly to free your attention and also to invite creativity. So, all of your writing project teachers knew about this memory chain exercise, because you did it every single summer?

Sondra Perl: Yes. That is a staple of my practice that comes from Jim. And then, that summer he also had us writing dialogues and monologues – all of the different genres he valued. And we did this fast, so it was a lot like free writing: non-stop, pell-mell, conducted in a 'don't worry about it' attitude. At one point I recall writing some dialogue and Jim suddenly said, "Introduce a third voice." And, of course, doing that shifts the direction you are going in.

Sheridan Blau: This is the movement to drama.

Sondra Perl: Exactly, and his notion of drama – that classrooms should be filled with drama -- and also songs and limericks and haikus. Jim broadened the base that was otherwise available for most teachers and teacher educators. And it lent our Writing Project institutes an extra richness in the way we explored a wide range of genres. I have relied on Jim's work ever since, as a practitioner -- as a classroom teacher and teacher educator for forty-five years.

Sheridan Blau: What a wonderful story. I just love it. I feel sort of brokenhearted that I missed working with Jim in the same way.

Sondra Perl: I'm surprised. You never did any of that with him?

Sheridan Blau: Well, maybe he never had enough time with us. When he visited our Writing Project, I always invited him to do whatever he wanted to do or simply tell us about what he was writing at the time. And he usually did that, presenting some new and provocative ideas, typically accompanied by a new chart reflecting his latest theory. Sometimes he would play with some ideas he was still formulating and talk about more general issues in writing, like the importance of writing from plenitude, and the ladder of abstraction. And he once did a meditation with us. But he never had a whole day to

lead our writing project. I'm so sorry now that I never thought of it. We would typically have him for a morning presentation for 2 or 2-1/2 hours. I think we saw him too much as a guru, and not enough as a master teacher. Ach! We could have read the guru, but we missed our opportunity to learn from our experience with the master teacher. My fault!

Sondra Perl: Well, speaking of the meditative part, it seemed to me that in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* and elsewhere in other theoretical pieces, Jim explored Western consciousness until he got to its limits. You know, rational, logical, cognitive stages. There is a way that Western thinking about intellectual development focuses entirely on mental states and cognitive development, and Moffett was perhaps the first in our field to develop a model for intellectual growth and development relevant to the language arts that took into account the connection between the mind and the body. And now are we beginning to see more of that kind of understanding in the field of writing studies.

Sheridan Blau: I agree. And I think Louise (Rosenblatt) was also discovering something similar fairly late in her career, around the same time that Moffett did.

Sondra Perl: That's interesting. I didn't know that.

Sheridan Blau: She wrote an essay in about 1981 called "On the Aesthetic as the Basic Model for the Reading Process," in which she comes to the edge of denying the equality of efferent, and aesthetic, essentially saying that all reading, if it's to be meaningful to the reader, has to be experienced aesthetically, because if you don't get it in the body, as it were, you're not getting it at all.

Sondra Perl: Right. I can see that logic. I thought Moffett had the sense that Western thinking in the end was sort of closed at the top or didn't get beyond consciousness, and what I'm remembering now is how he loved the concept written about by Julian Jaynes of the bicameral mind (1976), and its implications for education. I think what drew Moffett to Eastern thinking was its much more subtle and fluid understanding of the mind in its relation to the body and the idea that there are different levels and states of consciousness. I think Prana was drawn toward yoga and Eastern mystical thought because standard academic Western conceptions of mind didn't satisfy him. Eastern thinking around transcendence and spirituality really spoke to some core part of him.

Sheridan Blau: I'm sure that's right. And I assume that throughout your long and close connection with him he was especially drawn to all the work you were doing with felt sense, and he must have seen your work as closely linked and important to his own deepest interests and seen your research as having much in common with his own ongoing studies. But was Moffett drawn to Gendlin too? It was the philosopher and psychologist, Eugene Gendlin, wasn't it, whose writing introduced you to the concept of Felt Sense.

Sondra Perl: Yes, it was Gendlin who coined that term. You know I knew Moffett best in 1979. I had already worked with Gendlin's notions, publishing "Understanding Composing" in CCC in 1980, but while I'm sure we shared an appreciation of the body-mind connection, I was also shy about all of that as well.

Sheridan Blau: Shy? I remember you did a powerful workshop on Felt Sense for my Writing Project in about 1982.

Sondra Perl: I remember that – in the beautiful location, overlooking the ocean, right? And yes, I did introduce the guided process I developed. But I was always a bit nervous about that, worrying that folks might feel uncomfortable – even though the process is so safe and generative. In any event, I don't recall major conversations with Prana about it. Our ideas are certainly not dissimilar in approach and theory and we share an appreciation of the connectedness between the mind and the body and going into the body to discover what isn't yet in words. Like Moffett, I was also interested in what's prior to words, what surrounds words and the silence that is part of composing that we don't think about so much.

Sheridan Blau: You know, as you say this, I actually am understanding some things about him better. He writes about the importance of meditation and about how writing comes from that. And I have to confess that I was always a little puzzled by that idea, wondering "how?" How does it come?" And what you just said makes it less puzzling. Because meditation puts you in touch with things that are deeper. It puts you in touch with what you know from the body or from intuition, which is really what it means to experience a "felt sense" – something you know or feel, but don't yet know in language.

Sondra Perl: Yes, yes, and then you can use that as a guide and ask, "Is this really what I want to say?" But there is also an important distinction between meditation and felt sense. Gendlin would say that the point of meditation is to get beyond your thoughts, to get beneath your thoughts, to sit, if you can ever get there, with no thought. And that the goal of using felt sense with writing is to generate thought, but from a really centered place. So, Moffett and Gendlin are not writing about exactly the same thing and may have very different ends, but they're certainly connected.

Sheridan Blau: With that distinction, Sondra, I think we must call an end to our meeting which has already extended beyond the time limit I had promised. But it has also produced more discoveries and insights and useful information about Moffett and his teaching practices, and our own experiences with him than I ever would have predicted. So, I thank you for your generosity and your good memory, and your friendship, as well as for your important contributions to the field of writing studies and English education for the past half century, and I'll end this dialogical interview with the hope that we'll find future opportunities for similar conversations.

Sondra Perl: It's been a pleasure, Sheridan. Thank you for a very enjoyable afternoon thinking about the field of writing studies and the many ways in which Jim helped to shape it. He was a kind and caring person and I am grateful to have had this opportunity to reminisce about him and about the exciting early days of the field.