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Brief Reviews of Major Works of James Moffett

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Summary: John Warnock briefly sketches the works of James Moffett, emphasizing ideas for classroom practice found in his work.

James Moffett wrote first and always for teachers and students, not for academics. He held that discourse was "a unity—somebody-talking-to-somebody-about-something," and he never lost sight of the "you" that was his audience.

These brief sketches of the works of James Moffett emphasize ideas for classroom practice found in Moffett's works. A fuller treatment of Moffett's work is found in John Warnock's essay on Moffett in [Twentieth Century Rhetoric and Rhetoricians](#) (Greenwood Press).

Student-Centered Language Arts: K-12 ([Boynton/Cook, 1992](#)). Originally published in 1968 as *A Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers*. This book is a delicious collection of an astonishing range of concrete, specific ideas for developing the abilities of students to discourse across what Moffett calls "the universe of discourse" in classrooms K-12. The *Handbook* was revised and added to over the years and is now in its fourth edition and co-authored with Betty Jane Wagner since 1976. It has always been an invaluable resource for teachers, one that lifts the spirit with its ideas and makes teachers impatient to get back to the classroom.

Teaching the Universe of Discourse ([Boynton/Cook; 1968, 1983](#)). This is the book that sets out the theory and research that inform the practice suggested in *SCLA*. The essays here represent, Moffett said, "one teacher's efforts to theorize about discourse expressly for teaching purposes." The theory was developed from many sources—developmental psychology, psycholinguistics, philosophy, and literary theory, among them. Over 30 years after it was first published, it still has currency and the power to generate ideas for teaching and curriculum development.

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Interaction (Houghton Mifflin, 1973). An extensive collection of pedagogical materials ("800 activity cards, dozens of games, 80 hours of recordings, and 175 paperback books of diverse reading material") for classrooms K-12. (Some of these materials have been republished in digital form by EDVantage Software, cofounded by Jim Moffett and Robert Romano This material extends and diversifies the material in *SCLA*.)

Active Voice: A Writing Program across the Curriculum ([Boynton/Cook, 1981](#)). A rewriting of some 29 very popular assignments (with advice added about their use) that had circulated among teachers for many years in pamphlet form. Moffett originally developed the assignments while teaching at Phillips Exeter Academy in the early 1960s. The assignments invite writing across a developmental range, from the very personal to the essay. Moffett's rewriting adds a focus on writing as learning across the curriculum.

Active Voices I-IV ([Boynton/Cook, 1987](#)). These four anthologies, co-edited with teachers, offer student writing done from the assignments in *Active Voice*. Each anthology offers writing from a different level: elementary, middle, secondary, and college classes. The kinds of writing produced come from the wide range of possibilities suggested by Moffett's ideas of the structure of "the universe of discourse."

Coming on Center: English Education in Evolution ([Boynton/Cook, 1981](#)). This is a collection of essays written by Moffett beginning in the 1970s and addressing various topics pertinent to teachers, including the social and political contexts of schooling, ways of teaching literature, and meditation in teaching and learning.

Detecting Growth in Language ([Heineman, 1992](#)). Material extracted from *Student Centered Language Arts* shows teachers how to document growth for themselves, as an alternative to standardized testing. Moffett knew teachers needed concrete

alternatives if they were to have a chance to resist the powerful forces promoting standardized testing and to make evaluation something that could itself promote learning.

Harmonic Learning: Keynoting School Reform (Boynton/Cook, 1992). This book takes the controversy about the *Interaction* series as the point of departure in a book that explores the prospects of integrating the "learning fields" of "family, school, culture, and nature." "Learning fields," to Moffett, is a larger idea than "subject fields." The latter is simply "expedient and logical classifications of content that do not take into account how individuals learn" (75). As was his wont, Moffett searched through the tumult and particularities of life and learning for a unifying structure. The one he envisages here extends far beyond the domain of "English."

The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening through Education (Jossey-Bass, 1994). In this book, addressed both to "professional educators and to the public," Moffett argues against the governmental initiative for national assessment and a national curriculum, proposing instead that we "parlay school reform . . . into a totally individualized community learning network for all ages" and "merge most social services into education." In this far-reaching work, he explicitly asks his readers to suppose that the fundamental aim of living and of education is spiritual growth. In this vision, life is "soul school" (331 ff.) and education is the "master social service" (295 ff.). Teachers will find in this book specific suggestions for expanding the purview of our work in "English."

About the Author These brief sketches were contributed by John Warnock, former director of the Wyoming Writing Project and currently a professor at the University of Arizona.

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