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Interview

James Britton

"It needs to be from within ..."

Before the taping of this interview I met James Britton outside his classroom, and we walked together across the beautiful mountain campus at Bread Loaf, chatting about the history of our years together there. We met in 1982, his first summer on the Bread Loaf faculty, when I was a student in his class on "Ways of Studying Writing." Even then, I felt that we had known each other for a long time, since my reaction to reading Language and Learning *had been nearly as emotionally powerful as renewing a good friendship of many years standing. What Jimmy's book offered me — as it has so many other teachers — was a much-needed confirmation and justification for most of the good things that had been happening in my classroom for years, things I'd discovered largely on my own, or with the help of students and colleagues, through trial and error. More importantly, it supplied me with a theoretical framework in which to locate those practices, and therefore a more secure launching pad for developing new ones.*

The summer before, when I was in Nancy Martin's class, I had asked her to take Jimmy a copy of a poem I'd written shortly after finishing his book, one I'd dedicated to "J.B." for both Jimmy and one of my students who shared those initials, a student whose progress from non-writer to outstanding achievement embodied so much of what Language and Learning *seemed to be about for me. When we got to know each other, I discovered that Jimmy wrote poetry too, and every time we've met since then, one of his first questions to me has been, "Still writing poetry, Jim?" So in this interview we talked about poetry and other writing as well.*

--James Lobdell

JAMES LOBDELL: I know you're working on revising *Language and Learning*. It's twenty years old now, isn't it? What sorts of changes are you thinking about making?

JAMES BRITTON: I've done it. I've brought it here to Bread Loaf. I went through it very carefully and consulted people — the publishers particularly didn't want to get a complete rewrite. They suggested I should do a preface and an additional chapter to bring it up to date. So I've done some minor alterations to the text, taking out things I don't agree with any longer, and silly things like "shillings" and "half crowns" and that sort of thing. Then I've done a forty-five page chapter which is new work, which I think I feel quite happy with. I'm teaching some of it to the class here — little bits of it.

JL: Speaking of the course you're teaching here, it deals with the relationship between teachers' classroom experiences and the writing of stories. How do you see that relationship, or how are you dealing with that in the course?

JB: I don't think I'm dealing with the practice of it so much. I'm taking it for granted that everybody can write about themselves and is interested to do so, and they know how to do it. I mean, go back to *Teaching the Unteachables* (by Herbert Kohl). His experience stuck with me. He went to teach in a very tough school in a Black area, East Harlem, and he couldn't get any headway at all. He couldn't get students to talk to him. In the long run, he got the breakthrough by getting them to write, and what they did was write about their homes and their difficulties, and the whole thing came to life. On the basis of writing — well, on the basis of responding to what they wrote — they got a real relationship. I think everybody is interested in themselves and, once they break through, can write about themselves in a way which is productive. I find here at Bread Loaf — and I've done this in Canada too, done it all over — there's always something in somebody's life they want to write about, and have quite often been waiting to write about. They just have to settle down to do it. And when they do, it's amazing how many people write about somebody's death, somebody's suicide, somebody's row, break-up; and that means you have to be very careful, because you don't want to be — well, sort of keyhole-peeping.

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JL: Yes, prying into people's private lives.
JB: When they want to make it public, then it's the best thing to them.

JL: Are teachers writing about their teaching experiences, their experiences with students, and so forth? Would you consider that a kind of research?
JB: Yes. Sure. I think that's very useful. It needs to be from within — in other words, an autobiographical start is probably the best. But it can also be pretty effective, too, in analyzing situations.

JL: In 1974, Courtney Cazden went back to the elementary school classroom for a year, and afterward summed up what she perceived to be one of the major differences between educational research in England and the United States: "Americans like me have worked 'down,' trying to derive implications for education from theories about language and its development, colleagues in England have worked 'up' from instances of the best classroom practice." Do you share Courtney's perception of this difference, and if you do, what could the United States learn from the British way of working up from actual practice?
JB: That's an absolutely crucial question. It taps something I feel very strongly. People in a job like mine in England have nearly always come up through teaching. It's not true in this country. Most of them haven't had the experience of teaching, and I think it does make a big difference. For instance, while Arthur Applebee came to take his Ph.D. with me at Goldsmiths' College, he finished up teaching in an ordinary state school — quite a tough school — for two or three years. I wanted him to do that, and I think it paid. It's a great pity that more people in my kind of job in America haven't got teaching experience at home. I think changing the American system would mean upsetting all sorts of things, because it depends upon a large number of graduates getting Ph.D.'s in universities compared to a small number in England.

JL: That leads to a question about the increasing emphasis on teacher research and teacher as researcher. There's such a movement here, through people like you and Dixie Goswami, to get classroom teachers to do research. Do you feel that that is going to make a big difference, or is already making a difference, in this country in terms of working up from practice?
JB: I think so. Yes. I think, above all, that it takes a new line on teachers. Research is over a broader field for teachers than it would be for M.A. candidates. I think the trouble with M.A.'s in particular, and Ph.D.'s to some extent, is that people research things they don't really want to know. A certain technique can be used to get answers, but those answers are not what I really want, and that makes classroom research all the more valuable. Research is not always the best word for it — sometimes the research we do in classrooms is more like settling into the classroom and settling problems there. Not necessarily is that going to settle problems elsewhere. I've just written a piece for an American publication on a kind of theoretical backing that teachers really need, which is not so much interdisciplinary as it is closer to the phenomena. Teachers can't always afford to ask any great psychological, sociological, philosophical questions. Time won't permit. They can't take it on, not to the level of the real experts, but they can take on questions at the level nearer to the phenomena.

JL: So that it's clearly and closely related to the practice itself.
JB: Right. Otherwise we go on doing what we always have done. We do what we can — if there's no research evidence, we just have a good guess.

JL: When I was in London last January, going into schools, it seemed to me that that kind of teacher research has a great deal more legitimacy over there. It gets a great deal more respect from other people for

the teachers who do it. In this country if you're not doing the "high level," graduate school level kind of research, then you're not doing "real" research. So there's this political thing that happens where, no matter how good the classroom research is, that it's never quite as good as the "real" stuff. How do you feel about that?

JB: Well I think there's something to be said both ways. There's so much more facility here in America for teachers to take advanced study than there is at home. The kind of courses our teachers can take is much more often limited to summer courses without any credit. And in some ways it makes it more difficult to get them to take them. On the other hand, when they do take them they may be more valuable because they're less tied to credit or results.

JL: Right. It's certainly an important question for teachers and researchers here in the U.S.

JB: I once had a very fierce argument just on that subject. We used to have one-year courses for teachers. That's, I think, ideal. I don't mean it's the only thing you could do, but it's not taking a degree, it's just taking a year off teaching to study and read. Well, I had lunch with Mrs. Thatcher when she was Minister of Education, when the Bullock Report came out. We ate in a posh place, a fancy place the government uses. Bullock sat next to her on one side, and I on the other side. She talked to Bullock the whole first course and turned to me just when the rack of lamb was served. And I got so cross with her I didn't eat a thing. She'd decided that she wasn't going to give any more grants for one year off. She was going to cut them down to one *term* off because private schools can spare their teachers for a term, but they can't spare them for a year. Whereas in public schools, you can't have the term off, you have to take the entire year, because they're employed for the year. And she didn't, in fact, institute any one-term courses. She merely cut down the one-year courses.

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JL: Speaking of Mrs. Thatcher reminds me of the new national curriculum and its effect on the work that you and Nancy (Martin) and Tony (Burgess) and Alex (McLeod) and Hal Rosen have done. The new national curriculum is attempting to set up a rigid, unified course of study throughout the country and trying to standardize the way in which the curriculum gets implemented. Obviously, that's a discouraging thing for you, but do you think that in the long run your way — my way, every intelligent, thinking, caring teacher's way — will prevail? Will it come back?

JB: I think so. Although I think the process of putting over the program one wants to put over has become more and more difficult. They're cutting more and more bits off it. It's getting more and more reduced. I don't think this government will change it, but I do think this government will go out and we'll get something better. I don't think we can go on like this. I really don't, because teacher morale is very, very low. Teachers have to occupy themselves with satisfying other people's demands, and the other people are people who feel that education is a kind of market exchange. It's not *real* education. They're putting their money on the wrong things. The last thing that the new minister of education did was to talk about punctuation! Well ...

JL: You obviously have a wide acquaintance with teachers in the United States, and because we have that same kind of thrust — the conservative governments of Thatcher and Reagan were obviously very much alike — and because you've had so much influence on so many people in this country, how do you feel about the situation here along those lines?

JB: That's true, and it's been very rewarding, but it's not fair ... the kinds of changes our work involves are not prospering. It's not getting more influence, it's getting less. It's meeting up with all sorts of other kinds of movements, especially in America with its strong move to get preprogrammed methods with very little regard for the teacher — a kind of "teacher-proof" method — and that's the last thing you want. I've enjoyed my work very much. It's been wonderful, and I've felt happy about it, but it's getting more and more difficult.

James Britton is emeritus professor of English at the University of London Institute of Education, where for twenty years he was head of the English department. He is also on the faculty of the Bread Loaf School of English. Britton taught in the state secondary schools in England for eight years. He is editor and co-author (with Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen) of *The Development of Writing Ability — Ages 11-18*, one of the earliest writing research projects to focus on development and process. He received an honorary doctorate from the University of Calgary and NCTE's David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. He is the author of many journal articles and chapters in essay collections, as well as of *Language and Learning*, a book many consider the seminal work on the complexities of language development and its relation to learning.

JL: In great part, your work has focused on how we build our representations of the world, how we come to know the world through language and how classrooms might build on our language foundations. What about the idea discussed by people like Nel Noddings at Stanford of classrooms becoming settings for caring, settings where a new ethic of caring might be enacted. With the complex problems that surround classroom life nowadays, how can classrooms become havens for caring, caring about each other, caring about learning?

JB: I don't see any danger of our going too far with that. We're concerned with the child as well as with what he says and what he can do. When you think about the amount of time children expend in school, at a very developmental period of their lives, it's a very important part of their time. It matters a great deal. I think of Martin Buber's work on teaching, which appears in several books. It's absolutely first rate. And he does understand it. He sees the teacher as one who, in a sense, not exactly guarantees, but lends his weight to the right answers in a large number of ways. Because this teacher exists, a child can believe in that and that and that.Who was it ...? An American sociologist ... Well, the name's gone, but he talks about the myth of teachers loving their children and setting up a relationship with them for a year, then easily transferring that to another group of people. I think I'm set against that. In all caring professions, the caring is of a special kind. It isn't a secular care to any degree at all — it's professional — and therefore the relationship can be cut off without loss, in a sense. It has to be like that; otherwise, you get somebody more and more dependent.

JL: That's true. Then they never become independent of you. Jerome Bruner, in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds (1985)*, suggested that learning in most settings is a community undertaking, that a child must make knowledge her own in *community*, that knowledge comes through joint culture creating, a wonderfully idealistic notion that you have dealt with too. How do you feel about the community of learning and its importance in the classroom situation?

JB: I think that's splendid — it's very, very important. I think Bruner's come to it gradually. He wrote something some years ago called *The Process of Education Revisited* that's a real kind of confessional saying the mistakes he'd made. When I was here first in this country — on my first visits — the "gospel according to Bruner" was being preached everywhere. And it was a matter of going to the experts, the university experts, rather than getting an educational community kind of thing going. Whereas I think he's learned since then — and it's a kind of recantation — that the community kids are in can be a great help to them, and we ought to recognize that.

JL: In a talk in Berkeley several years ago you bemoaned the fact that English departments study great works *done* very much at the expense of what people *do*. Could you get into that a bit more?

JB: Well, it seems to be a clear-cut case. If you read literature at the University the chances of you being asked to have a go at it yourself are very, very limited. It happens occasionally — Cambridge, for example, has a creative writing element you can take, but most don't. Instead, you have to study what other people have done. By and large, I'm not at all happy with creative writing courses. I don't think that to get young people to learn how to write directly from a writer of stories or poems is a good idea. I think you tend to get people who don't base their own writing upon a really rich response to how other people actually behave, and I think that's essential. You can become somebody who makes their profession of writing poetry, but that really seems to me to be a gift that comes along with all kinds of experience, rather than merely copying of what other people do. It should be, I think, a much more free influence, and not just a kind of taught thing.

JL: On occasion you've mentioned that you advocate *reading* poetry not so much to model its form as to bring forth the type of emotional response one needs in order to write and think and be and discover. Could you elaborate on that a little? You write poetry yourself, I know — very good poetry.

JB: I think reading poetry meets a very real need. It's not a universal need, not something you need every day, every moment. Rather, it's related to problem areas of your own experience. And I think you do need that. Occasionally, from time to time. I can be personal about that, if you like. As you know, my wife died nine months ago. I needed to write about it, and writing about it took me to read what other people have written. One gets into a state of unequilibrium that reading what people have written can help. That's a very short answer ...

JL: No, it's a very *good* answer, and it's a very *personal* answer, Jimmy. Thank you very, very much.

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