

# The Stormy Times of James Moffett

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This article discusses the published work and career of James Moffett (1929–96), focusing in particular on Kanawha County, West Virginia, in the 1970s, when his innovative textbook series, *Interaction*, after adoption by the county, was opposed by local and national conservative activists. The series was ultimately dropped by the district following a highly publicized, protracted, and at-times violent conflict, after which other districts around the country followed suit, shutting down the series. The article examines Moffett’s response to the censorship battle, explores his later interest in spirituality and literacy, and considers the implications of his work and his career trajectory for the teaching of English today.

**J**ames Moffett’s 1988 *Storm in the Mountains: A Case Study of Censorship, Conflict, and Consciousness* tells the story of a successful and highly publicized attack on several popular textbook series, including Moffett’s own, in the early 1970s. A leading literacy theorist and practitioner, Moffett wrote groundbreaking, student-centered literacy texts (in fact, he was among the first to use the term *student-centered* in the title of a 1968 book). His work “had a profound and significant effect” on English teaching, according to John Warnock’s 2000 essay in *Twentieth-Century Rhetorics and Rhetoricians* (p. 264). The standard pattern for literacy educators has been to focus on the college, secondary, or elementary level, with few exceptions, but Moffett, who died of cancer in 1996 at the age of 67, ranged confidently and expansively throughout the entire spectrum with a grand theory of literacy teaching and learning. He had a distinguished career, but it was also in many ways an unusual career, and not without controversy. Moreover, his life and work both reflected and were influenced by cultural changes in the United States from the 1960s until his untimely death. In this article, I examine Moffett’s early career, the censorship battle he faced, and the path he chose afterwards,

placing his work in the context of the times in which he lived. I also consider his work and his intellectual, professional, and spiritual journey in relation to the teaching of English today.

As Sheridan Blau relates in a 2011 essay, James Moffett was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1929 but raised in Jackson, Mississippi, somewhat before the beginnings of the modern civil rights era. His family migrated back to the Midwest in the 1940s, when he was a teenager, and he spent his high school years in Toledo, Ohio. A bright and successful student from his earliest days, he went to Harvard for undergraduate and graduate degrees in literature, completing a master's degree, though not a doctorate, because he did not wish to become an academic and a literary scholar. After being drafted and serving for two years in the military, he took a position at the elite boarding school Philips Exeter Academy, where he taught for 10 years until the mid-1960s. At this time, he was beginning to publish work on English teaching and decided to leave the prep school classroom, taking a faculty position at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, spending three years there, and becoming increasingly visible as an English teaching specialist with powerful ideas and applications. At Harvard, he garnered grants from the Carnegie Corporation and other funding agencies to work on curriculum, met with teachers all over the country to spread his approach, and published widely used textbooks and studies of writing.

By the late 1960s, according to Blau (2011), Moffett had become a major national figure in literacy education, known for his innovative K-12 English language arts materials. But in the mid-1970s, after a coalition of Christian conservatives in West Virginia actively opposed his and other curricula, state after state backed away from the controversial materials rather than risk high-profile opposition. Following this battle, Moffett moved in quite a different direction both pedagogically and personally, a transition he discusses in an essay published not long before his death (Moffett, 1994b). His later work drew upon New Age philosophies, self-actualization movements, and Eastern religious practices. Soon after the textbook controversy, he relocated to Northern California, home to much of the alternative spirituality movement he had become active in, and he became an independent author of English textbooks and books for teachers, but with a smaller and more specialized following than before, for the last two decades of his life.

## **Culture Clash in West Virginia**

My own experiences in some ways dovetail with those of Moffett. In the late 1970s just after finishing college, I spent a year living in rural West Virginia,

where I taught and counseled juvenile offenders at a public institution sponsored by two adjoining counties. The institution was located in the northern part of the state, in a poor white community of 2,000 people similar in some ways to the town Shirley Brice Heath (1983) called Roadville in her classic ethnography of literacy, *Ways with Words*: close-knit, with lots of churches, and a mainly blue-collar, rural population. This was a difficult but fascinating time for me. It was difficult because I was working long, intense shifts, while living around the clock in a facility with troubled youth who had been sentenced to the institution by the courts for various offenses, some fairly serious, and whom I had to teach, counsel, and supervise. But it was also fascinating, both because the kids were interesting and because the job put me, an urban, middle-class Jew, into a world I had never known before. I remember my surprise and wonderment, early in my time there, at seeing a flyer at the local grocery store announcing the upcoming church appearance of Sister Lucy, a touring revivalist advertised as having the stigmata. Reading about this event, and viewing the evangelist's radiant smile in the flyer photo, made me feel like a visitor from another planet, a feeling I would experience many times that year.

Young people had little to do in this area, particularly of a constructive nature. Teenagers would sometimes gather by the side of the main road on the outskirts of town on Saturday nights when the nearby racetrack let out, to hurl stones at cars carrying African Americans. A private drinking spot in the next town was called the Cozy Corner Club and rumored to be affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan. When I asked a fellow counselor from the southern part of the state, who had recently graduated from a nearby liberal arts college, if there were African Americans living where he came from, his shocking reply was, "Sure, they live in Colored Holler." On one occasion, a juvenile court judge contacted us about admitting an African American teenager from downstate. The placement never happened, for a variety of reasons. However, while the possibility was under discussion the director of our facility expressed concern to me because our residents attended local schools and participated in town activities, and he was worried that an African American teen would be at serious risk of harm living in this community.

One beautiful spring morning, the director showed up at the group home with some literature that a young local preacher was distributing outside of his church a few blocks away. It was neo-Nazi propaganda discussing national and international Jewish conspiracies, the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion, and assorted dangers to the white race. Jimmy Carter was president at the time, and one memorable flyer talked about "Karter's Koshers Kabinet." The flyer listed every Jewish or possibly Jewish person on the

president's staff, an impressively large number as I recall, and declared they were involved in certain nefarious, even satanic plots as well as alliances with the Soviet Union. I do not wish to present a caricature of West Virginia or the town I lived in. There were many progressive, community-spirited folks in the area, most people I met were friendly and reasonable, and I later learned that the offending minister had to give up his job and leave town. But this was my initial exposure to religious fundamentalism, the KKK mentality, and extreme political conservatism, qualities that also figured prominently in the censorship battle in which Moffett became embroiled. I left my job after that year to go on to graduate school in literacy, relieved to stop riding herd on recalcitrant teenagers and dealing with their sometimes startlingly dysfunctional families. But since then I have maintained ties to people and places from my time in West Virginia. As a result, Moffett's West Virginia book has a special resonance for me. My experience in this small town gave me some insight into what James Moffett went through when his textbook series was banned and effectively put out of business, after a public battle that was an early manifestation of what has become an ongoing and growing censorship conflict in our nation's schools.

The censorship battle took place in southern West Virginia, in Kanawha County, which includes the capital city of Charleston, a mix of urban, suburban, small-town, and rural areas, with a diverse demographic but a strong fundamentalist influence. At the time, it comprised one of the larger and more disparate school districts in the country. Opposition to the textbooks, which Moffett discusses in *Storm in the Mountains*, and which George Hillocks also examines in a 1978 article, took the form of a protracted protest and boycott, including wildcat strikes, bombings, shootings, and other violent incidents, attracting national and even international attention. Opposing the textbooks were mostly local figures, some of the most prominent with almost stereotypical Appalachian names—Reverends Avis Hill and Ezra Graley, businessman and John Birch society member Elmer Fike, school board opponent and preacher's wife "Sweet Alice" Moore, and others. But in the background of this controversy was a fledgling network of conservative activists from around the country, many of whom cut their teeth during this textbook battle—Texas book-banning advocates Mel and Norma Gabler; Republican direct mailing innovator Richard Viguerie; television preacher Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network; and various members of the Heritage Foundation. For some of these people and groups, this conflict was the early success story that helped propel them to national prominence.

## The Textbook Materials

But what exactly were the opponents of the textbooks protesting against? In addition to Moffett's work, textbook opponents also sought to remove language arts series by D. C. Heath; McDougal, Littell; and Scott, Foresman, but my discussion will focus primarily on Moffett's materials. In the early 1970s he created a series for elementary and high school students titled *Interaction*, an ambitious, diverse, multimedia array of English teaching resources published by Houghton Mifflin, a leading publisher of English and language arts textbooks. It was, according to the publisher, the largest set of school materials ever put together up to that point for any school subject, comprising literally hundreds of different materials (Moffett, 1988, p. 4), and it was quite innovative in its design. Moffett was general editor and conceptualizer of the project, but he worked closely with a handpicked team of 50 teachers and writers from around the country to produce the series. They broke all the rules; in fact, it is a tribute to Moffett's stature, persuasiveness, and creativity that a major publisher would even consider the project. Obviously, and sadly, in the educational and political climate of recent decades, none would publish it, so responsive have publishers become to the criticisms of conservative groups and to the increasing demands of large-scale educational testing (Agee, 1999).

These materials were the opposite of teacher-proof, highly directive, and dumbed down. An accompanying volume for teachers and curriculum developers explained the rationale behind the series and its many parts. However, the books, tapes, movies, pamphlets, puzzles, songbooks, joke books, lists of proverbs or insults, even card and board games contained virtually no apparatus, such as generally appear in school textbooks. This approach was taken quite deliberately because Moffett and his collaborators wanted teachers and students to use the materials for their own purposes and according to their own interests as much as possible—not to follow set guidelines, but rather to approximate organic, self-sponsored uses of reading, writing, and speaking as closely as work emanating from a school curriculum could do. The series was also designed so that the whole class would not be doing the same thing at the same time. Rather, individuals and/or small groups were encouraged to pick and choose and to work at their own pace on the materials that particularly interested them, “to ensure that any learner of any background, level of development, temperament, or interest could find plenty of ways to engage with and develop language” (Moffett, 1988, p. 5). *Interaction* was extremely multigenre and multimedia, with songs, fables, ballads, proverbs, myths, films, and film strips. There were also tapes of

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people telling stories in a number of dialects, both regional and ethnic, so that middle-class speakers of Standard English could be exposed to a greater diversity of language use, while nonstandard dialect speakers could see their own language forms legitimately employed in a school context. The series contained about as many different kinds of texts as one could put together in a language arts collection. It was supposed to be diverse, comprehensive, and a bit zany, to look as little as possible like a textbook series and as much as possible like a disparate set of books one might find in a public library or in one's own home. Even the shapes, sizes, and colors of the books were varied to emphasize their diversity (pp. 4–6).

The materials comprised works by vast numbers of contemporary writers of all types, including a great deal of what we today call cultural diversity, though that label really hadn't been invented yet. Moffett states with pride that he was particularly effective at convincing the publishers to let him include significant amounts of contemporary writing in the collection. He points out that living writers are much more expensive to publish, with *Interaction* accruing a debt of nearly a quarter of a million dollars in permission expenses, quite a sum in the early 1970s (Moffett, 1988, p. 131). This is in part why so-called classic authors are pervasive in textbooks—they're long dead, are in many cases out of copyright (hence free of charge to reprint), and even if not, their estates usually don't charge so much to include in a book. The collection included books of crosswords and other types of puzzles, photos without text (so that students could supply their own), plays, mysteries, fiction and nonfiction diaries, and much more, spanning the age groups. In all, the project was not only politically and pedagogically progressive, it also had an extremely large budget and was anticipated by Houghton Mifflin, Moffett, and his collaborative team to be widely adopted throughout the country, because 1960s idealism still lived in early 1970s education, making possible some experimentation. Early indications were that the series would make a major splash. A number of states put *Interaction* on their lists of possible texts for districts to include, and Moffett crossed the country talking to administrators and school boards, the people who mainly made textbook decisions, and working with groups of teachers who would be using the materials (Moffett, 1988, p. 32).

One should keep in mind that James Moffett, though just over 40 years of age in the early 1970s, was at the height of his career, with some highly respected textbook publications as well as his groundbreaking theoretical

work, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968a). This book had made an important contribution to the fledgling field of literacy studies. Drawing upon George Miller's pioneering work in cognitive psychology, Jean Piaget's research on child development, and Noam Chomsky's theories of language, Moffett's book provided a new and interesting way of talking about children's intellectual growth and its relationship to curriculum in English, though applicable to other subjects as well. His universe of discourse breaks down into two interrelated but distinguishable dimensions, the social and the cognitive, each placing different intellectual demands upon the writer or speaker. For the social dimension, Moffett looked at the relative distance, in time or space or both, between writer and audience, with the greater distance generally but not necessarily indicating increased complexity. Because his categories are tied into curriculum, not purely theoretical, the system is fairly tight. His primary categories, moving gradually away from the self toward ever more distant audiences, include

1. Reflection—Intrapersonal communication, thinking to oneself
2. Conversation—Interpersonal communication between two or more people in vocal range
3. Correspondence—Interpersonal communication between remote individuals or small groups with some personal knowledge of one another
4. Publication—Impersonal communication to a large and mainly anonymous group extended over space and/or time

As Moffett states, "this communication system expands throughout the progression. Each kind of discourse is more selective, composed, and public than those before. Feedback becomes increasingly slower until it tends to disappear, which is to say that two way transaction is yielding to one way transmission" (p. 33). Assignment sequences in Moffett's pedagogical discussions were pegged to his developmental scheme.

His more internal, cognitive dimension posits an abstractive scale moving toward increasingly complex and abstruse forms of discourse, from reporting (what is happening, chronologically), to recording (also narrative but slightly more detached), to explaining (finding patterns/forming generalizations), to theorizing and speculating. All of these categories correspond to important types of writing in an English curriculum and, Moffett argued, have a kind of psychological reality and developmental progression in students' minds. Thus, as with audience, assignment sequences in Moffett's

work also moved up an abstractive scale. Moffett modeled these various social and cognitive dimensions of writing in his own published work, always staying close to questions of practice, of how to put a curriculum together. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* thus had a major impact over several decades, influencing a range of people in composition and English education (see, for example, Applebee, 1981; Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; North, 1987). Through this book, Moffett both led and captured the tendency for other literacy specialists to move frequently and comfortably between theory and practice, exploring their interrelationships.

The same year that the aforementioned theoretical work appeared, Moffett also published an important work on English curriculum, *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers* (1968b), also with Houghton Mifflin. This curriculum text, more than 500 pages long, was a parallel and more practical version of the accompanying book, which laid out his theoretical framework. In the *Handbook*, Moffett proposed a curriculum with four chronological levels—kindergarten and early elementary, late elementary, junior high, and secondary. Assignments and activities at each age group were pegged to the developmental scales for audience awareness and level of abstraction discussed in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. So, for example, the youngest students were to focus on verbal and nonverbal play, often with concrete materials, learning how to discuss in groups, and the writing of stories, songs, and sensory recording. Similar activities were to take place at increasingly higher levels of sophistication up through the high school years, including drama, Socratic dialogue, and reading and writing of haiku and other poetic forms, while the most senior secondary students would branch out into autobiography, full-scale research, reflection essays, and, finally, generalization and theory. The curriculum at each level was intended to be comprehensive, including discussion of basic reading and writing instruction for remedial students, ways of individualizing teaching and learning (always a major emphasis for Moffett), and plenty of age-appropriate games and play throughout the grade levels.

This curriculum text was an immediate success, used in large numbers in English education courses and seminars at colleges of education and purchased for inservice instruction by school districts throughout the country. In their 1993 article “Where Did Composition Studies Come From? An Intellectual History,” authors Martin Nystrand, Stuart Greene, and Jeffrey Wiemelt state that these two 1968 books “did much at this time to promote writing as a cognitive process” (p. 279). By the early 1970s Moffett was an accomplished figure approaching the height of his success. And yet, despite

his growing prestige, he wanted to move beyond the privileged New England prep school students he had taught at Exeter and the elite northeastern school districts that had been using his materials, to make a difference in the lives of students from all socioeconomic classes and in all parts of the country. As he later wrote, he developed *Interaction* with a wide and diverse audience in mind, “very much because I couldn’t bear that such a small portion of American youth should get educational opportunities that all ought to have” (1994b, p. 20). This point is key; Moffett was an idealist as well as a firm believer in the value of his approach to teaching. He was unwilling to limit his influence to the wealthy environs of a fancy boarding school or comfortable suburb. *Interaction* was to be the project that would help him accomplish this goal.

## Battle over the Books

The state of West Virginia was among the first to adopt the *Interaction* series, and the Kanawha County School District comprising the state capital, Charleston, and the surrounding area was one of the first districts to attempt to use the series. But the success for which he hoped turned into a bitter defeat and a harbinger of things to come, with implications for all of us working in literacy today. Instead of seeing his materials used by large numbers of students and teachers, the result was an intense, protracted struggle in West Virginia pitting supporters of the textbooks—mainly educated, middle-class, urban liberals—against opponents of the series—mainly conservative, rural and suburban Christian fundamentalists (Hillocks, 1978, p. 634). This censorship conflict drew attention in the national and even international media, and in the end, the conservatives won, with the help of a national network of activists just then beginning to make its influence felt. Of the textbook opponents, Moffett (1988) writes, with anguish but also with empathy,

My heart is with them. They are right about many things or at least right in a sense. They should not have had my books crammed down their throats. But I think the objectors are dreadfully wrong in some ways that endanger far more than outsiders the very family, country, and religion they think they are upholding. (pp. 103–104)

*Interaction* and other textbook series were successfully eliminated from school curricula in West Virginia after a nasty, at times violent protest and boycott by arch-conservatives and fundamentalists. The “book-banners” labelled Moffett’s series “Cover to cover, trash” (Moffett, 1988, p. 135), zeroing in on particular points of contention as examples of specific materials and the negative comments they elicited from opponents will show in the

following pages. A disparate collection of conservative groups voiced their objections to what they viewed as the anti-patriotic, anti-free enterprise, anti-Christian, pro-diversity slant of *Interaction* and other series. Fundamentalists and their followers from the hills and hollers of rural Kanawha County, as well as some of their more educated conservative allies from the city and surrounding suburbs of Charleston, rose up in full

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rebellion against the perceived disrespect of their educational system's leaders. Thousands of people were actively involved in all sides of the dispute at its peak, with business as usual in the county seriously disrupted, and major attention focused on southern West Virginia for the first time in decades. By 1975, *Interaction* had been removed from the Kanawha County curriculum, along with other sets of work that were also deemed pornographic, politically subversive, or otherwise inappropriate for young people. Even more important, however, other states and other school districts took their cue from Kanawha County. Rather than risk having a major fight on their hands, school officials stayed away from the books under attack or removed them from the approved lists, and publishers' representatives stopped promoting them. In point of fact, *Interaction* made money, just not enough of it to reach the publishing company's fiscal projections, and that, along with the political controversy surrounding the series, is why it was ultimately dropped (Moffett, 1988, p. 32).

But what exactly did opponents of the series object to? Moffett relates this information in detail in Part Three of *Storm in the Mountains* (1988). Extensive written critiques were developed by a sub-group of the Textbook Review Committee appointed by the local school board after criticisms of the series, and these critiques were presented in a 450-page report that was separate from the committee's main report. Each of the six school board members selected three people for the committee for a total of 18, of whom seven chose to work together against *Interaction* apart from the rest of the committee. The group as a whole, pro, con, and otherwise, consisted of some teachers, some politicians, several ministers, a few blue-collar workers, and housewives, all of whom had been active in community affairs in one way or another and were thus known by the board members. The subgroup comprised the more conservative, fundamentalist members of the larger group. The long document the subgroup produced offered a detailed critique of the entire series, their criticisms shedding considerable light on conservative positions hostile to *Interaction*. This sub-group quickly split off

from the committee as a whole, then consulted with a nationwide network of activists (including Mel and Norma Gabler of Texas, who wrote some of the critical evaluations, advising on strategy throughout). Most criticisms were directed to individual reading and writing assignments in the nearly 200 vastly differing books of the series, and with so many materials in the collection, critics found a great deal of objectionable subject matter. In general, objections from the sub-group could be categorized as political, cultural, and religious in nature, with some obvious overlap between the categories.

Where politics is concerned, critics objected to what they viewed as an anti-American bias or a questioning of U.S. history and tradition. For example, the subcommittee critiqued a reading for advanced secondary students from an *Interaction* book called *Transcripts* that contains interviews with five Vietnam veterans who had taken part in the My Lai massacres. The objector simply wrote, "Not necessary for education." In another book with the same name, but for less advanced secondary students, were interviews with the Italian immigrant anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti (executed for a 1920 bank robbery that they may not have committed); Lieutenant William Calley, the officer in charge at the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War; and other such controversial figures. The objector wrote, "I question why this type of literature is important for students unless it is to make them feel guilt and shame." The critics also objected to a page in a book for secondary students called (and consisting only of) *Advertisements*. The page in question contained an ad for advice on how to be a conscientious objector, surrounded by ads for, among other things, guns, padlocks, and Charles Atlas muscle-building instruction. The objection termed the ad "a springboard for the advocacy of radical ideology concerning hatred for the military and justification for rationalizing cowardice" (Moffett, 1988, pp. 157–159).

Moffett and his co-authors wanted students to learn how to think critically and question authority, and their liberal views were surely evident in their choices of texts and genre types. However, series critics preferred to inculcate in students respect for tradition and patriotism, even if it meant ignoring questionable aspects of U.S. history. The critics saw no reason why, even in just a small percentage of readings, school textbooks should portray the United States in a negative light, which they associated with liberal antiwar and civil rights protesters. In reflecting upon such criticisms, Moffett (1988) expressed concern for the attitude in which "war becomes an equivalent of patriotism and loyalty, to the point that pacifism means the opposite, dislike of one's country and disloyalty. Thus for the dissenters it was self-explanatory to object to a selection as pacifist, because this was their synonym for traitors and cowards" (p. 160).

Culturally oriented criticisms tended to focus on standards and types of language and on modes of behavior depicted in the series that objectors found inappropriate for classroom use or, in a number of cases, immoral. Many such objections centered on the occasional use of profanity in some of the readings for older students. In a book of play scripts, subcommittee critics pointed to the inclusion of such terms as *tits*, *Goddamnit*, *sons-bitches*, and *Hell, no*. But the plays' subject matter also raised much ire. The drama in which the above terms appear, *Blue Denim*, concerns the issue of teenage pregnancy, and its inclusion was intended by Moffett (1988) to help students "consider such matters more maturely" (p. 110). Protesters complained, however, that this play was pornographic and that it was entirely inappropriate for students even to be dealing with such matters in a school classroom. Similarly, a piece about beat poet and activist Allen Ginsberg in a book for advanced older students titled *Biography* quotes the poet discussing in vivid language a pot-smoking prostitute he had known while an undergraduate at Columbia University. Excerpts from this piece figure prominently not only in the subcommittee's report but in public protests against the series, in which quotes were sometimes displayed on large placards as evidence of pornographic content.

A related and equally harsh set of criticisms applied to parts of the series in which nonstandard dialects such as African American English were employed, mainly in narratives, folk tales, and fables. Linked as well in most cases with criticisms of the culture and attitudes portrayed in these texts, the objectors argued strenuously that it was wrong to expose students to nonstandard language forms; that such forms were not acceptable to educated speakers; and that the culture, attitudes, and behaviors that often went along with such dialects were hostile to and resentful of mainstream American values. An essay by the African American writer James Baldwin, written as a letter to his teenaged nephew, in which the writer denounced white racism but called upon all people to deal compassionately with others, drew the following response: "This man's letters and articles appear throughout this series of books, he obviously is a mentally scarred individual who believes in no one or nothing but himself. He appears to be anti-everything and reading this letter seems to prove the point. Enough of this type of thinking could bring about racial uprisings everywhere" (Moffett, 1988, p. 142). One pro-*Interaction* Kanawha County teacher quoted extensively by Moffett argues that racist feelings on the part of protest leaders, mainly against African Americans, motivated much of the criticism of the series, particularly the dismissal of these dialect materials as unfit for classroom use. Moffett (1988) concluded that "[t]he dissenters wanted all language study to drill

on correctness and to pretend that English has an absolute form. The fear arises over and over again in various ways: if youngsters know of alternatives, standards will crumble, whether in morals or language” (pp. 126–127).

Many of the most vociferous complaints centered on questions of religion, specifically, the depiction or non-depiction of Christianity as well as the discussion of other religious traditions alongside of Christianity in series materials. Any readings that touched upon theories of evolution came under attack. One representative example, a section in a book for secondary students called (and containing) *Charts and Graphs*, described four stages of humans ranging over nearly a million years, from lower to upper Paleolithic. The critical sub-committee wrote: “This presentation presupposes in a matter-of-fact way that the theory of evolution is a proven fact. This is scientifically inaccurate. It is contrary to the religious beliefs of many persons, and consequently, is not admissible material for inclusion in a public school curricula when implied as fact” (Moffett, 1988, p. 150). As well, materials that appeared to present Christianity as simply one religion or belief system among many came in for serious criticism. Thus, a book for high school students titled *Legends* included the story of Samson, while another at the same level, *Parables*, contained one of Christ’s parables. In both books, stories from other religious traditions were also included. A representative criticism argued: “The story of Samson as recorded in the book of Judges . . . is historical fact. To include this historical account in a book of ‘Legends’ is to cast doubt in the minds of young people upon the veracity of the Holy Scriptures. Moreover, this is at variance with and is calculated to undermine the religious beliefs of young people whose families have taught them to believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible” (Moffett, 1988, p. 149).

Moffett (1988) believed strongly in the potential of the *Interaction* series “to reform language instruction” by making curriculum more individualized, more intellectually demanding, and at the same time more fun (p. 4). However, even among educators, not all agree with this assessment. One secondary school teacher who went on to become a literacy scholar remembers the series from his days as a high school faculty member. He describes *Interaction* as a “magnificent failure, so ambitious, so diffuse, so uncentered” and adds,

My understanding at the time, based on conversations among my high school colleagues, was that it failed to catch on not because of conservative opposition in West Virginia but because of its own internal problems and the difficulty of marketing such a complex series to school faculties across the country, even those who were predisposed to embrace a more diverse and contemporary curriculum. (Smagorinsky, 2013, personal communication)

From a conservative Christian standpoint, Karl C. Priest, a former Kanawha County teacher who was involved in the protest and the author of the 2010 book, *Protester Voices: The 1974 Textbook Tea Party*, complains that primarily liberal media and educators have put forth “a biased view of the historically significant textbook protest” (xii) and that the protesters had good reason to oppose the books for their language, sexual content, anti-Christian perspective, and negative depiction of U.S. society and institutions. He argues that “Moffett’s bias is apparent” in his book on the censorship conflict and suggests that, instead of *Storm in the Mountains: A Study of Censorship, Conflict, and Consciousness*, a more appropriate title might be *Sulking in Liberal Land: An Example of Hypocrisy, Haughtiness, and Hatred* (p. 46).

But however one wishes to explain the opposition in Kanawha County in 1974, after months of protest, the public outcry and general disruption surrounding the response to *Interaction* and other textbook series were too much. The superintendent and series supporters on the school board were in hiding or under constant police protection due to threats on their lives, boycotts and fear were reducing school attendance, and strikes of bus and other services plagued the county (Hillocks, 1978, p. 632). The board ultimately had little choice but to remove these books from the list of approved textbooks for English language arts instruction. Consequently, for Moffett and his team, this set of materials that they had spent years preparing, that they hoped might revolutionize English teaching in this country, and that represented a major financial risk for the publisher because of its unconventional approach and expensive budget, ended up having almost no impact at all on American education, except, from the perspective of an English educator, as a sad story of what might have been and as a foreshadowing of the conservative backlash that has been taking place all over the country ever since. I believe this experience effectively changed the nature of Moffett’s career in crucial ways.

## After the Storm

I have heard it said that the true test of a person is how he or she handles the bad times. Applying this notion to Moffett’s life is instructive, as he experienced a censorship conflict of the rawest, angriest, and most divisive kind, the outcome of which caused him personal pain, a financial setback, and professional loss of standing; it also made him deeply worried about the future of education in this country. And yet, rather than this disastrous experience leaving him embittered and angry, the episode in many ways brought out the best in James Moffett: his generosity, his tolerance of dis-

senting views, his self-reflectiveness, and the will to understand, learn, and grow that characterizes his entire body of work. However, he did eventually move outside the mainstream of literacy education in the United States to advocate pedagogies that many considered and still consider unconventional.

But Moffett's immediate response was to research and write *Storm in the Mountains*. In the book, Moffett attempts to understand for himself, and explain to others, just what happened in Kanawha County and why. The book is kind of a giant "I Search" paper representing the type of personally motivated investigative writing that Moffett always advocated. He researched the book not just by reading all the available literature, but also by going back to the area and talking with participants on all sides of the dispute, including the people who urged the banning of the series, all of them he could find. To me, this point is particularly impressive: Moffett returned to Kanawha County and sat down with a tape recorder in the living rooms of people like Reverend Ezra Graley and John Birch Society member Elmer Fike. These people had advocated banning or even burning his books, had defended and possibly even participated in violent protests against his work, had closed down a school system out of fear and anger that their children might have to read the series he called "a work of love" (Moffett, 1988, p. 4). And as I have mentioned, there was actual violence in the protest. Two people were shot, wildcat strikes were initiated, even shutting down the city buses of Charleston for a time. Thousands of students boycotted school or stayed home out of fear, schools and buses were firebombed at night and shot at by snipers during the day. Several people went to prison for conspiracy to commit murder, including one of the young ministers leading the protest, Avis Hill, who, after release from prison, quietly relocated to a different town without a forwarding address, before Moffett could interview him. Most dramatically, the district superintendent and several school board members were physically assaulted and injured during a live, televised school board meeting that turned into a riot. This violent attack was even celebrated in a folk ballad written and recorded by one of the main figures in the controversy, who happens to be one of the people Moffett later interviewed for *Storm in the Mountains*. The school superintendent and several district personnel associated with the book series eventually had to go into hiding and then finally to leave town for a period, so incendiary was the atmosphere surrounding this conflict (pp. 17–25).

Clearly, this was not just a case of dueling lawyers, deal-making politicians, or grandstanding demagogues; it was a truly frightening situation, both in the violence of its immediate events and in the educational consequences of its outcome. In creating *Storm in the Mountains*, Moffett revealed an admi-

rable desire to figure out what was going on in the minds of his opponents, to understand and find common ground with the protestors, not just to vilify them. He tried hard not to demonize, ridicule, or patronize them, though I do think his bitterness comes through at times in the book. Still, Moffett showed courage in going back to the scene of this conflict, and the resulting book helped him come to grips with what had happened at the same time that he put together one of the most perceptive analyses to date of contemporary censorship issues. In the best Moffett tradition, the book traverses a wide range of the universe of discourse, comprising story, conversation, theory, literature review, even folk ballad. He also invented a concept, which he termed *agnosis*, to describe an unwillingness to comprehend or to consider ideas that challenge one's own views (Moffett, 1988, p. 184).

Moffett's career underwent a major shift in the early 1980s, a move away from the mainstream in the teaching of English. Whereas his early work is primarily social and cognitive in nature, focusing on audience awareness and intellectual development, though always concerned with students' growth as human beings, his later work centers more around an increasing fascination with mysticism, yoga, meditation, and spirituality. Many teachers and scholars are interested in spirituality in one form or another. What sets Moffett's work apart from that of most other composition and English education people with an interest in spirituality is that he came to advocate regular and systematic *classroom* use of meditative techniques. Others, such as the authors of a set of articles titled "Spiritual Sites of Composing" in *College Composition and Communication* in 1994, are careful to stay away from saying anything that could be construed as advocating religion, spirituality, or indoctrination in the classroom. But not Moffett. He also began to write at this point about his traumatic early life, his alcoholic father and the damage he did to the family, and how Moffett's own writing and teaching were in large part attempts to deal with and overcome these early traumas (1994b).

As the field of English teaching, particularly in composition, became more and more focused on social, cultural, and political aspects of literacy in the 1990s, Moffett talked increasingly about using writing to heal personal pain and to grow spiritually. There is a definite utopian strain evident in this later work, as in his essay "Coming Out Right," where he says "Any successful writing program has to allow, and allow for, therapy" (1994b, p. 28), or in his book *The Universal Schoolhouse* (1994a), where he talks approvingly about how schools in the future will come to focus more and more on these notions of inner growth and spiritual development. There is also a quixotic element in Moffett's predicting and championing such idyllic educational futures, when these futures contrasted so sharply with the narrow-minded,

grammar-obsessed, conventional, bureaucratized, intellectually timid, politically conservative reality of schooling that Moffett saw was becoming increasingly powerful in our society. On some level, he must have known these utopian ideas were doomed to failure, but he believed in them and so he advocated them anyway. I would place James Moffett in the tradition of educational reformers whose best ideas are not adopted on a large scale because they are simply too different, too visionary to be accepted by the mainstream. Such reformers sometimes respond not, as might be expected, by shifting to more pragmatic, less objectionable views, but by advocating ideas that are even *more* radical and have even less chance of succeeding than the original notions. Catholic priest and educator Ivan Illich (1971), who came to advocate the total de-schooling of society, is an example of one such person.

The educator John Holt, author of *How Children Learn* (1967) and *How Children Fail* (1964), is another. Like Moffett, Holt was, in his prime, a highly respected author, Harvard professor, powerful commission member, and federal grant holder. Holt was even the subject of major articles in magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. However, his plan for restructuring schools around student-centered methods did not catch on, as the idealism of the late 1960s turned to disillusionment and Nixon-era conservatism. His methods largely abandoned, Holt came to see little of value in America's massive system of public education. And so, in his later years, he began to advocate closing all schools and doing away with the entire institution of public schooling (Holt, 1976). In the place of formal education, he suggested that certain adults be designated as official "knowers" and given a badge to wear as they went about their daily business. If a school-aged person, or anyone else, was walking down the street and happened to have a question or wanted to learn about a subject of interest, they could simply look for one of these knowers and talk to that person, so that teaching and learning would be folded into the contours of everyday life rather than separated off into what Holt viewed as a monolithic, unresponsive, self-protecting bureaucratic system. Many wondered at the time if Holt had lost his bearings. James Moffett's ideas about spirituality in education were not as utopian as those of John Holt, but they did go against the grain in English teaching and in American education as a whole. However, as an independent educator—"self-unemployed," as he described it (1994b, p. 24)—Moffett could write what he chose to. And in the final analysis, one can say about James Moffett that he had the integrity to follow his own vision.

In these days of increasing conservative power in education and other spheres of American life, with the accompanying emphasis on fixed stan-

dards, proficiency testing at every turn, and packaged curricula, it is tempting to look back wistfully at Moffett's creative, rigorous, and intellectually challenging classroom approaches and wonder what might have been. But it is also worth considering how his ideas have fared in English education up to the present day. Clearly, Moffett would be critical of assessment-driven national programs, such as Race to the Top and Common Core, for their homogenizing effects on textbooks, curriculum, and student evaluation. As far back as 1970, he inveighed against the "education industrial complex" (p. 530) and complained that "standardized testing is no more easily dropped than cigarette manufacturing, however injurious to your health. It is packaged into materials and nested down in the souls of administrators. It evaluates curriculum and therefore dictates curriculum. Teachers teach toward the tests, and it's amazing how fast their good intentions dissolve about teaching anything else" (p. 533). Yet in the years since he wrote these words, the forces of standardization have gotten stronger, the tests more frequent, the consequences greater, with even less scope now for teachers and textbook writers to work against the grain.

Moffett's experience in West Virginia also raises important concerns about the ongoing issue of local control in the teaching of English. He was blindsided by the unexpected opposition of conservatives and religious activists, but today, teachers, textbook authors, and curriculum developers at least know they might well encounter such opposition and can prepare for it. When faced with criticism of particular books, assignments, and curricula, they can marshal arguments to justify their choices and propose alternatives when necessary. English educator and former high school teacher Suzanne Kauer taught public school for a number of years in Utah, a very conservative state. She has experience with parents and other community members opposing her classroom choices and now studies censorship, parental concerns, and possible school responses while also preparing new generations of secondary teachers. In a 2008 *English Journal* article, she bemoans but ultimately accepts the reality that, in many instances, people in communities across the country "do not agree with what English teachers ask their children to read" and will take action to prevent their children from exposure to certain texts or classroom approaches (p. 56). Now, she states, "I ask my student teachers to spend more time thinking about and articulating the merits of the literature they teach so they can make better-informed decisions about what to teach and how to defend their choices" (p. 60).

There remain a number of literacy educators around the country working to broaden literacy curricula to include an affective dimension of the sort that Moffett advocated, to the extent possible within the constraints of district

and state guidelines. These include, to give just a few examples, Elizabeth Dutro, who helps inner-city teachers work with students on using writing to understand and cope with personal trauma (2011); Anne Whitney, who studies and works toward “transformation through writing and sharing” among participants in the National Writing Project (2008); and Robert Yagelski, who helps secondary teachers devise activities that allow students “to experience writing as a way of making sense of themselves and the world around them” (2012, p. 189). And recently, a group of literacy educators established the “James Moffett Consortium,” under the aegis of Damian Koshnick, whose activities and discussions can be found (and joined) at [jamesmoffettstudies.ning.com](http://jamesmoffettstudies.ning.com). Their stated purpose is “to dialogue on the value of James Moffett’s theories and practices in English and education and our own uses of his ideas within K–16 classrooms.” In addition, as Sheridan Blau (2011) points out, one of the National Council of Teachers of English special interest groups is the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, which Moffett helped to found, and which is “committed to carrying on a vision of learning and of education that was articulated by Moffett in his writing and workshops for teachers” (p. 99). Throughout his career, James Moffett fought against the mindset he termed *agnosis*, the desire not to know, the inclination to reject ideas that seem threatening or strange. Perhaps the best way to honor his legacy is by striving to encourage a critical yet open consideration of ideas and views, in our students but also in ourselves.

### Author’s Note

Thanks to *English Education* editors and external reviewers and to Peter Smagorinsky for their helpful feedback on this article. Please direct correspondence to the author at [russel.durst@uc.edu](mailto:russel.durst@uc.edu).

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