

Jim Moffett • 1929-1996

An Appreciation

by

JAMES GRAY



In a 1980s article for The Quarterly James Moffett, who died last December, wrote about what school writing was like for students like him before the influence of James Moffett, educational visionary.

"Mostly my classmates and I were asked to write about what we had read to make sure we had done the reading and to see if we had got the point. Whenever I was asked to write about something outside of books the subject was so remote from me, such as national affairs, that I could know it mostly only second hand and hence could hardly do anything but paraphrase the information and arguments that I got from newspapers, radio and grown-up talk. But that's the point. My teachers really just wanted familiar adult-sounding prose. This they equated with mature writing. They wanted phrasing they recognized, views they had heard aired around them, because this meant their students were joining the adult world. Isn't that the whole point of school?"

James Moffett, the philosopher of education, was to answer "No." school has — or should have — another point. School should connect to the real lives of the students. Through books such as The Active Voice and The Universal Discourse as well as through his presentations to teachers all over the country, Moffett argued that the teaching of writing must be student centered, that meaningful writing can not originate with teacher decrees but must start where the child is, allowing choices and encouraging self-exploration.

In the two pieces that follow, two colleagues who knew James Moffett in different ways share their memories of the man and reveal the ways his life and work touched their own.

A few years ago when the Soviet Union was still intact, a group of teacher educators from the Soviet Block came to visit UC Berkeley, and I was invited to talk to them about the Writing Project. After I finished my remarks, the female head of Moscow's Polytechnic College of Education — an unsmiling and formidable woman who looked nothing like the Greta Garbo in *Ninotchka* — turned to me and asked "WHO IS YOUR THEORETICIAN?" and, without thinking, I blurted out — Jim Moffett?

The writing project has been influenced by so many teachers and academicians alike, and there were so many names I could have mentioned: Jo Miles, Jimmie Britton, for example. But the more I think of this story the more I like it. Jim Moffett was the right name to have mentioned.

Jim was the model of a teacher of other teachers. He was a classroom teacher with ideas so engaging that he made teachers and others like me impatient to be back in the classroom, and in presenting ideas he gave teachers the larger sense of why particular practices, assignments, activities, readings, are important. He always gave us the why along with the what.

Jim Moffett meant a great deal to the National Writing Project, not only because of the impact of his books: *Active Voice*, *The Student-Centered Language Arts texts*, *Points of View*, *Storm in the Mountains* — books that are on recommended reading lists all across the country; it's also his influence on the kinds of pieces teachers write when they come together as a community of writers in the Project's Summer Institutes. Jim's schema of writing assignments that asks writers to rework

their ideas in different ways, in different forms, and different points of view has been the model for teachers' writing throughout the NWP network. And Jim will be remembered by many directors through his personal and continuing contact with so many sites in all sections of the United States.

I know of no other in education who was able to respond to a question from the audience like Jim Moffett. At such moments he was like one of the great improvisational pianists of the past. No one could excite an audience in the give and take of a question and answer session like Jim could. A good question got his mental juices going, and such moments were wonderful to witness and to be a part of.

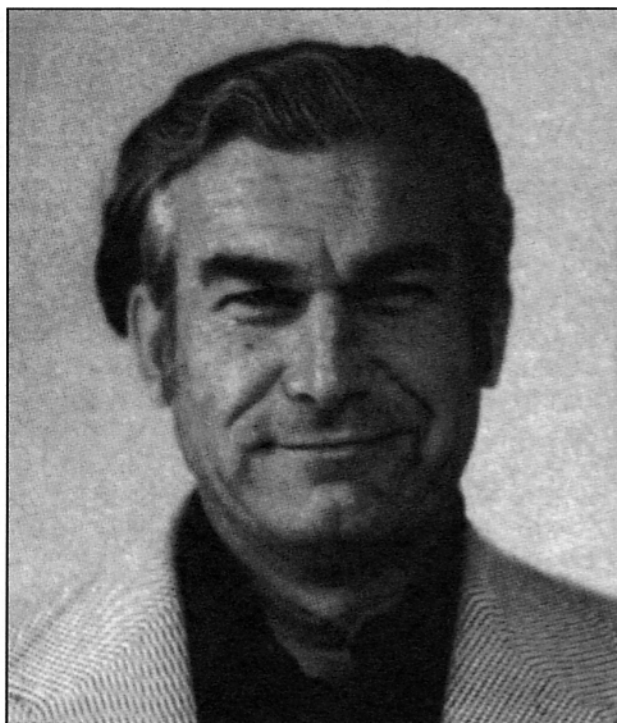
One of my long-standing disappointments is that no door to one of our many institutes or think tanks was ever opened to him. It would have been an ideal spot for him, a place where he could have been a permanent Fellow, free to think and write and to discuss ideas with others. There should have been such a place in our rich society for Jim Moffett simply because such a gifted man deserved to be supported.

But in one real way he and his wife, Jan, managed to create for themselves such a place in their own private retreat in the California foothills.

I've known Jim a long, long time, and I respected him greatly. I know of no one more stimulating, more interesting, in our profession, but at the same time I've never felt that I've known more than pieces of him. He was much too complicated to be able to say "Here! This is Jim Moffett!"

He constantly stretched us and surprised us. He was playful and experimental, theoretical and practical, brilliant and wise, honorable, uncompromising, and spiritual as well as political. He was our philosopher as well as our teacher, and frequently he was the conscience of our profession.

He was an original. There was nothing ordinary about him. Even at the end of a long day while the rest of us crawl into bed and stretch out with the covers tight around us, Jim Moffett would move to the wall next to his bed and stand on his head!



Jim Moffett was a teacher who, through the quality and range of his work, has become and will continue to be a national resource for American education.

There's no one in our profession I honor more. I stand in awe of him.

James Gray, founder of the National Writing Project, is currently the chair of its board of directors.