

**‘A chart for further exploration and a kind of rallying call’: James Moffett and English Curriculum History in Victoria**

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## **Abstract**

Both James Britton and James Moffett were keynote speakers at the Sydney IFTE conference in 1980 – a fact reflective of the wide recognition and acceptance of their work and influence throughout Australia by that time. In Victoria, Moffett's writings became known initially through teacher education, in particular at the University of Melbourne and the State College of Victoria, Rusden, then through the visits and writing of figures from the London Institute and others, and through the State and national English teaching association, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English. In the 1970s, Moffett's influence in Victoria came rather through the mix of his vision and writing, both theoretical and practical, in conjunction with others in Australia and elsewhere. This paper takes two separate but related sites or moments in English education in the 1970s in the Australian city of Melbourne, Victoria, as instances of the permeating influence of Moffett's work – in conjunction with leading figures from the London School associated with the 'New' English' – on education discourses and practice in that State's English curriculum history. It concludes with a consideration of the ways in which Moffett's work might still act as a 'rallying call' today.

Keywords: curriculum history; subject English; teacher education; writing; literacy; James Moffett

‘[W]hat I am presenting is not a definitive, thoroughly tried-and-proven course of learning; it is rather, a chart for further exploration and a kind of rallying call.’  
(Moffett 1968 p.1)

Moffett’s conclusion to the Introduction of the first edition of *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers* in many ways encapsulates the spirit and nature of his work as a whole, and the kind of permeating influence he had on the shape of English teaching in Australia, as in many places elsewhere. Looking back on Moffett’s influence on constructions of English in the 1970s and 80s, with its promise of an organic view of English and a sense of structure, coherence and wholes, creates a kind of nostalgia for its sense of what might have been. But to see Moffett’s work as comfortable or comforting is to misread it seriously.

In the opening chapter of the edited collection: *English Teachers at Work* (2003) – the book arising from the occasion of the 7<sup>th</sup> conference of the International Federation for the Teaching of English held in Melbourne in 2003) – Doecke, Homer and Nixon contrast this book with an earlier volume of the same name also linked to an IFTE conference, edited by Stephen Tchudi and published in 1986. By contrast with the organizing principles of that earlier book, they wrote, ‘professional dialogue between teachers can no longer be simply a matter of swapping ideas and strategies to improve teaching and learning in the classroom’ (Doecke, Homer and Dixon, 2003 p.2). Hence the subtitle of their volume: ‘narratives, counter narratives and argument’. In his long contribution to the ‘New English’, writing pedagogy and English teaching in the 70s and 80s, Moffett insistently provided both – not just in his model of language that envisaged a knowable and organised ‘universe of discourse’, in his view of language growth and hence of teaching and learning that saw ‘development’ as organic, holistic, and in his advocacy for teaching the parts through the whole – but also in the range of his publications across theory and practice. He provided both – the strategies and specifics for classroom teaching, but also the narratives, counter-narratives and arguments; as ‘a kind of rallying call’ (Moffett, 1968 p.1).

### **English Curriculum History**

A focus on English curriculum history offers particular perspectives not only on what (may have) happened, but also on the present; understandings of how it has come to be; and the presence and influence of visible and submerged discourses and expectations that shape present policies and constructions of the subject. It has implications for how we understand the politics and construction of the subject at any time, and for what is at stake in each iteration – ‘we carry our history with us, inescapably, in our own habitus, as well as that of the profession and the public more generally’ (Green and Beavis. 1996 p.4). As Reid (2003: 100) puts it, ‘Retrieving this intellectual history is not an antiquarian pursuit. [Rather], anyone wanting to be a well informed professional needs to understand certain continuities that link English curriculum discourses and practices with previous discourses and practices’.

Such a consciousness is particularly important at times like the present in Australia, where education has become a highly visible part of Federal policy and funding, with the so-called *Education Revolution* a core plank of Labor party policy, and part of the portfolio of the Deputy Prime Minister. Education is seen as directly linked to

productivity, human capital and Australia's future prosperity – 'the Australian economy now needs an education revolution ... A revolution in the quantity of our investment in human capital; A revolution in the quality of the outcomes that the education system delivers.' (Australian Labor Party 2007a p.3)

The most obvious and immediate impact of these initiatives is in the area of curriculum, where, after several false starts, the country appears to be finally undergoing the development of a national curriculum, with a shift from State-based versions and ownership to one federally mandated and centralized. English, along with Maths, Science and History, was identified as one of the four subjects central to Australian curriculum (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008), in relation to utility, skills and content knowledge, and situated with them at the core of the curriculum, with funding and resources to accompany their development. As is always the case, this move, driven by political as well as educational and curriculum imperatives, has been accompanied from the outset by extensive media commentary, and an appeal to populist and generally conservative myths and memories of the past, where attention to the basics, common sense and universal literacy are seen to have been the norm.

A further layer of complexity, and one which creates different and greater challenges in many ways, is introduced through the bringing together of the similar but different histories and iterations of English curriculum across Australia's six States and two Territories. There are significant differences here, as well as areas in common (Green and Beavis, 1996), with predictable consequences for how a National Curriculum might be both formed and received. A revisiting of specific States' curriculum histories provides the chance to reprise foundational principles that have been forgotten, domesticated or usurped, have gone underground, or been overlaid with pedagogical practices and orthodoxies, or less than hospitable assessment regimes. It provides the chance to reconsider old debates, and what was deemed valuable in earlier times, in the light of more recent understandings and realities. It provides a bulwark against the unproblematic or facile reintroduction of oversimplified versions of theory and curriculum, and the chance to trace common threads and discourses across the range of State-based curricula where points of difference rather than similarity tend to be defining features, especially when issues of State identity appear to be under threat.

### **Moffett in Australia in the 1970s**

In many States in Australia, the influence of Moffett on English curriculum in the 1970s was considerable, as part of the movement more generally associated with Britton, Martin, Dixon, Barnes, Rosen and others, known as 'growth model' curriculum (Homer 1973, Sooby 1980, Green 1995, 2008, Reid 2003). However, historical accounts of this period (eg Christie et al. 1991) rarely identify him as a singular figure. The exception is the State of New South Wales, where the curriculum developed by the syllabus committee led by Graham Little (claimed by Sawyer [2008] and Nay-Brock [1984, 1985] with having created the world's first 'growth model' curriculum in 1971), is documented as having been explicitly influenced by Little's reading of Moffett's *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* in 1969 (Sawyer 2008). According to Nay-Brock (1985), the launch of this curriculum, together with one organised around similar principles in South Australia and issued around the same time, 'pioneered a dramatic transformation of the junior secondary English curriculum in Australia' (p.2), although the degree to which it was enacted in practice

seems to have been somewhat qualified (Watson 1979, Nay-Brock 1985). In contrast to these claims, Homer (1973) argues that Victoria was in fact the first Australian State to introduce a 'growth'-based English curriculum, doing so in 1966, through the Suggested Syllabus for Forms 1-3 English, developed and released by the Victorian Education Department's Technical Schools Branch Advisory Committee on English – 'the first practical manifestation to be seen in Australia of what Dixon calls the 'growth' model for English' (Homer 1973 p.167).

Whatever the rights of it, Growth-model English, associated with key figures from the Dartmouth conference, became increasingly prominent in Australian guidelines for secondary English curriculum during the early 1970s. But while Britton and Dixon in particular became visible and well-known names, Moffett's influence on English teaching and curriculum in Australia during this period was less directly observable. Rather, it was evidenced more subtly in conjunction with a number of related influences and milieu around the teaching of language, particularly writing, and developed in the context of a wider suite of educational reformers and reforms. In the field of English teaching, and particularly the development of writing, Moffett was linked in particular with central figures from the Dartmouth conference, most notably Dixon and Britton, and with other key figures associated with NATE, the National Association for the Teaching of English in the UK, and the London Institute of Education. A second and broader layer of Moffett's influence came through his view of learners and learning, the structure of knowledge, the teacher, the relation between curriculum and assessment, and the organization of classrooms and the school. In this, he was part of a larger cohort of important thinkers of the time, many also concerned with English curriculum, language development and the language modes – at that time, reading, speaking and writing – but consistent too with other curriculum theorists, psychologists and philosophers concerned more generally with teaching, education, and the development of the child.

### **Teacher Education in Victoria in the 1970s**

In Victoria, two early and important locations where the kinds of principles and approaches to language learning and teaching linked with Moffett and others were disseminated, and further developed, were in an experimental postgraduate teacher education program at the University of Melbourne ('Course B'), and in the pre-service teacher education courses in English offered by Monash Teachers College, later Victoria College Rusden. Pivotal figures at each institution were Bernard Newsome (University of Melbourne) and Margaret Gill (Monash Teachers College/Victoria College Rusden). Separately and together, Newsome and Gill contributed materially to the shape of English teaching in Victoria in the 1970s, as Moffett's theorization of language, his perspectives on teaching writing, and his practical exemplars of teaching practice became an important component of their own teaching, writing and research. This influence extended beyond their own students, as the latter moved into schools to become teachers in their own right, to include also the wider English teaching community, through the involvement of both Gill and Newsome and their teacher graduates in subject associations at state, national and international levels, Education Department committee work and the development of English curriculum documents at the senior secondary level.

Teacher education had become a pressing priority for the Education Department of Victoria by the 1960s, following post-war expansion and increased demand for secondary education, with 'the secondary division in a continuous state of crisis in

respect to the provision of school accommodation and trained and qualified teachers' (Bessant 1979 p.315). Further, as schools expanded, the nature of the population attending secondary schools changed, but within existing structures and organization of curriculum in which education was geared towards the provision of technical education to those 'manually skilled' at Technical Schools, or to preparation for university entrance at High Schools for the elite – those small numbers intending to undertake tertiary study, with curriculum and assessment determined by Melbourne University. The Education Department had little authority or active role in determining secondary curriculum, and teachers were regarded as curriculum implementers rather than curriculum designers. Despite significant changes in enrolment numbers and the composition of school populations by the mid sixties, as Bessant (1979) explains:

The external public examinations were still the decisive influence on curriculum at all levels for both state and private schools.

This also meant that while the secondary school curriculum was largely determined by bodies outside the Education Department and private schools, there was no machinery within the Department or the schools for the discussion of curriculum (p.315)

Changes to junior secondary curriculum, where they did occur, were sometimes instigated by individual Education Department inspectors, but by and large teachers had little role to play in determining curriculum (Bessant 1979).

Under the leadership of Ron Reed, Chief Inspector of Secondary Schools/Director of Secondary Education from 1963-1968, a number of reforms took place. Reed believed strongly that 'the pressure of external examinations on the school must be relieved; [and] there must be an earnest search for the true purpose of secondary education "as a phase of education in its own right and not merely a preparation for tertiary education"' (Reed 1975, cited in Bessant 1979 p.316). Reforms introduced under Reed's leadership included the establishment of the Curriculum Advisory Board in 1966, and the abolition of the external examinations at Year 10 (Intermediate). The effect of these changes was a shift to greater autonomy for schools, with responsibility for policy making and curriculum planning devolved to teachers at the local level. If schools were to have greater responsibility for curriculum for their own pupils, teachers needed to be better prepared to become curriculum developers, and schools and teachers needed more resources and practical support. However, neither teachers nor schools were well equipped to manage this responsibility. Teacher Unions, in particular the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association (VSTA), added their voice to demands for greater support for teachers, (Dow 1979) and becoming increasingly concerned with issues of curriculum, equity and schooling. By the late 1960s, in addition to pressures to produce sufficient trained teachers to staff the increasing numbers of students now in schools, teacher education was faced with the need to prepare teachers able to generate and resource curriculum specific to their own localities and schools. This presented deep-rooted challenges to assumptions previously underpinning teacher education and its relationship with schools. As Dow describes it:

By the late 1960s there was widespread criticism from schools that teacher-training institutions were failing to educate students to meet the new, exacting

demands made of teachers... Three things were now obvious. Teacher training must find a way of relating theory and practice for its students; schools must be able to turn to teacher training institutions for practical as well as academic help; and teacher-training bodies had to inform themselves of the new realities in schools (Dow 1979 p.3-4).

## **Course B**

Course B was an innovative teacher education course established by Gwen Dow and colleagues at the University of Melbourne in 1973. Course B was funded out of Federal money set aside to support new developments in older tertiary institutions – the New Developments Grants – and by additional Faculty funding from the University. Assistant Director of Course B from 1973-75, and a key figure in its planning and organization from late 1972, was Bernard Newsome, recently returned from the London Institute of Education after working for eight years with James Britton and Nancy Martin on the *Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* research. Together with Rodney Fawns, a science education expert and subsequent Director of the Course from 1978, Dow and Newsome launched the Course with an initial focus on the Methods they could offer between them: History, Social Science, English and Science, supplemented by support from within the Faculty and from the Education Department, as well as the schools with which Course B worked (Dow 1979).

From its earliest days, the Course set out to integrate theory and practice at every level, in the links between university work and classroom practice, in relations between University and supervising teachers in the schools –(many of whom also lectured in the course) and in the selection of key theorists who framed the thinking of the Course. The university-based component consisted of Method (two subjects taken by each student) and Curriculum Studies – each taking perhaps up to half a day. Practicum took up two more days, with an additional three-week block round, with a constant flow of discussion back and forth between school experience and university work, back at university. The course was Methods-driven, with Curriculum Studies providing a forum for cross-disciplinary and extra-disciplinary study, across the whole cohort, into broader educational theory and practice.

Consistent with the need to prepare teachers who would be capable and confident generators of curriculum in their own right, and active contributors to the growing ownership of course content and schools' responsibility for the students in their care, the Course sought out theoretical frameworks that provided holistic and integrated insights across curriculum areas, that would include but go beyond the provision of structures and approaches specific to individual learning areas. As the submission to the 1979 Auchmuty Report into Teacher Education prepared by Newsome and five Course B graduates described it:

Every teacher training course must have a theory of curriculum which embraces both a selection procedure for content and an intention to explore that content in particular ways. We believe that the content should be chosen on the grounds that its mastery does, or will, make a significant difference to teacher behaviour for the good of a pupil's learning, and that the practice of teaching in the course should exemplify the theories of learning that are distilled in the theory.... The centre of a pre-service course must therefore be the development of a theory which generates questions and decisions about what to teach and how to teach,

and to do so in such a way that students and staff find themselves on a joint undertaking (Newsome et al. 1980 in Goodrich 1992 p.69).

Moffett's view of discourse, meaning and education met the core criteria for the selection of key theorists for the course – 'theoretical perspectives which had a completeness to them (Newsome 2010).' His ladder of abstraction, and his insistence on the interconnectedness of language and learning, language and thought, complemented the insights of Vygotsky, another Curriculum Studies central figure, and provided a framework for thinking about pedagogy and the student that extended well beyond English Method to have relevance to learning across the range of subject areas.

### **Monash Teachers' College/Victoria College Rusden**

Monash Teachers' College (later Rusden State College, Victoria, from 1975, and Victoria College Rusden from 1981) was one of a number of Colleges of Advanced Education. Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) grew out of the Teachers' College system. They were funded by State rather than Federal authorities, and hence more closely aligned with local education departments and schools. They offered teacher education from 1967 to the early 1990s, and formed a parallel system (albeit of lesser status) to the universities.

Margaret Gill, who was later to become Editor of *English in Australia* (1981-1983), President of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (1984-1989) and President of the International Federation for the Teaching of English (1987-1989), was appointed to Monash Teachers' College in 1973. Gill had already come across Moffett in her work as an English teacher at a Victorian Catholic secondary school. With her students, she had made extensive use of his anthology *Points of View*, and later, *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers*. With *Points of View*:

I only had the one copy so I used it for "read aloud" sessions with the Year 11s. We'd discuss or speculate about author and characters (changing points of view) and plot (what's been left out? what might have been different? etc.)... From the annotations in my edition I can see that we read 'But the One on the Right', 'The Lady's Maid', 'Flowers for Algernon', 'My Side of the Matter', 'A and P', 'First Confession' 'The Use of Force', i.e. stories where monologue or dialogue predominated (Gill, email correspondance, 2010).

*A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum*, similarly,

seemed full of hugely generative curriculum ideas ... From old teaching notes it looks as if I used Moffett's "discourse objectives" and "levels of abstraction" to structure the writing the kids did, so there are tapes of "eye witness accounts", football commentaries, at-the-scene TV reporters etc., class magazines and newspapers reporting gruesome events in Box Hill, letters to editors, how-to instructions, stories, poems, advertisements etc. I used the word play chapters a lot (Gill 2010 np).

With colleagues Shirley Collins, Gillian Barnsley and others, Gill taught English Method and related courses at Rusden and its antecedent institutions from 1973-1989 in the Curriculum and Teaching Department. On her appointment to Monash Teachers College, she prescribed *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum*

*Grades K-13* as a set text, through subsequent editions, replacing it with *Active Voice* around 1983 when it finally became too expensive. As with Course B, work coming out of the London Institute of Education and NATE from Britton, Dixon, Martin, Barnes, Rosen and the like, sat alongside Moffett's writings as guiding principles for the course. Teaching materials developed for student teachers on the teaching of writing included a series of handouts and diagrams built around Moffett's work and the London Writing Research undertaken by Britton et al. at the London Institute of Education. The central paper presented graphics focusing on the I-You and I-It dimensions characterizing the writer's task, and the hierarchy of discourse forms outlined in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. For the teaching of argument, Moffett's ladder of abstraction provided the organizing framework (record, report, generalize, theorise). His centrality to the course was reflected in the English method assignments Gill designed – 'one a study of students' talking and one a study of children's writing which required the application of Moffett both in the curriculum design element and the analysis of student writing element' (Gill 2010).

In 1975 Gill was awarded a Commonwealth Relations Trust Senior Fellowship, which enabled her to undertake an MPhil with Douglas Barnes on proposed changes to A Level Literature in the UK, aimed at transforming the subject into a more broadly based course in English. On returning to Australia at the end of 1976, she was invited onto the English Curriculum Committee of the newly formed Victorian Institute of Secondary Education and developed the Writing Option which constituted a third of the new compulsory Year 12 English course. As the most popular of the three options on offer (alongside Oral and ESL), the Option instituted from the top down the teaching of writing organised around principles and structures derived from the work of Moffett and the London School, supporting and strengthening this approach to writing, its vision of the student and of learning, and the centrality of meaning, audience and intention, elsewhere throughout the school.

### **Moffett Post 70s**

However, while Moffett continued to occupy a central place in English method at Rusden, and books like *Active Voice* made him a key contributor to the renaissance in teaching writing that took place in Victorian schools in the 1980s (influenced also, from about this time, by writers such Murray and Graves), by the 1990s, the literacy wars between Hallidayan linguistics and 'Growth Model' English, with which Moffett was seen to be aligned, eclipsed his influence in many areas. A survey carried out amongst teacher education institutions in 1991 as part of a major study on the pre-service preparation of literacy teachers (Christie et al. 1992) did not include his name amongst texts recommended for study, despite the fact that academics at several institutions reported having done so. Pieces such as 'Misbehavioural Objectives' in *Coming on Center* provided a welcome base for countering moves towards narrowly conceived and overly centralized standards and assessment, while 'Writing, Inner Speech and Meditation' provided beyond-the-pale and often unspoken inspiration and support for many. With respect to both the teaching of argument and the organization of writing curriculum, Moffett's schemas continued to be built into teacher education and senior secondary curriculum in many areas. By the 1990s however, as a figure of influence, Moffett was becoming increasingly less visible, as other theoretical frames and interest areas began to rise.

### **A kind of rallying call**

If the introduction of national curriculum can be an occasion to reprise fundamental principles, to ask what structures, and what knowledge, can best serve 21st century students, what might Moffett have to offer in present times?

The discourse goals Moffett and Wagner identified in *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading K-13* could well provide the kinds of commonality and foundational principles for English education across the States, with their diverse histories, that a National Curriculum should make possible, particularly if ‘language’ is taken to include multimodal and digital forms, as well as oral and print based literacies:

1. Make language choices wisely – how to put things and how to take things (composition and comprehension)
2. Expand to the maximum the repertory of language resources one can employ and respond to – from vocabulary and punctuation, phrasing and sentence structure to style and dialect, points of view and compositional form.
3. Extend to the maximum the fluency, facility, pleasure and depth with which one can speak, listen, read and write (the target activities of language learning).
4. Expand to the maximum the range, depth and refinement of the inborn thinking operations – classifying, generalizing, inferring and problem-solving. (Moffett and Wagner 1976 p.24)

What else? There are other principles too, that characterise his vision of English Education and language development that have much to offer in the present day. A central feature is his confidence in the possibility for structure and growth; a way of organizing curriculum that provides for development but allows space for teachers and students to linger and explore, and that uses students’ own reading, talk and writing, together with literary and other texts, as a basis for increased competence and understanding, for knowledge about language, and for meaningful literacy practice.

He presents a convincing argument for the integration of literacy, language and literature – the three strands that the Australian curriculum prescribes – whether the starting point is literature (as *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* and *Points of View* suggest, and much of classroom work in *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13* outline shows as possible) or whether it is writing (as in *Active Voice*, where reflection on the processes and product of writing workshops provide occasion to attend to elements of language and knowledge about language). For national curriculum in Australia, as for English curriculum elsewhere, experientially based knowledge of language and literature are what makes up literacy, with knowledge encompassing both ‘knowing what’ and ‘knowing how’.

For Moffet, language and thought are always intimately linked, turning on the pivot of abstraction, and ‘a model of mental growth’:

Because teachers of composition and comprehension necessarily deal with the putting of thought into speech and the interpreting of speech into thought, they need a model of mental growth ... The model of growth educators choose

makes a critical difference in how everyone involved thinks about learning (Moffett and Wagner 1976 p3).

In offering the model of the embryo, as a way to think about growth, Moffett argues for the centrality of function and intention at all stages of language development, and supports propositions put by Bruner and others that it is possible to teach anything at any age provided what is taught meets the learners' levels of interest and understanding.

Moffett views the learner as explorer, witnessing inner and outer worlds as sources for writing and understanding, a view of multiple audiences and purposes for writing, with one important audience the writer's self – hence one purpose of writing becomes insight into self, in addition to increased understanding of the issue or topic at hand, and increased mastery of, and knowledge about, the functions of language and genre. Writing may include, but exceeds, the demonstration of knowledge acquired, subject matter mastered, and the meeting of benchmarks. Writing is far more than an instrument of assessment, but is linked rather, to a growing refinement of thought, the apprehension of nuance, and ever increasing balance and precision of conceptualization.

Fundamental to Moffett's writing throughout his career, but particularly by the time of *Coming on Center* (1981), is a view of the relation between curriculum and assessment that refuses to be constrained to outcomes-driven pedagogy. In the same vein, he takes for granted the existence of great collegiality amongst teachers, viewing teachers as learner, and with a strong faith in their depth of knowledge of both their subject and their students, and their ability to develop curriculum best suited to their students' needs.

So far, so good. But more problematically, as counter-narratives to the tenor of the present time, he presents also an individualistic view of learning and the learner, and a view of the 'universe of discourse' as coherent and knowable. The first presents a set of private as well as public agendas for English curriculum and pedagogy, with an introspective and individualistic view of the learner as subject, and of the purposes of curriculum. The second, a final, tantalizing possibility of the 'universe of discourse' as finite and knowable. For Moffett, such a possibility can at least be entertained, built as his system is on structuralist principles, and with literacy organised around the word. In the digital age, with visual and design-based models, multiliteracies and new literacies research, and the constant stretching of communicative resources into ever more emergent technological and action-based forms, the possibility of a 'universe of discourse' within multiple modes may perhaps be a bridge too far. But even to ask such questions, to entertain the counter-narratives, reminds us of the value of his work as 'a kind of rallying call'.

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