

Moffett and rhetoric

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Starting points

Ostensibly *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* was written as a reaction to the 'arhetorical' practice, as Moffett saw it at the time, of sentence combining and embedding. Although sentence combining and embedding were themselves part of a 1960s reaction to the formal teaching of sentence grammar (and have continued as practices up to the present – see Abrahamson 1977; Combs 1976, 1977; Lawlor 1980; Ney 1980; Stewart 1979 for research on the efficacy of sentence combining; plus more recent systematic reviews by Andrews et al. (2004a and b)) Moffett bracketed them with de-contextualised exercises that had little to do with composition for specific purposes. So the very inception of Moffett's project was, by definition, rhetorical. He wanted to situate English within the tradition of the arts of discourse with their emphasis on function (why?), motivation (who?), the audience (for whom?), the substance of the communication (what?) and the techniques available to make that communication successful (how?).

The use of the term 'discourse' also made it clear that this book was more than a commentary or a prospectus on English as a school subject. In fact, the acknowledgement comes early on in the book that "some ultimate context or super-structure is exactly what English as a school subject has always lacked" (p3). For 'context or super-structure' we could substitute the term 'theory'. But Moffett, with characteristic diffidence and modesty, holds back from calling his project a theory: "you are advised not so much to believe these ideas as to utilize them" (p v). However, the book could have been subtitled 'notes towards a theory of English' because that is exactly the function it fulfils and has fulfilled since its publication in 1968. Despite the fact that Moffett states that he wanted to "recast into the psychological terms of human growth those familiar but opaque academic elements such as rhetoric, logic, grammar and literary technique..." (p vii), the project as a whole seems avowedly rhetorical in nature. 'Discourse' for Moffett means exchange, conversation, dialogue – in print and action as well as in speech – and the 'universe of discourse' is the range of communication in action in the real world as well as in the simulated (but also real-world) space of the English classroom.

Another point of reference for the Moffett project is the relationship between teaching the universe of discourse on the one hand, and literature teaching on the other. In the Foreword to the 1983 re-issue of the book, Moffett defends his apparent exclusion of literature from the original 1968 conception. He declares: "I unwittingly threw off some readers who did not recognize just how much in fact I was dealing with literature or how dear it was to me, so different did it appear to them in the greatly expanded context of the *total* universe of discourse...perhaps I should have indulged myself more." (p vii). Again, what Moffett was reacting to in the 1960s was *too* close an association of literature and rhetoric, characterized, for example, by Grierson's (1945) *Rhetoric and English Composition* which, although it drew the distinction between rhetoric and persuasion (thus distinguishing itself from the Aristotelian position of rhetoric as the 'art of persuasion' and re-

broadening rhetoric to include informational, descriptive and creative writing *and* speech) came across as a mini-treatise and argument for *literary stylistics*. In Harold Rosen's copy of Grierson, he has annotated in pencil the point where Grierson recites the what, who, to whom, where, why and how questions. Rosen seemingly distanced himself, as Moffett also seems to have done, from the over-literary sensibility, associated with prestige and an élitist take on culture.

Finally, although rhetoric had been revived in the USA through the work of Burke (1950, 1966), Booth (1961) and Corbett (1965), the audience for these works was largely in higher education. In Burke's case, the arguments were made for rhetoric as symbolic action; in Booth's, for an understanding of narrative as rhetoric in literary studies; and in Corbett's, as a primer in classical rhetoric for undergraduate students' composition.

In summary, then, as a starting position for what Moffett was trying to do in 1968, we can say that he was running against currents of the time that were emphasizing either literary or technical approaches to English teaching; and that his effort was to find new ground for the construction of the beginnings of a theory of *school* English, based on human intellectual, cognitive, emotional growth and on a broader, more contemporary, more generous sense of rhetoric than had been current.

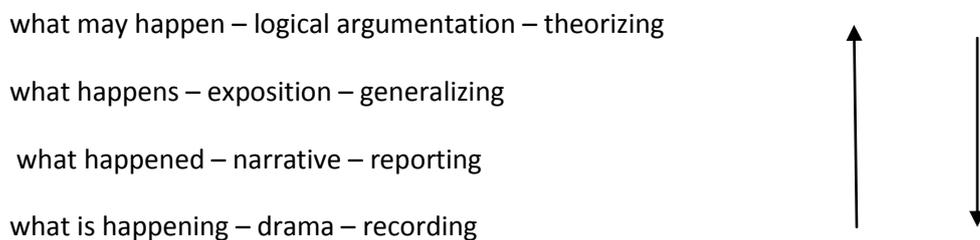
To what degree is this a *rhetorical* model?

It should be clear from the opening of this chapter that by 'rhetorical' I mean 'pertaining to rhetoric' in the positive sense, rather than suggesting that Moffett's position is the result of posturing, or that the 'model' is itself mere gestural politics within the English field. The source of Moffett's reflections on language development is deeply rhetorical in that it establishes "the ultimate context of somebody-talking-to-somebody-else-about-something" (p5) as a level at which it is necessary to make sense of discourses within the English classroom. While it may not have been until 1971 and Kinneavy's attempt, in *A Theory of Discourse*, to establish the approach as theoretical, it is Moffett's achievement to have provided the basis for such a theory.

If "somebody-talking-to-somebody-else-about-something" is the *sine qua non* of discourse, its definition is "any piece of verbalisation complete for its original purpose" (pp 10-11). The nub of Moffett's model then follows: "What creates different kinds of discourse are shifts in the relations among persons – increasing rhetorical distance between speaker and listener, and increasing abstractive altitude between the raw matter of some subject and the speaker's symbolization of it" (p 11). At the heart of the rhetorical model, then, is dialogue (the word derives from the Greek meaning *through* the spoken word, rather than two people speaking). In most cases, the dialogue does involve two or more people and this is the way Moffett interprets it. In fact, for Moffett, the existence of two or more people in dialogue is the starting point for discourse: the formulaic version is more accurately "somebody-talking-*with*-somebody-else-about-something". It is this move to the dialogic (in the contemporary sense of that term) that is at the core of Moffett's conception and use of rhetoric. This is not the rhetoric of a single orator expounding to a passive audience; it is the rhetoric of exchange.

Moffett’s conception, then, has more in common with Vygotskian notions of social constructionism in the making of meaning and the development of thought than with Piaget’s notion of an autonomous biological entity being gradually socialized. And yet it is the Piagetian idea of increasing *abstraction* from the particular that provides the structuring of Moffett’s proto-theory, particularly as Moffett believes “that development of symbolic expression depends on nothing less than general mental growth” (p 18). This is not the chapter in which to debate further the cognitive psychology allegiances of Moffett’s thinking (he seems to tend toward Piaget, as suggested also by the diagram on p68 that has the ‘biological’ as the “largest or most universal context” for determining the individual’s language), but it is worth noting that the peculiar concoction of his model is one between dialogism on the one hand, and abstraction on the other. It is as if elements of Vygotsky and Piaget are combined, from different perspectives. If we associate rhetoric more closely with Vygotsky and public discourses, Moffett makes the connection between *two* planes: between the *I-you* dimension of ‘talking with someone...’ and the *I-it* dimension of ‘...about something’. The notion of abstraction emerges from the *I-it* dimension. Abstraction is not the aspect of the conception that we will pursue in the rest of the present chapter. Rhetoric is more interested in the *I-you* perspective.

Nevertheless, the process of abstraction in Moffett leads us to a deeply rhetorical place: the classification of types of discourse based on the dual perspectives of the distance between people in the *I-you* relationship and the abstractive distance between particularities in space and time at the lowest level of verbal abstraction and generalities and theorization at the highest levels. To compress the argument and with a self-acknowledged “tautological transforming” (p 35), the formula comes out as:



This formula, once it is arranged as a curriculum sequence, sees drama as the ‘lowest’ level of abstraction and the starting point for all discourses and educational exchange. The natural move is ‘upward’ from there to narrative, and thence to exposition and logical argumentation. I have re-arranged the categories to depict the relative levels of abstraction. But the movement is also the other way: higher categories subsume lower ones and frame or bring meaning to them. Hence the arrows move in both directions. I stress that this arrangement, and the addition of the arrows, is my take on Moffett and not his own representation of the relationship and sequence of the different categories; but their mutual relationship needs to be represented by such a depiction.

The advantage of the two-way depiction, with the notion of ‘what is happening’ as the basis of the relationship, is not only that various elements of Moffett’s emerging theory are brought together, but also that the pattern as a whole, at the whole-text or whole-discourse level at which it operates, is revealed as rhetorical in the positive sense. We must assume a dimension in which the audience is present in every engagement, whether manifested in other people or in terms of an interior dialogue. What is evident, once we have assumed this dialogic dimension, is that “something of

every level is found at every other level” (p 48) and “likewise, the three main logics – chronology, analogy and tautology – operate at every level” (ibid.). What is more, the fictive dimension (yet another dimension that does not appear in the diagram above) is a matter of distance too – not of abstraction and generalization, but of degrees of distance from the perceived world (see Pavel 1986). We had to wait until the mid 1980s to have Pavel’s full articulation of the degrees of distance in fictional theory to understand the ‘mythic’ dimension that Moffett refers to (p 48), but does not fully explore.

Part of the limitation that results from a tendency to adopt Piaget rather than Vygotsky is an underestimate, in Moffett’s conception, of the powers and discourse faculties of younger children. The often-quoted statement that “whereas adults differentiate their thought into specialized kinds of discourse such as narrative, generalization and theory, *children must for a long time make narrative do for all*” (p 49, my italics) seems, in retrospect, contradictory and illogical in a model that posits the notion that “something of every level is found at every other level” (op. cit) – and yet we must remember that Moffett’s is a model of growth combined with a rhetorical model of the arts of discourse. He builds in a developmental sequence that is flexible, as in the refinements of neo-Piagetians; and, of course, there is the disclaimer that “this whole theory of discourse is essentially an hallucination” and “heaven forbid that it should be translated directly into syllabi and packages of serial textbooks” (p54) – which, ironically, it was, in *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13: A handbook for teachers* (1968/1991), a “companion volume” which was written alongside *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*.

So, to what degree does Moffett’s work constitute a rhetorical model? The answer appears to be that it is a hybrid – part-psychological, part-rhetorical, but ultimately a series of reflections that can act as the spur to an imaginative, coherent and engaging curriculum for young people and for teachers designing the best kinds of learning opportunities for them.

The chapter on Drama from *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*

What is distinctive and original about the core of Moffett’s book is that he posits drama and speech – what is happening – as “central to a language curriculum” (p60). This would not be news to the long tradition of rhetoric which had its (Western, at least) origins in pre-Athenian public speech and drama. But it *is* news to the hundred years of Scottish and American tradition for which Bain (1871) strikes the keynote at the time when the tradition in England was abandoning rhetoric for the study of literature (and thus leading to an unhealthy split between literature and language study). Bain’s categories of narrative, argument and description *in writing* have formed the template for successive curriculum formations in English, right up to the present. Yet again, the emphasis on speech and drama at the heart of the English project would not be news to those who were advocating speech in the 1960s in England and who helped to transform, gradually, primary and secondary classrooms into places where talk was valued as a means to learning.

The case for drama is well made by Moffett: in essence, it is primitive, accessible, the “first...verbal art to come into being” (p64). What is not fully acknowledged is that it is highly framed. Despite its connections with play, drama is one of the arts of discourse that is consciously framed; and framing is a key act in rhetoric. It might be said to be the agent of rhetoric in that without framing, there is

no meaning. Let us reveal this connection between framing, rhetoric and drama more slowly, and then come back to the place of drama in Moffett's universe of discourse. It is clear that framing operates in theatre: there is an edge between the performance by the actors and the space in which the audience sits or stands. That line or frame can be transgressed, but the transgression, for whatever function, is always consciously made. There is also framing in time in that a play lasts for a particular amount of time, during which there is a suspension of disbelief (unless you are watching Brecht or Brechtian-style theatre) or, more positively, a willingness on the part of the audience to engage with the fiction. So formal theatre is highly framed in space and time, and also institutionally in that it involves going to a theatre; it is a social occasion. But even informal theatre, carried out on a street or in a small show by children for parents and friends (and thus close to play) is framed by space and time. There may not be a curtain or even a line on the ground, but the performance is separate from the current of everyday life and demands a different kind of attention.

The point about this diversion into drama and rhetoric is that Moffett's conception is deeply rhetorical in the sense that dialogue and exchange are at the heart of the English project, but that the additional dimension or act of framing is underplayed by Moffett. It would fit well with his overall conception, but like much of the book, the ideas flow sequentially but not always systematically.

Another connection between the conception of speech and drama at the centre of English activity is Moffett's statement "I am asking the reader to associate dialogue with dialectic" (p82). Bypassing the nuances and complexities of the etymologies here, the connection between dialogue in everyday discourse and the oppositional, ideological dimensions of dialectic is an important one in terms of abstraction, and specifically with regard to argumentation (which, as a mode of operation in a rationalist universe, is closely allied to the rhetoric of persuasion). What Moffett is implying, I think, is that everyday exchanges, however seemingly insignificant, are indicative of larger dialectical moves: the to-ing and fro-ing of everyday exchange is like the puntal and contrapuntal rhythms of dialectic. Moffett does not expand on this connection, but it is fairly clear that everyday speech has all the hallmarks of drama and dialectic in more consciously framed worlds: the dramatic/dialectic level informs everyday speech, and provides the humanist framework within which discourse operates. From thence, the natural curriculum movement is from dialogue to vocal monologue to written monologue and then on to the other forms of written discourse. In English curricular terms, it makes sense; is exciting; and is difficult, for students, in making those transitions. In cognitive psychological terms, the sequence is Vygotskian. In rhetorical terms, the addition of speech and drama to the panoply of written forms that derive from Bain – and the demonstration of the connection of speech and drama to those written forms – is a brilliant move that re-connects 'English' to the rhetorical tradition, re-making rhetoric for the needs of the contemporary English classroom.

The section on rhetoric

Embedded (a key term for Moffett, even though he was reacting against sentence combining and embedding) in the chapter on drama and speech is a section on 'Rhetoric'. At first, Moffett seems to see rhetoric as "the ways in which a person attempts to act on another" (p115). It appears that he thinks that "the tremendously important art of manipulating other people" (ibid.) – let's call this,

less negatively, *persuasion* – “is the genesis of rhetoric” (ibid.). But as the argument progresses, it becomes clear that rhetoric is seen as a verbal and non-verbal means of exchange and making things happen in the world: “acting on others through words is merely one aspect of the larger rhetoric of behaviour” (ibid.). What is contemporary about this conception of rhetoric is that it acknowledges the multimodal. Speech and writing (the verbal modes) are seen as mixing with other behaviour or modes, and only later are they separated out to be taught as individual and seemingly distinct arts. So in drama, Moffett sees rhetoric in action: a rhetoric of persuasion. Such a conception of rhetoric is Aristotelian (‘the art of persuasion’) which tends to put emphasis on the function of rhetoric rather than on the forms. For me, persuasion is only one of the functions of rhetoric. If we adjust the notion of persuasion to include a wider range of communicative functions (entertainment, description, exchange etc), we could re-cast rhetoric as the ‘arts of discourse’ and thus marry Moffett’s conception of the centrality of speech and drama more happily to his conception of rhetoric...and indeed to the tenor of the book as a whole, with its emphasis on the ‘world of discourse’. One of the great links that Moffett makes, however, is to suggest that the seemingly distinct written forms in the English curriculum are all intimately related to the basic spoken and dramatic forms and motivations. The following passage crystallises the argument:

Although we enter school already with a rhetoric, it is of course naïve and drastically inadequate to later communication needs. The function of the school is to extend the rhetorical repertory and to bind messages so tightly to message senders that this relation will not be lost in transferring it to the page. What is too obvious to notice in conversation must be raised to a level of operational awareness that will permit this transfer. (p116)

Moffett also, by ‘binding messages to message senders’, re-emphasizes one of the main unspoken themes of his book: that there needed to be a re-balancing of the productive arts (speaking, writing, making) with the receptive ones (reading, listening). It is likely, in the literary-influenced English curriculum of the first part of the 20th century, that the productions of school children might always seem second best to those of published ‘writers’, and that the culture was one of deference rather than of co-production. We still suffer such a deferential curriculum and set of practices now: reading gets more research and policy attention than writing; English teachers are trained by their degrees as advanced readers but not as advanced writers; and even in the age of Web 2.0, the authority of the teacher is deemed greater than that of the learner. There is thus a politics of the English curriculum and its relative balances that is implied by Moffett’s book, but not fully made explicit. The nearest we come to it is in the wonderful paragraph at the end of the chapter on drama, in the section titled ‘The Drama of the Classroom’, which focuses on pedagogy:

Instead of creating constant tension between the social motives of the student and his own motive to teach the ‘subject’, the teacher would do better to acknowledge that his (sic) own intellectual pursuits are framed by dramatic relations between him and the world, and to recognize that this must be true for his students as well. Since discourse is ultimately social in origin and function, it seems a shame to fight those forces that could be put to such excellent use in teaching the subject. (p119)

For social and dramatic, we could use the term *rhetorical*, as long as we recognize that the rhetorical is intimately tied up with power and thus, more broadly, the political. This “broader discursive context” (p186), that Moffett argues is necessary to put the sentence in its place and for the

development of narrative in the English curriculum, is the underlying thesis on which the book is based. This thesis is the beginning of a “global rationale” for English, “the lack [of which] has obstructed the alignment of means and ends and obscured the unity of the field” (p211). In relation to the teaching of writing, Moffett advocates an environment in which writing is seen like speech, as a dialogic exchange within and beyond the classroom, largely between the teacher and his or her pupils, but also with wider communities and audiences. The alignment of writing with speech and drama gives it significance and function, even within the simulated spaces of the classroom. Although the answer to Moffett’s call on the teaching of writing came partly from the creation of the National Writing Project in the USA in the early 1970s, with its emphasis on building up the confidence and repertoire of teachers in writing, there is still a long way to go in persuading authorities, at least in England, that developing teachers as writers is key to improving the quality of students’ writing (see Andrews, 2008).

The relevance of Moffett to contemporary rhetoric

Moffett’s focus on discourse and rhetoric is one way of working toward a global rationale for English as school subject (and indeed, English as a university discipline – but that’s another story). The current interest in rhetoric, as discussed by Green (2006), for example, echoes much of what Moffett was proposing. As noted above, Moffett is characteristically modest about the scope of his argument; that modesty, with its eye very firmly on practice and possibilities in the classroom, is partly what makes the propositions attractive and use-able. And yet a global rationale *is* needed for the epistemological, social and pedagogical practices that constitute ‘English’, which continues to fissure as a subject. Such a rationale is needed because a) we are literally now experiencing global awareness under the heading ‘English’ which covers a wide range of practices and orientations, b) ‘English’ seems a misnomer for much of what goes on under its name, c) multilingualism is the norm worldwide and d) drama, media work, multimodal perspectives all sit under the umbrella term. As Green suggests (op.cit), neither ‘literacy’ nor ‘new literacies’ are the terms under which the range of practices can gather. Partly this is because these terms have been asked to do too much, and been stretched metaphorically to mean competences and capabilities, as in the terms ‘emotional literacy’, ‘computer literacy’ etc. Instead, he proposes rhetoric “appropriately reworked, as providing a new organising principle for English teaching” (p11). That re-working means, I think, a re-working of classical rhetoric for the present times. Such re-working would need to take into account that making persuasive speeches in public forums is only one small part of what rhetoric might be used for in the 21st century; and, furthermore, that the prescriptions, manuals and *progymnasmata* (exercises in which genres were modelled and then imitated) of Renaissance rhetoric are no longer appropriate.

In exploring the possibilities for rhetoric as a unifying principle or body of theory, Green discusses Hunter (1997) who proposes a separation of rhetoric, ethics and literature in the secondary classroom. This separation, it seems, confines rhetoric to something like a contemporary combination of classical and renaissance rhetoric and could (I am not suggesting this about Hunter’s work) lead to a reductive language curriculum.

The larger conception of rhetoric as the *arts of discourse* is one I would want to propose here, not least because it builds on Moffett, Hunter, Green, Kress (2005) and others who see rhetoric, in

various guises, playing a role in the redefinition of English as a school subject. To keep the focus on Moffett for the purposes of the present article, a further dimension of rhetoric that he does not develop sufficiently (and acknowledges as much) is the aesthetic dimension: the *arts* of discourse. This term also has the benefit (and, some might argue, the disadvantages) of an emphasis on the *technē* (technique as art, craft) of contemporary communication, as well as on the political nature of rhetoric. In addition, rhetoric can deal with communication in any language or combination of languages; in a number and combination of modes; and it can handle the difference between the fictive worlds and the real world or worlds; and it links itself to a long but varied tradition of public discourse.

But Moffett's position, as well as fundamentally arguing the case for speech and drama (in practice and as dialogic principles) at the centre of discourse in a renewed English curriculum, prepares the ground for such a wider conception of rhetoric. Rhetoric's concerns are essentially simple: it is interested in who is speaking to or with (writing for, composing for) whom; why; what are they communicating about; and when and how are they doing it? These simple questions have complex and wide-ranging answers. Moffett's conviction - that the interchange of speech or drama (an interesting coupling that is not fully exploited for its real world/fictive world potential) realizes a principle that applies to all communication - is deeply rhetorical. From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, when growth-based, literary and/or skills-based models of English or literacy no longer seem to convey the excitement or range of contemporary communication, Moffett's contribution as one of the first to challenge the orthodoxy of the written product at the heart of the English curriculum now looks prescient.

In partial conclusion, we could also say that Moffett's contribution to contemporary rhetoric needed further development: in relation to framing theory, dialogism, multimodality and the fiction/non-fiction divide. What the discussion in this article hardly touches on, but what is so inspiring about *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, is that it continues to be a tonic to any English teacher who is wondering what sequence of types of text to use in the classroom and why; how those types of text are related to each other; and how to engage and negotiate with his or her students.

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