From the Notebook

Teaching with Britton and Moffett "And Glad of It"

Mark E. Smith

For several years now I have been relying on the theories of teaching writing proposed by James Britton and James Moffett--and I've been darn "glad of it." In one of his works, Britton quotes that phrase from an eleven-year-old girl's lab report on how to make oxygen. While most of this lab report is direct though unpolished and, in traditional terms, expository prose, Jacqueline ends her account: "Very soon you will find that you have made oxygen and glad of it." Britton points out that these last four words are strictly speaking, inappropriate in a lab report, even though they would probably please Jacqueline's teacher, since they show her enthusiasm for the experiment. Britton exlains this unexpected concluding phrase as the intrusion of one kind of writing, **expressive**, into another kind, **transactional.** He characterizes **expressive** writing as personal, very close to the self; it's like written-down speech, whose context is usually unspecified; it's the language of a first draft, and thus relatively unstructured. **Transactional** writing, on the other hand, is the kind of writing used to carry on business, to get things done, often to inform, sometimes to persuade. It is more objective and less personal than **expressive** writing, as well as more structured and polished.

When I first began teaching composition, I assumed, like many of my colleagues who were similarly unprepared for this awesome assignment, that I should concentrate solely on **transactional** writing. After all, I wanted my students to produce clear, effective, grammatically correct prose in the essay examinations and research papers they would write for their future teachers. Thus, I assigned, almost exclusively, **transactional** essays; I was the one reader of my students' papers. On those papers I diligently marked all errors of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. One student left me an anonymous note: "Mark Smith owns a red ink factory." And I organized my courses according to the four traditional modes of discourse: description, narration, exposition, and argumentation.

Not until I read Britton and Moffett, discussed their theories with some colleagues, and experimented with their ideas in my classes, did I realize how wrong my first approach had been. I wasn't converted to the faith in a weekend; instead my conversion had been gradual and compromising. I still read all my students' papers closely; but from Britton and Moffett, I've learned a more meaningful process for achieving my goal of developing student writing.

From Britton I learned not only the distinction between **expressive** and **transactional** writing, but also to distinguish a third kind, **poetic** (not just poetry, but all creative, artistic writing). More importantly, I learned to think of **expressive** writing as the "matrix" from which the other kinds develop. So, in order to help my students improve their **transactional** essays, I needed to incorporate **expressive** writing into my classes.

Journals

With journals I integrate **expressive** writing into my classes (all of them, not just those in composition). We, my

students and I, keep journals. We write entries daily or almost daily, out of class and in class, sometimes at the beginning of the hour, sometimes at the end, sometimes when I can't get any of them to talk, sometimes in the middle of a heated discussion, from 3-4 minutes or 15-20. We write about anything and everything, but usually just one topic at a time: the weather, our feelings, a memorable experience, a puzzling issue, a paper coming up, an essay or story we had read and discussed, a scene from nature, and so on. Occasionally I ask them to write a particular kind of entry or choose a topic from a specific subject area, often directly related to a paper assignment, but mostly we write open topic entries. And sometimes we read and talk about our entries in class, but mostly we just let them sit and quietly germinate.

About the use of journals I say I'm "glad of it" for several reasons. For one, because I, too, keep a journal, it forces me to write more, and thus to remain more immediately aware of the problems students face in writing. For another, it makes my courses more interesting. Students enjoy writing on topics of personal concern to them, and I enjoy reading their journals certainly more than I enjoy reading a typical set of expository or argumentative essays; however, I don't believe it's imperative that teachers read students' journals.

But most of all I'm "glad of it" because keeping a journal improves student writing more than any of the hundreds of other teaching strategies I've tried. Students' writing fluency improves measurably in just a few months. At the beginning of the term, when I tell my students we will write almost daily journal entries, each of them about one page long, I hear many mournful sighs and a few disgusted groans. But, at the end of the semester, I often hear myself saying to a student in a conference, "Did you notice your latest journal entries are much longer? You used to write only about a half page for each entry, but now you write 2-3 pages for each one." The response is usually a wide-eyed stare and a quick thumb through the journal to check the validity of my claim. For most students writing ceases to be a consciously painful chore. Some students even confess they enjoy writing in their journals.

Because we use the journals as an integral part of the course work, we frequently write about topics discussed in class, assigned readings, and papers in progress. Whenever students complain, "I can't think of anything to write about for a third paper," I immediately look at their journals. Invariably, I'm able to suggest several topics directly from the journal that make eyes light up and work on the assignment begin. Also, by writing journal entries about papers they are working on, students are able to generate more ideas on these topics and to sort out organizational problems. Occasionally, they use their journals for revising, by rewriting, expanding and improving earlier entries.

I'm convinced, then, that students write better papers as a direct result of journal writing, and that they're "glad of it."

Working in Small Groups

While the use of journals is my chief application of Britton's theories in my classes, I use another strategy based on his studies--working in small groups on writing assignments. Two or three times a week my students and I gather in small groups to read and discuss drafts of our papers. I tell them that, unless I or they specify otherwise, they should consider the entire class, not just me alone, as the audience for their papers. They soon realize that **real** writing is aimed at a particular audience. They learn from each other and begin to make choices in their writing to achieve a desired effect on their audience, not just to please the teacher.

For me the key phrase from Moffett's work is "the universe of discourse." Several years ago the title of the freshman English course to which I was assigned was **Modes of Discourse**, an obscure title that meant little to me and less to the students. Checking a few of the textbooks recommended for the course, I surmised these modes were description, narration, exposition and argumentation. After all, that was the explicit or implied message

(cont. on p. 47)

Stephen Bernhardt (cont. from p. 20)

ful. Whether such transfer occurs, whether, for instance, practice in writing dramatic episodes will help the writer control other, less personal writing, remains an open question.

The question will not be answered, but support for such transfer will be assumed; for Moffett, like other good cognitivists, believes in the value of creative play with the forms of language through non-directed, individual exploration in a non-threatening environment. In these days of competency testing, explicit objectives, and the general homogenization of curriculum under the cry of "the basics," Moffett's ideas about teaching English appear even more radical than when they were first proposed in the late sixties. I would advocate a rational balance of his speculative, exploratory activities with content-oriented formal instruction. But whatever position we finally adopt, reading and thinking our way through the wealth of ideas in Moffett's books can only help us understand our own behavior better as we go about our day-to-day teaching.

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Mark E. Smith (cont. from p. 22)

of text after text; all you had to do was look at the table of contents. So, for five or six years, I methodically plotted out and plodded through separate units on these four modes. But then I read Moffett: there were not just four modes, but a universe of modes, infinite in number. And more importantly, they all have a place in the English classroom. So now I offer my students a much broader scope of writing assignments than those in the four traditional modes. They write papers ranging in point of view, from subjective to objective; in content and concern, from immediate to remote past or future; in topic, from simple to complex; in style, from unedited transcripts of speech to polished, formal essays; in audience addressed, from intimate to public; and so on. Now, instead of assigning a comparison and contrast or process paper, I ask students to think of a topic or issue that strongly interests them and then to write a paper which says what they want to say about that topic. Moffett quotes one teacher who says, "You can't write writing." But you can write ideas and feelings, which is what my students do more often now, and with stronger motivation.

To paraphrase Jacqueline, if you use journals, small group work on drafts, and assignments from a universe of discourse, you will find you have made better writers and "glad of it."

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Two Schools (cont. from p. 27)

But I didn't know if I could afford to let this muscled creature knock my ego around.

"We were just..."

"Just what?"

"Sheeuut," I mumbled, making my way to the end of the line, looking like a scolded puppy with its tail tucked between its legs.

Gary Robertson, '81

Matisse

I dreamed last night
that i was chasing
a butterfly
through a crowded city
and when he flew
too high i
sat down and cried
because i think that
that butterfly was
you

Anita Mantey '78

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