

CATE PROFESSIONAL WRITING CONTEST
Second Place 2009, \$150

Teaching the Universe of Discourse

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Many years after being challenged to take a curricular “road less traveled,” this is what a few of my former junior high school students had to say about the journey:

Dear Mr. Dowdle:

“I have been slow in writing but want you to know how much I have enjoyed your book. I can see the value for teaching purposes but hope you understand the value to me as a student writer. Throughout the early 70’s there was such an intensity that became real to me again as I read the works of other class members. I think we were trying to grow up too quickly, surrounded by the fight for love and peace—Viet Nam and the Hippie children. Your style of teaching encouraged honesty in writing and deep thinking as well. We were not just learning to write but to feel and see the value in our fellow students’ work. Thank you for taking me back to special memories and innocent times. You must feel proud to see your creation come to life. Thank you for including my poem and inspiring me to remember some very special ‘old friends.’”

With deep fondness,

Linda Escola
Seventh Grade - 1970

Dear Mr. Dowdle:

“Thanks so much for calling me. It was great to chat with you. I cannot tell you what a profound influence those two periods of 7th grade English with you wound up having on my life. It was all those assignments written in a fat cursive hand in a red spiral-bound notebook that I still possess that made me realize how much I enjoyed writing and think of myself for the first time as a “writer.” After decades in newspapers, winding up at the San Jose Mercury News, I have been at MSNBC.com for more than nine years now, so I was among the pioneering crowd in Web journalism. These days, I am a national writer based in Redmond, Washington. Below are some of the stories I enjoyed writing most:”

Cancer series: www.lowblow.msnbc.com
Profile of a Town Icon in Waveland, Miss.
Profile of a Cop from Bay St. Louis, Miss.

Season's Greetings from a Hurricane Zone.

Fondly,

Mike Stuckey
Seventh Grade - 1970

Mr. Dowdle!

"I want you to know that your class was instrumental in my development as a person. Several years ago, I wrote about you in my autobiography for my graduate school application. In junior high, I was not what one calls a "dedicated student." I really did not enjoy school. Your class, your manner of teaching was sanctuary for me. You challenged us. You addressed us as "people." We all thought this was funny at the time, but on some level it felt respectful. Most of all, you were encouraging. You taught me how to write poetry! You gave me an important means of expression when I needed it most. You created an environment where I could experience success."

What a gift!

Your friend,

Suzanne Dieter
Seventh Grade - 1981

These testimonials from former students were nice to receive, but what the students were not aware of was that if I hadn't been given a gift by James Moffett, there's no way they would have received one from me because I would have been teaching English the same old way I always had. But I was given a gift by him; I did take the road less traveled; I did make a personal choice, and that choice made all the difference in the world for my students and me.

This whole process of reeducation began on May 23, 1968 when a group of English teachers was invited to meet with the California English Textbook and Framework Implementation Committee to discuss in-service education for teachers of English. The State of California had \$100,000 available for this project, and they wanted us to tell them how to spend it. Can you imagine anything like that happening today? We decided that a massive in-service education program in English was the best way to spend the money, and the project was begun.

One hundred teachers of English from throughout the state were selected to attend two one week training sessions at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove, California, and three of us from Santa Rosa were fortunate to be among those selected. At those training sessions ideas were exchanged in small groups of about twenty to a

group, and major innovators in English from some of the top universities in the country spoke to us about their work and then participated in question and answer sessions which sometimes ended in heated discussions.

One of the major speakers at the conference was James Moffett, formerly a research associate in English at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and it's with Mr. Moffett's work that the real nuts and bolts of my story begins. First came *Drama: What Is Happening*, a fifty-four page booklet Moffett had written about "the use of dramatic activities in the teaching of English." John Maxwell who was Secondary Section Chairman of the National Council of Teachers of English at the time said, "In brief, Moffett's thesis is that one learns about language, literature, and composition in a coherent way by participating in the experience of creating discourse: writing plays and short stories, poems, and other forms; or acting, interpreting, and creating drama in diverse and realistic situations.

In Mr. Moffett's conception, discourse should be arranged along a continuum, extending from the person as an inner-speaker (soliloquy) to a speaker-about-things (essay)." This idea made so much sense to me that when I discovered that the booklet I was reading was only a chapter from another of Moffett's books, I got his *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* and read it, too. I shouldn't say I read it. I should say I studied it, mastered the sequence of ideas in it, and applied them in my junior high school English classrooms for the last twenty-three years of my teaching career. Never again would I teach in what I would call bits and pieces. Now my whole English program had connectedness; it was integrated. Forevermore, my kids would always be put through a sequence of oral dramatic and narrative activities before they'd ever be asked to write an essay or a poem about a topic. Each year we examined life itself as a topic in this series of language activities, and the following poems are products of the process that resulted during two different years:

"Life"

To love, to laugh, to play the game of life,
Each man alive seeks to survive at least,
Through one life's span to rise above the strife
That each day brings between the times of feast.

The feast is love, a giving kind that must
Be shared to be enjoyed. The giver takes all.
The game goes to the stronger man if just
He never looks for gain in love at all.

His soul and all his life are spent in search
Of why we're born and why we die and how
We span the time between like swaying birch
Wind-bent and battered, uprooted and forced to bow.

But always the hope that the pain will be shared by one other
Who loves you as deeply as a lover or parents or brother.

Cory Antipa
Ninth Grade – 1967

“Teenagers”

This poem is to be read fast and desperately, preferably in three breaths.

Hassle, Fight, Stab!
Who wears the nicest things?
Who throws the wildest parties?
Who makes out?
Who takes pot?
Who has the friends?
Who has money?
Who got busted?
Hypocrites! I scream in all my arrogant omnipotence,
No better than those I scream at.
Belong!
Get with it!
Get in!
You haven't time to waste;
The rats have started running.
Live!
The world is sinking fast.
You haven't time to waste.
Dance!
Yell!
Do wild things to be regretted!
Get married young!
It don't make no difference when you do it.
It never works nohow.
Kiss the shadows of the past farewell.
They are gone, so sings the knell.
Death and life so transcendental,
Of no importance.
How could they be, they are so easy come by.
The Gods sit on their chaise lounges,
Spitting grape seeds at their creations!
Mankind doesn't own the world;
They rented it from God.

The deed is being torn.
We sit on earth in the wastes of our existence
And hide behind the shield of our illusion,
Pretending we simply cannot die.
The Gods sit on their chaise lounges
And spit cherry pits at us!
Man sits in crowded cities,
Existing not living.
Producing children out of boredom,
Sentencing to fight the fight we fought and lost.

Beware,

the

Gods are eating avocados!

Kim Haylock
Eighth Grade – 1970

This journey through the genre (monologues, dialogues, short plays, letters, logs, diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, biographies, chronicles, short histories, short stories, essays and poetry) became an exciting trip for my students and me, one that lasted for many years and that wouldn't have been possible without the work of James Moffett.

Works Cited:

Dowdle, Chuck. *Kids Can Write!* Pittsburgh: Red Lead Press, 2007.

Moffett, James. *Drama: What Is Happening:* Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967.

Moffett, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse:* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968.

