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Interview

by David Sohn

Background

English teachers at Exeter admired a book called *Stop, Look, and Write* co-authored by Hart Leavitt, a teacher at our rival prep school, Phillips Andover, and by David Sohn. These two deserve credit for first putting across the idea of writing about photographs. By the time I met Dave years later, he was coordinator of language arts for Evanston, Illinois, schools and a contributing editor to *Media & Methods.* He heard me talk to the Illinois Council of Teachers of English and asked me to meet him at the New Orleans NCTE convention in 1974 to do an interview. The result follows here.

By the mid-70s my hands were good and dirty as capitalist lackey and political activist in education. But it was time for a shift. *Interaction* and a much-revised version of *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading* (with new co-author Betty Jane Wagner) were launched and now at the mercy of corporate and cultural forces that were too big for me. I needed to develop myself more and resume earlier searches outside of education for influences to bring inside. In the late '50s and early '60s I had experienced some small-group dynamics and interdisciplinary, mind–body integration and tried to incorporate these into curriculum development. Such movements later evolved as "encounter groups" and the "holistic" and "consciousness" activities. So much of my career seems to have been trying things out personally and then making use of them later professionally. In 1971 my wife and I began practicing meditation. Then, already in the habit of doing some yoga postures, we took in 1973 a class in prana yoga given by Swami Sivalingam, a hatha yogi and an extraordinarily developed South Indian who specializes in breath-control exercises, which we had been wanting to learn about. Thus began a very important association from which I was to learn far more of the realities of inner disciplines than I had gained from my reading in zen, yoga, shamanism, and Western mystics. I was also following at the layman level some research in brain functioning, consciousness, and neurophysiology.

This interview, which was taped in my New Orleans hotel room and published in the February 1975 issue of *Media & Methods,* captured in its

dialogical movements some of the interplay between activities in English teaching and ideas from outside the field. Coincidentally, James Squire had at that same NCTE convention brought together six English education people, including me, to do a group interview with him on "The Future Direction of English Teaching," which later became Chapter Ten in *The Teaching of English,* the 76th yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, edited by Squire and published in 1977 by NSSE and the University of Chicago Press. It touched at times on some of the matters David and I dealt with and reflected a new tendency of the profession to enlarge its view of English and to probe the future. Again as weather vane, I felt the winds blowing in topics coming my way such as "Consciousness Expansion and the Future of English," a significant linking that arose not only at the next NCTE convention but at other meetings in variant ways.

SOHN: Individualized instruction is pretty hot now in a lot of circles. "Self-concept" is also quite big. Should we be placing so much emphasis on these approaches, or are they just another flash in the educational pan?

MOFFETT: Well, I think for education to improve it's going to have to go very, very far in the direction of individualization, but an individualization quite different from the way the word is generally used. I think it got preempted very early in the game by narrowly programmed materials, so that right now it often means learning small things in small steps. My impression is that these materials—usually with a behavioristic approach—take all students through the same program, except for some difference in pacing. Basically they are doing the same things in the same order, and I think that that's a fraud and a terrible misleading of the profession and the public. It gives the impression that we have done something that we haven't. And what we need to do remains still to be done.

SOHN: What's that?

MOFFETT: We need an honest, deep, thoroughgoing individualization in the sense that learning really accommodates individual differences in people as they vary both by background and by personal makeup. That includes a tremendous amount. It covers the differences in ethnic and familial upbringing, the incredibly varied uses of language and dialects in different families and ethnic backgrounds. Then you get into differences in personality: what people understand by different words, what experiences they've had, which things they have or don't have concepts for, even the different sensory modalities which individual students learn best from—the auditory, the visual, the motor-oriented, the kinesthetic.

If we give these differences the critical attention they deserve, then we must have a much broader spectrum of materials, methods, media, et cetera, that kids can learn from. If we don't, we're simply not individualizing.

SOHN: Well, I wonder about the term "individualization." A lot of people use it, but I don't think they are really doing it.

MOFFETT: Actually, I prefer the term *student-centered* because it gets away from the connotations of narrowly programmed materials and kids working alone in carrels. Part of the problem with that sort of individualization is that it's isolated learning. Language learning in particular has to be social, has to be interactive. So if you put kids off alone with a machine or a carrel too much of the time, you cut them off from the social resources, you bypass the human interaction needed to learn language.

Now until this interaction occurs, we won't have really open classrooms in this country, no matter what we call them. The idea of the open classroom was to accommodate differences in kids, not just differences in timing. To do this requires a totally different classroom management, one that is very seldom seen in this country—and may not even be all that common in England, where the idea originated. It means having different working groups doing different things at the same time. And that's very hard to manage. At least it's a very different management. It looks chaotic to people who don't understand it.

SOHN: Doesn't it take a lot more work to individualize than it does to use a more traditional mode of teaching?

MOFFETT: It does. But it's also terribly hard to teach the conventional way. Many teachers are trying to emcee their classes. So you have twenty-five to forty different kids straying off in all sorts of directions. You wind up fighting them constantly, trying to keep them on one thing at the same time. This produces horrendous disciplinary problems because it's impossible for that many kids to be interested in doing the same thing at the same time. And it takes a tremendous toll on teachers; they're demoralized by the constant strain and the poor results of their efforts.

Take lesson plans, for example. Lesson planning, or "What Do I Do on Monday Morning?" is, you know, a chronic question. But I think it's the *wrong* question because it arises only when you're emceeing the show. I think you should always *know* what to do on Monday morning. It's a basic process of individualized management, small-group work that goes on all the time.

SOHN: Well, when is a group experience valid? Or is it? Are there occasions when the whole class should experience a common event?

MOFFETT: I think so. Certainly you don't want to close any doors by saying

that a whole class mustn't ever meet. There are times when you want numbers. The whole idea is to explore human resources, to have one-to-one relations, small-group relations, and large-group relations. Each uses numbers in a very different way.

I think, for example, that choral reading and large-group improvisations are very useful. Also, you want to get together as a whole class so that different working groups can present their products to each other, perform for each other. If the students are all doing something together, there's no audience within the class, and therefore there is a tremendous loss of motivation. I think the real motivation in communication comes from doing something and getting a response. Writing something, for example, and having the rest of the class read it, or performing something and having the rest of the class respond. So for that, you need the whole class. Some teachers plan certain sharing times; others play it by ear when certain groups are ready to make presentations.

SOHN: How about viewing a film as a group experience?

MOFFETT: Well, there's a little of the same problem as in reading the same book together. Are they all ready to be interested in that? And the problem also of choice: Who does the deciding for whom? If the whole class is "given" a film, they may react the same way as when "given" any other assignment—that is, when they don't have any choice in the matter. That's the only problem I see and it has nothing to do with films. It has to do again with the whole basic process in the classroom.

Certainly there is a value in sharing a film together, as there is in a book. Then the students can compare responses. That's tremendously important—to compare their responses to either reading or viewing. But I think you can do that more effectively in a small group. I'd rather see six or eight kids view a film together and then talk about it in a practical way. It's kind of hard with a whole class, I think, particularly if the teacher is leading.

SOHN: Especially if the teacher is imposing his or her own viewpoint. One of the toughest aspects of working with film is letting the ideas and responses come from the kids. It's an easy trap when teachers think they know what the film means.

MOFFETT: Right. One reason the teacher wants the kids to see the film is that he or she has a strong feeling about it, and wants the kids to have that same feeling. Not just film, though. It also happens with poetry. A classic disappointment of English teachers is trying a poem they love dearly with a class and having the kids go "uuuuuhhhhh." And then they hate the class for not sharing their feeling.

SOHN: Some teachers, in an effort to not prejudice the responses of the

students, go to the other extreme and refuse to voice their own feelings. Is that the answer? Or should teachers contribute their reactions in a discussion?

MOFFETT: I would play it very much by ear according to the kind of students I had. If they're experienced in talking with each other, expressing ideas, listening to other people, and are confident about their own thinking, then I'd feel much freer to play my own thoughts into the discussion. Kids like that can accept or reject the teacher's ideas and will benefit from knowing what you think and what perspective you bring to the discussion. They note what you say, they listen to it, but you know they're not awed by it, they don't feel they have to push their own ideas out of their minds. But if the students don't have that kind of confidence, your ideas could easily short-circuit their thinking, and that's bad teaching. The main problem is to make sure you give them plenty of time to think, that you don't foreclose the issue. It has nothing to do with an authoritarian-permissive dichotomy. It's simply not a practical way to teach—to assert too much too soon if it closes the issue. It takes a lot of independence for a young person to continue to think in the face of strong, maybe good, ideas from you, the teacher.

SOHN: What about John Holt's idea that we're training students to be answer-oriented? Shouldn't teaching be inductive?

MOFFETT: The thing about what Holt called "answer-pulling" on the part of the teacher is that it implies you know something ahead of time—you have in mind some piece of information, some statement, some conclusion. It's just a question of how you're going to get the kids there. Will you use the old-fashioned approach of just plain-out telling them, or will you trick them a bit, lead them up to it? In class discussions of literature, I used to do something that I guess would be considered inductive. I'd have a carefully planned series of questions that I thought led brilliantly up to the main point of the story. But I found it was guiding too much. Also, I often got frustrated because their minds went off in different directions. They didn't follow my lead. I had to come to value the fact that the directions they went off in—even if they were bad in the sense that I felt the kids were misunderstanding the work—made me go that way in order to find the cause of the incomprehension. You have to get the incomprehension out before you can get to the problems. Why did they misread something, you know? Or did they all? Was it just one student?

The trick is to let them compare what they feel, how they respond to the film or the literary work. And they discover that they don't agree. That, I think, is really enlightening. They expect a disparity between what you think and what they think. It doesn't impress them too much, because there's always a gap, you know, a generation gap—adults are dif-

ferent people anyway. But when their own flesh-and-blood peers respond very differently to a short story or a film, interpret it quite differently, then they have to stop and think. It breaks their egocentricity by forcing them to compare their own ideas with those of their peers. And that's an important aspect of learning, to break egocentricity.

SOHN: Don't we learn most things by comparison and contrast?

MOFFETT: I think that's very much the secret of it. I've been reading recently and thinking about research on the two hemispheres of the brain. Apparently the human brain specializes, that's why we have two hemispheres. The left hemisphere, which governs the right side of the body, is digital, linear, it moves in time and works like a computer would. It's analytical-intellectual. The right hemisphere, on the other hand, is spatial and visual. It functions holistically, and deals in the metaphoric mode. While the left is verbal, the right is nonverbal.

This has been demonstrated in experiments that present a visual problem to one hemisphere or the other. The right hemisphere can process the spatial problems, but the left sometimes just creates static. For example, if you're asked to define "spiral," most people start with words and then say, "To hell with it," and make a spiral in the air with their hand. It's a much quicker way to define a visual or spatial concept. The whole reason for the specialization, apparently, is to keep one hemisphere from interfering with the other. Some things are better processed one way, some another. Of course, they also collaborate. How well they collaborate is a vital factor in education and learning.

I think it's really critical to set up learning circumstances that permit kids to coordinate the two hemispheres. Many people who know this brain research—which is very solid at this point—feel that our culture has been overemphasizing the left hemisphere, the analytical-linear, for some time. They see this overdevelopment as one of the reasons why we can't solve so many of the culture's problems—pollution, ecology, world coordination. We're thinking too much with the left half, while the other half, the holistic and metaphorical, is precisely what would help most to solve such problems.

The reason is that today's problems—whether you're talking about the individual's own life, or whether you're talking about international coordination—center on *intricacy.* And intricate things are not linear; they involve several simultaneous happenings. It's the difference between playing a melody—a series of individual, separate notes in time—and striking a *chord.* The right hemisphere is always striking chords. It is made to process intricacy, to handle information about several things happening at the same time from several different sources. And this is, I think, the whole function of metaphor, figurative language, most literature, and, I suspect, of many films that are more metaphor than literal realism.

This imbalance in favor of the linear-analytic is dismaying and a real culture-wide problem. McLuhan hit on it from another angle. Though I don't believe his thinking was related to the brain hemispheres—the research hadn't come out with much yet—he talked about print being linear and analytic, and said we were overbalanced that way. From what I know of him, however, I don't think he allows for the fact that reading tends to combine the two hemispheres—at least it can if the material is metaphorical. On the other hand, something like television is also linear; you have a succession of images. Films and television both have that linear aspect. When he talks about the graphic media being different from linear-analytic books, it seems to me that that's only part of the story. A movie is also a succession of images. In that sense, it's like a novel.

SOHN: If it's a traditional movie. You've seen multiple-image movies.

MOFFETT: Well, it's a succession, even if it's not a time-order. It may be completely jumbled.

SOHN: It has to be a succession if you have time involved at all.

MOFFETT: That's what I mean. And I think literature—figurative, metaphorical writing—although it's based on the linear processing of the left hemisphere, can be intuitive because it includes *equivocal* symbols. Like the musical chord, it conveys several meanings at one time. That's what Melville was doing, I think, in *Moby Dick* with the image of the white whale. In other words, the intuitive, right hemisphere, the metaphorical mode, has a way of sneaking itself into the left hemisphere, so that both sides collaborate. And this new perception about the specialized hemispheres of the brain undergirds literature in the metaphorical mode, the visual metaphor. It supports metaphor in a rational, practical way that we haven't had before in schools.

Let me explain a bit further. Both literature and movies tend to be regarded as entertaining rather than utilitarian. Now if you talk to administrators and the public about where to put their money priorities, you know damned well which one they are going to pick. It's going to be the utilitarian over the pretty or the pleasurable. But now we're saying that the problem is with the dichotomy. It forces us to use just half our brain. But the metaphorical mode is not only practical, it's essential—without it we're dying. The culture is strangling on its own problems because it scorns that part of the human organism which is really made to process the intricacies of simultaneous phenomena. The right hemisphere—the intuitive and metaphorical—is atrophying in our culture. . . .

SOHN: This would suggest, then, that a lot more emphasis should probably be placed on—I hate to use another label—what is called the "affective" type of education. Art, music, poetry, film—things which lean toward the aesthetic.

MOFFETT: Yes, well, you know I've always regretted that cognitive/affective dichotomy. I don't think it's been helpful, and you know, I've heard people speak so technocratically about the affective domain that I kind of shiver when I hear it said too much. I can tell by the way it's being said that it's going to come out the same old way. I think it would be more useful to use the dichotomy that is based on our biology, that's based on these two hemispheres. Analysis and synthesis—that's what it amounts to—and they are both cognitive. But as long as we talk about cognitive and affective, there's going to be this bias.

SOHN: I've always suspected that somebody invented the affective domain to make an excuse for what can't be measured.

MOFFETT: It was an afterthought. I think that's historically true. Wasn't it Bloom and those people, with the taxonomy. I think they did the cognitive first, and people said, "Hey, look! There's more to life than that." And they said okay, and they went back as an afterthought. It's like that old utilitarian-pleasurable dichotomy—given the choice, we know where the money and the energy and so on is going to go. It's going to go to the cognitive. I'd like to think that people would begin to consider the metaphorical mode for what it really is—cognitive. We simply think in two different ways. Referring to it as affective makes it emotional. It's like saying "It's there, it's part of us, but we don't think with it." And that's not true. We think metaphorically.

Scientists have been saying that for a long time. Bruner talked about it in his *Essays for the Left Hand.* The problem was that, in his own educational research, he tended to emphasize the cognitive—the post-Sputnik reaction—and, as I think he realizes now, he spun us off too much in the direction that the culture was going already.

SOHN: Is the trouble with a lot of education that teachers tend to want to "unwrap the chord"? To take each separate note and look at it and investigate it?

MOFFETT: I think that's very true. It's one reason why I turned against the "lit-crit" approach—in both English and French. We played the old "lit-crit" game, where you take literature, the metaphorical mode, and translate it from the deliberately equivocal back to the univocal, the literal. It's paraphrasing a poem. And you're absolutely right. What it does is demythologize something. Literature was put in the metaphorical mode for a damned good reason to begin with. Because it's addressing itself to our right hemisphere. As soon as you force kids to paraphrase poetry or to tell the meaning of *The Red Badge of Courage* or *Moby Dick*—to give a univocal readout on the book—you're forcing them back into the other mode. Now that's the mode they're most often in anyway, the left-analytic. The whole point of studying literature is to exercise the metaphor-

ical mode, so you're undoing the whole thing. I think this is why kids hate it. And it's interesting that kids and writers are united in their opposition to this kind of paraphrasing of literature. I think they sense that this is destroying the whole point of the thing. We do it to get a grade. It's evaluation, basically. Because kids view a film or read a book, and we want to know if they understand it. And the only way to find out, we think, is to get them to paraphrase it.

SOHN: Frost used to say, "Read the poems. They're there. Why should I say it in another way."

MOFFETT: He used to satirize questions about "What did it mean?"

SOHN: That's probably why a lot of artists can't talk about their art. And why should they?

MOFFETT: Talking just hits one level, and they don't want to take just one level.

SOHN: I wonder if this is why the Russians get so agitated about art. You remember when they ran over an art exhibit with a tank? And they get very upset about writers like Solzhenitsyn who writes interesting, truthful novels, presumably.

MOFFETT: As you were asking the question, I thought of the Underground movement in France during the Occupation. A lot of the poetry, plays, and novels that came out of France at that time were tremendously metaphorical and allegorical. That was the only way you could write about the Occupation under the Nazis and get away with it. I think totalitarian governments suspect anything in the metaphorical mode. Part of the ambiguity gets to them, and they're not sure, you know.

SOHN: It makes them uneasy.

MOFFETT: It's a way of escaping censorship. A lot of rock lyrics referring to drugs resorted to this too. To get drugs and sex across the airwaves on most radio stations, you have to speak figuratively. That explains part of the style of rock lyrics. The same was true of the euphemistic style of Victorian writers like Dickens.

SOHN: Many of the films coming out of satellite countries are so allegorical. I suppose an artist jumps on the allegory wagon to avoid censorship.

MOFFETT: Also, you reach more people. Children, for example, really have to do their thinking about the inner psychic life in story form. They don't have concepts and names for all that's going on in there. The same is true with primitive people. *Beowulf* was the sociological treatise of its time. That's the way you did sociology in those days, in the metaphorical mode. Kids today tend to do all their thinking that way. It's a kind of

dream compression—a condensation in dreams, which have many levels. I think that's a prime example of the right hemisphere operating. The function of dreams, and it's apparently a definite biological function, is to help solve problems. A person whose dreams are continually interrupted gets into a near-psychotic state, because it's functionally very practical to dream—to try to solve problems in the metaphorical mode. If that's true, then it follows that in our waking life metaphor has the same practical function.

SOHN: What would this suggest about the student who is a dreamer?

MOFFETT: It could mean that he or she has a lot of problems. In yoga, for example, the yogis who have reached a very advanced stage of development stop dreaming. They hardly sleep at all. Still they have tremendous energy; they may work till 2:00 A.M. and then sleep for a few hours. When they do sleep, it's very deep and they purr like a cat—a constant snore. I think this means that they have resolved most of the problems of the inner life that we're still dealing with. They have simplified and unified their behavior, their thinking, their feeling. So you can say that the person who dreams a lot has a lot of problems. We dream because we haven't resolved our psychic life.

SOHN: Have you ever noticed that in education, a pedagogical idea will emerge, and you almost have to make a medium out of it to put the idea across? "Programmed instruction" and "visual literacy" are examples. Carpenter talks about each medium having its singular grammar—the elements that cause it to communicate.

MOFFETT: The rules of relating.

SOHN: To me, this is a critical insight, because I feel it is important to relate back and forth among the media, understanding all the time that the elements that make film communicate, for example, are different from the way that words communicate in a book.

MOFFETT: You were saying earlier that the idea of comparison was probably central to learning. Going along with that, I think that the comparing of media themselves is a tremendous part of what students should learn in school. It's putting language and all the other media in kind of an array, as alternative ways in which to inform oneself and to communicate with others. We should offer students opportunities to go to all these media and find out what each can and can't do, when one is more expressive than another. Also, I don't think we really understand language until we turn it off and work with something else. This is very hard for people who teach language, who have a professional investment in teaching English. They feel it's self-defeating to talk about turning off language and going to something else for a while. But I think you really don't under-

stand language until you do that. I think the most sophisticated verbalizers, from Shakespeare on, have been people who see through language. They have a perspective bigger than language itself, a sort of metacommunication that can go beyond the communicating process. This, I think, is one of the most powerful arguments for working in other media—for visual literacy, or media sophistication, or however you want to put it. Each medium can give us perspective on the other.

SOHN: McLuhan suggests that the environment becomes invisible to us.

MOFFETT: Including the language environment. . . . We have to get more sophisticated about how language gets produced. I mean, you look at the language level because that's visible and you can see it, but, underneath that, there's a tremendous amount going on psychologically. Like the states of consciousness in which people do things or don't do things. There's a correlation, for example, between absorption in reading and hypnotic susceptibility. This just reinforces what a lot of us suspect, you know. The people who love to read, avid readers, go into an altered state of consciousness. My parents used to laugh at me. When I was reading, they had a hard time attracting my attention. I think the same thing is true of film viewing; you go into a different state. And writing—to get back to what you were saying a moment ago—also requires a certain state. Talk about the language constraints—you know: Write a paragraph that goes from big to little or little to big, or is based on comparison, or something like that. That's not the way writing happens, I think. We all know that. I don't know what this hypocrisy is about.

SOHN: A lot of teachers don't know that, or they won't admit it. They don't recognize it. . . .

MOFFETT: I think that people who value language value poetry most of all because it can make language do things that it ought not to be able to do. Poetry has the capacity to push language to its breaking point, to depict accurately in words a nonverbal reality. That's very hard to do because language isn't really a help in representing reality very well, you know. It's too selective a medium. What it does is to stereotype reality, and that limits originality, which is the breaking of stereotypes.

SOHN: That's interesting. I never thought of it, but language has to be fairly superficial.

MOFFETT: It's interesting that we speak of the best and the worst moments as "unspeakable." The word "unspeakable" is ambiguous. It can mean some ultimate horror, or it can mean ineffable bliss. Things that are off either end of the scale are beyond language. They're too big for words. And when you use words, you have to realize that this is second best, and all it can do is represent reality with the limits inherent in the medium.

But we tend to think that somehow language escapes the laws of other media, that it can represent reality more truly, that everything can be *said.* This is not so. I don't think that everything can be *said.*

SOHN: And yet we revere the printed word. In fact we revere it so much that we ignore the other potentially powerful resources that we have in education, like film and television.

MOFFETT: Well, if you speak about the limits of language, this upsets a lot of teachers because they feel that their kids don't use language very much anyway. The kids, they say, are basically nonverbal; why encourage them to grow more nonverbal? They're practically inarticulate and mute as it is. They need more language, not less.

That's a hard argument to face because there's a lot of truth to it. I guess my response is that they need more of both. There are many kids who are pretty undeveloped in *any* medium. Sure, they need to talk a lot more. They need to develop speech, and really get interested in it. But they need to work a lot in the other media, too, so they can get perspective on them. Then when they choose speech, it will be because they understand the capabilities and limitations of this medium.

SOHN: Some teachers will not even admit that there are other media. They don't understand them. They don't understand that they are so much a part of our lives, and they need to be used and understood. We can't even measure the profound effects that television, for example, is having on our society.

MOFFETT: Well, the interweaving of the media is a very useful thing for teaching, because it provides ways for kids to use language and to get away from language at the same time. What we tried to do in *Interaction* was interweave talking, reading, and writing with drawing, photography, making slide shows, slide-tapes, working with tape recorders, so that it would be very natural for kids to become fluent with all of these at once. We don't make a big deal out of the fact that we're shifting media. We just allow the kids to do it. They improvise with the tape recorder on, they transcribe their improvisation, and then they've got a script. Well, there's talking, there's transcribing, they have to spell and punctuate their own speech—the basic skills come in there—and they are interested in their own speech. They're really motivated to do that. Then they give this script to other kids who read it and act it out. You set up these wonderful chains of activities that go on and on endlessly.

The main thing is to keep them going long enough. Some ancient doctor was supposed to have said, "All medical diagnoses come down to just one—congestion. And there's only one remedy—circulation." I think it's very wise, because the more you apply it, the more you see it holds up, medically and educationally. Both. You can say that part of the whole

problem with the schools today is just tremendous congestion. There's really not enough going on. There's not enough volume and variety of exercise and practice. The constraints of controlling and managing in a mass institution are so great that not enough of anything occurs to know whether it's worthwhile or not. This is part of the problem with educational research. The constraints are so great that you can't tell from the trial of this or that whether it's any good or not. Activities that have great possibilities simply need to be done with greater frequency. . . .