

FOREWORD TO 1983 REISSUE

THE PURPOSE of a reissue is to continue to make available a book that has won an enduring berth with its readership. It is not a revision, and so changes do not appear. One has to have faith that the book holds as is. Although I feel some pangs at references that could be updated, and I regret the unintentionally sexist prevalence of *he*, I can definitely say that I still stand behind the ideas.

It is in the nature of theory that it should not obsolesce as rapidly as information or more concrete exposition, but it also exists as an hypothesis to be modified, as a think-piece. The question is whether the modification should take place in the original book or in the minds of the readers. The practical experience and formal research that could corroborate or invalidate the theory developed in this book accumulate slowly, and the central thesis that stages of discourse correspond to levels of abstraction (if "abstraction" is specially defined) may never be susceptible of ultimate proof, like many other comprehensive theories about human functioning. But as I said within, I am after a strategic gain in concept: you are advised not so much to believe these ideas as to utilize them.

In those areas where I did cite research more than casually — developmental psychology and syntactic growth — new work has of course been done but none that vitiates the ideas. In fact, some rather direct testing of the developmental hypothesis in both the United States and the United Kingdom has tended to bear it out. James Britton has written of England's Writing Research Unit, "What does come through . . . (from a limited sample of about two thousand scripts, the work of 500 boys and girls in 65 schools) is the firm nature of the association between Moffett's abstractive scale and progress through the

years of schooling.”¹ And the sort of argument I raised against formal sentence-combining must still be reckoned with now that the latest such exercises have tried to meet its objections. Combining given sentences into a “whole discourse” does not keep these new exercises from being arhetorical, since they still do not engage the student in authentic *composing*. Further, the experiments that claim to show that such exercises improve the sentences that come out in actual composing neither measure for negative side-effects nor compare this “progress” with what would have been achieved had students spent the same amount of time doing real authoring in workshop groups taught to combine sentences as an organic part of revising papers together (the alternative recommended herein). In any case, research in these areas goes on at such a pace that updating for a book is futile; it is a task for journals.

Just as the ideas in this book must be thrown up continually against current evidence — not least of all the direct experience from the classroom — so must the theory be extended and amended by readers for themselves. More than anything else, I meant for readers to undergo certain thinking experiences that would later help them to conceive more usefully their educational mission. For this reason, it is not pertinent for me to revise the theory to overcome shortcomings or to incorporate others’ modifications. One can read elsewhere how others have amended or applied it. Though I may not agree with some of these revisions, I recognize that the book’s main value may be less to convince than to stimulate. This is consistent with my originally having sketched the theory suggestively rather than having systematically filled it in.

A few readers have felt that the book does not deal enough with literature, especially poetry. I was acutely aware when writing it that most English teachers know *only* literature, because college English majors study little else as their speciality.

¹ James Britton, “Language and the Nature of Learning,” in *The Teaching of English: The 76th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. James Squire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 34.

Though my own background was chiefly literary — and treating poetry more would have been a luxury for me — I felt that where teachers failed they did so from imperception about how learning occurs, about the *processes* of making and interpreting symbols, the inner workings behind the talking, reading, and writing. Too many teachers were thrilled by literature but chilled by youngsters, because they had nowhere acquired understanding of what learning to discourse entails for human beings. So I set out to build a bridge, intellectually rigorous but emotionally true also, between the familiar world of literature, books, and talk and the discursive universe of the mind that these manifest. I based the structure of English on the primal communication triad, which permits relating literature to life, language forms to modes of thought. I wanted to recast into the psychological terms of human growth those familiar but opaque academic elements such as rhetoric, logic, grammar, and literary technique, because I felt obliged to help teachers where they needed help most.

However warranted this approach may have been, 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. In a long chapter devoted to drama and another to fiction I focused on the real-life counterparts and the developmental significance of various dramaturgical and fictional techniques. To poetry I allotted a whole dimension running the entire length of the abstractive scale. By spreading it across the varieties of drama, description, narrative, and reflection I hoped to open up classroom possibilities for it. But I did not, it is true, trace out myself all these possibilities, trusting teachers rather to draw on the college training they *did* have. But perhaps I should have indulged myself more.

The further specifying and applying of ideas in this book is precisely the business of *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13: A Handbook for Teachers* (the title of the newer editions of *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum*). It

is on the occasion of the third edition of that companion handbook/methods textbook that the publisher and I have seen fit to reissue *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Recalling their original joint publication, we celebrate their continuing viability, which only reader response could embolden us to do.

James Moffett
Mariposa, California
1982