MOFFETT, FRESHMAN COMP, AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

James Moffett’s “Confessions of an Ex-College Freshman” (NWP Newsletter, May 1980) invites misreading. It does so, I think, because it is incomplete, in places cavalier. It does not say that essay writing needs only authenticity. It does not claim that good essays can be written without skills in vocabulary, organization, and logic. But it makes possible the impression that teaching such writing skills is a waste of our time and of our students’ time. Perhaps even more than that—that we are “regressive,” fraudulent, and hypocritical if we teach our students such things. Moffett argues correctly that writing needs more than technical skill, that it needs to be informed by a genuine self. But his essay lends his considerable authority to a bias—toward the personal and away from the skillful—which is widespread among teachers of English and subversive to the teaching of writing.

Moffett recalls the sudden transformation he underwent as a writer in his freshman year of college. He moved from writing technically correct but lifeless, “unreal” essays to writing significant essays about subjects that really meant something to him. His first essay, about the entertainment opportunities of Los Angeles, was phony and received a failing grade. Moffett got the point, he reports, relieved to discover that college “wasn’t going to deal in [the] kind of bullshit” he had been asked to write in high school. So he wrote a second essay, about his childhood adventures in the South; it was “real” and received an A.

His second essay (“My Boyhood in Jackson”) was no doubt full of fun, recounting the games of imaginary buccaneers and explorers. It was suffused by a self realized in words. But how was it organized? Moffett does not show us or say. Presumably—Harvard-A essay that it was—it did not lose the reader. Presumably it had no problems of transition or coherence. But he does not explain how essay #2 avoided these problems how it achieved its unity and logical power. It may even have had a “perfect thesis paragraph,” but if it did he does not share it with us. He is emphasizing the personal force of his second essay, the fact that it was informed by a more real self than his first.

Because of his emphasis, however, and because of his tone, Moffett neglects to give sufficient credit to the skills and discipline which he already possessed as a writer. In disparaging his teachers he also disparages, it seems to me, what they taught. “They were nice people,” he says, who taught him about thesis paragraphs and topic sentences, about transitions and coherence, about grammar and vocabulary; but they “didn’t know much about composition as such at all.” He suggests in fact that it was their fault that he wrote a dishonest first essay: “I wrote that theme as I had written stuff all through school. An all-A student in all subjects through high school, I always did what teachers wanted.” He indicts them for spawning pencil-pushers, impugning at once their motives and their methods. His essay, therefore, makes possible the impression that we should be
suspicious of the formal elements of essays, that they are obstacles to “real writing,” and that we should be ashamed to be teaching such “stuff.” We should not.

There are two schools of training in the modern Japanese martial art of Aikido. One teaches the virtue of dynamic balance in movement, a combination of fluidity and poise, a softness by which the Aikidoist turns all straight lines into spirals, eliminates all confrontation. The other school teaches power, solidity and resilience, by which the Aikidoist can concentrate the strength of his whole body at one point while withholding his mind, be perfectly committed and at the same time perfectly free. The two schools, I am told, lead to the same end: an old man, frail and still, suddenly spinning in the midst of a circle of attackers—disarming or eluding them all—and then, as suddenly, motionless again. It is a miracle of power and grace. When you see it, you know how powerful that grace is and how graceful that power, over the years, has become. And you know that somehow both must be learned.

It is a similar combination that we are striving for in the teaching of writing—the grace of a genuine self, the power of technical skill. Moffett’s basic objection, I think, is to an imbalance in teaching that stresses simply power and to the misguided pedagogical emphasis on cold drills and formulas that this imbalance has produced. But it is incomplete arguments such as Moffett’s that lead teachers to just another imbalance and to another misguided pedagogical emphasis, on the warm pleasures of solipsism. Instead of assuming that the writer’s self can only be realized in essays of personal experience or anecdote, we ought to concentrate on teaching our students to care about their ideas and to recognize in the formal elements of essays the means to express themselves.

One problem with the following paragraph, for example, is that the writer did not manage to express anything she “really thought or felt” about Galileo; it may be that she did not “really think or feel” anything. The idea she expresses about Galileo here is indeed insubstantial and incoherent, but I think it would be doing her a disservice to recommend that she forget Galileo and write an essay about her childhood.

1 As man began to advance his scientific knowledge during the period of the Renaissance, many issues regarding natural phenomena, namely physics, were questioned. 2 Not the least of these was the Ptolemaic theory which stated that the earth was the center of the universe. 3 Although Ptolemy’s theory was based on astronomical observations and the beliefs of Aristotle, the modern scientists of the day, for one Galileo, disputed the validity of the Ptolemaic theory. 4 Galileo through many experiments, observations and mathematical calculations had come to support another theory, the theory of Copernicus. 5 Copernicus had hypothesized that the sun was the center of the universe and the earth revolves around the sun. 6 Unfortunately, the presiding feeling of the church was not at all in favor of the Copernican theory. 7 For one thing it directly violated the Scriptures, and also, it did not coincide with the philosophy losophy during that time. 8 And so it was that Galileo was forced by the Church in 1633, to publically recant his support of the Copernican theory not only because the theory itself
violated the Scriptures and philosophical beliefs, but that Galileo had personally
insulted the Pope and was a nuisance to the security of Papal authority.

What this student needs to be taught is not to quit writing about Galileo, not to quit
writing about second-hand stuff. She needs to be taught that she can care about her ideas
(whether they are about history or science or national affairs or her childhood). She can
take her ideas seriously, without embarrassment, and she can express them with exactness
and finesse.

She needs, for example, to be taught to look more closely at the meanings of her words.
“Physics,” in sentence 1, is neither an “issue” nor a “natural phenomenon.” Her
“although” in sentence 3 may be the wrong word; Galileo may have disputed the
Ptolemaic theory because of its dependence on Aristotle, not in spite of it. The “presiding
feeling” in sentence 6 and the “predominant philosophy” in sentence 7 are probably
redundant and certainly vague, whatever they were “during that time.” Her “so it was” in
sentence 8 is illogical. It means “therefore,” but sentence 8 is not the logical consequence
of what went before; instead, part of it repeats what she has just been saying about the
violation of scripture and part introduces the new subject of Galileo’s relationship with
the pope. That is to say, she needs to be taught precisely where this paragraph breaks
down and how specifically to make the writing of this paragraph better.

The introduction of Moffett’s own first freshman essay illustrates the same point on a
smaller scale:

Los Angeles, while not exactly the city of angels as its Spanish name proclaims,
has within its environs a multitude of entertainments to please natives and tourists
alike. Regardless of what his individual tastes may be, deep-sea fishing or
listening to a fugue by Handel, there is probably always something which will
satisfy his whim.

It is perhaps atrocious writing, as Moffett says it is. But we should be able to be more
specific about some of the reasons why. The implicit contrast between the pleasures of
heaven (in the city of the angels) and the entertainments of LA is not bad; nor is the
specified contrast between deep-sea fishing and listening to Handel, a contrast which
suggests the range of opportunities he is about to describe. The paragraph is
pretentious—wordy, with its “environs” and its “multitude of entertainments”; clichéd,
with its “natives and tourists alike” and its “individual tastes.” And it is artificial, self-
less, because it has no genuine point of view; it moves from natives and tourists to “his”
tastes and “his” whim without ever deciding or declaring who the “he” is. His first
freshman essay, therefore, may have been as shallow as Moffett suggests, but I would
like to have seen him revise it, to have taken the rich experience of Los Angeles
seriously, to have inventoried it accurately and vividly. And I think his beleaguered
instructor ought to have helped him do that. Since he did not, we are permitted to assume
(wrongly) that the weakness of the LA essay was intrinsic to its subject.
Exposition—let’s call it that until we get a better name—demands considerable care and skill. Moffett’s article emphasizes the care; but as writing teachers we should emphasize both. And we can. Consider the virtues of two pieces of exposition by student writers. The first is an introductory paragraph from a freshman who wrote a girlhood-in-Denver essay.

My parents’ house was very formal, and my brother Tim and I were expected to behave accordingly. We were taught to be neat and clean and, more important, to be sweet and gracious. We could never be wild. Although our house was big, everything was breakable, and we had very little room to play in. We lived in starched and pressed calm. Understandably, we adored any place that was different from our home.

There it is, at the end, the thesis statement, organizing her memories of the places that were different from her home, the places she adored. Her language is lean and personal, acute in its contrasts between simple adjectives, and brilliant in its understatement of “starched and pressed calm.” I agree with what I suppose Moffett would say, that these effects were possible because she was writing about what she “really” thought and felt. Yes. But I want to say too that her writing was rigorously disciplined. The moments of her childhood were made luminous only because of the order, coherence, and point she had learned to give them.

The second example is Chapter 2 from my son’s fourth grade report on the California missions. It illustrates something about reports, even by young children—that they don’t need to be “reports,” paraphrased-plagiarized out of the World Book; that they may be essays, the product of a mind shaping facts. The awful assignment my son received from his teacher had nothing to do with his idea or his writing; it was full of warnings, rather, to watch his footnote form and to take lots of notes. But when I asked him what he wanted to say about the Costanoan Indians (after spending a day among their artifacts in the museum at Santa Clara), he knew: they were friendly and they were skillful. Thesis statement (uncoached by his sly father), order, detail. And the conclusion is spectacular; the two parts converge making the chapter whole and elegant.

When Father Fray Thomas de la Pena arrived in the Santa Clara Valley he met some Indians that were part of the Costanoan tribe. They were friendly and skillful.

One thing they were good at was making arrowheads. They would make long skinny ones and stubby ones out of obsidian. Their arrowheads were all different colors like brown and black.

Two more things they were skillful at were woodworking and making baskets. They could make bows and axes and spears and they could make these things very smooth. The baskets they made were pretty and they were so tight they could hold water.
Not only were they skillful but they were friendly and when Fr. Thomas had founded it the Indians used their skill to help build the mission.

It may be that my son, at age 10, should have been doing other sorts of writing as well as this—that he should have been telling stories about buccaneers and explorers, that he should have been imagining and writing down what he would have done as a young Costanoan boy, that he should have been playing with the sounds and colors of poems. But I want to argue as clearly as I can that in his report, all about second-hand stuff, my son really thought about those Indians.

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Last year at the Bay Area Writing Project I heard Marjorie Kirrie and Ken Macrorie debate the purposes and methods of teaching exposition. Ms. Kirrie likened the learning of writing to the learning of golf and argued that we ought to learn each part of our swing perfectly before beginning to play. Otherwise, she warned, we will just learn all kinds of bad habits which will bedevil our game and keep us from every playing well. The conclusion she drew for us teachers was that from the very earliest grades we should stress skills and drills, that we should be mercifully ruthless in our correction of errors, letting nothing slip by lest it breed a bad habit in our students’ writing.

Ken Macrorie didn’t mention “skills” once. But his eyes twinkled as he read us sample after sample of wonderful writing by students—the portraits of one student’s “Dad,” for example, a monster who haunted her childhood, drunken, violent, beating her and her brothers and sisters, clubbing their pet animals to death before their eyes, but grown ironically senile now and helpless. The wonder, Macrorie said, was how students who had never heard of parallel structure would suddenly use it in a perfect place to astonishing effect. Syntax beyond their conscious power would surprisingly appear just when and where it was needed—syntax generated not by skill but by the truth-telling honesty of the writer.

But Kirrie and Macrorie are both wrong about the task of teaching exposition. Kirrie’s skills are not enough; the forms of organization and logic are not enough. Neither is Macrorie’s truth-telling (the genuine “self” that Moffett advocates). We must try to teach our students to take themselves and their ideas seriously, to develop both a caring self and a skillful mind. So the goal is two-sided, as in Aikido—grace and power—and it is the product of two kinds of respect—respect for oneself and respect for the art.

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