

# Narrative as a Springboard for Expository and Persuasive Writing: James Moffett Revisited

*“Being a writer is powerful. It helps me to express myself. In more ways than one, writing allows me to show my feelings through words.”*

—JaKaila

*“I love to write, I just hate when the teacher makes me write about 5 paragraphs. I like writing letters, lyrics, and meaningful stuff.”*

—Vincent

I delight in the language of my eighth-grade students. Each has a voice—some are unmistakably belted through the halls while others are gingerly whispered in my ear. It is my desire to hear every last one, even those that hang in the periphery or have been silenced. How can I hear each voice, especially the silenced? One answer is through reading their writing. The students I teach have been labeled low-achieving and unmotivated. The two quoted above paint a different picture; their words address a common need: the opportunity for expression.

Most students enter elementary school eager to learn, yet many lose some of that desire in the transition to middle school. When I taught third and fourth grades, students begged for writing time. Author’s chair was a ritual performed daily, and students’ writings were alive, creative, and uninhibited. Yet by eighth grade, students’ love for writing seems to fade. Why does this happen? I suspect this less than enthusiastic response

to writing has something to do with the shift in what counts as writing. The notion of honoring students’ oral traditions and narrative writing is replaced with the demands of expository and persuasive writing. In preparation for state writing tests, middle-level students are forced to put away their “childish ways” of writing narration and focus on the more serious and academic writing of exposition and argumentation.

Academic writing is unquestionably necessary as students advance through the grades, but does it need to be exclusive beyond the elementary grades? Can narrative and academic writing coexist in the middle grades curriculum? What messages are students receiving when narrative writing is either limited or excluded from the curriculum?

After three years of teaching eighth-grade language arts, I wondered, “What role should narrative writing play in my middle grades writing curriculum?” Through reading and discussions with colleagues concerning James Moffett’s (1965) work, I found an educational theory that could support my own inquiry into my teaching practices and my eighth-graders’ writing development. While Moffett’s work may appear dated, he was well ahead of his time. As Walmsley (1993) so eloquently put it, what “makes Moffett

still ahead of his time is he . . . understood the need for a balanced approach to language arts, one that is not fearful of form while promoting meaning, that cherishes students' voices without diminishing teachers' expertise . . ." (p. 126). Even now, Moffett's work is still worthy of attention, and when blended with meaningful topics important to young adolescents, his body of work provides a powerful scaffold for engaging students in writing instruction (Burgess, Ellis, & Roberts, 2010; Dixon, 2010; Paré, 2010).

## Theoretical Perspective

Moffett (1965) contends that one kind of discourse evolves into another, and these language experiences build and reinforce each other in significant ways. Basically, students' writing experiences should build from their inner world to the outer world (Moffett, 1965). What a meaningful connection for young adolescents who are in the midst of moving from an egocentric to a socio-centric perspective developmentally, and who are transitioning from a limited "in the moment" perspective of time and space to the broader "past and future" orientation!

Moffett's (1965) *I, You, and It* theory suggests a spiral of writing experiences, one that supports the development of the writer; that is, when creating writing assignments, teachers consider a purposeful progression of informal to formal, personal to impersonal, and lower to higher abstraction, through the interweaving and interrelation of discourses. The further along these continuums students are able to perform, the greater their range and choice in idea development, organization, sentence fluency, and certainly voice.

Four stages comprise Moffett's (1965) schema of discourse in terms of the speaker–subject progression, or *I–It* relationship: drama, narration, exposition, and logical argumentation. The speaker–audience progression, or the *I–You* relationship, also includes four stages: inner vocalization, outer vocalization, informal writing, and publication. The first stage, inner vocalization, is defined as "what is happening now." At

this stage, students record what is happening as the moment unfolds. At the second stage, outer vocalization, students are the subject and the audience is another person. During this stage—the "what happened"—students must consider the rhetorical situation of speaking or narrating the events to another in terms of selecting, organizing, and presenting their experiences. In the third stage of discourse, students begin to abstract from an experience and make generalizations based on their understanding of an event. At this stage, the level of discourse moves to correspondence, as students engage in informal writing such as composing letters or writing exposition. The fourth stage of discourse takes place in formal writing, as students shift their choice in language, idea development, logic, organization, and voice in an effort to speak to a universal audience. It is at this argumentation level that students begin hypothesizing about what could happen based on present knowledge and past experiences. Understanding Moffett's four developmental stages provided a new way of thinking when it came to teaching expository and persuasive writing.

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## The Writing Spiral

### Bridging Theory to Practice

Moffett's theory is aligned to what most middle grades teachers already know—that student learning is supported and fostered by moving from the concrete to the abstract or from the experiential to the logical argumentation (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's and Moffett's theories provided the rationale necessary to break the language arts tradition at my middle school, thus allowing my students the opportunity to embrace their love for narrative writing as a tool to reach proficiency on the district- and state-mandated writing assessments. Thus, my personal explo-

ration into my teaching practice began with the question, “What happens when narrative is used as a springboard for exposition and argumentation?”

I explored this question with my eighth-grade language arts/reading class. All students in this class were unsuccessful on the district writing tests as seventh graders, and many were second-time repeaters in middle school. Leaning on Moffett’s theory, I designed a set of writing experiences meant to move my students through a progression of informal to formal, personal to impersonal, and lower to higher abstraction. I chose a topic I knew would resonate with them: teen violence.

Why choose such an unpleasant topic? According to the Surgeon General’s Executive Summary on Youth Violence (Rea & Stallworth-Clark, 2003), youth violence is a social disease of epidemic proportions. Violence continues to bleed into the everyday lives of today’s youth. Teen violence indiscriminately cuts across religious, racial, and social lines, and takes on many

### CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

#### Writing to Promote Thinking about Core Values

In the article, the author asks students to think through and write about violence. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan **Giving Voice to Students through “This I Believe” Podcasts** plays off of the National Public Radio website, the “This I Believe” series, which is “a national media project engaging people in writing, sharing, and discussing the core values and beliefs that guide their daily lives.” In this lesson, students participate by writing and recording their own essays. Students first complete a series of activities designed to get them thinking and writing about their experiences. They then write, read, and record their essays for a class blog. The final activity has students comment on each other’s work.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/giving-voice-students-through-1096.html>

forms, such as bullying, teasing, fighting, and sexual harassment. So the answer is, it was *real!* This experiential approach to writing had at its core the complex relationship between experience, language, and thinking (Britton, 1970; Emig, 1977; Judy, 1980).

I introduced one type of writing at a time. First, I asked the students to recall an incident of teen violence and to reflect on, sketch, or mind map the incident. Once they completed the task, they joined a partner and shared their thoughts. This pre-writing activity allowed students to engage in both inner vocalization as they reflected and outer vocalization as they spoke face-to-face with a partner.

While most students sat quietly reflecting on what *had* happened during an incident of teen violence, which is the second level of Moffett’s progression, KaeKae walked to the back corner of the classroom and proceeded to silently enact a scene in which he was beating down another person. When I went over and questioned him about his behavior, he replied, “*Sorry, Ms. Rad, I just had to relive the moment.*” KaeKae showed me that I had failed to consider Moffett’s first level of speaker–subject relationship—drama; that is, recording what *is* happening. I realized some middle school students need to go back to the very beginning to build up to the next stage.

#### Scaffolding Writing Tasks

After students talked with their partners about an incident of teen violence, they wrote to the following prompt:

Everyone has some experience with teen violence. Reflect on your experiences with teen violence; perhaps you were the aggressor, the victim, or a witness. Write to someone you trust, and share one of your experiences with teen violence.

The goal of this assignment was to have students write to someone close (speaker–audience) about something that happened in the past (speaker–subject), thus producing a personal narrative. Upon completing the writing, students were asked to reflect on the process and the rhetorical situation. The students were required to write a

process reflection in the form of a letter to me, answering the following questions:

- Who did you expect to read your narrative?
- What was your purpose for writing this piece?
- What was easy about the writing?
- What was hard for you?
- What is something you really liked about your writing?

Preparing for the next writing assignment, an exposition piece, proved to be a bit more difficult, as focusing on a speaker–audience relationship implies having an available audience. After much consideration I created the next writing situation:

Several university students are preparing to enter the doors of middle schools as teachers this coming August. Think about what these soon-to-be teachers need to know about teen violence when working in middle schools. Write an informational letter or essay to a soon-to-be student teacher giving them a “heads up” concerning teen violence.

Transitioning from narrative to expository created a greater distance between the students as speakers and their audience. Likewise, the distance between the writer and subject increased as students had to generalize from prior knowledge and experiences. Students could no longer rely solely on their personal experience; rather, they needed some general information about middle schools and teens in order to generalize about teen violence in middle school. Again, using the same reflective questions, students wrote process reflections concerning their expository piece.

In the final writing task, the issue of a real audience emerged again, but was resolved through a discussion with the students. The students decided as a class on the intended audience. The class agreed to write their pieces as the start of what would later become a “Stop Teen Violence” campaign for our school. The final rhetorical situation was:

Teen violence is getting out of control at FMS and other middle schools in the county. How will teen violence impact individuals, our school, and our

community? What solutions do you have? Now, write to convince our middle school community that it is time to take a stand against teen violence.

In addition to determining an audience, the distancing of writer and subject matter became an issue. Students were now writing to a mass audience and needed to consider how the rhetorical situation impacted their writing decisions. It was during this portion of the writing project that I taught several minilessons focused on elements of persuasive writing, including techniques such as making a claim, using facts (logos), influencing others’ emotions (pathos), building trust (ethos), and convincing the audience to take action (kairos).

This new level of complexity put many demands on students as they wrote for a distant audience and made inferences from past data. Although students wanted to bring the facts closer to their own lives, they were encouraged to not only generalize, but to theorize or hypothesize to the middle school population. Thus, students were taught how to research youth violence, to access the state’s Department of Education’s website concerning incidents of crime and violence in middle schools within the county, and to consider the different literature we were reading in class during this unit, such as *Give a Boy a Gun* (Strasser, 2000). Upon completion of their final writing, students again wrote process reflections.

### Reflecting and Self-Assessing

Viewing writing as a process and a product, students completed both reflections and self-assessments as they analyzed their work. The student reflections were beneficial as they allowed me to “see” inside my students’ heads. Students shared successes, difficulties, perceptions, attitudes,

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ways of working, and thought processes through their reflections. The most telling source of students' writing development was their analyses of their work. This was the culminating piece of the project.

After all writings and reflection letters were completed, they were returned to the students,

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who looked at audience and purpose across all three writing pieces and wrote a culminating reflection. Once students completed the tasks presented below with their narrative writing, they followed the same pro-

cedure with their expository and persuasive selections. Three tasks were presented:

- Read the piece once carefully and determine the reader based on the writing.
- Go through the piece again and highlight where you show evidence of your awareness of the audience.
- Read the piece a third time and, using a different color, highlight evidence of purpose in your writing.

Students first read all three pieces separately and marked their text for audience and purpose. They then reviewed the three pieces as one complete project, moving along a continuum from narrative to expository to persuasive. Students considered the following and then wrote a final reflection:

- What do you notice about your writing?
- Do your process reflections match the reader and purpose you identified when highlighting?
- Which writing would you classify as your best work? Why?
- Considering the entire project, what was most difficult for you? Why?
- How do you feel about yourself as a writer?

## Looking across the Continuum

Just as the students looked at their writings by pieces and as a full project, I, too, reviewed their writings and reflections in both ways. The first thing that jumped out at me was the craft students used in their narrative pieces. The voice was strong and personal, the descriptions vivid, as most drew me in, and I felt as if I were a spectator standing on the sideline watching the events unfold. Chelsea's narrative was perhaps the most harrowing account I read. When she handed it in, she apologized for it being messy, stating that she cried while she wrote it and the ink started spreading. The following was the opening paragraph of a five-page account of her experience with teen violence:

I don't have to try to remember the day. Saturday, June 14, 2003. It is burned in my mind forever. It is like living in a nightmare and never being able to wake up. The moment right before it happened as Ricka fussed back and forth with Devon, the blast of the gun shots [sic], Ricka falling on the driveway, and the blood oozing out of my sister's mouth play over and over in my mind. I want to hit stop, not rewind and play, but my mind doesn't listen to my heart. I can be wide awake and eating breakfast, or sitting in third period and listening to Mr. P. lecture on the Boston Tea Party, or even be at cheerleading practice after school and the horror movie starts playing.

From there Chelsea went on to paint the horrific scene with her words. After reading her writing, I asked Chelsea if this unit would be too painful for her and suggested she might prefer to write on a different topic, but she said, "*No, for the first time I got to say what I have been thinking for almost a year. I let my grandma read it and she cried. I'm glad we get to write about this.*" The personal narratives the students wrote were neither stilted nor formulaic as they identified the purpose as an opportunity to share, tell, or express their feelings or experiences, and seemed to enjoy doing so.

A shift toward more formulaic writing occurred for some students as they wrote their expository pieces, although many used selections from their narrative writings as a way of illus-

trating their points. Both were evident in Iman's informative letter concerning teen violence to a soon-to-be student teacher. Her introduction reflected the typical five-paragraph essay:

There are a lot of incidents of teen violence in our society today and much of the violence takes place on school grounds. Yes, the place where parents and teachers would think their children are safe. You might be wondering why teen violence happens in middle school. Well, I will tell you. The first reason is because of all the 'he-say, she-say' stuff or you might call it a lack of communication. Another reason for teen violence is bullying and a lot of time that is because bullies have their own problems and need some help they aren't getting. Finally, the lack of respect between people today, whether teen to teen or teen to teacher, encourages teen violence. So, if you want to know how to be successful when you start teaching middle school, read this letter.

Although the introductory paragraph suggested a formulaic response, later in Iman's letter she returned to a portion of her previous narrative writing as she discussed the relationship between respect and teen violence:

Most animals can smell fear and I think it is true for teens as well. Teens never fight around teachers they respect, but that isn't true for teachers that don't connect with students or are afraid of their students. If students can back-talk you and disrespect you, they will do anything in your presence. I have seen it many times before. Take for instance Mr. Jones' class. Everyone knows, even the principal, Mr. Jones has no respect for students and no control either. After he gives the assignment, he just sits behind his desk and waits for the dismissal bell. One day during class, Sara and Jess were getting into it. It started out just two girls flapping their lips at one another, but when Mr. Jones didn't end it, it escalated . . . . When Jess put Sara out there in front of all her peeps, Sara grabbed ahold of Jess' hair and slammed her to the ground.

Iman goes on retelling the incident using an abbreviated version of her personal narrative as support for her claim. The students' use of anecdotes helped offset some of the more formulaic writing that reemerged during expository writing. It was interesting to see how most students abandoned their formulaic writing styles and found their voice again when shifting to persuasive writing.

As students moved along the speaker-audience continuum, the notion of teacher as reader lessened. While the notion of audience became clearer to the students as they progressed, purpose did not. Although students were clear in their purpose for the narrative selection, purpose became a hodgepodge of ideas as they moved toward exposition and argumentation. When describing their purpose for the last two writings, students combined verbs such as *describe* and *convince*; *share* and *explain*; and *show* and *prevent*. I do not view this lack of clarity as a failure because it illustrates Rosen's hypothesis that within all non-narrative discourse "stalk the ghosts of narrative" (as cited in DiPardo, 1990, p. 12). Students used narration as a tool for other writings, blending and mixing their writing rather than boxing them into three specific, identifiable categories.

As students continued to write with greater complexity, their confidence in writing grew. The most surprising find was that over half of the students chose persuasive writing as their best writing and the writing in which they felt most confident. Stephen wrote, "*Persuasive writing was my best writing because the other writings helped me get there. I realized I excelled on the writing I thought I hated.*" It appears that the creative tension, the process of working through the unknown, gave students a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

## Conclusions

Through my inquiry, it was evident that rather than replacing narrative with exposition and argumentation, it is important to consider the classroom processes that allow both oral storytelling and the narrative form of writing to grow

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with a deeper understanding and complexity and coexist as a support for learning new modes of writing.

Narrative breathes life back into the writing curriculum for middle school students and provides a springboard for more complex, academic writing. I have never seen my students as engaged in writing, and while some of their motivation can be attributed to the topic, I believe that the idea of building on success and encouraging a gradual shift toward more abstract writing had significance. I leave the final words to Jacob, who reminds me how important expression is for middle school students:

I think being a writer is special. I get to share a piece of me. It may be something about my life or it may be my thoughts and opinions about life's issues. If I write a lot and I develop skills, maybe I can be an author.

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## NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2012: April 19

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