

Book Review of: Toward a Re-Emergence of James Moffett's Mindful, Spiritual, and Student-Centered Pedagogy

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Received November 2024

Accepted for publication November 2024

Published November 2025

Abstract

In recent years, there has been something of a resurgence of interest in the late language learning theorist James Moffett. While Moffett is less known in holistic learning circles, he was a strong advocate for the integration of spiritual, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of education, viewing them as essential for fostering empathy, personal growth, and societal responsibility in learners. Published in 2023, *Toward a Re-Emergence of James Moffett's Mindful, Spiritual, and Student-Centered Pedagogy* delves deep into the multifaceted contributions of James Moffett with a focus on his spiritual and mindful approach to education and language learning.

Keywords: *James Moffett, spiritual pedagogy, student-centered pedagogy, holistic education*

In recent years, there has been something of a resurgence of interest in the late language learning theorist James Moffett. While Moffett is less known in holistic learning circles, he was a strong advocate for the integration of spiritual, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of education, viewing them as essential for fostering empathy, personal growth, and societal responsibility in learners. Published in 2023, *Toward a Re-Emergence of James Moffett's Mindful, Spiritual, and Student-Centered Pedagogy* delves deep into the multifaceted contributions of James Moffett with

a focus on his spiritual and mindful approach to education and language learning.

One of the book's strengths lie in its structure, which organizes chapters thematically to explore different facets of Moffett's legacy. From philosophical and pedagogical analyses to investigations of Moffett's spiritual turn, each chapter offers a unique lens through which to understand Moffett's contributions. For instance, Gareth Rees-White's chapter examines Moffett's transatlantic relationship with James Britton, highlighting the interconnectedness of language

learning research between the UK and USA. Similarly, Lisa Chong's chapter explores Moffett's spirituality, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that blends civic duty, personal growth, and holistic education.

Additionally, the contributors are a diverse group of scholars, each bringing their own expertise and perspectives to bear on Moffett's work. This diversity enriches the discussion of Moffett's work, by offering readers a range of interpretations and insights into his complex legacy. Chapter One of the book, "The Moffett Roundtable," features a discussion among fourteen experts on Moffett's work, many of whom knew him personally, in which they reexamine the philosophical and pedagogical challenges Moffett faced as he advocated for a more holistic approach to education. The unique roundtable format, especially in conjunction with the wide-ranging encapsulation of Moffett's life and career in the introductions, provides a unique primer to Moffett's life and legacy, especially for those less familiar with his work. Several of the chapters take up parts of his life and legacy to re-evaluate his impact on the field.

Several chapters have a holistic focus, including Chapter Three by Paige Arrington, which presents a comparison between the approaches of Ann Berthoff and Moffett, by emphasizing both the similarities and differences in their ideas regarding the role of humans as meaning mediators. In Chapter Four, Joseph Jones also tackles the spiritual aspects of Moffett's work, by positioning Moffett as an esoteric thinker and emphasizing the need to understand his writings within a broader context of human development and consciousness. Don Gallehr, in Chapter Five, shares his own personal experiences with Moffett to reinterpret Moffett's work on mindfulness and meditation as a cognitive model for composition, despite the initial backlash it faced. Chapter Eight by Jonathan Marine explores noted educator and

philosopher Rudolph Steiner's influence on Moffett by connecting Moffett's interest in abstraction and experiential learning to Steiner's educational philosophy.

One of the most absorbing aspects of this book is its engagement with Moffett's spiritual turn and its implications for education. The introduction to the volume makes a compelling case that Moffett's so-called "turn" to the spiritual and mindful was less an overt change in his approach to education and more of an extension of his early interests in Eastern thought and cognitive approaches to writing. And several chapters, especially those by Jones and Chong, explore Moffett's exploration of spirituality and meditation, arguing for a more holistic approach to teaching and learning. These discussions are timely and offer educators new perspectives on how to integrate spirituality into the classroom in ways that promote empathy, personal growth, and social responsibility.

However, the book is not without its limitations. While it provides a thorough examination of Moffett's work, some chapters may be inaccessible to readers unfamiliar with writing studies or educational theory. Additionally, the focus on Moffett's spiritual turn may overshadow other aspects of his work, such as his contributions to composition theory and pedagogy. Overall, *Toward a Re-Emergence of James Moffett's Mindful, Spiritual, and Student-Centered Pedagogy* is a valuable contribution to both writing studies and holistic education, offering a nuanced exploration of Moffett's enduring legacy to education. By engaging with Moffett's philosophical, pedagogical, and spiritual dimensions, the book invites readers to reconsider their own approaches to teaching and learning. Whether one is a seasoned scholar or a beginning educator, there is much to be gained from the insights contained within these pages.

As someone deeply interested in holistic education, I was thrilled to learn of this new book. My first experience with Moffett's work was discovering his very last book, *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening Through Education* (1994). In it, Moffett offers a powerful and comprehensive perspective on education, society, and spirituality which challenged me to continue to consider new conceptions of what school and education might mean. Moffett encapsulates *The Universal Schoolhouse*:

Each community should organize a totally individualized, far-flung learning network giving all people of all ages access to any learning resource at any time. Nothing is required, but everything is made available. Users make the decisions but avail themselves of constant counseling by a variety of parties. The very concept of schools, classes, courses, exams, and curriculum is superseded. Subjects and methods are reorganized around individual learners forging their personal curricula in interaction with others doing the same across a whole spectrum of learning sites, situations, and technologies. (Moffett, 1994, p. xvi)

Toward a Re-Emergence of James Moffett's Mindful, Spiritual, and Student-Centered Pedagogy takes Moffett's ideas in *The Universal Schoolhouse*, metaphorically fans its embers, and extends the dialogue toward many other modern thinkers in holistic education. My sense is that Moffett's ideas connect to others and that these intersections may be useful to those interested in furthering their own understanding of how to attend to students' mental, emotional, and spiritual growth alongside their intellectual and physical growth.

Exploring one such intersection, Nora Bateson, President of the International Bateson Institute, urges us to embrace complexity when she says, "education is shaped by many contexts: the economy, employment, family, the meaning of success, technology, identity, health, history, tradition." Educational problems and solutions are "transcontextual," which is to say they are embedded within complex systems and there are no quick and easy fixes. James Moffett's radical conception of education as student-centered while also being socially connected and intertwined with social activism and collective community-building speak to the call to account for and integrate many contexts when viewing contemporary teaching and learning practices.

Overall, *Toward a Re-Emergence of James Moffett's Mindful, Spiritual, and Student-Centered Pedagogy* is an opportunity to explore the life, work, and ideas of James Moffett anew with fresh scholarship from contemporary classroom teachers working to enact his ideals in their teaching and instruction intertwined with historically relevant reprints of his own work which demonstrate the backlash he faced in advocating for a more boundless and humane approach to learning. Through advocating for the "spiritual" and "holistic," James Moffett seems to have anticipated the current need and hunger for both. Importantly, he did not turn away from the difficult and complicated, remarking that "if I come back to public schools, it's not —God knows— because I idealize schools. ... I come back to them for one reason. That's where the children are...." (Moffett, 1994, p. 59). We, too, must face the many difficult, complicated, and interconnected contexts in which learning and life take place.

Current day 'eco-versities' are people, organizations and communities who are reclaiming knowledge systems and cultural imagination to restore and re-envision learning

processes that are meaningful and relevant to the challenges of our times. Learner-Centered Ecosystems seem to be channeling Moffett who was the leading exemplar in his time of language arts educators focused on communication as well as individual and collective meaning-making. Looking for connective tissue with everyone reimagining education, we must include Moffett.

From Chapter 6, *Reorienting Teachers' Gaze with Moffett's Vision* by Lisa Chong,

“...Moffett described **individualization** as ‘students engaging in different learning tasks at the same time,’ **interaction** as ‘individuals using oral-language skills within a small group dynamic,’ and **integration** as ‘persons synthesizing their structures for thinking ‘across subjects, media, and kinds of discourses’ (p. 16). The three I’s (individualization, interaction, integration) embody learning that is centered on the learners’ active engagement with self and others as well as their agency to choose and curate their own learning path. For Moffett, individualizing and creating a universal learning network (across different disciplines and communities of practice) were ways teachers could position their students to be better attuned to the spiritual dynamics around them as well.” (p. 113.)

Moffett knew about the reasonable distrust of the word “spiritual,” and he hesitated to use it because as he said, “...it’s apt to trigger associations that will smother my other words. But I haven’t found any better term.” (*Harmonic Learning*, Moffett, 1992, p. 15.) Moffett says “Spirituality is the perception of oneness behind plurality. Spiritual *behavior* is the acting on this perception. Morality follows from spirituality, because the more that people identify with others the better they act toward them.” (*Harmonic Learning*, p.15)

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Author Bio

Sheryl Morris is a self-directed student of holistic education looking for integration of philosophies, theories, and systems that speak to issues of social justice, to the love of Earth; “ultimate concern” that reaches beyond humankind; and knowledge that All is connected. When asked, “What is constant in your own

spirituality as it is today?” Sheryl answers with a quote attributed to Eden Phillpotts, “The universe is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper.”