

The following is an introduction I gave to a summer workshop for regional English and Language Arts teachers, on July 1, 1986. The workshop dealt with new state guidelines for integrating the language arts.

A Very Simple Game: Integrating the Language Arts

One of the real pleasures of these, my silver years (if not yet my golden) is having a large and peaceful house, now free of clattering teen-agers, all of whom are off terrorizing other neighborhoods and beginning to cope with the threat of their own offspring. One of the things that that peace and quiet brings is the chance to lie in bed on Saturday mornings, drinking coffee and watching old World War II movies on Ted Turner's Superstation from Atlanta. Some Saturdays, though, instead of Alan Ladd and John Payne and John Wayne and all those other good old boys I used to watch at the local movie house at the Saturday matinee, for a quarter and another nickel to buy a huge Tootsie Roll with – rather than that, as I say, they are showing one of those late '30s, early 40's soap operas with Bette Davis or Barbara Stanwyck. Not at all the thing for a Saturday morning or nostalgia trips. So I turn over to the Sports Network and there, for good or ill, is the Roller Derby.

To be sure, it is not quite the wondrous thing it was back in the 60's. The track seems smaller, the crowd not so vicious, the skaters less skillful, the carryings-on even more pathetically contrived. If you are not familiar with Roller Derby (no great loss), it involves two co-educational teams who try to lap one another while skating around a small, sharply banked track in the midst of what have to be some of the world's most simple-minded fans. While you are trying to lap that other team, it appears that either there are no rules, or if there are, no one pays any attention to them. You can hold, punch, bite, kick, throw, tackle, block over the railing and into the milling throng below; you can spit on, corrugate with your skates, even trash with a folding chair – anyone, absolutely anyone who gets in your way. As they are fond of saying over on Ted Turner's channel, Watch America's team.

So what has the return of Roller Derby to do with Integrating the Language Arts? This: I remember back in the 60's when giants skated the earth, there was a book out about Roller Derby. I never read the book, but its title was memorable: It was *A Very Simple Game*. That title is very appropriate for Roller Derby. And, oddly, it is very appropriate, too, to teaching the language arts and thus to integrating them. As you probably have seen already, that booklet from the SPI that lays out the new curriculum guidelines

gives the appearance of considerable complexity. And I think it is important to remind ourselves, here at the outset of this busy week, that after all is said and done, what we are about – helping youngsters master their native tongue – is a very simple game.

It's simple for a number of reasons. For one thing, the kids come to us having already done an immense feat of language learning, arguably the most astonishing feat of learning that any person will ever do. And they have done it for the most part on their own. They have learned an incredible amount, even the weakest of the lot, even the runts of the intellectual litter. Consider one little for-instance: They have learned perfectly and without exception when to say *a* and when to say *the* and when to use no article at all. They have learned that – and it is almost certain that no one taught them and that they never were aware of learning it. You can't really appreciate how astonishing a feat that is until you have tried to explain our system of articles and count and non-count nouns to someone for whom English is a second language. Our students, assuming English is their native tongue, have learned that and thousands and thousands of other things – and what is most remarkable is that they don't even know they know it.

That is a lesson we finally learned here at our Academic Skills Center and now profit from: Even those students who come to us seeming to be beyond hope, the very instances for which the term "basket case" must have been coined – even they know more about their language than they know they know.

That is not true when you teach other subjects. It is not true in a math class, nor in social studies, nor in chemistry. It is not even true, I fear, in a sex education class. But in the arts of language all of those kids know more than they know they know.

And better yet, what they know is already an integrated whole. When you learn your native tongue, you do not learn it in bits and pieces. It is always learned and used of a piece. We construct our native tongue in exactly the same way we construct our version of reality. It comes to us in bits and pieces, in broken and constantly changing samples, and out of that flux and buzz of samples we construct a reality that is marked by unity and coherence and wholeness. Those few who don't are called psychopaths. That unity and coherence, that wholeness isn't impressed upon us from outside; no, we express it onto the outside from inside our minds. And I believe that the same thing is true of our learning of our native tongue: The sample of it we experience comes to us in bits and pieces but we learn it as an integrated whole. It is a variation on that old philosophical theme that we experience our world in particulars but our knowledge of it is always in universals. Thus it is with our native tongue that we seem always to have

learned it all.

So when we speak of integrating those language arts, we are really talking about something that runs with the natural grain of language learning and language use. And we are talking about students who in a very real way already know so much that it is quite reasonable to say that most of our work consists not in pumping new information into them but rather in helping them get in touch with more of the amazing stuff they already know but don't know they know.

At the Roller Derby track the commentators try to make the game seem complicated. They try to analyze it. They try to do the same things that textbook writers and writers of curriculum guidelines try to do: to lay things out in all of their impressive complexity. That is a good and necessary thing to do, for even textbook writers and writers of curriculum guidelines are god's children and they, too, play an important role in his plans for the universe. But we should take comfort and profit from the fact that beneath all of that analytical clutter there lies a grand simplicity.

So welcome. Welcome to what we here at Central hope will be just the first in a continuing series of workshops and visits and exchanges as we language arts people discuss ways of best playing our own simple game.