

Scott Hinkley
and the Golden Hook:
or
A Teacher Discovers Himself
in Class 20 Years Later

By Deborah L. Rickey & Scott Hinkley

The small metal hook was surprisingly heavy for its size. Mr. Starr tossed it at me because I was trying not to answer a question about the story we had read — lest I set myself up for more ridicule from my peers. He called this “gift” the Golden Hook Award and bestowed it on students who incurred his wrath. When such an occasion arose, he would unscrew the hook that served as a hand in his prosthetic right arm and throw it at the deserving miscreant.

Deborah L. Rickey is assistant director of the Masters of Arts in Teaching Program at Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana. Scott Hinkley is a graduate of the Masters of Arts in Teaching Program and a first-year teacher.

“That’s for being stupid,” he said. “I know you know the answer. What I don’t know is why you’re acting like you don’t. Now, get with the program.” He then reclaimed the hook and stuck it back in the hole at the end of his prosthetic arm.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with being smart,” he growled at the class. “Too many of you will find yourselves in situations where you don’t know what you’re doing. When you do know the answer — shout it out. It’s a rare thing. You should enjoy it while you can.”

At that point, the only logical thing I could do was

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answer the question correctly. It was the only choice that would keep me out of trouble with Mr. Starr — even the classmates who routinely harrassed me for being a bookworm knew there was nothing else I could do. At that moment, thanks to this gruff old man's tactics, I had the freedom — if not the responsibility — to live up to my potential.

"That's better," Mr. Starr said with a tight grin on his face. "Don't hold out on me again."

I have told that story to friends and colleagues throughout the years, and the reaction has been predictably mixed. Some argue that Mr. Starr was traumatizing his poor students and should have been kept far away from fragile adolescent egos. Others, like myself, felt that he understood all too well the pressures put on a young high school boy to be part of "the crowd" — surly, sarcastic, and hopelessly disconnected from school work. The only way to succeed in school and maintain my precarious social standing was to be put in a situation where I could claim I was "forced" to give the right answer — "forced" to get good grades or else Mr. Starr would do something even more horrific than anything my friends could devise.

Mr. Starr recognized what too many other teachers didn't. I was not stupid, I was making a bad choice: I was selling out my intellect to buy an increase in social status. I never had to work very hard in school, and getting good grades didn't get me any friends. When I stopped working so hard, I was finally accepted into the social mainstream. My new friends valued my membership in their group because I didn't make them look bad. As one of them said: "You used to be such a geek, but now you're cool." So I turned my attention to harassing teachers and staging elaborate pranks. I got away with it, too — after all, I used to be such a nice boy. Now, I was just another trouble-maker with a bad attitude, destined for detention. As my stock with the teachers went down, my popularity rose — I thought I had made the best decision of my 14-year-old life.

It wasn't — and Mr. Starr made it painfully clear on that day. He held me after class and asked me why I was trying so hard to get in trouble. When I told him of my desperate desire to be left alone and not be picked on anymore, he told me that I would be done with high school in three short years. Then I would have to deal with people who didn't care that I was popular in high school, they only wanted to know that I could get things done. No amount of witty comebacks could save me from his steady glare.

"Why do you care?" I finally said, hoping I sounded tougher than I thought.

"Because you're different — you're capable of great things. Don't blow it," he said.

How could I argue with that? I stopped my academic freefall, started doing my homework again, and signed up for his honors English course — etymology — the next semester. In that course, I rediscovered my love of learning — the tough, messy kind of learning where you tear into a problem, sift through the guts and try to piece together a solution using only my meager store of knowledge and my wits. One

compliment from Mr. Starr was worth a week of insults from my former friends. In his classroom I was once again a smart kid, a competent kid, a worthwhile kid.

Debbie Rickey: Finding Scott

Scott was one of our cohort members — a student of ours in his middle thirties, who had already had several successful careers as a journalist, computer specialist and a businessperson. When he first applied to our program, we wondered the same thing — why are you here? Clearly he had the abilities to do many different kinds of jobs, and probably make much more money than he would as a teacher.

What we knew about him was that he had also been the drama sponsor at the local high school for a number of years and really had been a “lone ranger” out there with the drama troupe. We had heard he was tough, demanding, overconfident and, well . . . passionate about his drama program and you had better not get in his way. We wondered what he was doing trying to become a math teacher. From the beginning of the semester, it was clear he was smart, quick, and also quick to judge. He gauged his responses to the rest of the cohort, not really opening up and revealing too much of himself and yes, challenging all of us on several occasions. Passionate, yes . . . but a passionate teacher? Not by a long shot.

What we found as the semester began was that Scott was a very bright and creative individual who had some deeply-held hurts and anger about his own schooling and interactions with adults and teachers. Interactions that left him feeling like he “didn’t fit in,” and maybe even not wanted. Adults had let him down, teachers especially. They hadn’t taken time to see the teenage boy who had moved five times during his school years — they couldn’t see how intelligent and bored he was. All they saw was another smart mouth in the back row. These feelings and memories surfaced during our first semester and I think some were just too painful to talk about. And certainly not be shared — too much to risk.

Scott kept to himself for much of the first semester and I am sure did not win many points with his fellow cohort for some comments and discussions. Was this person really going to make a good teacher? Would he be able to take those feelings of hurt and injustice and turn them into passionate teaching?

Scott was certainly passionate about his subject — he loved math, numbers, problem solving, and things associated with it, computers, technology — that we weren’t worried about. But would he be able to take the wall of frustration he had built up around schools and turn that into a passion stirred by his experiences and released to help his own students? What we needed was to see him in action with students.

The trouble was it was summer when our program began and not many schools around have school in session — kids and teachers alike were ready for a break! What we found was a neighboring school district who was going to be offering a two week “early start” for some of their students who had not performed well last year in school either on standardized tests, grades and even with issues

like attendance and discipline. In other words, this school's "at-risk" population.

Armed with a few case studies on some of the potential attendees, Scott and the rest of our pre-service teachers were divided up between four regular classroom teachers, each room having students assigned to them for the 10 days of this "early start." We hoped our pre-service teachers would meet kids who had not done well in a regular school setting; watch as teachers found ways to give them support and help with their areas of weakness; and maybe, just maybe, begin to make the connection between our readings and these real life, flesh and blood kids, each with names, histories and ideas about school. Did our pre-service teachers get this?

Scott Meets the Dynamic Duo

Twenty years later, I'm facing down a young man with crutches, big ears, and a razor-sharp wit in a local junior high classroom. I am there as part of a two-week summer practicum for my MAT program. This program was designed to help failing and remedial students prepare to re-enter the school in the fall — and hopefully give them the skills they need to advance to the next grade. Chad, however, is too busy making strange noises and funny faces to benefit from this program. He has done none of the math problems on his worksheet and is busy creating a ruckus with his partner in crime, Ron. The teacher in charge tells him that he will never get out of summer school if he doesn't learn how to behave in a classroom. Just another trouble-maker destined for detention.

Yet something about the energy behind his outburst draws me to his table. He's not being surly, he's not being sarcastic — there's something else going on in his mind.

"So, what's up with number one," I ask.

"It's stupid," Chad responds.

"Maybe, but do it anyway," I counter.

And he does. In his head, no less. He writes the answer down and looks up at me with a goofy grin.

"So what's the next one?" Problem by problem he proceeds to destroy the worksheet and make a mockery of the reason he's in this program in the first place. Chad knows how to solve every problem I put in front of him, even when he rushes through the calculations and comes up with an incorrect answer. Ron does the same thing. The answers aren't always right, but the process for solving the problems is.

"Why," I ask this dynamic duo, "are you guys here? You know what you're doing. What's the problem?"

"I didn't do my homework at all last year," Ron says.

"I just rush through the test, and if I feel like it, I go back and do the work," says Chad.

I suddenly wish I had a metal hook at the end of my right arm to throw at these two.

Debbie: Scott Meets the Educational System

This is when Scott, assigned to that classroom, began to take special notice of Chad. Why would a boy who so clearly is capable of doing the work be here in the first place?

Scott quickly became intrigued by Chad and began helping him in class, giving him harder and harder problems to do. Chad ate it up. He asked Scott for more and Scott finally asked the regular teacher if they could take Chad and a couple of other students like this into a different room and really let them go with math. The teacher seemed only too glad to get "rid" of Chad and his buddies. What was Scott thinking? He now had a small collection of under-achieving students who were going to be expected to pass the exit test in a few days.

Scott and Brenda, his MAT partner, worked with these students, helping them with math, talking to them as though they were good math students, and finding other more challenging work for them to do. Chad, for one, loved it.

During this time, Scott also began asking questions of anyone who would listen. "What is Ron like during the school year?" "Why was Chad put here? What were his grades?" And, "Do you have a talented and gifted program?" The reply to that brought laughs and smirks to the faces of the teachers: "Gifted — for Chad?? Yeah, right."

I remember thinking Scott was really taking an interest in Chad, a genuine interest not only about his math skills and abilities but also about why he was there. Each day after working with students, our pre-service teachers would meet back on campus and debrief about their morning. We would all wait to hear what Scott had found out that day about Chad and listened to more stories about his time in class. We all found ourselves caught up in this kid who was so ok and yet no one was noticing.

Later, Scott told me he saw some of himself in Chad — a bright, probably bored to disruption kid who teachers really didn't understand and didn't care to. They saw the demeanor, the lack of interest in school work, and had shut him out. Scott, like Chad, had moved many times in his middle and high school years. A self-pronounced "geek," Scott would attempt to hide his feelings through clever talk, witty banter, and a very cocky exterior. Like Chad, it wouldn't have taken much to get through to him — just having teachers notice his potential would have helped.

It was towards the end of the first week when we all gathered as a cohort with the teachers and administrators from the school to reflect on our experiences so far. When asked if there were any questions, Scott's was the first hand to shoot up and ask, "What is the deal with Chad? Why is he here?"

To which the reply was: "Oh, Chad . . . well he is just like his last name . . . Dim."

I am not sure where I looked first — at Scott or the other teachers, but the look on Scott's face made me wince . . . I think he might have gone out of his chair if another cohort member had not put his hand on his shoulder. His face was red,

masked in pain and I could see tears spring to his eyes. He tried to speak, but then didn't. I am not sure of the rest of that conversation . . . but I guess it didn't matter. I had just seen the passion awakened.

Debbie: The Student Becomes a Teacher

Most of us . . . signed up for this profession because we care deeply about our important place in the lives of students. To put it simply: in addition to a brain, we have a heart – and we want to put it to use in promoting young people's learning.
—Roland Barth (2001)

This heart, according to Barth, or passion, as Fried calls it, is exactly what we had in mind when we created the Master of Arts in Teaching program, Earlham College's answer to teacher education in the 21st century. We already had used *The Passionate Teacher* as a foundational book in the creation of our program, but now our challenge was how to help transform our pre-service teachers into passionate teachers. How to get them to be really committed to that bridging of their passion about their subject to their students? We knew we wanted them to become passionate teachers, but our challenge lay in how to set up the program to help them make that transformation.

After much thought, reflection, and discussion, we decided to take a very intentional approach toward the teaching of passion, one that would give our pre-service teachers a way to define, activate and use their passion for student learning. We also realized, however, that being intentional about the teaching of passion would not be enough. We needed to be able to create a process for learning passion, rather than simply an explicit plan for the teaching of it. What we asked ourselves was, is it possible? Would it be possible to awaken passion through a process?

While passion is not a word that seems to lend itself to practical application, passion can be put to practical use. The core of this book is that passion is not just a personality trait that some people have and others lack, but rather something discoverable, teachable and reproducible, even when the regularities of school life gang up against it. (Fried, 1995)

Debbie: The Rest of the Story

Scott stayed like a burr on Chad during the next week, helping him to understand why he needed to do well on the test, why he did need to show his teachers how smart he was, and why, he, Scott, really liked him.

The day the big test arrived, Scott knew that if Chad didn't do well on the test, he would have to repeat the 8th grade, and Scott also knew that Chad had never put out the mental effort to do well on any test. Scott talked to Chad once more about "taking the time to really show us what you can do." Chad went to work. Amazingly, he seemed to be working the entire time, really concentrating.

I was walking down the hall past the math room when the door opened and Scott

came out. He looked funny, excited, flushed, but yet, something about his eyes . . . he was crying!

Scott told me Chad had passed and not just passed, really passed! He had correctly solved all the problems, but one . . . the one he didn't get to finish. As our other MAT students came out and heard, we all stood there with teary eyes, hugging and congratulating Scott. It was at that moment I knew I had seen Scott take his passion and transfer it to a student whose "dilemma and potential" had captivated him. This was a passionate teacher.

Creating an Environment for Passion to be Practiced

Scott's experience with Chad wonderfully illustrates the goal of our program. We emphasize the practical application of passion for our pre-service students and present them with opportunities to discover passionate teaching for themselves. What we have come up with is a simple process that creates opportunities for passion, validates the pre-service students' experiences, and then encourages them to translate their passion into action.

One of the first things needed for the teaching of passion is a safe and supportive environment where it can be openly explored. Pre-service teachers need a place in which acknowledging their passion is not only accepted, but seen as a necessary part of becoming a teacher. We didn't want to help our students develop their passions only to lose them quickly — we wanted this to be a lasting foundation for a lifetime of passionate teaching.

Connecting Passion to Children's Learning

Of course, passion itself is not the goal of education. It is a bridge that connects us to the intensity of young people's thoughts and life experiences — things that they too rarely see as a part of school. Once that connection has been made, we can help transfer passions about ideas into habits of hard work, discipline and practice that will remain with them even when the going gets rough, when peers cajole them to "take it easy." (Fried, 1995)

To make the leap from being "passionate about teaching" to "passionate teaching," the pre-service teacher needs to stop feeling passionate and start acting passionately. It's not enough to be passionate about your content area or to be passionate about "kids" — that only gives students a piece of what is needed from their teachers. They need to be passionate about kids learning. And it is not enough to be passionate about teaching and learning — it must be taken further and become "teaching FOR learning." After the connection is made, the pre-service teacher's sole purpose becomes how to teach so Sam can learn, so Suzie can learn, so Tonio can learn.

That is the connection we wanted our pre-service teachers to build; taking their

passion and connecting it to real students with real issues, problems and lives. For Scott, Chad became his bridge. Scott was able to take his own learning experiences and thinking about school and bridge it to Chad's circumstances. Chad became Scott's connection — he started teaching for Chad's learning. Scott's purpose for teaching became his passion for Chad' learning.

Validating the Passion of Inexperienced Teachers

Once the connection IS made, pre-service teachers begin looking for validation of their excitement or passion. Our job now is to take seriously the excitement, the frustration, the anger, and the ideas. Whatever the pre-service teacher may be showing us in a passionate moment, we must help them see the value in it. Don't dismiss it or react too much. Helping them validate their own feelings — passions — only helps to cement the connection and gets them ready to channel that passion into action. If an idea is worth talking about, it is worth doing. No passion is too great or small, and the pre-service teacher needs to see and hear that validated. When Scott reacted to the comments about Chad being "just like his name" or comments like "we don't connect gifted and talented with Chad," it would have been easy for us to have just calmed Scott down and helped him forget about the encounters. After all, the comments were outrageous! But what was really needed were clear, calm heads and thoughts to help Scott take the anger and turn it into passion. This needed to be a teachable moment for Scott.

So, we listened, offered advice, and talked through the "game of school" that is often played by the adults. We tried to help him understand more clearly about schools and their sometimes unhelpful ways with students. We did not try to minimize the effect on Scott or Chad, but we also did not let ourselves get swept up in a cloud of emotions, although it would have been easy to do! We helped Scott think through his reactions and think about strategies: Now that we know what we are up against, what can we do? How can we move around these circumstances and still help the student?

Feeling passion is not enough — being passionate is our goal. Had Scott simply remained angry and frustrated by the treatment of Chad, his passion would have cooled as quickly as his anger. Instead, we helped Scott find ways to turn that passion into action. Had Scott devoted himself solely to the few students he could most directly identify with, his passion could easily have been seen as favoritism. Not only did he work with Chad on math and test-taking, but Scott began to consider other over-looked students and search for ways he could connect with them. He worked through his disappointment and anger and used it to take action. It was through the transformation of passion into action where Scott's stance began to take shape. Scott's journey as a passionate teacher had begun.

Chad, Ron, and the others in his class were the beginning. Scott needed them to make the connections to his passion real and valid, but it didn't stop there. Scott

continued his journey as a passionate teacher during the fall and spring semesters of student teaching. A different school, with different classes, but Scott's questions remained the same — "Who are my students? What can I learn about them? How can I create a learning environment that will help each student reach their potential?" He spent many mornings before school giving encouragement to a student who believed she couldn't do the math — but she did. Another student who spent the entire first semester hunched over his sketchpad joined in the class — and earned straight As for the second semester. And another young man, who was taking geometry for the second year, took an honest interest in his classwork after Scott took an honest interest in him — this student wanted to go to Germany and become a pastry chef.

And this is exactly what we had hoped for — creating an environment for passion that would appear not just for a brief moment but would become part of each teacher's stance, a habit. Chad and Ron served a valuable purpose — they became the hook Scott needed to take his passion and bring it into passionate teaching.

Scott: Epilogue

The last time I encountered Mr. Starr's hook was the final day of my sophomore year. We were working as a group on a puzzle, and I thought Mr. Starr had left the room. I told my newest group of friends — the ones who signed up for Mr. Starr's etymology class — that I was moving again. Suddenly, I felt a cold weight on my right shoulder. Mr. Starr looked down with a look that, if he were anyone else, could only be described as tender. In deference to his gruff manner, however, I will call it "concerned."

"When do you leave," he asked quietly.

"July," I squeaked, startled more by his manner than his sudden appearance.

"Well, you take care out there. Take the toughest classes they have to offer. Anything less would be a waste."

Twenty years later, I'm telling my students the same thing.

References

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