

Life with Ted:

A Hipplite Speaks Out

When I was seven my older brother and sister took me into my bedroom, told me to sit down, and changed my life forever. All that I had believed in, hoped in, was gone. Apparently, they had searched the house and discovered where our parents hid our Christmas toys, causing them to reach the conclusion that there was no Santa Claus. Why they felt inclined to break this news to me, I have yet to understand. What I do know, however, is that their revelation completely turned my life upside down. I was no longer sure of anything and began to question everything: the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, Rudolph's ability to fly. This one event turned my life in a new direction. The feelings it aroused have been repeated throughout the years, especially during the times I am venturing into unknown waters, attempting things never before tried, or questioning standard, acceptable practice. It was during such a point in my life when I met Ted Hipple. And, once again, my life was changed.

The first class I took with Ted was a young adult literature course. I knew next to nothing about the genre, a deficiency which Ted soon eradicated. He introduced me to the history of YA literature, the story of the conception of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN), and the novels themselves. I instantly fell in love with these books and developed an insatiable appetite for more of them. Fortunately, Ted



was more than willing to share his vast supply of books, as well as his knowledge. He pointed me to the mainstays of the field (*The Outsiders*, *The Pigman*, and *The Chocolate War*) and to titles considered to be controversial (*Annie on My Mind*, *The Drowning of Stephan Jones*, and *Forever*), always sharing his passion and nurturing my new-found love. It was during this encounter and awakening of sorts, I determined that what I was doing in my seventh-grade classroom was no longer acceptable. “No wonder stu-

dents don't enjoy reading,” I mused. “I force them to read books they have no interest in. Something's gotta give.” The something was provided by Ted.

Reader Interest Surveys

Dr. Hipple, as I knew him then, questioned me about the choices I made for classroom novels and how I determined which books would be read. For once, I knew the answer: some choices were based on personal likes and the rest were ones “they” told me must be read. The next question he had for me concerned who “they” were and why I was allowing them to tyrannize me. (See [Hipple's 1989 English Journal article “The Tyranny of the Ts”](#) for more about tyrannization.) I couldn't answer him. From there he introduced me to a reader interest survey. This one instrument proved to be a catalyst of sorts, changing what I did in the classroom in a major way.

No longer did I randomly choose books or give the infamous “they” power to make the choices for me. The novels my students read related directly to their interests. Through a reader interest survey I developed as a class requirement for Ted, I was able to determine that students in my classroom liked humor stories, “stories that could be real,” and mysteries. More than anything, they wanted to read something that didn’t have “words nobody has used in ages.” It was at this point, I introduced them to *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) and the entire tone of the class changed. Students could not wait to learn what happened to Ponyboy, Johnny, Sodapop, and the rest. I overheard them talking in the hallway and at lunch about what they were reading. They were making predictions and creating story guesses. Their appetites had been teased, and they wanted a full meal. Their excitement grew even more when I told them to store their literature anthologies on a shelf in the back of the room. Their motivation propelled me into action. We would read more novels and then more novels. I was hooked and had become a young adult literature junky. I turned to Ted for my fix.

It’s Not What Kids Are Reading, But That Kids Are Reading

By the end of this first class with Ted, I had been introduced to a new and exciting way of teaching. Throughout that semester, my students and I read young adult novels, discussed their themes, and examined them for literary merit. I discovered that I could teach the same skills I taught through the traditional textbook method, but in a more interesting manner. With the reading of Rawls’ *Where the Red Fern Grows* (1961), students examined figurative language in detail. They found examples of idioms, personification, similes, and metaphors. What made this concept exciting for them was highlighting the examples. Suddenly, they were being told it was OK to mark in their book. For me, the excitement came from their enthusiasm, knowledge, and authentic connection between skills, reading, and writing.

It was during this time I heard what has become one of my favorite quotes: it’s not what kids are reading as much it is that kids are reading (Hipple, 1997). He used this quote in class to prove that the primary goal teachers should have for students is that they are reading. According to Ted, sometimes teachers get so caught up in the literary value of works and

whether or not they are part of the canon that they sometimes forget how crucial it is that kids are actually reading. And, he argued, a large percentage of kids just won’t read canonical literature. Furthermore, he shared, some of the staples of the 1960s (*The Pigman* and *The Outsiders*) have become classics because they “represent excellence in storytelling, character development, language, and exploration of theme” (Hipple, 1993, p. 5). Hearing this argument changed my attitude and opinion about what kids should read.

Ted convinced me that my middle school students did not have to read literature simply because it had always been read in the past. The success I was having with young adult literature supported Ted’s position. For me the choice was a simple one. I would use these novels in my classroom and never look back.

DOWMs

With my new-found love for young adult literature came an increasing desire to incorporate multicultural works into the curriculum. I wasn’t sure how to do this because of the limited knowledge I had of the books out there. Once again, I turned to Ted.

He came into class one day and wrote the word DOWMs on the board. Not sure what this was but knowing instinctively that if it was important enough for the renowned Dr. Hipple to write on the board, then it had to be something significant. And it was. Throughout my undergraduate English major days and middle school teaching experience, almost everything I read and required students to read were written by venerated DOWMs. According to Ted, my allegiance to them resulted in my students missing out on a lot of good stories. Who were they (the DOWMs)? I had no idea, yet somehow I knew that I must break the bond I had with them.

It turns out that DOWMs is no more than literature written by

- Dead
- Old
- White
- Men

I left class with the hold held over me by all DOWMs dramatically loosened. Mind you, the union was not completely severed because, as Ted reminded me, a lot of the work by DOWMs really is terrific, and it would be a shame to categorically discard them. But their grip was not as tight as it had been. In replacement, Ted shared with me stories by Walter Dean Myers,

Katherine Paterson, Gary Paulsen, and many others. Some of them were multicultural titles, some by women, some by men, and none of them were written by DOWMs from hundreds of years past.

From Ted I learned that multicultural literature does not have to be literature written by specific ethnic groups. He showed me that Greene's *Drowning of Stephan Jones* (1992) was multicultural because of its subject matter; that *With a Hammer for My Heart* (1997) by Lyon and Cleavers' *Where the Lilies Bloom* (1969) were multicultural because of the setting, language, and culture presented. Stepping outside of the power of the DOWMs revealed that multicultural literature was plentiful.

It's All in the Attitude

Perhaps more than anything else I learned from Ted was the importance of a positive attitude. He made class enjoyable. True, he had high expectations of me as a student and a doctoral candidate, but the payoff was much higher. Ted challenged me to perform to the best of my ability. Because I knew he did not like mediocre work, I strove to excel. Often, I was like a sponge soaking up information he shared. If Ted suggested I read a book, I read it. If he thought I should attend a conference, I went. This was not because he meant any of these as requirements, but rather because I had faith in Ted's opinion, and I knew he cared about me as a person and wanted me to do well. His attitude conveyed this.

Ted began each and every class I took under him with an opener. I learned that openers were, basically, anything he decided they were. They typically were brief, lasting anywhere from two to five minutes and were, more often than not, hysterical. The openers were short quips he read at the beginning of class. Their purpose was to create a rapport with students so that we could become a community of learners. They worked. The classes I had with Ted were filled with people who wanted to be there, who wanted to learn, and who wanted to become better English educators. Ted inspired us all, and his attitude was such that we all wanted some of it to rub off on us.

Beyond these, Ted was, without fail, approachable. Though I knew as a student that he was a legend in the young adult literature world, I was never apprehensive about approaching him with questions or ideas. He encouraged me to become active in the publishing arena and even went as far as to orches-

trate articles that we could co-author. His support was unwavering, and I continued to run ideas by him and ask for suggestions in my role as professor.

Flash Forward

Armed with Ted's belief that the best reason to use young adult literature in the classroom is because kids will read it, I started a new career of sorts. He convinced me that middle school students love reading this genre, that it can be used to teach literary skills, and that it belongs in the curriculum in a central, not a peripheral, place (Hipple, 1997). But even beyond this, he also convinced me that I could be a teacher educator. Through his relentless support and love for sharing his knowledge and understanding of young adult literature, I earned my doctorate and entered into higher academia.

Today, so much of what I learned from Ted I share with pre-service and experienced teachers. When I read an opener to the class, I hear his voice. I begin each semester administering a reading interest survey and teaching students how to create their own survey and use it to enrich their teaching. I discuss DOWMs and the stranglehold they have on so many of us. I use humor to build a community of learners and attempt to keep a positive attitude and an approachable demeanor. As a Hipplite, I think I owe it to Ted.

Melissa Comer, a former student of Ted Hipple at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is a Literacy Block Assistant Professor at Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville.

Works Cited

- Blume, Judy. *Forever*. New York: Bradbury, 1975.
- Cleaver, Vera & Cleaver, Bill. *Where the Lilies Bloom*. New York: Lippincott, 1969.
- Cormier, Robert. *The Chocolate War*. New York: Dell, 1974.
- Greene, Betty. *The Drowning of Stephan Jones*. New York: Bantam/Starfire, 1992.
- Lyon, George Ella. *With a Hammer for My Heart*. New York: D. K. Ink, 1997.
- Hinton, S. E. *The Outsiders*. New York: Dell, 1967.
- Hipple, Ted. "The Tyranny of the Ts." *English Journal*, 22.9 (1989): 56-60.
- Hipple, Ted. "What's Good About the Best?" *Connecticut English Journal*, 22.3 (1993): 3-6.
- Hipple, Ted. "It's the That, Teacher." *English Journal*, 86.3 (1997): 15-17.
- Rawls, Wilson. *Where the Red Fern Grows*. New York: Doubleday, 1961.
- Zindel, Paul. *The Pigman*. New York: Harper Collins, 1968.