

WORDS MATTER

Jason Pelowski, who teaches math and video production at Chaska High School, knows that words can hurt. “I have a learning disability – dyslexia,” he says. “In almost every class I hear the word retard. ‘Oh, I’m such a retard.’ ‘That’s so retarded.’ As soon as that word is used, it shuts down the learning environment for kids working to overcome their disabilities.”

To help his students understand the frustration of dyslexia, he gives them an assignment with a twist – it’s missing a few key words they need to complete it successfully. Jason’s students see for themselves how important it is that every student feel safe and that the words they use have an impact on others. “In the process I see a ton of cliques break down,” he says. “Their learning has really increased.”

The FISH! Philosophy has helped Jason create, with his students, “the kind of classroom we want.” Students are learning the technology by “playing” with it, experimenting,

asking questions and becoming more curious. They are learning to choose their attitudes so they are better able to receive criticism that helps their work become better.

One day, the most technically gifted student made the day of two classmates by telling them that their work had “raised the bar for everyone.” From that day on, Jason says, “I heard more students saying to each other, ‘That’s cool. How did you do that?’ That’s an empowering question to hear. You may have thought what you did was no big deal, but suddenly someone wants to know, ‘How did you do that?’ That’s when real learning occurs, when the barriers between students come down.”

In Jason’s classroom, everyone is a learner, including him. Instead of acting as someone who is all-knowing and all-powerful, Jason acts more as a facilitator who guides and supports. He works hard to reach out to students who otherwise might not reach

back. A few years ago, when a student who had tried to commit suicide left school temporarily for chemical dependency treatment, Jason invited him to keep attending video production class so he wouldn’t lose an important connection. The boy turned his life around.

His mother wrote to Pelowski, “*When he could barely handle being at school, you called and told him that you needed him . . . I cannot tell you how powerful that was for him. . . It is in times like these when a good teacher becomes a great one.*”