

# CHALK TALK: The Art of Purposeful Personal Teaching

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Starbucks has recently released its new “holiday” cup design this year.

Last year’s blank red cup design was blasted by a few conservative Republicans and one evangelist who declared that the blank cups were waging war on Christmas, and by extension, Christians.

Starbucks argued that the blank cups were a form a unity, a way for each customer to write their own story.

This year, the new cup is green, and features a spotlight on the cup that includes hand-drawn baristas, customers, and their friends and families. The artist, Shogo Ota, made a purposeful choice in his design — 132 people are drawn together using one continuous line.

While the cup is meant to be symbolic of the ideals of the holiday season, I also see it as symbolic of our goal as educators, a goal that often gets lost amidst spreadsheets of MCAS scores, standards, Do-Nows, and data points. Ota’s design, both purposeful and personal, encapsulates what I strive for in my classroom.

When I say purposeful, I do not mean having thoughtful questions and focused learning objectives that help students see why they are learning what they are learning. That’s educator prep 101 and just plain good teaching.

Purposeful teaching is choosing to have students read Amy Tan’s “Mother Tongue” to give them an outsider’s perspective on the complexities of “just speak English.”

It’s making sure that I call on some of my autistic students first and point out their strong analysis of a novel during Socratic Seminar.

It’s praising my Ecuadorian student for his beautiful use of Spanish in his personal narrative and using it as a class model.



From the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Northampton, Mass. Used by permission.

At a time when our nation is so divided, I've made a purposeful choice to build community in my classroom by attempting to show students that our differences make all of us better readers, writers and thinkers.

My colleagues have also made similar purposeful choices.

We have foreign language teachers who went out of their way to find out if there was a way to use gender neutral pronouns in class for our transgender and gender non-conforming students (at least in French, there is!).

A video production teacher brought his students to a Trump rally so students could see "the other" up close and challenge the narrow stereotype that the media has focused upon so heavily.

Making teaching personal means realizing that J. lives for biking and building, and giving less homework so that he can do those things after-school. It means asking him if he's going for a ride today and where he's going and what his newest jump looks like. It means giving him a break when he can't sit still another moment and is desperately trying to wrap his head around writing using extended metaphors.

Personal means that when students in the journalism course are completely stressed and overwhelmed by the sheer amount of homework they are struggling to do in some of their AP classes, I decide not to do a "Do Now" and instead listen to them.

I ask them questions about why they look so miserable and really hear them when they say they are more focused on getting work done rather than actually thinking about what they are learning.

They breathe a visible sigh of relief when I ask if I can bring this to the greater school community for discussion, even if no immediate changes are going to be made. "Thanks for listening Mrs. O," a student smiles, and then asks, "Can we go over my article revisions? I want to see if the organization fits better." Now, we can focus on the task at hand.

Making teaching purposeful and personal is often hard to quantify and harder to observe in a classroom walkthrough, but no less important.

Education is giving students the skills to draw the figures on the green cup. But that's only one part. The other part is building an educational system that creates students who understand and exemplify the vision behind Shogo Ota's design: We are a global community. Though our individual drawings may differ, we are all connected.

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