Educators work hard to help students focus. That includes John Senisi, OCT, but he’s referring to a camera, not their attention.

“The visual arts teacher starts with this premise: students are eager to be in school. Most want to learn, they just don’t want their time to be wasted,” says Senisi, who teaches at St. Jean de Brebeuf Catholic High School in Woodbridge, Ont., just north of Toronto.

Here’s his formula: connect the curriculum to something that matters to students. Tap into their natural curiosity. Give them autonomy. Get them to work together.

“Then you just get out of their way,” he says.

It’s important to teach the technical aspects of, say, composing a photograph. “But that’s just a tool to facilitate their deeper learning,” says Senisi, who this year is teaching Grades 9, 10 and 11. “I want students to feel like they have agency.”

What does he mean? Too often, he says, students become frustrated. They feel like they lack power. Or they don’t see the links between their learning and the real world. Senisi wants students to make those connections and know that they can make a difference. The work they produce should actually mean something.

Senisi’s approach earned him a 2017 Prime Minister’s Award for Teaching Excellence. He was cited in part for encouraging lessons and projects that tie to social issues and community needs. Often, the projects involve students meeting or working with community leaders and organizations.

For instance, a few years ago, one of his Grade 12 classes worked with the nearby City of Vaughan Archives to match historic images with their present-day locations, taking new shots of each. Besides assisting the archives, Senisi explains that the project helped students to understand vantage points: “To see with someone else’s eyes is to more deeply understand our own,” he says.

The online version of the photo exhibit (oct-oeeo.ca/VaughanRetrospective) won a 2015 APEX Award, a competition for publication excellence, in the social media category.
John Senisi, OCT, with his visual arts students in front of their mural project at St. Jean de Brebeuf Catholic High School.

Another of Senisi’s classes undertook a project with the Nature Conservancy of Canada (ncc-oeco.ca/ConservationDocs) and the Toronto Region Conservation Authority. The students studied the Humber River and Don River valley systems, and created documentary videos for YouTube (ncc-oeco.ca/ConservationDocs). Last year, his Grade 12 class mounted a photography exhibit at the Kortright Centre for Conservation in Vaughan, Ont., an environmental and renewable energy education and demonstration centre. The exhibit showcased naturalized and artificial ecosystems and raised awareness of conservation efforts. Senisi had the students drive the entire project, including all administrative and promotional efforts.

“As a teacher, I want to give students a voice,” he says. “I want them to be the leaders in what we do.”

Senisi became a practising artist and soon entered the Queen's University Artist in Community Education program, for those who want to teach. Since he started teaching in 2001, Senisi has empowered students to guide the class agenda and effect change, and to do it collaboratively. “My classroom is like a lab. We’re exploring. I often don’t know what we’re going to do until I talk to the students.”

Early in the school year, he leaves some final projects and weeks of class time up for negotiation. It’s no free-for-all; there are curriculum goals, but Senisi can allow considerable freedom because he creates a strong instructional infrastructure. On the class website he has organized tutorials, videos, handouts and assessments — content students need to progress in their studies.

Senisi says it’s hard for many teachers to give up control and have the faith that students will stay on track. To him, giving them that responsibility is an essential part of learning. “He totally flips the classroom,” says colleague Lara Gudelj, OCT, a communications technology teacher at St. Jean de Brebeuf. “It’s all student-centred. It’s about giving them the platform to express themselves, and encompassing community and teamwork in these endeavours.”

Gudelj says Senisi excels at helping students think independently and connect the arts with the skills he learned as a student—such as critical thinking and creativity — and see their learning as relevant in any subject. She cites the way he encourages students to pay close attention and reflect. “At every opportunity, Senisi says, “we must look for the connection between what they’re learning and how it applies to their lives.”

Senisi’s experiences as an artist and a student colour his teaching philosophy. In high school, he felt he never fit in. He struggled to understand the point of what he learned, and generally felt stifled, sensing his desire to question wasn’t welcome. In university, he found what he calls his “kindred spirits.” At the University of Toronto, he pursued a minor in medieval studies and majors in Italian studies, as well as art and art history. Senisi focused on the smaller details, like crystals. “We were at the same place,” she says, “and he just had a different perspective.”

It’s important for students to see the big picture, all the patterns and themes. But Senisi wants students to see the forest and the trees.

That became particularly evident in one class. After briefly shuffled between two groups of students — instructing one on how to use a tripod, helping with the other to review uploaded project files — Senisi led students across the road to a forested park where they continued a semester-long assignment.

Student teams had used the GPS on their phones to pick an area in the forest with a 10-foot radius. On this day, as they did weekly, the students took pictures of that spot. The goal was to apply their photography skills to document the seasonal changes that occurred. It’s just another way he encourages the students to pay close attention and reflect.

In a nomination letter for the Prime Minister’s Awards for Teaching Excellence, one of Senisi’s former students wrote that his lessons transcended her education. “Mr. Senisi provides students with skills that can be utilized in any subject, and well beyond graduation,” wrote Josie Libertucci, now a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Michigan Medical School. “Although I did not continue with health science, his lessons have clippings on technical issues like the physiological responses to heat, the chemistry of what foods to eat — the skills I learned as Mr. Senisi’s student — are invaluable.” She considers the lens with which his classes view the world. What will they choose to see when they make a professional, productive work environment should look like.

Psst, have you heard the story about the stoplight in the forest?...

Letting students take charge boosts their confidence, says Bianca Mastrodicasa, OCT, a former student-teacher Senisi mentored. Now a supply teacher, Mastrodicasa says that Senisi helped define what it means to be an effective educator. “It’s someone who believes in you and allows you to lead your own path.”

“How can you make the school environment more welcoming? Award-winning John Senisi, OCT, shares how to set the right tone and eliminate “hot spots.”

1 Stand outside the classroom doorway to greet students as they enter. “It’s the first few minutes of class are crucial. Begin the day’s agenda right away. You’re demonstrating what a professional, productive work environment should look like.”

2 Jump right in. “The first few minutes of class are crucial. Begin the day’s agenda right away. You’re demonstrating what a professional, productive work environment should look like.”

3 Watch for danger zones throughout your school. “Do groups of students create zones of intimidation? We call those ‘hot spots,’ a perfect place for bullying. To identify hot spots try to be inclusive. Identify zones, groupings in areas where you would not feel comfortable. Where students feel too intimidated to go? Disrupt those zones when you see them, and make the administration aware of those that are more established.”

5 Don’t get fooled by outward appearances. “Teenagers often act mature or tough but they’re more vulnerable than they appear,” says Senisi. “Regardless of what difficult situations they may bring to your classroom, you need to make it a place where they’re assisted and not judged for their mistakes.”

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