

THINK LIKE AN ARTIST



John Senisi, OCT, helps students use a critical lens to capture the big picture and the small details.

BY STUART FOXMAN

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-oeo.ca/VaughanRetrospective) won a 2015 APEX Award, a competition for publication excellence, in the social media category.



ONLINE

To view our Great Teaching video archive, visit oct-oeo.ca/GTvideos

EXCLUSIVE

PHOTOS: MARIAN LOZOWCHUK



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 (oct-oeeo.ca/Conservation) and Toronto Region Conservation Authority. The students studied the Humber River and Don River valley systems, and created documentary videos for YouTube (oct-oeeo.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 spaces and raised awareness of conservation efforts. Senisi had the students drive the entire project, including all administrative and promotional efforts.

"He steps back to give us a lot of independence," says Giulia Venir, who was in that class and now studies art history at York University.

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 her define what it means to be an effective educator. "It's someone who believes in you and allows you to lead your own path."

Ways of seeing and framing issues dominate Senisi's teaching, whether he's talking about equipment or broader lessons.

A bulletin board hanging in the 17-year teaching veteran's classroom has clippings on technical issues like colours and cropping. Tacked up is a piece on camera exposures, zooming in on the three integral settings. There's the aperture — the opening in a lens that you adjust to let in light; shutter speed — which controls how long the light comes through the aperture, and then the ISO — which measures the camera's sensitivity to light.

In a way, these variables preoccupy Senisi as a teacher. He considers the concept of "exposure" on a metaphorical level.

"What are the moral and philosophical implications inherent in the choices we make as educators regarding what material to expose students to?" The award-winning teacher constantly considers the lens with which his classes view the world. What will they choose to document? What will they ignore?

This puts learning in a new light. "At every opportunity," says Senisi, "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 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 deeply. She recalls a trip they took to New York City with their art and design students. One stop was the 9/11 Memorial. On the way, Senisi talked about the design competition to create the memorial. Most proposals had the monuments above ground. The winning entry was different — it had two large reflecting pools on the footprints where the Twin Towers stood.

Senisi discussed how artists use positive and negative space. The artist with the successful concept showed the depth of the 9/11 wound by placing the monument far below the surface — it's a void.

"I thought, I wish I were a student in his class," says Gudelj. "He brings relevance to what they're learning, so it makes sense to them and they can think like an artist."

In New York, they also stopped at the Metropolitan Opera. While Gudelj took photos of the grandeur of the building,

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 shuffling between two groups of students — instructing one on how to use a tripod, huddling 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 his 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 the arts in my undergraduate degree, the skills I learned as Mr. Senisi's student — such as critical thinking and creativeness — were vital in my success."

Senisi says he wants students to see differently, whether it be objects, their surroundings or the goal of their education. "That allows them to engage with the material in a manner that's not merely abstract or distant," he says. "We get the majority of our information from what we see, but we're not always aware of what we're taking in. Teaching my students to notice things others miss is one of my main objectives." **PS**

The Ontario Certified Teacher featured in this profile has been recognized with a teaching award and exemplifies the high standards of practice to which the College holds the teaching profession.

CREATING POSITIVE SPACE

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 surprises them because it's rarely done. Let them know you appreciate a similar greeting. It establishes a friendly environment and teaches them to be collegial."

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 intuitive and empathetic. Are there any areas where you would not feel comfortable? Where students feel too intimidated to go? Disrupt those spots when you see them, and make the administration aware of those that are more established."

4 Look for "hot spots" in your classroom, too. "When I notice one form, I take everything off my desk and make the hot spot my new work area. Every part of the school environment should feel safe to everyone."

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, they need you to make it a place where they're accepted and not judged for their mistakes."