



## The Write Stuff

Nicole Chen, OCT, helps her students tackle challenges, gain confidence and find their words.

BY STUART FOXMAN

**W**riting isn't a spectator sport. However, Nicole Chen, OCT, turns it into one for her English class at Francis Libermann Catholic High School in Toronto.

Several times a year she sets up her laptop and projector, and asks students for a topic. Maybe something like "Should we have part-time jobs while in school," or "Should school uniforms be mandatory." On the spot Chen starts composing, while the students note what she's doing.

After, they discuss what they observed: how Chen started writing just to get ideas out, reorganized her thoughts, used synonyms to avoid repetition, read aloud to hear how the sentences sounded, kept tightening her copy and checked for errors.

"This shows that even though I'm an experienced writer, I go through a process," says Chen.

The exercise speaks volumes about Chen, suggests Domenic Mastrullo, OCT, head of the school's English department. He says she finds a way to model desired behaviour and techniques and helps students understand they shouldn't be intimidated by a blank page. She also conveys that it's OK to make mistakes and have false starts. That's how you learn.

"The activity becomes transformative," says Mastrullo. "The students get to see the flaws and the triumphs."

Chen received a Certificate of Achievement in 2018 for the Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence. The 21-year veteran teaches Grade 9 English, as well as English-language learners (ELLs) in levels A, B, C and D.

Those are the classes, but Chen teaches something more. She manages to weave in lessons about self-confidence, leadership, being in the moment, respect and responsibility. Her goal is to help students not only acquire skills, but become the most successful version of themselves.

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Nicole Chen, OCT, knows Shakespeare can be daunting, so she has students focus on the emotion and themes in the work, instead of words.

“We all have something inside us that can be inspiring to other people,” says Chen. “Be kind, be caring, be smart and make good choices. Someone will notice. The smallest thing can make a difference.”

She tweaks the curriculum to feed student interests. The environment, for example, is a passion for both Chen and many of her students. She led the effort to get the school Platinum-level eco-certified (as rated by Ontario EcoSchools). She designed an English course with an environmental slant. Students write green-themed poetry, produce videos about protecting Canada’s water supply, and study sci-fi/dystopian stories with plots about the world going to war over water.

“You’re pulling on themes that are relevant to today’s issues,” says Chen.

Keeping things current is always critical. Coming into English, many students think the poetry unit will be hard. Chen makes it fun. In a newer assignment, she has students choose emojis to express a situation (something they do anyway, every day), and

from there they write a short poem. She also has students share their works in a poetry café, with hot chocolate, cookies and presentations that run from group dramatic readings, to slam poetry with musical accompaniment, to rap.

Like poetry, Shakespeare can be daunting. Chen explains that understanding every word of Shakespearean language isn’t vital. After all, Shakespeare was writing for a different audience at the time. “It’s our job to pull out the emotions and themes he wrote about. Words and sayings change, but emotions are universal,” she says.

She uses [shakespeare.ca](http://shakespeare.ca) to provide workshops, and also relies on “Shakespeare in Bits” via [mindconnex.com](http://mindconnex.com) (character mapping, animated re-enactments, soundtracks and more resources) to make a play come alive. Chen has students translate selected passages into modern language and slang, and get silly by trading Shakespearean insults. The content becomes more approachable.

At first, Shakespeare can seem like a foreign language. That’s nothing

compared to learning a new language for real. Chen has taught ELLs since 2014, and calls it her most rewarding teaching experience. Her mother came to Canada from Germany at age 14 with zero English skills. Chen knows how tough that is, and helps students feel welcome and comfortable in their new home.

That means focusing on more than the academics. To really get to know the students, Chen has them write journals, share stories, and relay the pros and cons of being in Canada. Discussing their cultures and their paths to Canada helps the students empathize with each other and realize what they have in common.

It’s important for Chen to acclimate the students. Outings to places like a pioneer village (to show what life was like for new Canadians way back) or local art galleries immerse the students in some of Canada’s history and culture. Even teaching about unfamiliar celebrations like Halloween can matter. Elizabeth, a former student from Syria now in Grade 11, loved learning that tradition.

She dressed as a clown and trick-or-treated with her little brother. “I felt more at home, starting to belong here,” she says.

Language acquisition breeds self-assuredness. While Chen says accents are beautiful, many students are concerned about theirs. “They want to fit in,” she says.

So she brought in a speech therapy expert to run pronunciation labs. Elizabeth, who found some pronunciation frustrating (the letter “r” in particular), loved the sessions. “I’m more confident,” she says.

Chen successfully advocated for an international student representative on student council, and says her goal is to help ELLs be leaders. That can mean formal leadership positions, but she thinks of it more as finding the leader within.

Her students show determination simply by learning English and making a place for themselves in Canada. Chen says successful ELLs inspire their families and those who come next. That’s leadership. Mastering a new language opens possibilities. Students know they can achieve, and can draw on that well of positivity. That also spurs leadership.

Teachers want to help their students have full minds; Chen is also focused on helping them to be mindful and to bring their full attention to the moment. She points out that students can’t learn or express themselves well when their minds are racing. Mindfulness can unclutter their minds, expel negative emotions and reduce stress.

“You can make decisions more easily because your mind becomes clearer, more focused,” says Chen, who trained in mindfulness. During class she routinely has students do a few minutes of exercises like mindful breathing, which involves deep, slow breathing with visualization, as soft music plays. (She recommends [mindfulnesswithoutborders.org](http://mindfulnesswithoutborders.org) for ideas.) Once students know techniques, they can practise them on their own to get in the right frame of mind for learning.

“Mindfulness allowed me to be in the present,” says former student Kim

Torio, now in year two at the University of Toronto. “Back then I was trying to understand how to control my emotions, so my actions would not merely be dictated by my feelings. Do I stay in my head or take a step back? Mindfulness allowed me to be more rational, more in control over my emotions, more intentional.”

Another former student, Kezia Johnson, recalls an exercise where she rolled a grape in her mouth. Chen had her think about the taste and texture, and reflect on what’s involved in getting that grape from a farm. Johnson became more contemplative and appreciative of what she was consuming. The mindful lessons linger, says Johnson, in her second year at York University (biology and education). Instead of worrying about the next class or assignment, she savours the present moment.

Chen’s former principal, Lisa McGuckin, OCT, says the mindfulness effort recognizes something fundamental. “We might be teaching, but students might not be learning. Knowing how students feel supports a better learning environment,” says McGuckin. “Nicole is the total package when it comes to being a great teacher. She knows her curriculum, loves her job, respects her students and creates the environment for excellent learning.”

Last summer, Chen co-wrote a mindfulness and social/emotional learning course, which three Toronto Catholic District School Board schools are offering this year. Her dream is to have the course become part of the Ontario curriculum.

She encourages teachers to learn exercises to become more mindful themselves. That will help them to observe and react without judgment, take a breath, become calmer and be more present for each student.

“Isn’t this what teaching is supposed to be?” says Chen. “When students feel they’re being paid attention to in this way, they’ll respond positively.” **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.*

## Searching for creative activities

Since 2006, Nicole Chen has mentored teacher candidates from university programs and colleagues through the TCDSB’s New Teacher Induction Program. She says these lessons will serve new (or any) teachers well.

### 1) Be over-prepared.

Teach right until the bell rings. Chen says many behavioural issues occur when students lack enough to do.

### 2) Set your expectations for respect from the start.

That means listening when others talk, disagreeing without belittling, and devoting your full attention (like abandoning the phone during class).

### 3) Have a system that lets all students be heard.

Be disciplined about ensuring students take turns speaking. Those who love to talk can dominate a class. Have students write questions down (it helps with shy ones), and collect those to share.

### 4) Connect everything to the real world.

Find out what students are into as fodder for discussions and assignments. Share news stories that relate to the theme of studies.