

He put the cool in school

By Anthony Carnovale

I'm getting old. I can quantify it, but why would I want to do that? I mean, it's bad enough that I can feel it; I can see it. I hear it when I'm at school standing in front of my students.

When I ask them if they've ever seen the movie *Gladiator*, they stare back at me as if I'm speaking gibberish. When I told them that I recently downloaded *Richard III*, they chuckled and rolled their eyes (they stream). One day I wore my New Balance sneakers to school; one boy said that they looked like BBQ shoes. It's not easy getting old in front of a group of 17-year-olds. And yet, despite all of this, some of my students still describe me as cool. Turns out, being cool is hard; staying cool is even harder.

Being cool is an illusory trait; it's an elusive word with layers of nuanced meaning. Cool meant different things at different times. At its simplest, cool is neither too hot nor too cold, and it's from this point that the word transitioned into English from German. If you think about how peppered our language is with temperature metaphors ? tempers get hot, loves go cold, eyes are warm ? it was easy for cool to make the leap from literal to metaphorical.

For example, cool was a certain type of demeanor adopted by African American slaves in order to avoid punishment. For slaves, being cool, staying cool, could be the difference between life and death. Later, cool evolved into a resistance to authority via creativity and innovation. Eventually, cool came to mean something akin to an attitude, style and poise.

Like the word itself, the things that make us cool have also evolved. In the 1970's, cool was disco, clogs and tube tops, John Travolta, a Dodge Challenger. In the 80's, cool was listening to RUN DMC on a Walkman, drinking New Coke, and saying things like ?Gag me with a spoon?, while rocking a pair of acid wash jeans, a swatch watch and a Kangol hat.

When I was in high school in the 1990's, I tried to be cool (who didn't?). I wore all the proper gear: Starter Jacket; baggy chinos; Air Jordans; Polo cologne. I listened to rap music on my Disc Man and walked with a subtle limp. I was wearing the right things and saying the right things: ?Talk to the hand?; ?As if?; ?Not!?!; ?Aiight!?. It wasn't long before I learned that there was more to being cool than simply playing at being cool.

Father Michael Goetz Secondary School was a good school with good teachers. A colleague of mine told me that the principal at the time, Ed King, had a mandate: he hired good people before he hired good teachers. His rationale: It was easy to turn a good person into a good teacher.

I had some good teachers. There was Ms. Cosgrove (a detention every week), Mr. Farrugia (caught me cheating), Ms. Savella was my teacher-crush; Mr. Power gave history a personality; Mr. Ammendolia made math count. There were good teachers, bad teachers, quiet teachers and grumpy teachers; there were strict teachers; smart and not so smart teachers. The teacher that ended up having the biggest impact on me, also happened to be the coolest.

Mr. Bonnah had style. He wore fresh shirts, chic vests and always sported a tie. He wore his hair in a ponytail and spoke with a whisper of an accent. He was serious about what he taught and how he taught it. He had high expectations for his students and wasn't afraid to tell you when you weren't reaching them. We deconstructed poetry with a ruler and a red pen and dug deep into *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.

He was my first male English teacher. For the first time in my life, learning was cool. He showed me that it was okay to like books and talk about poetry with a swagger typically reserved for all-ages clubs and basement parties. He didn't try to be cool and that's what made him so cool.

At university, I used the lessons from Mr. Bonnah's class to help navigate my way around Ottawa. Every corner I turned was another

page in my own narrative. Everywhere I looked I saw metaphors, paradoxes. I was seeing things that I couldn't previously see. Being away from home was a chance to reinvent myself, like Duddy. I could be whomever, and whatever, I wanted to be. In second and third year, I had some wild and eccentric professors. Ben Jones offered me his personal library (I accepted). Charles Haines challenged us with a 13-hour exam; the following year it was a one-word exam. Both were risk-takers; they challenged the status quo. They made learning cool, like Mr. Bonnah. In high school, I thought about being an accountant, an urban planner; maybe, an archaeologist. By the time I graduated from Carleton, I knew I wanted to be a teacher.

I've been teaching for 18 years now (I'm old) and I feel like I haven't worked a day in my life. That's what happens when you love what you do for a living. I get to work with young people; sometimes I feel as if they teach me more than I can teach them. Sure, they laugh when I say something stupid, but I've also learned that being vulnerable is cool, being honest and sincere is cool. Learning from each other is cool.

Over the holidays, I found out that Mr. Bonnah is retiring. I'm sad. When I was young, he gave me the tools to help dig myself up from beneath all the gadgets and labels and toys that I thought, most of us thought, made a young person cool. In many ways, he's the person most responsible for making me the teacher I am today. He was a good man; I looked up to him. But more than anything, Mr. Bonnah was a damn cool teacher.