

“HE'S THE COOL ONE:” TEACHER CREATES GEN Z DICTIONARY SLANG

By USA TODAY, adapted by Newsela staff | May 5, 2019

For ages, parents and teachers have struggled to understand what teenagers are saying. One brilliant high school teacher in Massachusetts found a solution, and people on Twitter are saying they are "willing to pay money for it."

Since September, James Callahan of Lowell High School has been keeping a spreadsheet of all the everyday slang terms his students use as well as his attempts to define the words. People on social media are having a field day with their work.

Understanding and Connecting with Students

"I often overhear students in the hallways or my classrooms using words (or) slang terms in their personal conversations," Callahan said. He wanted to understand and connect with his students, so he started asking them what certain words meant.

On Monday, April 29, one of Callahan's students, Twitter user @Mewtailv2, posted a photo online showing a four-page document the sociology teacher had created. The spreadsheet is called the "Callahan's Generation Z Dictionary." Anyone born after 1997 is part of Generation Z.

On the left is an alphabetized, green-colored column with all of the slang phrases, like "sis," "spill the tea" and "snack." In the yellow column on the right, Callahan attempts to define each phrase using a formal interpretation of what the students say.

For example, to "put someone on" means "the act of getting someone on trend." The phrase "secure(d) the bag" translates loosely into "money received."

Word "Teacher" Not Dignified Enough

The student told USA Today that she referred to Callahan as a *professor* in the tweet because "the word *teacher* didn't seem dignified enough to describe him." She also said that students get college credit for taking the Introduction to Sociology course.

Within 24 hours, the tweet received over 300,000 likes and 93,000 retweets. Some of the people who responded to the tweet applauded the professor's interest in teenage culture, while others tossed in their own submissions to the list. "Yeet" was a popular suggestion. It is an easily adaptable word that can be used as an exclamation, a verb or even a noun, according to the online slang website, Urban Dictionary.

Callahan explained that students are more interested in his class if he can connect with them. "The typical teacher-student dynamic involves a rigid power structure, but in my experience, I've found that students are more engaged and perform better if I am able to reach them where they are," he said.

Twitter user @MewtailV2 wishes to keep her real name secret because she is still in high school. She said she gained over 500 followers since tweeting the photo of the Generation Z dictionary document.

"I'm just the catalyst. He's the cool one. He should be on 'Ellen,'" @MewtailV2 said. "Period, sis, take the L, this aint it, slay the game, were definitions given by my class."

Callahan himself tweeted that he was, "excited, yet terrified" of going viral. The student says Callahan pulled up the document in class on April 29. He wanted the students to help him update the definitions of "bops" and "jams."

"Mr. Callahan asked if any enjoyable song was a 'bop' and someone clarified, saying that the song has to be modern," @MewtailV2 said. "Mr. Callahan asked if an old song can be a bop to which a student answered, matter-of-factly: 'No. That's a jam.'"

Ownership of the Dictionary

The professor said that the unofficial guide to teenage language breaks up the lesson. The list also gets the students involved and provides them with some ownership of the dictionary.

"Language is so fluid, and every generation creates their own vocabulary bank of slang," Callahan said. "The students created it, I am sort of just the archivist!"

Source: USA Today, adapted by Newsela staff. (2019, May 5). "Sis," "bops" and "jams": Teacher creates Gen Z dictionary of slang. Newsela. <https://newsela.com/view/ck9nool8c075t0iqjq49a42z5/>