From Socrates to Sugata Mitra:

a dialogue with digital natives

Part 3: a personal meditation

'To see a world in a grain of sand
Heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour'.

William Blake

My friend Amstrad

I remember 'Amstrad', my first computer, with its green monochrome screen. It was the late 80s and the personal computer revolution was in full swing. This first of what was to be many computers in my life, didn't do much; it sat there like an ugly Cyclops, its one green eye staring at me, winking at me occasionally.

My Amstrad was basically a word-processor but it revolutionized the way I worked. I was a teacher, trainer and writer of ELT textbooks. Up to that point in my teaching career, I had relied on others to type my lesson plans, my manuscripts and classroom materials: professional typists, friends and family. Using other people's typing skills made my work look nice and professional and it saved me time: but it was still a long, laborious process, especially when it came to correcting mistakes. There was a constant process of passing the typed sheets back and forth with mistakes and corrections, helped by the use of deleting fluid and bits of paper stuck on to the original script to cover the errors.

Having written a text, I f I changed my mind about the order of the sentences, paragraphs or even words, it was a time-consuming hassle to make the changes. As it cost me time, money and stress to make mistakes, I tried hard to avoid them and make sure that what I wrote in my *first* draft was as close as possible to the *final* draft; I strove to write accurately. It made my writing slow and careful; but typos, though taboo, and changes of mind were unavoidable and I was stuck in the relationship of dependence on the services of typists.

Typists were doing brisk business in those days; till the word-processor came along. The repercussions of the word-processor were multiple and far-reaching. It wasn't only the gain in speed and facility of writing: there were two more profound

implications of word-processing that I discovered as the use of the word-processor in society at large and in my own work became the norm.

Firstly, this new 'digital typewriter' was a liberation from the *fear of error*. Mistakes, slips, errors, false starts...whether of spelling or the choice of word, could be corrected in seconds quite painlessly – they were without consequence.

Secondly, the freedom to make instantly-correctible errors facilitated and accelerated the *creative flow* of writing. The 'terror of error' having been removed, the mind was free to wander and explore, to try out ideas, whether of language or content, knowing there was nothing fixed or final in the choice of text. You could change your mind and no harm done. This actually led to a different quality of writing; it wasn't just a matter of writing more text, more quickly. The writing became more exploratory: it literally became freer, unhampered by fear; as a result, one could write down any ideas that came into one's mind, trying things out, changing them at will – till one came up with the best option. This quick and easy process of first draft-second draft, 'vision and revision', allowed one to produce better texts - instead of settling for less than the best, in an attempt to economize on time and the 'to and fro' with professional typists.

The potential of the word-processor to make one a more fluent and creative writer had pedagogic implications for the classroom, too: a long-term concern in my teaching career had been dealing with students' errors. One feature of EFL classes I had taught over the years was their mixed-level composition and the frequency of errors made by the 'weaker' students. The fear of making errors would inhibit the willingness of students to take risks in both their spoken and written work. Besides, writing texts by hand and producing second and thirds drafts was laborious and - covered in red corrections - disheartening for the student. And particularly in the Greek teaching context, where exams were the main driver of motivation for learning English, errors in punctuation, grammar, vocabulary were penalized, meaning marks were lost, often with devastating results. Then, the error-friendly word-processor came along to free the student from 'error-as-terror', as it had freed me from error-phobia as a writer.

Digital distractions

But the days of the PC and desk-top computer eventually gave way to lap-tops, ipads or tablets, mobile phones, iphones or smartphones. The exponential developments in digital communication have revolutionized the way we live; and they

struck the classroom like a pedagogic earthquake. It is not my aim here to go over the personal and pedagogic issues raised by digital technology; many more qualified authors have explored the terrain in great detail (eg Carr, 2010; Turkle, 2011; Morozov, 2012; Lanier, 2013). I will limit myself to anecdotes that have affected the way I/we relate to our students and to others. My focus will be on the effect of digital connectivity on our 'being present', at a particular moment, in a particular place and with particular people. The importance and fascination of 'mobile digital technology' is that we can take it with us everywhere and it can shape our behavior everywhere. Our manner of being in the world and with other people can be shaped radically and in a very short time by a small digital device.

My Auntie Polly falls silent

Aunt Polly (80 years old) liked to talk. She was talkative, even garrulous, but we loved her all the same; we even found her verbosity entertaining at times. She seemed to remember a lot about her long life and insisted on sharing her memories with friends and family; no detail of her childhood, or her teenage years in a small provincial town in northern Greece, had been lost in the mists of time. Her courting years, her marriage, the dark years of the civil war, her years as a mother and the lonely times that followed when she became a widow, were ever and clearly present in her mind. She seemed to conjure up the past in all its detail at will. And the past was a country with an endless source of anecdotes with which she regaled her captive audience of nephews and nieces whenever she saw them - but especially at Christmas time. In the festive seasons, Aunt Polly would come to stay...and not only did she have endless stories to tell, but she had opinions about everything under the sun. Whenever she asked what you thought of some current issue or other it was really the prologue to her reciting at great length her own views; views which were repeated again and again - either because she had forgotten that she had already treated you at great length to the same opinions the previous Christmas or because she believed that if her opinions were worth hearing once, they were worth hearing twice. Or thrice...

One thing I particularly dreaded was being caught in a small space with Auntie Polly for a great length of time. I often had to drive her to her hometown 300 kilometers away and was exposed, for at least three hours, to her loud, high-pitched voice, with no escape. She did not use commas, full-stops, colons or semi-colons when she spoke; her speech was a stream of non-stop, unpunctuated inanity.

Then, suddenly, last Christmas, Polly fell silent. She sat at the living-room table or sank into a comfortable armchair and said virtually nothing for the whole day, her head down. Had she gone deaf? Had she been struck dumb? Had she run out of stories and opinions? Had we offended her mortally? No.

She had turned up with a shiny new tablet. All her OAP friends had acquired one and had stopped listening to her. They often went on trips together and when the other old ladies were all securely captured in the coach, Polly would unleash her narrative skills on the company of hard-of-hearing octogenarians, screeching louder to make herself heard over the engine. The old ladies had stopped listening and talking to each other- something they had done for half a century or even 70 years of friendship - and had switched to sending each other messages and photographs on their shiny new tablets. They downloaded video clips, uploaded selfies and googled one thing after another, thus producing an endless stream of silence.

Polly could not beat them, so she joined them. And last Christmas, for the first time in her life with her nephews and nieces, she virtually said nothing. She was still physically present but her attention was elsewhere. She might have not been there at all. The turkey that Christmas was one of the tastiest ever, but Polly made quick work of it and went back to her shiny new tablet.

The professor who fell silent

Let us now go farther afield, to Latin America.

In December, 2015, Leonardo Haberkorn, lecturer in Communication at the University ORT in Montevideo, Uruguay, suddenly resigned. Haberkorn is a journalist who had been teaching Communication for 'many, many years' to Uruguyan students. So why did he resign? 'I was fed up', he wrote on his blog, 'of telling them off about their mobile phones, Whatsapp and Facebook'. He stopped giving classes for the degree course in Journalism because he was sick and tired of pouring forth his soul about subjects he felt passionate about to students who couldn't take their eyes off their smartphones. Their shiny devices sent and received a non-stop stream of selfies during his lectures. Not all students were glued to their screens instead of listening to him: but the numbers of screen-struck students increased by the day.

Until a few years ago, imploring students to switch off their devices for 90 minutes produced a co-operative response; 'that's no longer the case', says Leonardo. 'Perhaps it's all my fault', he adds, 'perhaps I've burnt myself out in the fight to get

attention; or perhaps there's something I'm not doing right as a teacher...'. But one thing is certain, says Leonardo: 'a lot of these young people are not aware of how offensive and hurtful their behaviour is. It is increasingly difficult to explain how journalism works to people who have no contact with it and don't see the point in being informed about what's going on. Had any of them heard of the great Nobel Prize winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa? Yes, but had any of them read any of his books? No. What with their lack of culture, their indifference to and alienation from culture – what with their lack of curiosity and their inability to spell...I no longer want to be part of this vicious circle. I was never like that and I never will be. I always did what I did because I liked to do it and do it well. I believe in excellence. Every year on my courses, I introduced students to outstanding reporters, writers who touch your soul. This year, I showed my students the film *The Informer*...about two heroes of journalism and life- and I saw students sleeping during the film and others chatting on Whatsapp and Facebook. I have seen the film dozens of times and I still find it difficult to watch some of the scenes and hold back the tears.

I showed them Oriana Fallaci's interview with the dictator Galtieri and the questions about the thousands of 'disappeared'... to be met only by silence, silence, silence. They just wanted the class to be over. So do I' So Leonardo the lecturer reigned his post and fell silent.

As a teacher all my working life, I was intrigued and moved by the resignation of professor Leonardo Haberkorn from his position. It confirmed the addictive power of digital devices, especially when they make it so easy for us to be connected to other times, places and people... while disconnecting us from the present moment, the present people. For Professor Leonardo Haberkorn, the challenge of keeping his students' attention was direct: they preferred to be on social media than to listen to him; they preferred the trivial flow of ephemeral exchanges with real-world friends and digital 'friends', than the challenge of critical thinking about issues of importance to society (the freedom of the press, democracy, and so on).

 In our ELT classrooms, the distractions from the present pedagogic moment may come from the physical presence of mobile devices in the classroom or from the culture of the internet which is diffused through our everyday lives outside the classroom. But it has changed the nature of teaching and the process of getting students' attention and keeping it. 'Motivating' content is not enough, it seems; the equipment is often more powerful than the presence of a passionate teacher. The

little screen which connects the student with the outside world often has a greater pull on the majority of students than the things which are happening in the classroom. Or so it seemed to Professor Leonardo Haberkorn - and who knows how many of our ELT colleagues.

What we type into that little screen seems so weightless and temporary, but in reality it can come back to haunt us. Though it may feel ephemeral it is permanent. And potentially disastrous.

Going fishing

Personal data today is big business. Government and businesses have become a colossal marketplace for personal data. Our email address and its contents as well as all the traffic on social media that we engage in (not much in my case) are goods that can be bought or sold. Our privacy has been privatized and is available on the free market for ruthless profiteers.

On the internet, we are helpless, unprepared and vulnerable to thieves, manipulators and enemies.

I remember the first time I got a 'phishing' message from my bank, warning me politely that my account would be blocked if I didn't renew my personal details, including bank account numbers and PIN words. Alarmed at the prospect of losing money or not having access to my money, I set about filling in my personal data, which included a PIN number, on the attachment that the 'bank' had sent me. I was in the middle of filling in my details and sending them to what I thought was my friendly, reliable bank, when my technologically-savvy son looked over my shoulder as I mumbled something about 'getting a message about my PIN number from the bank', when he stopped me in mid-sentence to point out that I had fallen victim to a well-known scam: I was a few keyboard strokes from financial disaster. And it had all been so quick and easy.

Years on, using email and the internet, reading about and discussing 'phishing' attacks that claim to come from banks, I know better. Whenever I get such messages from 'banks', email servers, rich Africans wanting to share their wealth with me, beautiful Russian ladies wanting to share their free time with me, I automatically delete them, without bothering to open them. I was alarmed recently to get a message from a good friend of mine, Steve, with an attachment which I was invited to open. It began 'Hi, Luke...' so I assumed for a split second that the

message must be real – till I remembered that Steve couldn't possibly be sending me an email message: he had been dead for several years.

Public shaming

Computers are simply not designed to be safe: electronic communication is subject to surveillance and can be intercepted by all kinds of agencies, official and semi-official. Users of digital communication can be divided into two groups: those who feel comfortable with surveillance and exposure of different kinds and those who feel they might be harmed because their reputation is precarious.

Both groups are potential targets. The average happy user of the internet faces insidious risks when he or she least suspects the danger; the culprit may be an anonymous colleague who uses the internet and is sitting next to you in a seminar or someone you know and trust: apparently, the most common way in which reputations are destroyed instantly in the internet age has nothing to do with hackers, corporate -government surveillance or data profiteering: a single joke on twitter can lead to ridicule –or someone may overhear you say something politically incorrect about gender or race as they attending one of your conference presentations– this comment gets posted on the net and leads to abuse and death threats; not only is your reputation smeared forever, but you may lose your job, have a nervous breakdown or worse…

This is the threat of 'public shaming'…whether by mobs of the righteous, who can be instantly mobilized or manipulated by the person responsible for the posting, or by one's colleagues, if it is an issue sparked off in the work environment. The only way you can protect yourself from public shaming is to ensure that you will never publicly say something thoughtless and that nothing you say may be misunderstood.

Images are also potentially vehicles of public shaming with the usual gamut of consequences, ranging from mild embarrassment to disgrace and suicidal despair. Friends and acquaintances can take pictures of us – with or without our permission – embarrassing or flattering (usually the former) and upload them onto the internet. Thus, a fleeting moment becomes fixed forever. And once a file is shared it goes forth and multiplies. The single biggest danger we face online is to our identity and reputation. I have come across photos of myself on the net which I hate because they do not show me as the young handsome guy that I am in reality – photos taken while I was attending a conference, having a meal, flirting shamelessly or otherwise making a fool myself.

Private photographs or photographs taken of us surreptitiously in compromising poses may appear in the social media without our knowledge and cause us a great deal of embarrassment and distress.

 I was at a dinner and dance celebration recently in which dozens of people gathered to enjoy themselves with fellow members of a dance group. As always on such occasions, souvenir photos are taken of the event, with the participants posing awkwardly, grinning into the camera, hugging each other and so on, important monuments in the background. Taken out of context, some of these pictures may suggest an intimacy which in reality is non-existent: people sitting close up in a crowded room; going very close to the other person's ear to be heard over the loud bouzouki music a posture – from certain angles - which may be indistinguishable from a kiss. These 'compromising' photos find themselves on the internet where eventually they are seen by 'significant others' who mistake them for betrayal and all chaos is let loose.

The person taking the photo and posting it may be simply naïve, mischievous or deliberately malicious, motivated perhaps by jealousy – in all cases, the damage is done and is difficult to remove.

My technological incompetence exposed

Texts, too, by us or about us, can be not only embarrassing on a personal level but damaging to our professional status or prospects. I remember attending an international conference as a plenary speaker in Izmir, Turkey a few years ago. There were two other distinguished plenary speakers from the UK, with both of whom I thought I had a long-standing professional relationship and I assumed we were also good friends. At the conference, we each gave a talk to an audience of about 400 teachers from Turkey and other countries. My talk was on 'Self-esteem: 21st century skill number 1'.   The point I was trying to make in my title was that amidst the dazzling technological aids which are now at our disposal (mobiles, ipads, IWBs etc) still one of the most powerful ways to get students attention and motivate them is to build their feeling of self-respect: if we believe in them we can make them believe in themselves and this will lead to more successful second language acquisition.

Part of this presentation on self-esteem in the classroom made use of a 3 minute video clip from the film masterpiece by Ken Loach, KES. The film is about a boy from a deprived social background in the north of England – who is a poor student in both

senses of the word 'poor': he is totally demotivated at school and his teacher despairs of him until it becomes known that this ne'er do well student, Billy Kasper, has a passion: he loves taming and training his pet hawk, 'Kes'. Once the teacher discovers the pupil's passion and makes use of it in class the boy is inspired to talk and take constructive part in the lessons, which hitherto he had shown zero interest in. The moral of the tale is clear: build on the students' strengths and interest and you will build their self-esteem and language skills. Don't dwell on what they don't know but on what they are good at.

One thing I am not good at is technology. I am a digital immigrant who makes minimal and unimaginative use of the electronic media in my teaching, training and conference presentations. I know that. But over the years I've managed to get the hang of powerpoint, including the use of video-clips and audio files. At the time of the Self-esteem talk in Izmir I was unsure of how to do anything too fancy with video but I had successfully embedded the video clip from KES into my powerpoint presentation and had selected the option on the menu which made the clip appear automatically when the slide changed. To my dismay, when I clicked my remote control the slide with the video appeared instantly – magic! – but just as instantly it then disappeared; the screen went blank; my precious video-clip had disappeared down a black hole. 'Black magic'.

I didn't want to keep the audience of 400 teachers waiting while I pressed buttons trying to recover the video so I called jokingly to the Turkish technician 'Mustafa, help!' and carried on with my presentation. Mustafa climbed onto the stage and like a technological magician he made the clip –re-appear from the black hole in the laptop in 2 seconds. The rest of the talk was uneventful and 50 minutes later I brought it to what I thought was a reasonably successful conclusion. I received the usual routine words of 'thanks' and 'well done' from my colleagues including the other two plenary speakers.

Blogging as a tool for scoring points

My fellow plenary speakers were not only amongst the most well-known on the Conference circuit both they were both popular bloggers, read by many thousands of our colleagues all over the world. Imagine my surprise when next day I decided to read the blogs out of ideal curiosity and saw, on one of them, a detailed description of the point in my plenary where the video clip had disappeared and my reaction to the unfortunate glich in the technology. The blogger described me as technologically

'incompetent' and looking 'silly' in front of 400 colleagues. He had decided to 'share' my apparent failure with the technology with his myriad followers on the net. I watched in horror as the discussion on the post unfolded, involving more and more colleagues from all around the world, my embarrassment intensifying with every new contribution to the 'thread'. After this demonstration of the power of blogging to hurt by public shaming I decided never to start my own blog and to have nothing to do with twitter, Facebook and the other social media so beloved of the 'twitterati'.

My digital passion: me and my ipods

I am not a digital luddite, in spite of my reluctance to get involved in social media. Like most mortals nowadays, I am enamoured of - and sadly addicted to - certain digital devices - and one in particular. If I had to choose the one digital device for which I feel nothing but enthusiasm it would be my beloved ipod. The humble ipod is my candidate for the greatest invention of the digital era. Why do I feel this passion for this modest-looking devicde? It does not connect me with the outside world (which can be a time-consuming headache); I can't send and receive emails on it, so work and bosses can't find me on it; I cannot send instant messages and photographs, so I am not bombarded with memory-consuming trivia every minute of the day. I cannot phone anybody with it and those who wish to sell me things cannot find me on it. There are no 'false friends' on it, no insincere 'likes'.

But this palm-sized gadget can hold thousands and thousands of things I like to listen to: music, poetry, audio-books, plays, broadcasts, recordings of friends, video-clips. And it can do this wherever I am, whenever I feel I want to listen to any one of

my thousands of audio CDs or files downloaded from iTunes or audible.com or from wherever. At home or outside; in a hotel or at bus-stop; in any place on the planet, alone or with friends, I can enjoy music and literature, podcasts of my favourite radio programmes.

One of my two ipod classics (160GB) contains 18,000 tracks, of music of all kinds and spoken word items. The two ipods together represent the whole of my audio CD library, which I have been collecting for more than half a century and which had taken up rows and rows of shelf-space in my various homes over the years. The ipod gives me non-stop joy- and it doesn't require an internet connection; no wifi. It is portable and almost infinite pleasure that fits in the pocket or in the palm of your hand. If I want to use a track with my students or conference audiences, for whatever purpose, it is easily done. It doesn't tire my eyes out and it doesn't give me headaches. It is eternal delight.

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About me

Luke Prodromou graduated from Bristol University and has an MA in Shakespeare Studies (Birmingham University) a Diploma in Teaching English (Leeds University, with distinction) and a Ph.D (Nottingham University). He has been a plenary speaker at many international conferences in Europe and Latin America, including IATEFL, UK. Luke is a founder member of *Disabled Access Friendly Campaign* for which he wrote - and performed, with D. Gibson - the 'Wheelchair Sketch' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6TxkEOkxt8). He was a member of the theatre group: *Dave'n'Luke English Language Theatre (*https://davenluke.wordpress.com/*)* and now performs as *Luke and friends: English Language Theatre.* He is the author, with Lindsay Clandfield of the award-winning handbook for teachers, Dealing with Difficulties. He has also written 20 or so coursebooks, including: *Jackpot, Smash*, *Flash on* and *The Longman First Grammar and Vocabulary.* He gives talks and performances related to Shakespeare and Dickens, their life, work and relevance to issues of modern times (gender equality, globalization, power and the financial crisis et al).