



From the Principal

Peter Clague



Call Me (Old-Fashioned)

Old School was Not Cool

Three wonderful new technologies were born in the year that I left school (1983, to save you having to ask Alexa or Siri). Revolutions that would change human interaction irrevocably. Firstly, those early adopters who were wealthy or nerdy enough to possess a newfangled device called a 'Home Computer' (which had, itself, only debuted 11 years earlier) were able to purchase the Multi-Word Tool. A software program that allowed the user to miraculously manipulate text on a screen. Bold, underline, italicise, cut and paste; the typewriter officially died that day (and the product went on to rebrand later as a little thing called Microsoft Word).

That same year, the first handheld mobile phone arrived on the scene. I say first 'handheld' because there was a slightly earlier model, resembling a brick in size and weight, but you needed to be a powerlifter to carry it any distance. Better batteries soon meant lighter models though, and by the early Eighties it wasn't just characters from Star Trek who casually flipped open portable communication devices. If you possessed this ultimate new status symbol, you ostentatiously flashed your Motorola DynaTAC 8000X in public at every opportunity.

Finally, and most momentously, 1983 heralded the official birth of the internet. Computer networks had existed in isolation up until then. But two scientists (whose names have since slipped into obscurity although they probably deserve better) thought it might be a good idea to connect them all together using a universal language. Before you could say TCP/IP, the worldwide web sprang into existence.

Immigrants vs Natives

By which time, as I say, I had already left school. My formal education was over without so much as a single email, text, or Insta post. Which makes me the very definition of a Digital Immigrant. Ironically, one who has gone on to spend the next four decades educating the Digital Natives. The 'always-on', compulsively-connected generations, who have never known any different. Leaving aside the possibility that might not make me a great fit for the job, years of watching young people navigate a virtual world that at times seems foreign to me have proved fascinating. I'm sure that generations of my students have despaired as I have nagged them to lift their eyes from their screens occasionally, but I protest that I am not a Luddite.

The Internet is Agnostic

Nor do I consider new technologies inherently good or bad. In truth, they are simply amplifiers of existing human traits. Online applications extend the range of bullies and Good Samaritans in equal measure. And as much as we work to educate against the negative impacts of narcissistic social media, addictive gaming, obsessive selfie-taking, and the like, I am equally in awe of a generation who intuitively see positive potential in their personal devices (things that would never have occurred to this immigrant).

Like texting a picture of their Uber driver's car to friends before they get in, just for safety. Or geotagging followers to share recommendations for food or festivities. Or satisfying any fleeting curiosity with a quick Google search, when my generation would still be deciding if it was worth a trip to the encyclopedia section of the local library. Or simply mastering, from a young age, a sophisticated integration of digital alarms and reminders, direct messaging, payment apps, file management, story-curation platforms, and a plethora of other digital tools to stay on top of their life admin. As much as I might rail against the threats, I applaud the opportunities as well.

Invisible and Silent

That's why mobile phones aren't outlawed at St Leonard's College as they are in some places. Partly because I have learned in this job never to make rules you can't police. Banning devices that are so integral to life in today's society will simply drive them underground. In the face of similar prohibitions, I have known children to take two phones to camp; one to be confiscated so that the other can be kept for surreptitious use.

But our stance of controlled usage onsite also stems from the fact that I know what it was like to grow up as an immigrant in the digital world.

I would far rather we took an active role in preparing young people to use technologies responsibly before they leave us, instead of allowing them to graduate with no experience or training in how to self-regulate online. Hence, the College mantra of 'Invisible and Silent' when it comes to mobiles on campus.

From an appropriate age, students may bring them because they aid the transition to independence and adulthood. We are educators, and along with solving quadratic equations and conjugating verbs, we owe it to our students to teach them how to navigate the world they will inhabit as adults. That includes ensuring that, unless asked to use devices for educational or administrative purposes, students must follow the etiquette expected elsewhere in society, and not let them interfere with positive interaction and social engagement.

Instant Messaging and Teenage Hormones

A final observation from my life as a digital immigrant. Perhaps one that simultaneously makes the case for and against ubiquitous technology finding its way into the hands of young people. It is based upon the findings of a powerful neuroscientific study, published in 2012. In which researchers studying a sample group of teenagers began by exposing each of them to a mild stressor, such as giving a speech or being confronted with a tough Maths problem in public. Immediately afterwards, the participants were able to contact their mother. Half were able to do so by text, the other half could make a phone call. Scientists then measured changes in their brain chemistry throughout.

The results were striking. For those who phoned and heard their mother's voice, levels of oxytocin (the so-called 'love hormone' associated with feelings of pleasure and happiness) went up, whilst levels of cortisol (the stress hormone that triggers anxiety) went down. However, the levels amongst those who were only able to have a text conversation with their mother were quite different. For those teens, oxytocin remained unchanged, but cortisol levels actually increased.

The implications being that hearing their mother's voice had an immediate reassuring effect, reducing their stress levels and making them feel safe. Whereas having a text conversation with the same person only served to heighten their anxieties. Hence, carrying a mobile phone may be a double-edged sword for teenagers. Exposure to relentless texting, without the associated cues of human interaction, such as tone and clarity of message, may be stress-inducing. Yet the ability to immediately call and hear a parent's soothing voice may stem a problem before it becomes overwhelming.

Responding to the uses and abuses of technology can be challenging at times, but whether we migrated to the digital world or were born into it, we all need to learn how to live there now.