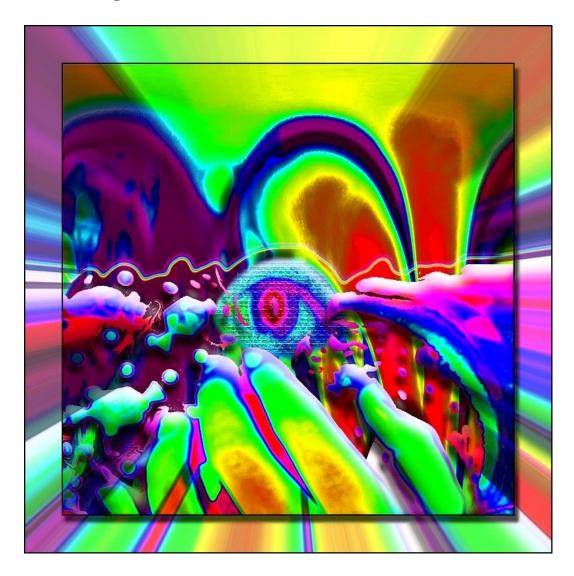Language Acts and Worldmaking Debates:

Has the digital world revolutionised language pedagogy?

King´s College London. Bush House. 21 March 2018

The Digital Order: Challenges and Direction of Travel

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I. The new Digital Order

A) Digital devices and tools enrich, but also redirect, our creativity, multimodality and sociability:

We can produce audio and video, for synchronic or asynchronic communication, at ease.

We write not just for direct readers of written texts, but for audio and audio-visual audiences who listen what we recite or what we read out.

We have at our disposal more outputs to listen and view than ever.

Our sensory mix is changing also because our hearing, tact and smell, our movement and kinaesthetic senses are focusing increasingly more on devices.
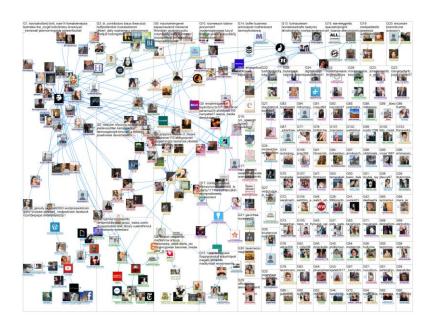
We can spend more time away from others, physically, as there are plenty of opportunities in computer-mediated communication with many other people.

Computer-mediated sensoriality and sociability are rich in many respects but very incomplete in others. Crucially, they are shaping our humanity, including our learning, emotionally and cognitively, as well as practically.

The development of digital literacies is part and parcel of learning. They are instrumentally essential, in the same way as holding a pen and producing readable handwriting used to be indispensable not so long ago.

B) The digital revolution has brought about new opportunities for human interconnectivity and communication.
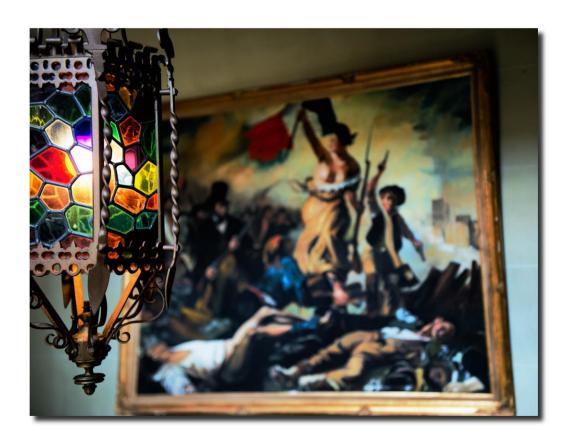

In the eyes of the external observer, there is greater fragmentation in humanity resulting from social clustering of the digital world. However, digital communities, some of them in the form of more stable groups, some others just fast-moving temporary swarms, are more global, incremental and inclusive than their pre-digital predecessors.

A wide range of contexts and narratives have appeared, some of them very social, multimodal and multi-layered.

For the learner, digital spaces provide fascinating opportunities for identity construction, agency and social engagement. The work of Darvin and Norton[1] covers very well this aspect in the area of language learning with references to a vast array of literature.

[1] Darvin, R. and Norton, B. Identity, Language Learning, and Critical Pedagogies in Digital Times (2015) J. Cenoz et al. (eds.), Language Awareness and Multilingualism, Encyclopedia of Language and Education, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-02325-0_3-1

C) The institutional and economic ecosystem

Internal competition is now consubstantial within the School System and the Higher Education System. Their institutions also compete and intersect with a blend of participatory and quasi-participatory platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, or Wikipedia which can be regarded also as institutions, because they have their norms, hierarchies and, in cases like Facebook, a strong proprietary input. Moreover, our dependency on externally produced commercial software grows as we embrace change. We are less autonomous, for good and bad.

There are legitimate concerns about the exploitation by corporations of the cognitive capital, or immaterial labour, resulting from the application of digital technologies in learning, teaching and research. We are contributing to the extension of the mode of relations of capitalism into many aspects of our lives, including learning. This has been articulated brilliantly by Richard Hall[2].

II. The challenges

A) How does the change in the nature of inputs and outputs, the learners' sensory mix, affect their competences and preferences, their opportunities and limitations, and I dare to say, their consciousness?

How do we reach an optimal balance of the four strands of Paul Nation[3]? These the opportunities for learning language (meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development). Can current taxonomies of inputs and outputs in language cover the complexity of the new reality? Is clicking a form of writing? ☺

B) In a world with so many identifiable and accessible clusters of interests, the L2 target culture ceases to be a monolithic construct and becomes a 3D mosaic in respect of which students can fine tune their desire of integration, targeting their preferred groups or interests. Authentic learning is not only desirable, it is unavoidable. Personalised construction of the target culture is too.

C) Can we have effective critical pedagogies inside institutions?

Marketisation of education is progressively infusing the student-tutor relationship with a perverse sense of transactionality. This further constrains the ability of institutions and practitioners to innovate in certain directions, such as

1) defining learning outputs in more open and contingent ways;
2) placing greater responsibility for their learning on the students, or simply redefining their duties;
3) or departing from educational marketing and contractual orthodoxy.

III.   The direction of travel

We need to understand better how learners receive and produce language in this new and yet evolving, multimodal, multisensorial and multifaceted scenario, that is becoming our default scenario.

Both the student and the tutor must become protagonist in the design of platforms and tools and be open and critical about spaces created for us externally, whether they are meant to be for educational purposes or not.

A) The journey

Students face many different contexts. Their learning is a journey through different landscapes and even atmospheres and climates.

The tutor then becomes a sort of map designer, who at times turns into road maintenance contractor, or traffic controller, or weather advisor, or even Sherpa, co-pilot, and networking advisor, match-maker.

A famous animation by Forges

-Your occupation, please?
-Animator, educator, actor, teacher, psychologist, tourist guide, chaperon, translator, speaker, linguist, psychiatrist, designer, coach, writer, painter, whilst gesticulating and walking.
-I can´t fit all that in, sorry.
-Just say Spanish Language Tutor, it is the same.

B) The waters

Eversion is a concept originally coined by William Gibson to explain the phenomenon of the turning inside out of cyberspace. Jones represents eversion with a picture of Kelly Goeller's "Pixel pour" street art featuring a fire hydrant vomiting water-like pixels over our old physical reality.[4]

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[4] Martínez-Arboleda, Antonio (2017) "Ártemis: Poetry in the Age of Eversion" (The Language Scholar, Nov. 2017): https://languagescholar.leeds.ac.uk/a…

If we accept the metaphor of the water and the digital eversion and we imagine that our students have to deal with digital flooding, like the big floods of Noah, the role of the tutor is to provide:

Activities to direct or give some purpose to the digital experiences, such as autonomous learning portfolios and language learning logs;

Opportunities for emersion from digital spaces such as islands, peers, meeting points in beaches, or even summer schools in mountains away from the waters of our digital seas and oceans, reclaiming the full sensoriality of our physical proximity.

C) **The spirit**

We need to identify those traditional teaching and learning practices that are a reflection of those relations of power that constrain education: I would like to point here at two areas of action, but there are more: academic essays and feedback and grading[5].

The digital revolution presents fantastic opportunities to revamp, reformulate and even supersede with emancipatory spirit some traditional ingredients of our education practice that are, in their current state, preventing change in the right direction.

Commercial software dependency is a great challenge too. In so far as possible, universities should engage in the production of open and free software.
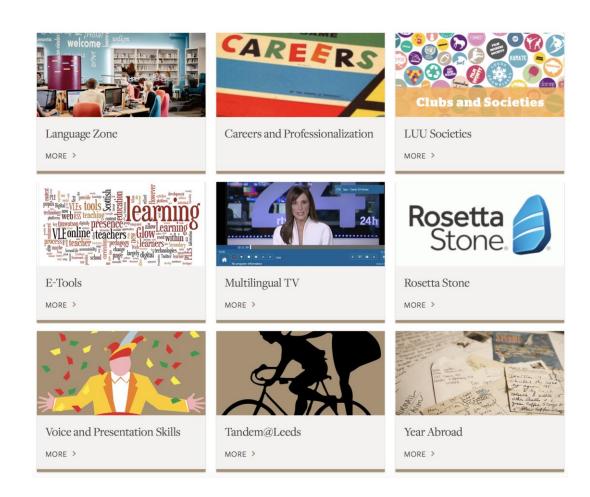
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[5] http://teachingexcellence.leeds.ac.uk/blog-diary-using-screen-capture-feedback/

Critical pedagogy is possible, but we need to be strategic and patient about it, because it requires external changes for it to take roots. Otherwise we may end up feeling disheartened. Critical pedagogy in language learning in the UK Higher Education has to be an incremental operation. For the time being, it will feel like cultivating safely flowers of emancipation and, more importantly, seeds for when the weather is right, in the greenhouses of some modules or learning activities.

One example of this type of project is OpenLIVES, where students carry out oral history interviews and produce and publish podcasts as OER, intertwining their narrative with that of the research participants[6], challenging genre conventions and engaging with external audiences. Another is the project of Speaking Skills in the Liberal Arts programme at the University of Leeds, Lingualink.
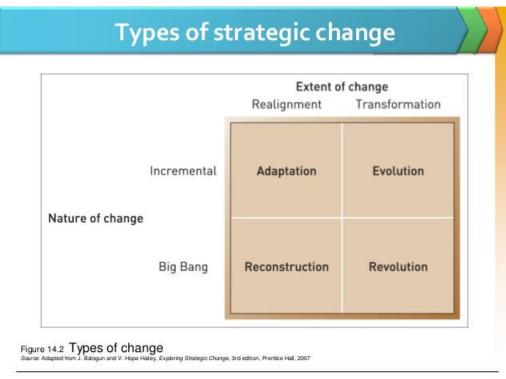

In our ecosystem, emancipatory pedagogies may have become a utopian aspiration, yet, paradoxically, they are an urgent necessity.

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[6] Martínez-Arboleda, Antonio (2016). 'Historia oral digital: reprogramación y empoderamiento educativo y social'. Bresciano, Juan y Sossai, Fernando, eds. El conocimiento histórico en el cíberespacio: prácticas académicas y proyección social. Montevideo: Ediciones Cruz del Sur.

Conclusion: Yes, there is a revolution, but whose revolution?

The revolution in Language Pedagogy has been brought about, primarily, by the invisible, and not so invisible hands operating in the ¨Digital World¨.

Theorists, educators and students are responding as well as they can. We have been the protagonists of adaptation, evolution and even reconstruction, sometimes in a rather piecemeal and decentralised way, but we have not been the revolutionary subjects.

Figure 14.2 Types of change
Source: Adapted from J. Balogun and V. Hope Hailey, *Exploring Strategic Change*, 3rd edition, Prentice Hall, 2007

We must make sure that we have a greater stake in what happens in the Digital World and in our institutions in order to maintain the ethical sense and public interest mission of education in these new times.

Technology should not be the tail that wags the education dog.

It is about time that we also revolutionise.