



September 2015

THE LEGACY OF PART THREE

Anyone who read my last piece, a summary of what I'd learned in my 18 months' training to become a fully-fledged ADI, may have picked up a central theme. One that's dogged me ever since I began as a PDI in June 2012.

It's simply this. All the training has been focused on helping me pass my Part Three, the Pre-Set Tests. That's a very particular goal, somewhat distant from the quotidian needs of bread-and-butter teaching. As I noted on my first sitting of Part Three, rather artificial and super-concentrated, like an episode of *EastEnders*: you'd never carry on living in Albert Square if it was as intense as that all day every day. Unlike more skilled practitioners who drew a line at the outset between the exam and daily work, I rehearsed my PSTs on paying pupils, so I could see how they'd react and hence what the SE might say or do in role, during my 30-minute tests.

The unhappy legacy has been that I can still find myself expecting to squeeze all the detail of a PST topic into a subject briefing at the start of many-a lesson, while making it catchy, memorable, and attention-holding. Some hope! I'm enough of an old hand now (well, 4000 hours under my belt) to recognise that probably no more factual material, about dashboard lamps or what an ABS does for you, gets retained if I push through a slick spiel about open and closed junctions than if we go look at one or two as a driver ... or maybe even better on foot.

Of course, our communicative ability with the core subject matter must be tested. No, I can't think of a better way than a role-playing SE homing-in on one topic out of a dozen, all under the time constraints that comes with a centrally-funded organisation. But the missing link really has felt—continues to feel—how to build, immediately post-qualifying, good value lessons that cover the essentials once you're on the move. You know what I mean: set-up; use of primary controls; biting point; refs for normal driving and stopping; MSM; parking sites; dealing with obstructions. It all seems to be needed at once, unless you've got a super-quiet, unparked-up, straight and flat road!

It's not always doomy-gloomy, enthusiasm-sapping worry over how to deliver proper professional value to the client while honouring the thoroughness of our training and the responsibility for young lives on our shoulders. Only when you've had a run of test fails, or someone makes you think your whole cohort has been stuck on a learning plateau and it's probably 'cos you've been too lax in your approach. But then a pupil's off-the-cuff remark gets you back on your feet and you relax again, personality comes back, creative ways of explaining and animated gestures and face.

Maybe most ADIs don't feel this. Maybe most keep PSTs and real life ably separated. But perhaps there's a significant proportion, like me, who get subliminally locked in to expecting a pupil to progress as rapidly as does the SE provided we're doing our job properly. And it's that final point that can sting. An absence of progress can leave me feeling distinctly under-performing, no matter how much inventive effort I invest in someone. A nasty hangover indeed, difficult to shift if you've a tendency toward self-doubt.

So what's to be done? Well, give a little more credence to the pupil. The vast majority will know when they're setting off a bit sharpish, and can press a footbrake. They'll also be pretty adept at turning the steering wheel away from danger. Do I really need to labour best technique in the very first few lessons? If a bad habit starts to form, I'll spot it. We can then work at aiming toward something more conducive to safety or efficiency. It's not really going to make learning more productive or enjoyable if I spout a mini lecture at the start, or rush them toward independent attempts after half an hour!

So that's it in a nutshell. The biggest challenge in my ADI career to date. Tempering my PST mindset with some gentler expectations, grounded in realism. Simple to state, often tricky to apply.

October 2015

Moody Blues

Adolescents of a certain age will best remember Carrie Fisher as bun-haired Princess Leia from Star Wars. Asked whether she would prefer not to have bipolar "disorder" she replied in the negative. How would she feel without that significant flow and ebb of mood and creativity? Who would she be?

While I've no longer sufficient hair to pass myself off at Comicon as the eponymous intergalactic princess, I too have come to recognize myself as comprising different moods. These aren't simply wafts of temperament. They're mental-sludge-inducing sloughs of turgidity, where everything's bland and disinteresting; where I can't remember simple facts, make obvious links, or take decisions (cos I can't hold two thoughts together to compare!) Or, happily for equally extended periods, bursts of creative ideas and boundless enthusiasm at meeting new people and helping them conquer their fears about driving. (Etc.)

Being prone, as a significant number of us are, to mood swings, is commonly seen as a problem. Or an "issue", in politically-correct language. Yes, it does have consequences. Our industry perhaps attracts more than the average proportion of "sufferers", with its relatively small syllabus, sets of rules and Codes, scope for exercising control and authority, and maybe the displacement activity of helping someone else overcome irrational fears which we believe ourselves incapable of readily managing in our own lives.

But there IS an upside. And it's big. I've been, frankly, flabbergasted by how many drivers, young and old, show signs of deep-seated self-doubt which go far beyond the technicalities of moving about on the road. I'm not skilled in digging around people's psyches, and have to be very careful what I may touch upon (especially if

we're moving), let alone qualified to provide the care of a professional psychologist, but I can share my own experiences when I think this leaves the student feeling less alone. Our common ground comes from being two human individuals, much more broad than the difference characterised by one of us carrying a green credit card bearing our photograph.

I often start with a nervous pupil by asking a little about how they enjoy spending their time. It's seldom by driving. It's fun, and it keeps life interesting, to ask them to teach ME something that I know they can do, where I'm patently unskilled. It doesn't have to be clever or complicated, just obvious to them that I don't know as much as they about it. This builds their confidence in a certain openness from me as their teacher.

I've coined a neologism for this: "rapportance". It's a conflation of rapport and importance, to remind myself—as much as anything—how much this "initial bond" matters in such a tender relationship as being chief protagonist in the very public spectacle of (to plunder Jerome K. Jerome's literary precursor to TV's "Last of the Summer Wine") "messaging about in cars".

It's not like the eternal bond between the flying-dragon-thingey and its blue rider, in "Avatar", or a pair of swans. But it's a crucial moment in two people risking trust in the abilities of the other. The client's in "taking me on" as a tutor, for which they're parting with hard-earned cash; mine in putting my main livelihood's asset, if not my limb and life, in their (in)capable hands.

As I've written before, I'm not the sort of instructor that likes to be thought of as having ALL the answers (compared to a driving examiner, who may have an ideal way they expect a test candidate to navigate every junction). I'd rather admit up front that there's a range of treatments for a given road feature and, only in the final analysis will one method be evident as the ideal. But we're about teaching learners, primarily, to suss out for themselves what makes sense, without squeezing out their personality and character as they drive ... just as we'd hope they don't all start dressing the same to attend lessons. Their behaviour on the road is not to be robotic: we'll leave that to GoogleCars. When would I laugh if lovely girls like Helen didn't come out with spontaneous and idiosyncratic remarks like "The brakes work a lot, don't they"?

And within their levels of natural skill and states of emotion—including how upbeat or downcast they may be feeling with us, and henceforth into their lifelong driving career—I applaud their honesty at this sensitive time and welcome any admission of mental uncertainty, just as I hope they see in mine a kindred experience from which we can keep journeying together.

Driving is a microcosm of life. We're all nervous about learning it, teaching it; learning how to teach it, just as we are in any public forum when surrounded by dozens of people who seem "superior" because they seem adept at doing it. Depression's a sod. But even it can be usefully applied.

November 2015
"Predictive sex"

"Passing Comment". Passing cement. That's what it felt like writing the summary piece to my twelve episodes of training to become an instructor. Or "Twelve Stations of the Cross", to err on the side of blasphemy for a moment.

"Such is life," as teenage friend Stuart used to say. And this all ties neatly with what I wrote last time, concerning mood. So, this month, how about some levity—or "Levitt-y", in honour of another witty friend through senior school.

Comment and Cement. Ah, the perils of predictive text! (Or "prescriptive sex", as Cortana once helpfully suggested). Is it bane or blessing?

Of course, it's both. Especially for the busy self-employed, especially for a driving instructor who tries to use it on the move. ESPECIALLY by voice. And it's not just an occasional encumbrance, like the electric can-opener that fails just after you've finally discarded the blunt manual version. This is an important point to teach your pups.

Oh yes; working out a succinct string of punctuation-less words, while threading through Kingston's one-way system on a Saturday, is the easy part. Enunciating them, equally so (provided you can pretend to onlookers that you're a budding thespian, odd-jobbing as an ADI to pay the bills). The hard bit is what happens after you've given your vital utterance to Siri / Cortana / Viagra (OK, I made that one up). And so with your younger clients, once they're out on their own. Will they REALLY pull over and switch off before texting a smiley face—or whatever—in response? 'Course not. :(.

As our cars get made with more fun gubbins inside, engine bay and seating area, how well can we as human animals cope with quasi-intelligent interaction while operating machinery in motion? Not very, it seems. But then, we're old, by and large. Maybe our driving experience keeps us alive. What has the nimble-fingered 18-yearold got in HIS kitbag?

So, back to the charade. I say my piece. I then have to concentrate, as usual, while Cortana speaks it back to me. This is significantly distracting. I'm listening hard, remembering what I said, matching the two versions, taking myself "away from the road". It feels like trying to visualise junctions on the journey ahead, to avoid a wrong turn. Result? Near misses at THIS junction.

Often, even with windows all up and radio all down, "she" mishears me. I spot a discrepancy. The brain then gets really involved, in this necessary "spot the difference" game, because no-one wants to feel they've wasted their time, taking to a machine. (Or be defeated by one). So we steel our sinews and strive on.

Does the discrepancy matter? More computational effort required. Do I want to Send (regardless), Add More, or Start Again? 'Twould be interesting to know how those three options are favoured. Like many, I want to say Send. Economic, efficient; cut and run. But how will the recipient interpret the mixed-up word(s)? Will the morpheme still be there for them to grasp, or will my message in fact prolong what I intend as a "monologue chat". A one-way street. The only way to judge is to recall all previous interaction with the addressee. How much distraction does THAT cause!?

More brain work: “Diversion, a head”. So, must I have another go? Will it work any better? My experience says not. “Computer says No”. Most utterances need repeating 6-8 times: if I’m on my toes, each one getting shorter and omitting any proper nouns or syntactical complexity. I sound like a wartime radio operator, barking staccato orders into a five-second window.

Of course, alongside the (im)practicality issue, frustration is building. It’s like any labour-saving device that, well, doesn’t. Do are younger pupils find it less irritating? We can’t know. Not until they’re “out there”. We can only warn them—and show them—how hands-free doesn’t mean brains-free. An apocrypha for the Show Me / Tell Me library?

But the same can happen with a real person. I’ve mentioned teaching Kathy, who mis-heard “six car-lengths” as “six cans of Carling”, and Henna (thinks I’ve said “Scotch” when I reach for “squash” from the glovebox). But these interactions are quick to correct, often after mutual giggling. Siri doesn’t have the same sense of humour. Or does she? Nathaniel, who passed last Tuesday, recounted a scooter experience where he was being voice-guided on a journey by his phone. A car cut him up from a T-junction, and he let slip some expletive. Siri indignantly intoned “Well, Nat, there’s no need to be like that; I thought we were friends!”

So, that was my pre-Seasonal Silliness. With a salient teaching point. I end with my tale of Jim, on Monday, who texted to say he was nervous about his morning’s test and could I come early. Cortana coped well with me relaying that I was on my way to the dentist with my agèd mother, but “would meet you at Kings Heath [TC] I’ll be wearing a brown hat”. Quite why she heard this as “... meet you in Kinky Sex” I cannot say. And matters took a turn for the absurd, if not illogical, when she helpfully added “I’ll be wearing a bra”. All this does nothing for the quality of my roadcraft: partly from my watering eyes, partly from suppressing nasty visual earworms.

I gave up. But—like my learners—will I learn ...?

December 2015

PASSING comment: Mind your language / All just words

“Language is a virus from outer space” wrote the American writer William S. Burroughs. On that theme, “men are from Mars and women from Venus”.

So we can recognise that the same words get heard very differently. Words are a form of code: a pattern of symbols or sounds, which need choosing carefully enough (“encoding”, by us) that they can be reasonably understood (“de-coded”, by others) in a particular setting. And, as with driving, we have control only over the first part: we cannot determine how others respond or behave, only try to judge what they’re likely to do based on context and our ever-growing experience of it.

We’re taught, as instructors, to watch our language. Or, more precisely, to hear it. It’s one reason I enjoy/endure listening to myself on an in-car recording. Quite a few students feel, understandably, intimidated by a camera scrutinising their every twitch and fluster while they drive—“it’s bad enough the world outside the windows is watching!”

So I like audio-only. The file sizes are much smaller, too, making for neat storage, speedy upload to The Cloud, and easy student access via texting them a trivial link. It also forces me to mention anything relevant going on visually, as there won't be pictures to remind us later, so keeping me on my toes as I try to maintain a balance between comprehensiveness, interest, and brevity.

And so back to language. Verbal, yes, but also the under-used aspects of tone, pace, timing, structure, body ... and appropriate silence. Effective and memorable writing often uses varying sentence-length; sometimes quite long and involved, requiring concentration and inference, deductions and cross-referencing, where the listener may lose the thread or have to mentally replay earlier clauses to remind themselves what pronouns refer to whom, before extracting the meaning and “what's in it for them”. Often, shorter is better. And variety's best.

Onomatopoeia is good. And alliteration. Some made-up words (I use “guh-doyng” for teaching how to recognise a gear lever's in neutral without looking at it). Judiciously interspersed farmyard noises? Certainly, if it breaks some ice, shakes up a dull technical explanation, or makes a “cattle crossing” warning sign more memorable.

What I'm learning in this career does echo what I've picked up from previous ones. A barrister needs to spot when the witness has said enough, and needs to now shut up. A software engineer needs to know how accurately a user will interpret a short on-screen message. A journalist must sum up the whole story in the opening paragraph, yet still leave a reader wanting more detail. A scientist must mean it when they say “all” or “every”, not just “most” and “many”. Yet we're dealing with people who, just like us when concentrating under pressure, don't hear the difference between “At the end of the road ...” and “Take the next ...”.

Since we're waxing literal, some Shakespeare is timely: “... the world [is] a stage where every man must play a part / And mine a sad one” (The Merchant of Venice; Act 1 Scene 1). Any teacher is called to play roles: sometimes sad, sometimes joyful. We need to be soothing, reassuring, convincing, coaxing, joshing, chiding, stern. We show our emotion just as we encourage the student driver to acknowledge theirs as part of being in a fit state (or not) to mingle on the roads. I'm all for emotional expressiveness in the car; learning to drive is a very public and visible thing, possibly the first practical test many young people will have done. Performed in a fish-tank of sorts, surrounded by dozens of grown-ups who can patently do it better than we. What language might we expect when push comes to shove? Encourage, even? It's a war zone for some!

Here I introduce the Examiner among our “*dramatis personae*”. If an ADI's language, its tone and delivery, affects the feelings—and therefore further performance—of a pupil, how will *theirs* be received when our student becomes a test candidate? Of course, examiners like us (pun intended) are only human, so their phrases must be allowed some lee-way between formal rectitude and natural personality. But, to a non-English speaker, “That'll do you nicely just there” is pretty meaningless. I've heard it. Seen the baffling effect. As with the well-intentioned raised hand, to thank a patient oncoming motorist; distracting in the driver's peripheral vision.

It's easy to use turns of phrase that make “foreigners” (“aliens”, being literally “a-lien”,

or “those without a link”) feel instantly and viscerally apart from the local situation. That feeling will trump any number of words trying to convince them that the examiner is just there to just observe, rather than influence in any way. I teach in French as well as English, to put university-based francophones more at ease on their own turf ('cos their French will be better than mine) while I try to impart the business of transferring understanding and skill about driving in a foreign country.

The French language has a useful word, “étranger”, which doubles for “stranger” as well as “outsider” (as used in the title of Camus’ eponymous book about the lonely Meursault). It connotes at once a vulnerability through naivety which can be countered only by emphatic enthusiasm for your subject, generosity of spirit, warmth of welcome in your body language and overall demeanour.

This vulnerability was NOT evident in the knee-jerk reaction of a test candidate I heard about in a Facebook page yesterday. Sensing her examiner was about to reach for her wheel in a particularly challenging multi-lane, rush-hour jam, with a revving Porsche in her left blind-spot, she blurted “F*** off; I’ve seen him!” But all credit to the examiner (not in my neck of the woods) for giving her a pass.

This is not to be confused, of course, with “making a pass”, for the non-native English-speakers reading this. Just as we must be sure to distinguish between “taking over” and “overtaking”, and to elucidate the difference between “follow the road ahead” and “road ahead closed”. Is there one? Why, yes. The road ahead may bend, perhaps significantly, yet the closed road may actually be a side road, different from the one you’re on! I sympathise with the young Chinese woman who remained silent after I’d asked her to say as soon as she identified a pedestrian crossing. It took some minutes to see that I wanted her to spot zebras; she was looking for people stepping off the pavement. QED.

But “to get back to our sheep”, as the French say, might our examiners be extremely careful in the words they choose during debrief? It’s the most vulnerable time for a student. They may be too emotional to be listening clearly, but they’ll sure be feeling the impact of what’s said. Being told a test has been “aborted” or “terminated” early “on the grounds of health and safety” or “in the interests of public safety” may be technically correct—maybe legally necessary—but hardly likely to ring true with “I wish you the best of success next time [which] I’m sure will go well”. How many costly hours of rebuilding young-driver confidence will it take to over-write the sensation of told by an authority figure, like an older parent or teacher, that you’re toxic on the roads?

So, it’s tone and empathy we all need to be aware of. The peripheral but vital context in which we issue our utterances. Like the actor Simon Callow pointed out when recalling his Roman Catholic school days: once Mass was no longer in Latin, it lost something. For what everyone thought we’d gained in understanding the literal words, now in English, we’d lost the musical cadence which left a deeper impression. Which could change our outlook, self-belief, make us more confident learners—at any stage of motoring—hence be more able to think calmly about driving decisions. Just as the DVSA would wish.

Looking is more than seeing; listening is more than hearing. Speaking is more than saying. “What’s in a name?”, we say. Well, what’s in a word? Loads. Teachers, each: beware!

December 2015

Alternative test

Sitting in the back of my car as David takes his first driving test, I'm reminded of last month's piece about words. David is doing the "alternative test"—an "alternate test", our American cousins might say, with perhaps more appropriate statistical connotations of sample size, control groups, and "removing observer variability".

What's reminded me is the TomTom unit which the DVSA is using for the trial. Helpfully, the examiner warns David that the machine (can it be a machine if there are no moving parts?) will mention "waypoints" occasionally. A word I'd only once encountered before all this digital mapping of the last decade, on some programme about trekking the Appalachian mountains.

Trouble is, the nice lady's voice intones "weh-hey points". This, with its louche undertone of British seaside boarding-house revelry, is a nice icebreaker; I catch a smirk from David in the centre mirror. And again, each time she says it, the punch-line losing none of its impact at each utterance. I try to avoid eye-contact, concentrating instead on bracing the iPad between my knees and typing this. (My mind flashes back to senior examiner Keith, recounting from his ADI days some long, heartfelt listening-sessions with a pair of partners, who had driving lessons back-to-back, but were conducting longstanding extra-marital affairs ... presumably front-to-front).

We're now [11:44-11:07] minutes into David's performance. We trundle on, competently if a little jerkily. I've asked in the waiting room what would happen if the test candidate ("formal assessment client"?) asked en route to pull over and observe the two-minute silence. The examiner suggested it may evidence poor planning to book a test covering 11:00 on Remembrance Day. It wasn't said wryly. But maybe some culturally unaware types could be forgiven for thinking all government agencies don't stop, including DVSA staff; after all, folk continuing about their mundane chores is not what's broadcast on BBC Worldwide at this time of year. That would seem disrespectful, and not at all "Ambridge". Hence confusing. Again, what we presume is the norm can often be otherwise. Words. Driving. Situations differ each time they arise, evolving as we factor-in our growing base of experience.

I wonder if these trial tests are more boring for the examiner, or a relief from talking. Certainly, it's more oddly quiet in the car: we instructors are taught to disdain silence. "There's always something useful to be said". Hmm; maybe.

So, no reversing manoeuvre yet. Wonder what it will be. I bet David's increasingly conscious of that question. Being the alternative test, it can't be left- (or right-) corner reverse, or turn-in-the-road. In fact, David quickly declined my suggestion to turn around in a cul-de-sac in the pre-test lesson as he wouldn't be asked to demonstrate that. (I countered that much of his early driving career would be made up of taking wrong turns and having to get out of small spaces, as he grappled with geography on the move, as well as car mechanics).

11:51. Unusually, stuck in traffic. A roadworks queue. Mr Assessor comments that they seem to be everywhere these days. I nod, internally. David remains

immutable. The satnav lady seems oblivious to the fact that we came the other way a quarter hour ago. I note the primary children who'd earlier circled the little stone war memorial, bedecked in DayGlo vests against the grey granite and crimson poppies, are now filing past, back to peacetime studies. I wonder if anyone who didn't need to sit a driving test (wartime dispensation) is still on our roads. I wonder I veterans on mobility scooters will sometime out-rank seventeen year-olds for KSIs. I wonder if there'll be a test for them before long; "scoot-ability". And as we draw through the "4-way control" at the temporary lights, I wonder if the US still has so many "four-way stops", and how they're getting on with their new-fangled roundabouts. I wonder a lot.

David nudges 34 and recoils abruptly from the gas pedal. We have done some work on smoothness, including me strongly advocating creeping round a car park in the family MPV, a shallow glass of water BluTak-ed to the dashboard. I've asked him to picture its surface, keep it as still as possible. But, like most learners on test, he's concentrating hard, lips quivering in a sub-vocalised echo of each directional command. Smoothness should come with independent practice ... and the odd comment from family passengers. It becomes intrusive, doesn't it, to labour clunky coordination when there might be a medical root-cause, or someone's already conscious of clumsiness?

We make some more close-sequence turns in a 1930s council estate: bread-&-butter stamping ground of the driving-tester. David's stamina is holding up. Mrs Tom continues her tub-thumping. (Could SHE be programmed to observe The Two-minute Silence?) I muse that maybe an alternative test is more boring for the examiners, deprived of opportunity to flex the vocal chords, reduced to just a pair of keen eyes and a biro.

We're home. Well, nearly. Let's not count our chickens. Especially when it comes to roads, crossing them or navigating along them. "Secure your car, please". Now the part akin to listening to Saturday teatime football scores: the intonation before the result usually gives it away. But no, this time I didn't see it coming! GOAL!! I mumble my usual, one-word compliment from the back on hearing David's passed (I was ticked off once for "commenting on the test" before the examiner had left the car).

Brilliant job, David! All sorted before the university interviews. Shall we drive back along the motorway? Perhaps not. Remembering and celebrating his "big battle"—now a part of history—is one thing: there's no need to relive the trench warfare which is midday around the M42.

January 2016

Lessons that Aren't

Just back from Essex. Went on the M1, M25. I's drivin' along, and there's this bread van in front, right, with German number plates. And, as I's followin', the back door swings open, and a bleedin' couple of loaves pop out, bouncin' over the carriageway, like. "Strike a light", says I, and swerves to a stop behind 'im. And he comes marching up to me wind-er, tries to offer me some to keep schtum wiv da rozzers. So I goes, "Alright, Fritz; let's just say it fell offa back of a lorry". Minutes later I'm nicked and the blagger's scarpered: turns out it really was *stollen*. Boom-tish.

Good. Now we've got the (alternative) Christmas story out of the way, I can get down to this month's business. The business of wacky lessons. Lessons that "aren't lessons".

What, you've never had any? You get nothing but? Me, too. Some are wacky cos the pupil's wacky. Some are wacky because of Jo(e) Public outside. And some get wacky when we see something and just go with it.

Take Saturday. Pupil's just started at Coventry Uni, and I pick him by the bus station (en route for a vintage bus running day in Romford—gotta beat Xmas shopping somehow). Shops aren't yet open but the city centre's being dug up for what looks like its second makeover following the Second World War. And very appealing it seems too. Grass, for example. Chris informs me his mum won't even drive on the Ring Road, so I make a deliberate note to have him do at least a few hundred metres before we end. (That'll "big himself up" when he tells her).

But maybe we should start with signs-&-markings, as there's lots of construction traffic and temporarily diverted routes through the old and mediaeval parts. I DO like the illuminated poles on their zebras: a different sub-species of the 1930s striped horse, perhaps? (I muse what might the world be like with herds of luminescent equines flocking the African plains, like the glowing fish that nice Mr Attenborough's explained, one Sunday evening long ago? Darwinian evolution; survival of the fittest. Maybe the same will happen to this class of street furniture, as the merely painted poles get gradually mown down with cars driven by similarly un-illuminated types).

Off we trundle, helpfully forewarned we're about to be overtaken by a JCB as it bibs its horn, in full accord with The Highway Code. We loop the city centre, skirting the lightly populated pedestrianised zones, and retracing my own demo drive. Confidence building, I suggest we make a left at an obscured crossroads, before the red lights patently for marshalling traffic under (or onto) Coventry's own *périphérique*.

Yes, I knew it was a cul-de-sac (or peversely, as the French would have it, an impasse). But it gave a useful opportunity for Chris to elect HOW to do an about-face. He understeered and we ended up parking, pointing at a brick wall. No matter. I glanced left. Dozens of disconsolate faces were munching in unison, staring out through a plate glass window. Why would they all be in a restaurant and the shops not even open? Of course (looking up): Sir Lenny Henry's favourite site of repose. I comment. "Have you ever seen a Premier Travel Inn, Chris?" He hasn't. "Would you like to?" He would.

Dodgy ground, this, as the paying client and I exit the car and saunter toward the hotel. But his parents know us from church, and my own son's in the same BB troupe. I smirk that we could probably pass ourselves off as guests and down The Full English for nowt. I waft a hand around Reception, accidentally behaving like some aristocratic plantation owner, recounting how good value these places represent. A young lady greets us from the bar. Would we like breakfast? Well ... it seems rude to decline, and neither of us has planned our early morning well enough to have eaten. So, proffering money, I treat us both to a fry-up, as we discuss British tourist etiquette and the observable behavioural links to "types" on the road. I feel justified. And satisfied. Chris, too.

Our lesson on the ring-road was a good one. He should be brimming with pride to tell his parents. I'd recommend it. Hard roads at easy time; always a morale-booster. Was it a lesson? In life, more than driving maybe, but that's much of what it's about, no? Chris needs self belief. Unexpectedly dining with sleepy families in a hotel, plum in a city he's got to know better than I, is a good way for him to play host. And thereby take more charge in the car.

I thought back to other “non-lessons”. Parallel parking right outside Louisa's front door. Tame. Discussing fears from a previous pillion accident, and never switching on the engine. Very productive. Stopping by a ford to spy kingfishers and dragonflies. Charming—and educative. Squeezing round the KFC Drive-Thru to press buttons and order a Bargain Bucket. Fills a hole, and serves a need. Pausing to peek inside my favourite pub, which the student's never seen but is barely a mile from her home. Perfect!

These are the aims of learning to drive, and what the pupil will do once I've departed their life. It's their *raison de conduire* (as opposed to their *raison d'être*). Focus on the goal, not the mechanism or means: eyes on the prize. So let's do it now. Make it real. Bring it on!

February 2016

How rude's “rude”?

Day starts with me texting a mum “Hi Armada,” when it should have been “Amanda”. Never mind. I'm sure she's been compared to a redoubtable Spanish fighting fleet in the past. As long as her daughter's just a little dinghy—in preference to dingy. Ah, well. (Fewer consequences, I suspect, than the time I got muddled between Fernox and Feminax on the shopping list).

A student once made me smirk with what I thought would make an excellent name for a driving school: “Cheeky, not rude”. We were creeping out from the worst T-junction known to Man—South Birmingham Man, at any rate—and I was typically using too many words to convey the imperative for caution. That, or I'd defaulted to the rather bland “peep-n-creep”, which is great unless you're not a native Anglophone.

Sometimes, you DO have to be assertive. That's just short of aggressive, well south of angry, and at the most northerly point of confident. We all know that, if you're not, you'll get walked all over (driven all over) when waiting patiently to enter a busy roundabout at rush-hour.

Of course, we mustn't ignore different cultural expectations. Or even “micro-cultural” expectations: how two generations of one family may accept or rebut an identical suggestion. Most of us can't say what's the norm for using the horn in South America: we've not lived there to know. We don't know if it's impolite or just normal to push out / merge-in-turn when entering a roundabout on Guernsey. All this let alone how one sees 'civility' versus 'servitude' in the supermarket carpark, depending on one's social stratum. And hand-gestures—Highway Codified or not—are a language of their own. (We won't get into finger-gestures).

It's the same as in conversation, really. Easy to misinterpret, except there's less

imperative for clear understanding when you're not moving towards the same piece of floor or road. Things are different when you've got the momentum of a 40-tonner behind you, or four-score lives at stake in your greenhouse-on-wheels that's a double-decker.

So, should we make an effort to learn these various dialects and shades of meaning as we shuffle about in our little metal boxes? To some extent, Yes. OK, the Highway Code is an attempt at elocuting us masses into "Received Pronunciation", but we all know that flashing headlights usually means more than simply "I am here". (In Kabul, for example, I learned last week that it means "Watch out; I'm coming through!"—an amusing and dangerous polar opposite to a UK driver, more akin to the Gallic use just before overtaking. Flashing hazard lights on the move apparently reads as "Chase me!", not "Cheers!" But not so outside the city).

And that's one reason I've equipped my car with a "courtesy signal". For some months, student Oliver and I concurred it was more than a shame you couldn't easily say thankyou, after dark, to a waiting vehicle. Raising the fingers from the left hand on the wheel just isn't visible above your headlights. So, having looked at the (two) ideas already patented, I decided for a Facebook-type thumb-up symbol at the left side of my illuminated roofbox. It lights up when I squeeze a simple button. After all, we ARE trying to cultivate a culture of mutual respect, are we not? We shall see this winter if it gets interpreted as a sarcastic "well done", or is just plain distracting. But 'seems rude not to try.

As with everything, I daresay most borders between rudeness, cheek, and confident assertion are discerned by the broadest consideration of context. Are you in a different part of town? Usual norms may not apply. Is it the last shopping day before a big festival? People could be excused for less generosity to folk wanting to join the road. Is there an 18-inch gap kerbside? Pizza bicycle or city courier may, in fact, be maximising efficient use of roadspace.

But we don't want to admit any of that. Human nature predisposes us to "attribution bias" : the prejudicial view that everyone else is a berk and we're the only sane one out there. But we all have our reasons for nipping in once we've nipped out, for cutting out mannered manners as we cut up and in. Sometimes they're legit; sometimes not. Often it's to express frustration that the other buggers want to go places too—whose bloody road is it anyway? Well, so with them. Deep down, we know it.

Conclusion: how rude can you fairly be? "Fairly"? Depends if you favour blunt speech and (often) equally decisive action. Depends if you smirk at cheekiness, secretly admiring the gall, or get irritated it wasn't you who pulled a fast one. Depends if you're a shrinking Violet by day, or a shrieking Giulietta. Rude? It's how you want to take it. Take what? Offence. Now there's a lifelong learning lesson. And not just for behind the wheel, or above the handlebars.

March 2016

Reading the road to Reading

A month or two back I wrote about language. About, among other matters, the driving distractions that flow from trying to converse with in-car tech. This month, I've

gone back to one of the first phrases of an instructor's mantra—"READ the road ahead"—ruminating on what helps our words to flow as we travel along.

So how do we glue them together, to make more meaningful clumps of these words? How does the journey pass smoothly and fluently, like sonorous music and not a jarring juxtaposition of junctions, signs and unconnected events?

We're told to "read the road", but sometimes it speaks to us out loud. Thud, thud, thud go the cats' eyes. Swish and fleckle say the tyres as they meet a damp patch and spray gravel into the wheel arch. But these are acoustic confirmations of what's already happening, already "under way", what we're tripping over and coping with instead of spotting and making allowance for before we encounter it. Anyone who's had to read aloud formally will know how much more in control you feel if your eyes are considering how to deal with the group of words half a line ahead of what your mouth's currently saying!

And what helps develop that skill? Could it be the relative spaces between words—the lines (the brackets), the dots and flicks that tell us when we're nearing a join with some new notion or flow, or need to be firmer or more gentle with how we deploy our larynx?

Enter Punctuation: the coded markings in the story of the road ahead just as on the written page. These are the crucial "stage directions for the lungs and diaphragm", giving colour and life to our narrative, clues to when to ease off or pause for breath, or even stop then start anew, at the helm of our mechanical beasts.

For us as coaches and instructors, to speak is a very active pursuit, requiring skills in linguistic gymnastics. To read the road ahead—the activity in which we're training people—takes disciplined concentration because it's so much more passive. The YouTube channel "Vsauce" has a very interesting point about relative effort needed for each.

So exactly what punctuating marks are there in our stories along the road? (This may sound like a topic barely more fun than pulling out nasal hair, but bear with it: there is real utility here).

The solid white line ahead is pretty obvious, be it at traffic signals or octagonal red sign. A full stop is required. A completely fresh pick-up has to follow. It's almost a paragraph break (though perhaps that's where we pause on a journey with the engine running, collecting a passenger or setting down freight). Much more common is the broken line across our carriageway, a cautionary mark to entreat our taking stock of what we're about to get into; to watch for the new clause entering from the right and take a gracious breath, reduce the pace, maybe come down to a crawl.

And lines along the road? A solid white line along the edge patently denotes the margin within which our driving story should remain safely confined: our words (or our wheels) don't need to veer to the edge of the paper (or the tarmac) to make for a cliff-hanger narrative. Short white ones down the middle "keep us on track", following a trim and sequenced path—as with ruled lines on a page—instead of bumping inelegantly into unrelated sentences (traffic) where a different story (journey) is in train. Longer white ones, marking a hazardous environment, remind me of the ellipsis ... a string of written dots suggesting a hiatus in the text

("suspension points", the French accurately term them) which should cause us drivers to hold our breath for a moment, while we actively search for whether it's a bend, a pinch, or a crest we're being warned of.

At this juncture I have to admit that the road-marking equivalents of the colon and semicolon fair escape me, as does that for the humble bracket. But zig-zag lines feel as though they have similar purpose to the literary exclamation mark: raising the voice of the author in a way that a child might instead write the words in capitals (or do squiggly underlining!) And the question mark? Pretty similar to the ellipsis, I think, expressed on the road by hazard lines or the printed word SLOW, jolting us to actively think about seeking out a specific hazard in the next few seconds.

In between the punctuating marks go the signs themselves, perhaps regardable as words in their own right. The circular ones are the verbs: instructing what's to be done and what not, conjugated in the imperative tense. The warning triangles are adjectival: drawing your attention to features often identified by real text beneath them: "sharp", "slippery", bumpy". And the rectangular panels represent the nouns; sometimes proper nouns, like "Derby" and "Pocklington", beside arrows pointing at their whereabouts, but commonly more bland, as in "School" or "Mud".

So there we have it. One small allusion to our driven journeys as short stories, tone of delivery dictated by us, but actual fluency aided by our skill at "reading the road" with its punctuating, coded, painty symbolism. If nothing else, maybe you'll now have one more way of encouraging your learners to aim for "a rolling first" at a closed T-junction, if you can get them to spot there's a "Give Way" comma ahead—and not a full stop—in the middle of your current sentence.

April 2016

HI-TECH COMMS

Are we better off being able to share information at the touch of a small screen?

Ostensibly, a resounding Yes. The tech is cheap, convenient, you don't have to find a pen or sharpen that pencil, hunt change for the phone (or a phone box itself). And it's oh-so-portable: no bigger than a mobile phone. In fact, it IS a mobile phone—to boot—yet with all the power of a personal computer. And a built-in camera/video.

However, has such facility encouraged an unpleasant change in our mutual dealings? As self-employed types reliant on direct contact with paying clients, we know more than most the benefits of arranging our working lives "on the road", "on the fly" and "on the go". On, on, on ... as electronic technology would have us chant.

Notwithstanding, among the gripes of the humble instructor, surely a middle-ranking complaint is the No-Show student. By extension, does our upper lip curl when we get a No-Response to texts which offer, propose, suggest, and recommend in the hope of assisting the pupil attain their aim?

Why is this? By which I mean, why should the Great Learning Public—or the phalanx of casual enquirers—fail to answer our civil propositions? AND why should it matter to us so much when they don't?

I think the answer's quite layered. We put ourselves out for them; we feel the least they can do is return the courtesy with a reply. Whether they like what we've said or not. But maybe the cultural norm of the present is NOT to make a space in case someone wishes to speak; to assume that not speaking means a person has nothing they want to say. Sending messages without seeing or hearing each other as we speak, we grow deaf to the clues reminding us it's polite to be inclusive. Second, there's such a panoply of choice buzzing around most young people that it's unlikely you are the only party with whom they're in discussion. Their day-to-day experience and our days-past expectations mightn't line up.

Additionally, our gadgets are clever and "resourceful" but ultimately inanimate mechanoids, standing in for the erstwhile switchboard operator and library assistant. So why should we care if we leave them hanging? They have no feelings; they are our contractual slaves, metaphorically and literally in our pocket. We can drop them in mid-sentence, cut them dead, change our mind about what we're after, roll over and turn our backs after whatever kind of one-night stand takes our fancy. We have no shame, as we used to.

These slaves are generally fast, too. We can cuss them when they're not and they'll never rebuke or revile us, seldom mutiny, always be at our beckoning. How easy it is to let the attitude percolate into our social exchanges. How quickly we tire of the slow buggers: the shop that doesn't return our call the same day, the instructor who's not responded within the hour. Do we worry our learner drivers will have no patience on the road because they normally get what they ask for so quick?

Being so well connected, your device can make split-second friendships with a billion others to get you what you want. It's like having a pet dog who has all other dogs on the planet ready to help him find that stick and get it back to you, by relay, just as fast as he can. But never expecting a reward. You owe your phone nothing when it's saved your skin, or done a superlative job routing you to the back-of-beyond. Is this why a young pupil may skip lessons, cancel unreasonably late, or change instructors on a whim—because loyalty doesn't come into it? You wouldn't treat your dog like that, nor they you. And, for all its worth, the smartphone undermines that crucial relationship.

The absence of loyalty may feel heightened when, in a supreme and explicit act of dis-loyalty, your pupil breaks off listening to you to see who's making her phone buzz. (Or perhaps it's you who does that to them!) None of us like not being noticed, or rudely interrupted, and an uninvited joiner-in of a cosy in-car chat between two people clangs like a true affront: we're no longer the recipient of undivided attention, the value of what we're trying to give seems cheapened, and the personal rapport gets a little, well, violated by no longer staying private, supportive, customised and dedicated.

So there we all go. It's not just the physical distraction of these handy little devices that pose a risk to novice and seasoned drivers alike, but the material effect they have on us as trainers and breadwinning entrepreneurs. Maybe I overstate the case, but my short experience of Facebook groups for our trade reveal a generous helping of bile ready to be heaped upon the masses who pay our wages, and much of it's about lack of respect. Are WE being sufficiently attentive to our individual students and their needs? Oh, hold it right there, can we—I think I feel the phone buzzing ...

May 2016

Intensive or what?

I don't know what I think about intensive courses. Well, I did, and it wasn't very positive. Now, in the words of the old joke, I'm not so sure. During a small lull in booking activity by my current 22-strong cohort—does anyone else find that two-thirds of their lessons are these days made ad hoc, within the final 48 hours?—I decided to open a cold email from a company offering such things, and who'd found my address on the gov.uk site.

Their own website read well. The founder was an ex-ADI and the company now appeared to cover the nation, with sensible prerequisites for their 18-, 30-, and 42-hour offerings, respectively. The “private” instructor pages were convincing too, as was the 90-second homepage video, in speeded-up cartoon style, about why cramming it all into a week or so made much more sense. For me as instructor, Yes; but what about the all-important Client, on whose Learning we are encouraged to Centre?

Well, for me there's NO hassle involved. Just none. I simply agree to take on an individual whose postcode and name are divulged, with a few words about experience hitherto, and the site guides you through what's expected (make contact with them on such-and-such a number; take regular breaks while teaching; have the remainder of their course fee from them when you meet). Other benefits include being relieved of any “dead time” or fuel cost between otherwise short teaching commitments, a faster getting-to-know-you experience (which can really accelerate your teaching approach), a mind-focusing deadline in sight. There's still the flexibility of changing pace as each of you tires or has their appetite whetted. It's easier to go further afield, too. And all with no fewer chances of leaving a good aftertaste with the pupil, from which more recommendations may happily flow (intensive or not). Hourly rate was 10-15% below my usual, but that computed.

And the student? Well, they've likewise got a fixed target in the calendar, can be “worked on” to become more realistic about the endpoint (if they start a little over-optimistic), and can fit learning to drive into perhaps a busy working schedule which allows little annual leave (as an alternative to shorter lessons at the end of a tiring day, or in darkness). To boot, they have their test booked and paid for (price was included in their tariff), and the promise of a free retest if it doesn't work out.

But does it make for effective long-term learning? I took on two pupils, back-to-back. In hindsight, breathing space between would've been better, as 30 hours with one person, no matter how agreeable, is tough enough. A gap would also allow usual pupils to be fitted around the intensiveness (plain “unavailability” to them) without fear of loss.

Matt came first. A late 20s barber, he was well-used to mixing with all types of city-centre folk in need of a haircut. So he could hold a conversation while operating a pair of scissors, using mirrors effectively (always a boon), and balance his limbs as he slid adeptly around his hirsute customers while avoiding colleagues' elbows. He'd spent an hour in his mum-in-law's C-Max but spent his late teens on a bike. And boy, did it show in awareness and roadsense. By the end of day two—12/30 hours

in—we'd covered the syllabus and were well up to test standard (my rule of thumb, based on Alfredo Pareto's famous management principle for allocating resources, is a threshold of 80% chance of success).

But, to his credit, heavily-tattooed Matthew was aiming high, and applied his not-inconsiderable stamina to strive toward perfection. My own stamina was less big; I was metaphorically gasping for a break after the third day, conscious that my teaching was not as consistently pithy, targeted, and fun-filled as I might usually muster. We adjourned for half of Thursday, both later admitting that had been pretty crucial for freshening up. It remained a fair challenge to me to find sufficient faults to focus upon, but Matt was worried he might forget the trios of directions in the Indy Drive so we sauntered about the test suburbs doing plenty of that in between posh coffees at local restaurants with loos.

Come Friday and the last test slot of the day, Matt declared himself slightly nervous but well rested. He gave a stunning performance (only 2 DFs) despite me marooning us too far north just as the private schools emptied and the roads churned anew with Touregs and Discoverys: I drove barely legally to get us to the centre only five minutes late, and all credit to the examiner for hanging on. It was a test of Matt's capabilities when under extreme (and undue) pressure, for which I unreservedly apologised, but which served to illustrate just what kind of road-user he would be. Moral: don't let final-day indy driving lull you away from watching the clock, ideally an analogue one (easier to "read")!

Samantha was different. She'd had three lessons, was younger, but just as mature. She did 12-hour shifts at Lenny Henry's favourite motel chain, and was pursuing a science degree. We clicked even more: the learning occurred more steadily, and was real fun. The town was different, too, which made a good psychological change, but a DVSA strike caused Sam's test to be rebooked (coincidentally) where Matt had taken his: the company did the rearranging, and our blocks of time made for easy travel between towns—more advantages.

Learning from my previous week, I recommended Wednesday apart, and later on continuing beyond the usual six-hour day (to gain experience in rush hours and gloom). As the only two people involved, we happily set the tenor and timetable of each day, electing to even lunch together (a different nation's bar-food each day) which added further variety and sociable ease.

More immersively trained but ultimately less natural than Matt, Sam fared less well on test. Her stamina and self-conviction was less, and nerves made her go at an early roundabout when she should have paused to be sure. Still, her overall tally was creditable and the free retest kicks in.

So, has my view on intensives shifted? Sure. It's pretty damn good for the instructor, and probably at least no worse for the student. And if the weather's too consistent, or someone gets too saturated, you can always defer some hours to maximise the skilling-up. It's as flexible as you both wish, and just as deserving of our professional oath: to always strive to deliver best-value learning. And for a quick boost to finances or re-entry to the teaching market, why not give it a punt?

June 2016

“Distraction”

I would've written this earlier but I, er, got distracted.

I should have remained focused on the goal, the destination of a finished article, both it and me arriving on time and fresh. Instead, I've left late, I'm now in a rush, tempted to take ill-considered shortcuts, speeding through typos and, poor punctuation. Why do we do it?

The writing journey itself is seldom art for art's sake. Like a car journey, the task of taking a passenger-reader (and their baggage?) from their own premises to a new and perhaps unexpected endpoint is fraught with diversionary opportunities if not distractions. The writer wants to make the journey possibly more than the reader. The relationship is that of taxi and client, where the customer can always choose to alight early if they're fed up with the route. Maybe it's like a stage-carriage bus, with folk joining and leaving partway through the narrative. And all the more so for those who never knew a time before e-readers and on-demand telly—that is, the folk we teach.

Truth is, once we've made a similar journey (writing or travel) the pull of doing the same commute all over again can pall. We look more out of the side windows, not the front. We people-watch. Or we gaze forward, our eyes glazed over as much as our dashboards. We may daydream.

A key benefit I still enjoy about being a professional driver is that we CAN focus on our road-performance in ways that no-one else realistically has the time or patience for. Yes, we WANT them to, but they're on the road purely as a means to an end; it's a necessary evil between being where they did want to be (their departure point) and where they'd rather be right now (their destination). All this milling about among obstructing strangers is just a pain—at best, a chance to gawp at and ponder nicer stuff. Attention will naturally linger on recent past events, or hopes and fears at the next venue, seldom in the liminal but demanding space of the urban roadscape. Worse still, if there's not enough of interest happening beyond the glass, we'll invent things to do in the cabin: talk, listen, plan, imagine, fiddle, eat, drink, rummage ...

Having just passed by Shakespeare's 400th birthday, I ruminated on “distraction”. The word's built from a Latin prefix (“dis-”, meaning undoing) close-coupled to the tugging pull such as a tractor-unit might apply to an arctic trailer. It's close to “abstract”, but that's more “pulling away FROM”, and “ex-tract”, “pulling OUT OF”. All these are words are characterised by tension, a being-pulled-in-more-than-one-direction-at-once.

Bill the Bard was wont to employ the Elizabethan qualifier “divers”, meaning many and varied, from which comes “diversion” (to “go a second [alternative] way”: a “version” is, after all, one rendering of something, one option among several).

But “diversion” itself used to have a positive and uplifting sense, rather than a portent of traffic hold-ups. It stood for entertainment and light-heartedness, a spell away from the rigours and drudgery of the humdrum daily grind. “Distraction” was used in the same way until perhaps only a century ago. So, is distraction—when driving—always bad?

“Driving”, by the very word, seems to be the business of forcing onwards, like a screw-driver, driving rain, or whipping at horses to compel pulling a carriage. (I much prefer the sedate French, which means to conduct, in the sense of leading an orchestra to work together in concert). Driving sound arduous and exhausting: no wonder we crave blessed distraction!

Enter “coaching”. Not in the horse-drawn sense, but in the way an instructor can encourage an anxious newbie, training them how to self-soothe when they get into traffic or keep calm in a sticky situation. Here, distraction is about learning how we can each sublimate our fears and compulsions, perhaps by music, by chewing something, by deliberately handing over the mechanical tasks of gearchanging and accelerator-sense to the subconscious mind, so we stay focused on the priority before us. And, to achieve this, I'd query those trainers who dogmatically insist that both hands (for example) must ALWAYS remain at ten-to-two: to maintain concentration on longer drives do you not reposition hands occasionally, rest an elbow on the sill or head against the restraint, warm your blood-drained cold fingers under your thigh? These are “good distractions”, if used wisely, to a greater end.

So how was the article? Rushed-feeling? Was the journey a jerky swerve round Marble Arch, or an untroubled meander over the undulating Mendips? Timing is all. And teaching how to choose the right moment to take a phone call or a change our posture is all part of our task.

July 2016

How much do I love thee?

Forsooth! Ten weeks have passed since April 23rd, and we're now onto fêting Her Majesty's 90th birthday rather than Bill Playwright's 400th. However, being somewhat cavalier more than roundhead, my thoughts fall on the start of Sonnet 43 for a hook on which to hang notes of my ongoing satisfaction with this new-ish endeavour.

To paraphrase Mr Shakespeare, “How much do I love thee [O ADI]? Let me count the ways”. Well, in order of significance:

1 **UTTER FLEXIBILITY**. Provided, of course, you aren't desperate for a high income stream from the word Go (that is, are fortunate to move into instructing with a financial buffer), you are sole master of how much time you spend at it, where you do it, and who you choose to consort with. Like being outside when it's sunny? Text your existing students offering double lessons. Fancy a trip to the next town, or a favourite local beauty spot? Suggest it as part of you both broadening your horizons, exploring together. Those whom you get along with best will tell their friends (likely to be similar types) who may then increasingly constitute your client base: a cohort of pleasant folk whose company you're quite happy to share, whatever the shared frustrations of parallel parking.

2 **SELF-DETERMINISM**. Allied to flexibility, you can vary how much you want to work, not at all for a period if you so wish (on a whim, or through need of a break). In principle, anyway, and always mortgage permitting. But this external pressures appear in any job. The difference here is that this is “your work” (a variable, fluid, non-integer amount) compared to “someone else's job” (a fixed quota of

expectation).

3 CREATIVE SCOPE. If you're so inclined, the whole shebang can be down to you: marketing, business design, self-promotion, wacky offers and tie-ins. Bored of delivering the same thorough lessons on the same topics? Then try developing a means of achieving the same result via a series of images, or analogies, or jingles, or catchphrases. Play around its memory-triggers like aromas and associative cues. Critique other drivers while taking a break on a park bench, or go for a bus ride and watch the driver's different use of mirrors in a more hefty vehicle!

4 NO SET RETIREMENT. Health permitting, you can carry on longer than many employers would assume you'd want to stay on. Coupled with 1, you can adjust your commitment for a phased withdrawal, your ever-lengthening experience perhaps commanding a premium (providing you "connect" with your customers by behaving reasonably young at heart).

5 NO SUDDEN RETIREMENT. Once, in a previous life, a departing committee member thanked me as secretary for providing the opportunity to ease himself out of being a busy architect (he'd served on the committee assessing other architects' schemes, seven times a year). And so with ADIs. We don't have to suddenly leave. Like our windows, we can wind down. If the climate changes, we can wind up again. How much easier is this phasing, for the individual (who might often feel bereaved or without purpose) and their domestic partner (whose space and routine get invaded after decades of "self-rule").

6 NO QUALIFICATIONS NECESSARY. Well, you have to earn your Green Badge. Effectively, every four years. But that's it. No swatting technical rules from text books, then sitting academic written exams. No minimum C in GCSE maths; no UCAS points bar. Just a practical review of "can you show core skill?".

7 IDEAL WORK BALANCE. This stands or falls on your need for money. To be honest, I'm past any acquisitive phase and value my time more than stuff, or even going fancy places. So it's lovely to be able to pop back home lots, be more involved with kids and home-running, keep more aware of what's afoot in the lives of family and friends. Weekends and weekdays blur happily, and there's time to step back to consider how everything's going and done.

8 APPEALING CAR (-cum-office). It helps if you like cars. At some point, you'll get to choose what you're keen to drive! With today's personal leasing offers, you may enjoy a variety of new vehicles, too. The choice DOES have to suit you; your students will fit around it. It's a rolling office, after all; a dining room and a study, accounting den and consulting room.

9 REAL SENSE OF EARNING (not just getting). Salaried jobs are fine, but no cash changes hands. Here, you handle banknotes. You see the wad thicken, you feel their worth for your endeavours, as you part with each for your daily bread. I've found that unexpectedly powerful.

10 OPPORTUNITY TO EXCEL. This isn't rocket science, the work I mean. It's a closed syllabus, hardly volatile, played out on well-trodden paths. One gets to recognise the characters: cocksure stag; buffoon; timid shrew ... "Upstart Crow". You can REALLY hone your material, delivery, and added value, not just your own skill at

working the machine. As with most teaching, I suspect, there's minimum preparation needed, once you've settled in.

11 SENSE OF SELF-WORTH. In a time when most seem ground down by overwork or being "lost in the machine", both encouraging self-doubt, seeing the fruits of your preparation, your careful training the raspberry canes as they grow, reinforces that you must be doing something right. And the trainees' gratitude is a real filip.

12 VARIETY OF INDIVIDUALS. Point 11 is amplified by these people not being simply your friends, or "all the same type". If many learn from you and benefit, you must be half-decent after all! And it's a joy to encounter such a breadth of backgrounds, ages, and circumstances within the client group: so much to learn from folk you'd not encounter among peers in one profession.

13 SATISFACTION OF SKILLS-DEVELOPMENT (in others and self). I guess this is true in all work, attitude permitting. But it seems clearer to see when you're teaching. And it's self-evident the enjoyment that comes from seeing pupils grow in confidence.

14 OUTDOOR WORK. Maybe I'd spent too long in offices! Sitting in a car all day is hardly like being a lumberjack. Though you can better savour the weather, the seasons, and the range of humanity about, when your six windows in your tiny office.

15 VERY RAPID PAYBACK. How many other new careers can break even after 6-12 months? All for a venture of £2k. If it fails, you've got "self-starter, independent thinking; teacher" to put on your c.v.

16 SCOPE FOR BARTER AND EXCHANGE (a tax-neutral micro-economy). Money isn't everything, and some people don't have it. So can I teach you in exchange for help you can give me, avoiding me paying someone to paint, garden, deliver, plumb, or bake? I also offer free lessons to occasional people selling goods or services, in lieu ; they can always say no, but the possibility can fill diary gaps.

17 SCOPE FOR MORE. If teaching learners starts to pall, there're offshoot channels allied to teaching driving. I love the chance to write, approach schools, explore new assessment and teaching methods, lobby. Again, freedom.

18 LOCALISM. The one person who cast a small shadow on my thought to become an ADI (a stranger at a job counselling event) asked would I not get bored, trundling the same routes every day? I've often reassessed that. Truth is, I like noticing the minute changes in my neighbourhood, and getting to know individual shopkeepers and localities; it breeds a sense of rootedness.

19 INSIGHT. Odd one, this. My original franchisor, who had children the same age, laughed when I said I hoped "getting inside learners' heads" would help me grapple with the psychology of teenagers in the home. In a way, it has, through effective dialogue, patience, and timely repetition.

20 And finally ... ease of spotting your own car in a multi-storey carpark. That headboard works as a homing beacon, not just to alert other drivers. (And, by extension, all-over advertising renders your vehicle less appealing to thieves!)

INTELLIGENT INSTRUCTOR

August 2016

"VIRTUAL SEC-TRAY 2"

[Points at sky]. Is it this summer's blockbuster at the multiplex? Is it a soft-porn remake from the nadir of 70s British cinema? No, it's merely a sequel to last month's excellent feature by Eve Wakefield (see lead-in photo of "Robbie the Robot", typewriter on a trestle, and some leggy lissom lovely poised to give orders).

So, after last time, what more's to say? Little, if it's generalities about technology. What I offer here is one ADI's journey along the by-ways of "small business management": a Travel Guide from the sleepy timewarp of Little Jottings, via backwaters like Templates and Memory Hall, to the scenic but expensive towns of Bespoke Software, the muddy tracks of Own App, the misty hollows of The Cloud, and finally along One Drive, to the sunny uplands of yellow-bricked Roadio.

Starting out, I needed to learn fast, to carve a good reputation. My trainer counselled wisely: "Keep your clients informed". Verbal feedback ate into teaching time and was easily forgotten. I didn't want to lose clues my learners disclosed, "poker-like tells" which could unlock my route to teaching them fastest. TRC* needed CRM**.

So began a system of (1) MANUSCRIPT NOTES. I quickly adopted a simple set of topic abbreviations per lesson, with more lumpy refs to bookings, payments, progress, needs. All was there, at-a-glance, but prone to verbosity and a closed book to pupils. After a month, this evolved to (2) SPREADSHEET TEMPLATES, based the DSA's but trying to straddle my needs for PST practice while serving real learners. My topics list was awkwardly idiosyncratic and most pupils seemed to rise pretty quickly to a bland "3/5; some prompting" yet evidencing very different flaws.

The straining x- and y-axes of my grids refused to serve up meaningful, accessible info, even to me! Performance-ranking seemed, by turns, too coarse or too ferknicky. (It reminds me of Clive James's memoirs where, in a vacation job, he ends up concocting an intractable "multicoloured symbol scramble" for matching students to courses ... then does a midnight flit).

I then found (3) I'LL DRIVE IT, an iPhone app with a beautiful blue interface (very Apple). It was slick, routinely emailing a lesson summary to the client, but came at a per-pupil price. I was a sucker for a nice GUI***, and wanting to engage with the chore of admin was half the battle. We were motoring!

Perversely, I then "went the other way". No, not a sexual epiphany, but the consequence of a waiting room chat. My guru here was a Greek archaeologist, an ADI of four years. He reckoned it took about three to settle on an agreeable scheme. Reassured, and with confidence I was now tackling learners' real issues, I relaxed into using just (4) MEMORY.

Now, memory's a fine thing when it's working well. It works best, in this business, with relatively few students doing several hours per week. Get a couple called Dave, or two whose most striking feature makes you think of "that girl" at school, and dodgy

blurring occurs or the client no longer feels "special". I became nervous. Was it really enough to rely on a student remembering Emergency Stop, in the hope they'd tell you where they still had difficulty ... or that they'd never heard of it?

So it was back to some kind of (5) RELATIONAL DATABASE; a step on from the spreadsheet, now showing timely flow that students could appreciate. But I still yearned for an aid like the app by "MORETH>N" insurance: supremely clear, attractive, where ability is measured by smoothness and made engaging by a numerical result (you could even take part in regional and national leagues!)

Core work of teaching, however, prevented the necessary investment of time to produce something oneself. So I punted £20 on (6) "DRIVING INSTRUCTOR", by Instructor Software: an all-in-one app offering star-ratings for progress, a payments tally, graphics-based teaching modules, and sample theory / hazard material. Brilliant! This lasted a year before wanderlust seeps back. I've found it offers rather TOO many ins-and-outs for me, like wearing an overlarge fancy suit to do the photocopying.

Next comes (7) Robosoul's "RECORDS": great pedigree (from Neil Beaver ADI's stable) and with which I dwell for the longest period to date. (I did have misgivings about his Fuzzy-Felt-ish apps, which I thought pupils would see as too crude but now love). After many months, once again I found myself slipping into being rather longwinded in what I was noting down—and realised that "It's me; not you": any record-keeping system had to click with an individual ADI's mindset.

So I reflected on the wonder that is the software FileMaker, which I'd used in 1997 to develop a long-lasting database for the Church of England (it's still working for them today). A free add-on called (8) FILEMAKER-GO was now available, infinitely customizable on the fly, and auto-synchronising to home when I was in the car with only an iPad. I bought a cheap eBay copy of the developer version and started playing with their predefined "business solutions". It dawned pretty quickly that it would be BIG JOB to build something displaying history and current state of a pupil's progress and payments, all on a 9-inch tablet. I just wasn't prepared to put in the hundreds of hours unless I might commercialise it.

Thus (9) GODRIVINGIT. GoDriving.It was a halfway house between not (yet) developing a dedicated app but asking peers what they'd value in one. A three-page website based on the "FileMaker Go" name plus a pun on my last employer, it attracted zero comments. Here was proof that either I didn't know how to talk to my colleagues, or no-one was in fact interested in any admin aid, thank you (even gratis). Valuable lesson towards the Holy Grail of record-keeping: if I ever did design something, it should suit only me.

Once more, I fell back on simplicity. I would (10) EMAIL myself simple notes after most lessons, thereby being backed-up automatically, collatable into any other application, and "forwardable" (once fleshed-out or sanitised) to the client. For ease of my on access, this soon turned into (11) TEXTING myself, often just a summary string of letters, covering topic, location, need, and level (e.g. "LHR B14 OBS 75" or even LHRB14OBS75), sufficient to bring me up to speed for next time.

Around this time (2014) I noticed that younger customers were no longer surprised by concrete, logged feedback. They were used to booking and paying online,

leaving them a copy of any transaction; why shouldn't their reflecting on lesson performance be also?

So I turned to (12) YOUTUBE. Here was someone else's system, with scope for moving pictures (as well as narration to prompt my memory and the client's), and which could even me money (via their "monetisation" option). All for free. With some judicious titling, a student could find as many date-ordered (or topic-sorted) clips to confirm topics covered, reinforce their learning, evidence progress, and (if I remembered to say so at the top of each one) a thankyou for payment made!

Of course, not everyone wants to be recorded. So be it. It's an add-on. And chiefly for private consumption, shareable by the client as they see fit. A useful tool for self-reflection on my part, too, as well as the inbuilt "analytics" telling me which topics are of most interest ... or which student are doing their revision!

Closely allied to the videos, came (13) MINIRECORDER, an audio-only, less intrusive, faster (and more reliable) upload of "a soundtrack to our lesson". Easily uploadable to OneDrive (another free facility), we all but forgot "a device was listening". A supreme benefit was to keep me on my toes, since the elapsed time filled the phone screen and I had to describe enough of the road around us ("all-by-mouth") to make an intelligible standalone record. The pupil (or I) could stream it from a short URL link I could send them, often before they'd got the key out of their front door. Another client-impressing way of keeping in touch and allowing me the instructor to critique my own lesson delivery (pace, tone, digressions, umming, ...). A virtual library of their learning, often beneficial to others (with their permission).

With audio records particularly, (14) SOUNDBITES became a VERY practical way of making a real-time, end-of-lesson, one-minute summary, often en route to the next lesson; no more wasted time scribbling state in the car or recalling that evening.

And then came (15) ROADIO. Just brilliant! I'd downloaded it (as ever, free) in 2014, but forgot about it. When I did look again at the screenshots on iTunes which summarized its functions, I was bowled over by what was the first fully intuitive system. It had a cool blue-&-white theme. It was beautiful and clear. It wasn't a struggle to decide "how many stars" for a pupil of a certain standard. It was bang up to date with the DVSA's thinking on CCL and research-backed methodologies like the GDE matrix. And, though designed for an iPhone, my big thumbs and middle-aged eyes LOVED its superlative ease on my iPad.

I still use it. It was actually enjoyable to enter old data (previous lessons) for current pupils, so the total time and spend shown was right. It synchronizes with my Calendar and Windows phone. It advertises me. It shares notes and a traffic-light progress display with pupils, who can book themselves lessons around existing ones just as easily as I can set one up for them (either of us can cancel or reschedule in a couple of clicks).

Yes, there are minor bugs ... and I crave an Android version (for the other half of my student cohort) plus a simple data-export (for the taxman and your own further analysis). That and no expenses-logging option are the only reasons I also maintain a simple, comprehensive spreadsheet (now also on OneDrive). They're not yet enough to make me look into (16) MYDRIVETIME ... which does sound rather good.

And the winner is? Whoever you want it to be. As with briefing notes, record-keeping's so subjective that different personalities and temperaments will feel comfy with many of the above. And it's funny how some of my journey was quite circular, back-tracking or reversing out of near impasses. Age and ongoing experience show things in a different light, like evening sun on a city of glass skyscrapers. A freedom to mix and match is what I follow now; a smörgåsbord of Roadio, MiniRecorder, YouTube, and email. Like the dedicated webpages I used to feel were key to my learners' learning, a self-authored, all-singing app is probably just overkill and my long-held conviction of need for it now redundant.

"Vive la liberté (à choisir), l'égalité (de ces systèmes), et la fraternité (de nous, les ADIs)!"

*me

**Customer Records Management

***graphical user interface