

POTATO CRISP PEDAGOGY

John Aitchison and Paul Graham

Centre for Adult Education, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg and Durban

Disclaimers and acknowledgements

Potato crisp pedagogy is no new thing. It's methods are, one suspects, those that good educators have used throughout the ages, whether they have been prophets, philosophers, schoolteachers or political activists. Hence we would like to begin with a number of disclaimers and general acknowledgements of sources.

The disclaimers are the following:

- we are saying nothing new
- because we do not always quote an published academic source for a statement does not mean that there was not some original published source. Many of the key documents in experiential education in the sixties and seventies were produced in church circles by writers who usually did not bother to put their name to workshop papers and were not obsessed with copyright or academic kudos.

We acknowledge four major sources for our present understanding and practice of "potato crisp pedagogy":

- the experiential learning movement of the sixties,
- writers on media such as Marshall McLuhan,
- the experience of academic support programmes, particularly in relation to research into cognitive strategies, and
- the groups of learners we have worked with over the last 20 years.

Introduction

"Why experiential learning **now** in South Africa of 1988?" is a good question? We think there are three main reasons why experiential learning methods may well have a renaissance.

Firstly, political movements, particularly those with an agenda to transform society, generally come unstuck unless they have a genuine educational component. When such movements, including the national democratic movement in South Africa, don't

have everything their own way, they may pause to reflect on the role of education. With luck they do something about it.

Secondly, experiential education methods are particularly appropriate to the alternative, non-formal, small group environment that is all that is available to many radical educators in South Africa today. Thirdly, formal education in South Africa does not work very well (even when taught by radicals). It makes no or little sense of people's life experiences. It does not enable people to think conceptually about their problems.

It is in this context that our experience of potato crisp pedagogy arose. The name, "potato crisp pedagogy", reflects two quite specific experiences we had in which we used potato crisps as food for thought in workshops. But the concept seemed generalisable to an approach to helping learning.

We were asked to run a practical training course for youth leaders who would be working in small non-governmental organisations. The sponsors *inter alia* wanted us to teach the group "social analysis". Although the participants were highly motivated politically, we wondered whether "teaching" social analysis would actually be very helpful. They were the recipients of 12 or so years of Bantu Education, had failed their matric or dropped out of school before that terminal experience, and were none too good at conceptual thought. Would a series of lectures or even discussions beginning with definitions of socialism, capitalism, economy and surplus value enable them to critically analyse the structures of South African society (and communicate these insights to others). It required something more experiential.

But having had some experience of experiential education (the original authentic classic version) in the sixties and seventies, we did not confuse experiential education with discussion groups or with practical work. Many courses nowadays have lots of small group discussions, learner participation and practical work. This is laudable no doubt but is not necessarily "experiential".

It is hard to find clear definitions of experiential learning. The following one is probably adequate:

Learning which derives either from the general life-experience or from specific activities of the learner.

Learning derived from the feelings and thoughts aroused in the learner while or after undergoing such experiences.

(Titmus *et al*, p. 45)

Thus we saw experiential learning as resting firmly on the life experience of the learners (any pedagogy relying on it had to be relevant to their everyday lives and genuinely make **use** of that life experience). It would also engage the learner in specific activities and much of the learning would be derived from the feelings and thoughts aroused by experiencing these activities (sixties experiential education was great in reflecting on **here and now** activities and particularly on the emotions aroused by them).

We also recognised (which many so-called experiential educators and "facilitators" do not) that regrettably "the last thing one learns from is experience" (evidence for this statement, which we first heard elegantly phrased in this way by Sue van Zyl of the University of the Witwatersrand, is provided for by the bulk of humanity). Experience is what you have to halt, check, negate, in order to get knowledge. As the definition above states, experiential learning is **derived** from life experience. It does not just happen. Learning requires reflection. Hubery, writing in 1965 said:

Some advocates of the experiential approach are convinced that to teach from experience, to experience, and through experience, is all that is required. The function of the teacher is simply that of planner and manipulator. ... Nevertheless I cannot agree that the process of ... education should be limited to exposure to experience, and that the rest is entirely out of the hands of the teacher. The greater the effectiveness of the experiential approach, the greater becomes the need for someone to articulate and identify, to interpret and assess the significance of the experience.

(Hubery, 1965, p. 74)

In addition our work and acquaintance with academic support programmes and the cognitive issues involved (Aitchison, 1984) placed high on our priorities the necessity for such a pedagogy enabling learners to conceptualise, a point that is very strongly made by Shor (1980).

Linked to this necessity for reflection and conceptualisation was a feeling that we did not have to carry a baggage load of guilt and mystification about being educators. The way that many educators go on about how they never teach but only facilitate, etc., makes one wonder why they are necessary at all. Denying the key role the educator has in structuring and engaging learners in the process of reflection is a mystification of real power strongly exercised. (Why, if the peasants/workers/etc. really "know everything" is it that the educator seems to be the only one who knows that they know everything?) The possession of power needs to be owned up to, not hidden. The democratisation of education is a key South African issue. Therefore the role of educator should not be masked behind terminology about facilitation and participation that obscures rather than reveals. This is not to say that we do not wholeheartedly support the drive to recast the educator from didactic teacher to facilitator. But the facilitator plays a crucial part in the unveiling, recognition, transmission and production of knowledge. If we are serious about facilitation we need to recognise what it is about. The definition of facilitator that we accept does own up to this leadership and skill that the educator has, namely:

A leader who is skilled in helping a learner or group of learners to specify its/their own learning objectives and to select the strategies by which to reach them.

(Titmus *et al*, p. 46)

Unless there is clear and honest description of what "facilitators" do it will be impossible to design and implement structured experiential learning events that do not need highly trained and experienced educators. Highly professional educators (in

the best sense of the word) are few and far between. It seemed to us that what was interesting about experiential learning (and our adaptation of it in our potato crisp pedagogy workshops) was that the **process** was the real learning and that even if replicated by an unskilled facilitator it would continue to produce real learning. By contrast most didactic education, with its inordinate stress upon the content of what is taught, must fail dismally when replicated by teachers or speakers who get the content wrong (whether the "wrongness" be that of factual inaccuracy or linguistic or intellectual inaccessibility). In this we partially concur with Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message". It is the process of potato crisp pedagogy that is really important.

Why potato crisps?

Potato crisps seemed an appropriate way of "extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary" (Ira Shor's phrase in the book *Critical teaching in everyday life* in which, we found to our chagrin some time later, he had pre-empted by some years our pedagogic discoveries in his "hamburger pedagogy"), enabling people to move from their everyday experience of life to a systematic conceptual understanding of the structures and forces operating in South African society.

Potatoes are a common food, in a variety of cooked and processed forms. They are eaten by most urban people. The modern processed forms of potatoes (as in potato crisps) are a product that, when looked at with discernment, reveals much about how commodities are produced and distributed in a modern industrial society. Potatoes have a place in South Africa's political history (as in the African National Congress's potato boycott in the fifties) and in the history of imperialism and colonialism (where did they come from in the first place?), and how they are packaged and advertised throws light on way the media massages our psyches. The way we use such "convenience" foods illustrates some of the dynamics and the values of the society we live in.

The idea of using a product, such as a packet of potato crisps, as a focus point for reflecting on experience and as a tool for thinking with, is rarely used in higher or adult education. Real objects are used in pre-school and primary education but usually just as visual aids to teacher talk. Materials that would guide educators are rare. One source we found was the *Teaching Development Issues*, a series used for raising awareness of development among British schoolchildren). Shor (1980) has a detailed account with many useful examples. A further source, though because it is really about media it is inevitably dated, is Marshall McLuhan's incomparable *The Mechanical bride - folklore of industrial man* (1951).

Looking at a product must be allied to a method that is capable of evoking "conceptual literacy and critical thought" (Shor, 1980, p. xxiv), that helps people to see things as a structural whole. It needs to be able break through the chains of reification (social abstractions seen as concrete, real (and hence usually unchangeable) things), mystification (false and misleading answers to social

questions), magical thought, and the accelerated pace of modern life and media produced "noise" which makes it hard to slow down enough to carefully scrutinize and think about anything. Looking at products in an experiential and critical way may begin a process of externalizing and objectifying the false consciousness of reality that lies within us, exposing it to scrutiny, laying bare the networks that created and support it.

If experiential learning for liberation is to be used we need to take seriously the indispensable function of the designers and facilitators of it. Experiential learning is not just a method, a trick technique. It is not just a matter of sitting in a circle. Shor (1980, p. 97) places the onus firmly on the educator to be competent and to have access to the systematized experience that we call knowledge:

It is a difficult task to use dialogue as a means to systematically and problematically re-present to students what they have unsystematically and uncritically taught the teacher. The teacher is the architect of this un-doing and re-doing. The extraordinary re-experience of the ordinary cannot begin or proceed without the teacher's counter-structures.

Potato crisp pedagogy is both a possibility and a challenge to education for liberation.

Bibliography

- Aitchison, J.J.W. *A concrete exercise*. Johannesburg: Association of Southern African Theological Institutions, 1982
- Aitchison, J.J.W. *The development of decontextualized academic thinking skills*. Unpublished paper. Conference of University Principals: teaching and learning at universities in Southern Africa, University of Bloemfontein. 3-5 September, 1984
- Aitchison, J.J.W. *Gnosis, ritual and faith: fundamental issues in the education and training of adult educators at universities in South Africa*. Unpublished paper. Conference of University based adult educators, University of Natal, Durban, 23-24 June 1987
- Cooke, D., *et al Teaching development issues: section 1 -perceptions*. Manchester: Development Education Project, 1986, ISBN 1 869818-05-9
- Donaldson, M. *Children's minds*. London: Fontana/Collins, 1978, ISBN 0-00-635287-1
- Fuglesang, A. *About understanding*. Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, 1982, ISBN 91-85214-09-4
- Hubery, D.S. *Teaching the Christian faith today*. London: Chester House, 1965
- McLuhan, M. *The Mechanical bride*
- McLuhan, M. *Understanding media*. London: Sphere, 1967
- Miller, J. *McLuhan*. London: Fontana, 1971
- Postman, N. *The disappearance of childhood*. London: W.H.Allen, 1985, ISBN 0-86379-083-0
- Shor, I. *Critical teaching and everyday life*. Montreal: Black Rose, 1980, ISBN 0-919618-03-0
- Titmus, C., Buttedahl, P., Ironside, D., and Lengrand, P. *Terminology of adult education*. Paris: UNESCO, 1979, ISBN 92-3-001683-7

Appendix: a note on Marshall McLuhan

In looking at media it is almost impossible to escape some consideration of the ideas of Marshall McLuhan, who became something of a cult figure in the sixties and seventies. He heavily influenced the whole communications and media industry and many of his ideas are undoubtedly of long term importance. His first famous book, and which many believe to be his best, is *The Mechanical bride* (1951), is an amazing and devastating critique of advertising, done through a series of reproductions of adverts with a running commentary on them. McLuhan's aim in making intelligible the real meaning of the advert is, like that of a psychotherapist, to release his readers from their slavery to them, for McLuhan sees these adverts as synthetic dreams that dramatise the fulfilment of desires which society normally forbids or makes impossible the individual to gratify.

Modern knowledge and technical ingenuity is used not for the ends of knowledge but for control and manipulation. Psychological knowledge is not used to enable us to have greater self knowledge (thereby reducing the number of our actions that are dictated by unconscious motives and increasing those that are deliberate) but is commandeered by experts who have specialised knowledge of the susceptibilities of our unconscious mind and used by them to dictate our behaviour without our knowing consent.

However McLuhan, though he denounced the content of the advertising message, drew a careful and previously overlooked distinction between the form and content of the material. What is particularly important about this book is that it in he made a crucial distinction, never before made in this context, between the **form** and the actual **content** of the advert - the form being the presentation, the visuals, the shape, the style of wording, the content being the "This is selling Berkshire nylons or Ford motorcars." He celebrated the triumph of the "artistic" techniques of juxtaposition and contrast in these productions that enabled the advertiser to "say" what could never pass the censor of the conscious mind (but which the unconscious mind hears, supplying the missing connections to the most seemingly diverse and externally unconnected facts and situations).

Understanding media (1964) looked at media and how they work and, like much of McLuhan's writing, is densely packed with ideas, making it very difficult to summarise, particularly when many of them are expressed in imaginative ways. To give an example of the flavour of his ideas, what is money - "the poor man's credit card". It is certainly a book that makes one look at things like telephones and credit cards in a new way.

McLuhan, addressing cultured people, many of whom found the content of modern media amoral and disgusting, argued that they were experiencing a pointless moral anguish. McLuhan says that they need to learn what the media are doing, realise how they are being influenced by them, and maybe they will come out on the other side with a more positive appreciation of the positive side of modern media.

McLuhan argued that technological changes by imperceptibly altering patterns of perception, create new environments of self and feeling. Media are not just means of looking at the environment, they are in themselves an environment. Technology extends our human senses and creates an environment. To quote Miller (1971, pp. 131-132):

McLuhan has forced us to attend to the various media through which we gain our knowledge of the world. ... The medium may not be the message exactly, but it certainly imposes subtle constraints which we are constantly apt to overlook. Staring at the view beyond the window we have become unconscious of the fact that glass, for all its transparency, confers optical peculiarities upon the various scenes at which we like to think we are gazing directly.

McLuhan makes the point that we are frequently only aware of these media constructed environments when they are outdated and new and transparent ones are already installed.

Another writer, Postman, argues that we learn fast from environments. The reason that children learn a language in a year or two is simply because it is an environment. What television is saying is also learned with equal rapidity. (In education there is no reason why mathematics and biology cannot be given the same environmental codification and learned with the same speed and ease).

Original paper that was published in edited form in:

Aitchison, J.J.W. and Graham, P. 1989. *Potato crisp pedagogy*. In Criticos, C. (Ed.) ***Experiential learning in formal and non-formal education***. Durban: Media Resource Centre, Department of Education, University of Natal, pp. 15-21