

WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF STATE REPRESSION

IN THE 1970s AND 1980s?

SOURCES

The sources in this unit highlight the brutality of torture carried out by security police when interrogating people in detention and the actions of kidnap, torture and murder by the Vlakplaas units in the 1980s. Stories such as these were told over and over again at the TRC hearings, so it will be helpful to reread these sources when studying the TRC.

Source 1

Paul Erasmus was a member of the security police. In this interview he talks of his beliefs about communism that were shaped by the Cold War situation and the danger he believed communism posed to South Africa. He justified the actions of the security police as being ‘for the cause’.

I’ve got no doubt in saying that I was a more committed ideologue even than many of the guys that I worked with. Much of the influences that influenced me to doing what I was doing went back to my high schooldays; I was very involved in church and very influenced by the writings of people like Pastor Richard Wurmbbrandt, they had this thing called Christian Missions International. They were talking at schools and we were all praying and collecting money to send bibles to the communist world and it was very much this East, West type of conflict. I was very much a child of that era; you know, “Stop them at the 45th parallel! Blast those Reds to Hell!” you know, those types of slogans. Much of what we learnt at school as well, once again via the church, was that the communism was out to rule the world, our country would be, they were after the Cape Sea Route and the gold and I really believed for many years that somewhere along the line, somewhere in years to come we would actually fight, physically fight the Communists, the Russians specifically...

I can try and distinguish between a committed ideologue but if you looked at the Security Branch and right through the history of it, the easiest way to get trustworthy people into the system was to use family of the existing policemen or somebody that was politically safe. So without insulting any of my former colleagues, a lot of them weren’t committed, it was simply accepted that their father was a policeman so the son would follow in his footsteps...

when I walked through these doors I was taken on a guided tour and shown the actual window, by the gentleman that was showing me around, where Ahmed Timol, the security detainee, “fell” out of the window on the 10th floor. And in the rest of my time here I was to witness another two deaths in this building, Matthews Mabelane and of course Dr Neil Aggett. Neil died in the cells here, where we are now, a couple of floors above us.

The first time I ever sort of witnessed any, I suppose brutality, was going on raids very early. In fact right from the start I think I might have been here about a month. Information was received about a terrorist in Soweto and the entire security branch, all the units including the Investigation Branch simply because they obviously needed man power, armed ourselves to the teeth and we raided a succession of houses in Soweto and a lot of suspects were arrested and I saw the interrogation then first hand, no niceties. The guys were caught and they were immediately beaten to hell. I witnessed a black security policeman crushing somebody’s testicles. But the follow up investigations from that I wasn’t really a part of for two reasons: It was a “Black” affair and it was exclusively the domain of the Investigation Branch...

I think by the early, going through the mid and the late eighties I was probably a more accomplished conman than even my bosses were because the secret fund was then supplying us with everything. I was paying my personal accounts. In fact, in my case, it got so bad that couldn’t distinguish between my finances and government finances and towards the end of the eighties I was involved in Stratcomm, working full time as a Stratcomm operative I was carrying around, in my briefcase, sometimes ten, R20 000.

Our general sort of feeling at that time, although once again to the listener it might sound like we were a bunch of thieves or whatever, was the incredible hours that we were working, the difficulty in running these operations and eventually the sort of standard feeling was anything was justified, legal or illegal, if it was “Vir die saak,” if it was for the cause, if it in any way benefited our mission or mission statement, you could do it firstly and secondly you could get away with it...

I couldn’t easily or readily adjust to a civilized way of life in a city after having been in Ovamamboland and being involved with Koevoet and Security Branch up there. I think that affected me for lot of years, it affected a lot of people.

And I think certainly if you look at what happened later years like Vlakplaas and Eugene de Kock, these people were ripe to take from a situation like that and put them in a more orderly situation and it was in effect a recipe for chaos. I mean hence Vlakplaas people going berserk, Eugene himself getting away with murder literally and this sort of phenomenon of taking people that should have been deprogrammed, certainly in Eugene’s case maybe even in my case, all of us that were exposed to the barbarity of what we saw up there to come back and readjust wasn’t easy and there was no mechanism. The only thing that you could do then because God help you, if you said, “Look I have a psychiatric problem,” you’re in trouble, they would have posted you off to Putsonderwater and you would have rotted away there without any promotion for the next thousand years....

And I applied for a transfer down to the Southern Cape thinking that, “I want to get the hell out of this.” I had blood on my hands, I had been involved in more crimes than we’d ever arrested people, certainly for criminal stuff, it was every night, we were throwing bricks through the windows. It was endless mayhem, stealing money from the government, everybody was lying, it was this bullshit world and I had to get out of it. So I took a transfer down to the Southern Cape... You know standing procedure in the police you started off every day, you know, it didn’t matter what you were gonna do, who you were gonna kill or torture or whatever, they started off the morning with prayers.

Source 2

Hennie Heymans, a former member of the security force, talks of the pressure the security police felt in the 1980s.

It was a very difficult task facing us. I remember in 1987 in the police yearbook, Minister of Law and Order Adriaan Vlok wrote that everything would be done to stop the revolutionary onslaught. So we tried to gather together our best brains to make the best plans. But you know what they say about the best-laid plans of mice and men. We were confronted with a very serious security situation. Did we feel beleaguered? Yes, some days we did feel beleaguered. But at least we tried to contain the situation. Unfortunately, in the townships they felt it more than we felt it. It was relatively safe in the white suburbs. It was relatively safe on the borders. Then resolution 435 was passed in Namibia and there was tremendous pressure brought to bear there. Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, Angola and Mozambique got their independence so it was South Africa that was left...There was tremendous pressure on the police. Every day we had a security meeting. It was attended by National Intelligence, by the military and others...there was also a security report every day and sometimes it was quite bad. Some days it was quite frightening to see the onslaught just from the police side. But this was a multi-dimensional onslaught. There was a sport boycott, a weapons boycott, a cultural boycott so if you put all these things together the picture was quite bleak. But I want to say that Adriaan Vlok stood strong, Magnus Malan stood strong. I remember reading a *Sechaba* where Ronnie Kasrils said that the pillars of white supremacy in South Africa rested on the SADF and the SAP.

So some days it felt as we were riding on a tiger and at some stage we would have to let go. In retrospect we had a tough time. We all had to write threat analyses and security surveys and they had to be sent to the branch...

Coming back to South Africa today. The police have managed this change. You have to remember what happened when De Klerk took over. Look at how he was supported by his police and army chiefs. They could have rebelled against him but they stood behind him and they managed that change. Sometimes I think that De Klerk didn't know what power he had behind him. But we managed that change and I think the ANC respected us for that. You must also remember that with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Communism was no longer a threat. The Cuban surrogate forces had left Angola. We were in a quandary but we managed the country up to the end of communism and then we transferred power to the ANC and look at the infrastructure and the country that they inherited. The country was not in anarchy when they took over.

Source 3

Penelope 'Baby' Twaya was detained after Soweto Uprisings. She talks of the interrogation and torture during detention.

The first three months. The first two months was tough. That was daily interrogation. Daily. The third month eased a bit. The first two months was regular torture.

I can remember the policemen. I think it was Adjutant Jordan; he was the lead interrogator for us. I remember the first day I was questioned about a whole range of things: Am I working for the ANC, do I know about the ANC, who sent us to form the SSRC, who else do I know who's involved in the struggle who was not arrested with us? Then there were specific questions about who of the group were insiders and instigators and leaders and where did they get their instructions from? So there was quite a range of questions.

I remember. I was slapped and kicked. That was better than when they covered my head with a black hood and electrocuted me. That was quite scary. They did that about once every second day. Quite frightening. That was the first week. The second week he would threaten, kick and slap. But even then when I went through that type of torture I just thought that there was nothing more I could do, what would it help?

...obviously the torture was directed towards getting you to implicate other people. At that time I personally felt that I was just going to be solid on this issue and that anything could happen.

After about three weeks I remember asking to go see a district surgeon. I had quite a lot of pain in my ear as a result of the torture and the electrocution. It was quite scary. We went to the doctor, saw the doctor and came back into the cells again.

The irony was that after international awareness and protests began to increase we were then told by Jordan that if we felt we had been tortured and that we had a story to tell, we should charge them. I remember that myself and Joyce were convinced that we had a case. We wrote statements charging the police with torture little knowing that it would take more than six months and the case would just fall away....

I didn't pick up any humanity in any of my interrogators. I was fearful and I was not looking for it. I knew that they had work to do. Make sure that you don't pursue your struggle, that you don't become convinced as an activist that there's some value to fighting for the freedom of the country. They were not there to give you support.

At the level of the policemen who were taking care of us in the cells, yes there was. There was one called Visser. He was the type you could decide if wanted to trust or not. There wasn't any feeling of trust when you were under Section 6. You can't necessarily say that you can trust these people because they are on duty and their work is to make sure that your work doesn't succeed, bottom line.



Source 4

Jaki Seroke was detained in 1987. He talks of his experiences during interrogation.

Ja, Ja. The guys actually said they could kill me if they liked. The interrogation was terrible you know. I must tell you. I think, Ja, this guy was Badenhorst, I remember him, he was terrible, I think he was a colonel or something. You know the type of torture that he used is something that is not pleasant to talk about. You know when I was interrogated I was naked but blindfolded with my arms behind my back also tied up but, there's you know police desks in their offices, they have a drawer with a shiny handle on that drawer. He put the testicles in there and just put his foot on it and say, "Praat nou." [Talk now]. Now you must understand that is a very, very painful part of the body and quite frankly he would do that and laugh. I mean the guy was sick, terribly sick. And then they used other forms of torture like beating you up with their fists and whatever they were using. I don't understand what it is that they were using. And also you know they used all range of form of torture because they would use cold water, just pour cold water onto you and I know that it was winter then and then start from there up to the worst form of torture like squeezing your testicles and beating you up, using electric shock you know, and electric shock when you are wet it's very bad and they would use that. They used the broomstick between my legs. They would put a broomstick between your legs and they have your hands handcuffed in front of your legs like this and use an electric shock, very painful! I don't think torture of that nature works because when that happens you tell yourself, "Look 'I'm losing my life and I'm not going to die and make these guys happy by confessing to anything, if they kill me let them kill me

[It] was possible at that given time that you could easily die.

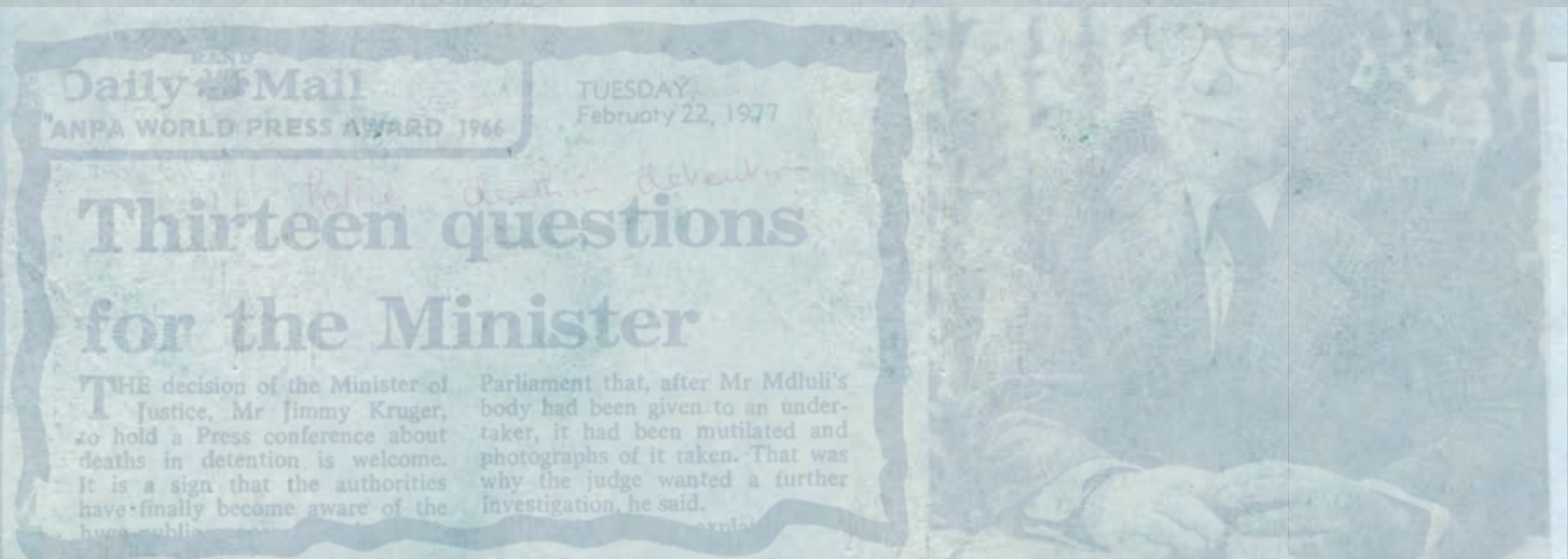
In hindsight talking about this makes it seem as if it was rosy. It wasn't! I mean it really wasn't. I mean the kind of torture and the fear and everything and they also used torture methods that work on your mind to say that... for instance this guy, and this came back to me very strongly, he told me "When is your birthday?" I said, "No, it's in February"; and he said, "You are not going to see another year in your life, you are dying, now we are gong to kill you! We've been trying to get a way in which to deal with you and this is it, we found you now!" And of course they were referring to other areas where I was detained but with no evidence, nothing that could take me to court and that sort of thing so this time they had it and I thought it's possible. It was just one avenue that is possible. But I knew that once the world knows that I'm detained it would be easier.

Source 5

Zwelinzima Sizane was arrested at the end of 1976. At the time of the interview we was working for the ANC in Gauteng as a secretary for political education and trade unions.

If they thought I knew about the ANC then they could charge me for whatever the activities that they perceive to have being ANC activities because I knew that at that time they had no clue, nothing around my activities as an underground operative of the ANC from 1974. And they then started beating me. I think they had brought in a special unit from Springs. Amongst them was a Smit who later on joined NIS. There was one other one who used to look like almost an albino. They brought in an electric generator and told me to strip and I told them I'm not going to assist them to torture me. If they want to torture me they would first have to strip me unconscious. Two, they would attach those terminals probably when I'm dead. Their entry point they were trying to say that, whom in the ANC were we in contact with, they failed, they couldn't get anything from me around that. Ultimately they got frustrated and they started using chairs that had steel frames to beat me. Of course whenever they would assault, already I was bleeding through the nose, the mouth, I would spit back my blood at them, just to get them angry. A tactic that begins to say once they are angry they are not going to be able to think rationally and as professionally as they are supposed to be as interrogators. Once they are angry they will boil up and use whatever, so they did that until they beat me up.

The next thing I woke up, I was back in that cell 201 on a mattress. Taken to the showers. I couldn't walk. The whole body was painful...I realized that I couldn't feel sensations on my face for instance that I must be pretty badly swollen but I would walk ten, twenty paces I would have to stop because the pain was unbearable, the headache was unbearable. It was like you are revving a two-ton in my brain."



Source 6

Jabu Ngwenya was detained and tortured in the late 1970s.

I don't remember, was it 1977, somewhere between 1977 and 1978, between that time, I was detained. The police were looking for me on several times but the place that I had been detained in several times and been taken in and released and taken in and released most of the case was Protea Police Station but John Vorster I was brought in here I think in 1978. Yes I was tortured at some stage up on the 10th floor where they took us. They used to make us stand, and then you stand for hours without anything and then they would take your clothes off, you will be naked at times and then they will make you sit on your chair and then you sit on the chair and then they will remove the chair you know as if you are sitting on a chair, and then you squat like this (demonstrating) for hours! So then you will sweat and sweat on your own. I don't know you will just start crying because of the sweating. And then they will kick you and swear at you and so on. By that time they need information to say what are you doing? Who are you working with? So for us it was not to really tell them what they wanted in a way...

But then in 1980 or 1981 I was detained then for quite a longer time. I was in Sandton Police Station, and then I was brought up here in John Vorster again. During that time it was the first time that I was with whites, blacks and Indians and so on. But usually, during my times of detention there were not lots of white people that were detained but by that time there were lots of white people who were detained. And in my head, my understanding was that whites were not people who were beaten up, you know? By that time those white people, my comrades that I had, they were tortured, tortured badly. Lots of them were tortured badly.... they were not [treated differently]. At that time they were never, they were beaten. I felt that they [the security police] hated them more to say what are you doing? Because this thing has nothing to do with you, what are you trying to do? I think they had most difficult times that they never had in their lives. It was tough. It was heavy for them and they were rejected by their society they had a tough time. They never had good times.

Source 7

This was part of the interview with **Joyce Dipale**, her husband Tiego Masinga, and brother Tsankie Modiakgotla. Tiego talks about the cross-border raid into Botswana in search of Joyce Dipale.



JOYCE DIPALE

Tiego: Yes, there was a raid in Botswana where Joyce and a group of women were staying, Well it was normal procedure, you know that the state declared total war against so called terrorists in the neighbouring states. I think that the night Joyce was shot they had a three-pronged attack on Mozambique, Botswana and Zimbabwe. The same night. Ruth First was assassinated and Joe Qabi was assassinated in the same year during the same period. So it was the policy of the government to pursue those who they thought were terrorists so Joyce was one of them and that's what happened.

Q: What happened to Moabi Dipale? [Joyce's brother]

Tiego: Well it's quite a complicated story because we don't really know the truth. At one point he was visiting us in Botswana. One story says that he was kidnapped at the border. One thing I know is that he was probably cruelly murdered between the borders of South Africa and Botswana and they brought him here when he was already dead. I don't think it would be nice for Joyce to know exactly what happened although she wants to know. It's something that won't help because it may push us even to kill someone if we know the truth so I would rather that we don't go deeper into that. But the truth of the matter is that the death squad that Joe Mamasela belonged to, what we call askaris, was well trained. He killed not only Ernest [Moabi] but a lot of young people in this country and his story is well known. So I would rather not dwell too much on what happened. I can just say that he didn't die a reasonable death. Many things must have happened to him before they threw him into this place.

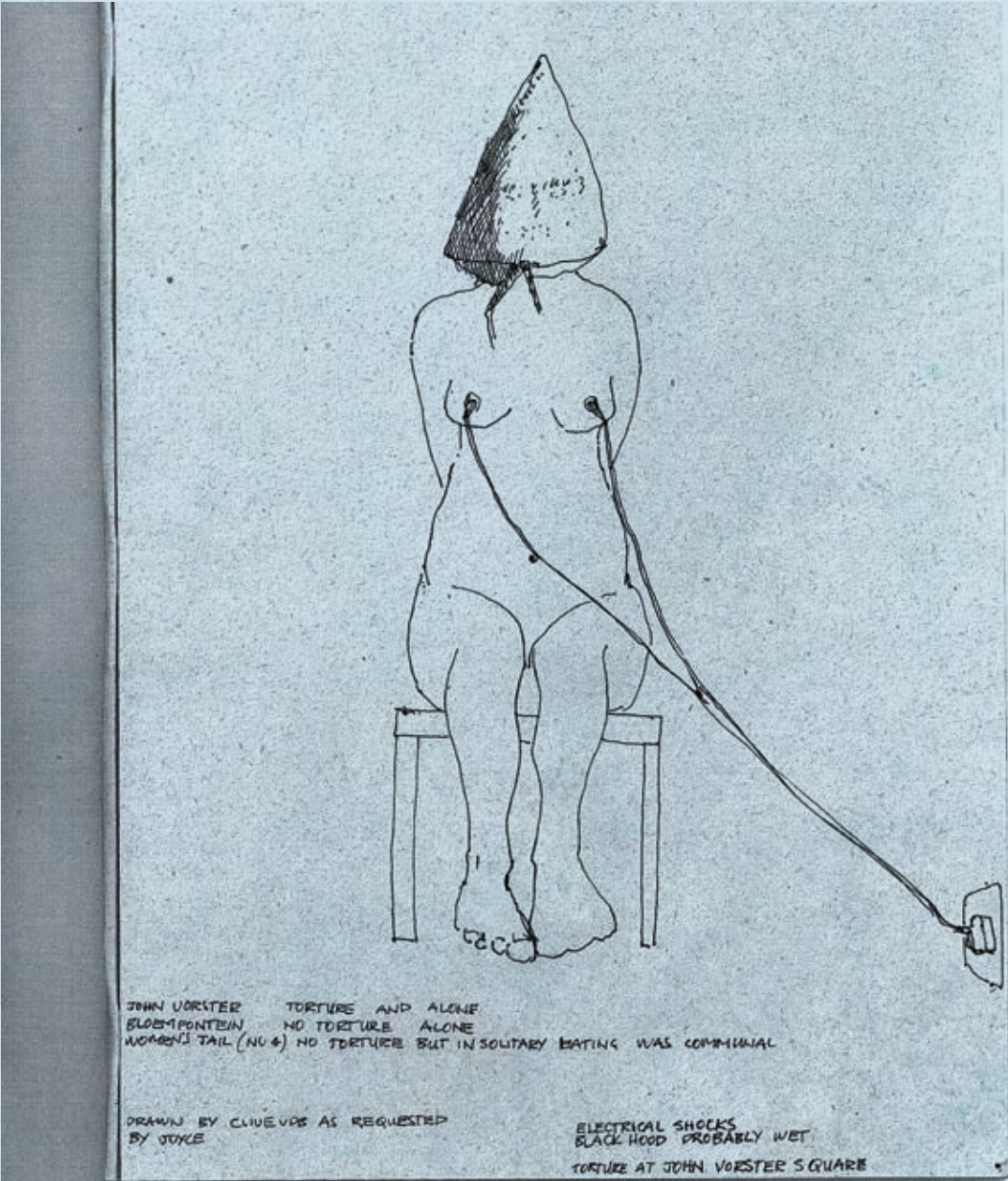
Q: So, in the end his body was found here?

Joyce: Yes, here at John Vorster.

Source 8

George Bizos in this extract talks about the difference between the torture and deaths in detention, which had led to public inquests, and the death squads that operated more frequently in the 1980s.

The effect of course of the publicity, the books and the films that were made about torture, the revelations in the inquest, had an unhappy result. It was after the Aggett inquest I think, that although there were hit squads before, their number and their effectiveness increased because the idea of having to have an inquest and having people charged and if they are giving evidence were giving the country a bad name. They copied the doings of the Argentinean and other South American dictatorships and they just abducted people, killed them and say that either, "We released them, they must have gone out for military training, this is why you don't know anything about them," or they would bury them, or they would burn their bodies as we learnt after the fact when they started applying for amnesty. So in a sense although there was some value of the exposure that we were able to make in the inquests, which was bad enough, things became worse, people were killed and they didn't have to have inquests or magistrates or counsel cross examining them.



Act No. 96 of 1965. Amendment of section 108bis of Act 56 of 1955, as inserted by section 4 of Act 39 of 1961 and amended by section 17 of Act 60 of 1962, section 9 of Act 37 of 1963 and section 23 of Act 80 of 1964.

6. Section 108bis may be amended as he deems fit.”;

(b) by the substitution for sub-section (1) of the following sub-section:

“(1) Whenever any person has been arrested on charge of having committed any offence referred in Part IIBis of the Second Schedule, the attorney-general may, if he considers it necessary in the interest of the safety of the public or the maintenance of public order, issue an order that such person shall be released on bail or otherwise before sentence is pronounced on him. This order may be discharged: Provided that in the event of an order being made against such person, a preparatory examination or trial, within a period of ninety days after his arrest, he may at any time apply that period on notice to the attorney-general apply in the event of the failure of the Court to do so.”

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ACTIVITIES

THE ACTIVITY

Big Paper - Building a Silent Conversation

Why this activity?

This discussion strategy uses writing and silence as tools to help learners explore a topic in-depth. Having a written conversation with peers slows down learners’ thinking process and gives them an opportunity to focus on the views of others. This strategy also creates a visual record of learners’ thoughts and questions that can be referred to later in a course. Using the Big Paper strategy can help engage shy learners who are not as likely to participate in a verbal discussion. After using this strategy several times, students’ comfort, confidence, and skill with this method increases.

How to do it:

■ STEP 1: PREPARATION

First, you will need to select the “stimulus” – the material that learners will respond to. As the stimulus for a Big Paper activity, teachers have used questions, quotations, historical documents, excerpts from novels, poetry, or images. Groups can be given the same stimulus for discussion, but more often they are given different texts related to the same theme. For this activity we have suggested using all the sources in the unit on state repression. These sources are difficult to work with in class because of the traumatic nature of their content. But engaging with them through this activity should help the learners to process the traumatic content in an easier and safer way.

This activity works best when learners are working in pairs or triads. Make sure that all learners have a pen or marker. Some teachers have learners use different coloured markers to make it easier to see the back-and-forth flow of a conversation. Each group also needs a “big paper” (typically a sheet of poster paper) that can fit a written conversation and added comments. In the middle of the page stick one of the sources that will be used to spark the learners’ discussion. If you use all of the sources in this section there should be 8 Big Papers.

■ STEP 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF SILENCE

Inform the class that this activity will be completed in silence. All communication is done in writing. Learners should be told that they will have time to speak in pairs and in the large groups later. Go over all of the instructions at the beginning so that they do not ask questions during the activity. Also, before the activity starts, the teacher should ask learners if they have questions, to minimize the chance that learners will interrupt the silence once it has begun. You can also remind learners of their task as they begin each new step.

■ STEP 3: COMMENT ON YOUR BIG PAPER

Each group receives a Big Paper and each learner a marker or pen. The groups read the text (or look at the image) in silence. After learners have read, they are to comment on the text, and ask questions of each other in writing on the Big Paper. The written conversation must start on the text but can stray to wherever the learners take it. If someone in the group writes a question, another member of the group should address the question by writing on the big paper. Learners can draw lines connecting a comment to a particular question. Make sure learners know that more than one of them can write on the Big Paper at the same time. The teacher can determine the length of this step, but it should be at least 15 minutes.

■ STEP 4: COMMENT ON OTHER BIG PAPERS

Still working in silence, the learners leave their partner and walk around reading the other Big Papers. Learners bring their marker or pen with them and can write comments or further questions for thought on other Big Papers. Again, the teacher can determine the length of time for this step based on the number of Big Papers and his/her knowledge of the learners.

■ STEP 5: RETURN TO YOUR OWN BIG PAPER

Silence is broken. The pairs rejoin back at their own Big Paper. They should look at any comments written by others. Now they can have a free, verbal conversation about the text, their own comments, what they read on other papers, and comments their fellow learners wrote back to them. At this point, you might ask learners to take out their journals and identify a question or comment that stands out to them at this moment.

DEBRIEF

Finally, debrief the process with the large group. The conversation can begin with a simple prompt such as, “What did you learn from doing this activity?” This is the time to delve deeper into the content and use ideas on the Big Papers to bring out the learners’ thoughts. The discussion can also touch upon the importance and difficulty of staying silent and the level of comfort with this activity.

VARIATIONS

Little Paper: In this variation, the ‘stimulus’ (question, excerpt, quotation, etc) is placed in the centre of a regular sized piece of paper. Often teachers select 4-5 different “stimuli” and create groups of the same size. Each learner begins by commenting on the “stimuli” on his/her little paper. After a few minutes, the Little Paper is passed to the learner on the left (or right). This process is repeated until all learners have had the opportunity to comment on every Little Paper. All of this is done in silence, just like the Big Paper activity. Then learners review the Little Paper they had first, noticing comments made by their peers. Finally, small groups have a discussion about the questions and ideas that strike them from this exercise.