

## JUST FOR INTEREST

### Carrot ice cream: Reactions to the new or different

by Tessa Woodward

#### Introduction

Years ago when I went to the USA for the very first time, I was given some carrot ice cream to try. I tasted the ice cream and my mind went all confused. One part of my brain seemed to be telling me that the stuff I was tasting was very cold and smooth and therefore must be ice cream. Another part of my brain seemed to be telling me that, as the stuff in my mouth was carrot flavoured, it **MUST** be warm and rough. But it wasn't...Help! I was stunned by this genuine newness. "So..." said my friend. "What do you think?" I couldn't answer. I couldn't think. I froze for a long time and then declared, "It's impossible!" That is one reaction to the new. Denial!

Back in OUR professional world, reactions to the new and different can be just as dramatic. Like all teachers and trainers, I am often in groups where someone is attempting to introduce something a little new or a little different to people who are, ostensibly, gathered together precisely in order to meet something which is a little new or a little different. Over the years, whether in ice cream parlours, language classes, workshops for teachers, staff meetings to discuss a new timetable or in informal teacher and trainer development groups, I've been noting my own and other people's reactions to newness.

It seems to me to be centrally important that I understand more about this. So, below, I'll introduce some of the types of reaction I have noticed in myself and others. I'll give a nickname to each type of reaction and this nickname will refer to possible reactions to carrot ice cream. Under each nickname however, the explanation will be in terms of more familiar professional situations.

#### Reaction types

Reaction one. Can we talk about curry instead?

Here, the person is not interested in the topic chosen for discussion. Perhaps they feel it's not relevant to their situation or perhaps they have had the agenda decided over their head. Or maybe there is something else about the situation that makes them feel like appropriating the agenda.

Reaction two. Carrot what? What is ice cream? Sorry I can't understand anything.

Newness sometimes seems to cause a general fogging of the brain in some people. It's almost as if all systems have shut down for a while. Usually, more explaining leads to more fog! Best for the fogged one to take a break for a while. On coming back to the same information later, it will probably be much clearer.

Reaction three. I love it! Give me the recipe. Can I take home your ingredients?

Some people fall in love with an idea instantly, certain that it will transfer to their own situation, wanting to use it immediately and not wanting to go to the bother of adapting or varying the idea or even of making their own materials. They'd rather photocopy, sound or video-tape the presenter's!

Reaction four. Yuk! I hate it. So I'm never going to make it.

Some folk take against a new idea instantly. They do not bother to entertain it or learn about it. If they are trainers, this means that no teacher they work with will ever get a chance to learn about the idea from them either.

Reaction five. But if you eat carrot ice cream all the time, it will get very boring.

This person assumes that, just because a new idea is being concentrated on for a time, the presenter is thus expecting it to be taken up and used constantly. Everything gets boring, if you do it all the time.

A sub-category of this reaction is, "Some people won't like it". It is interesting that this problem (of future participant preferences) is not raised in relationship to things they already do!

Reaction six. I already make potatoes. This is nothing new.

Here the person has completely misunderstood the idea and has connected it to something that they DO know about.

Reaction seven. I've been making carrot ice cream since 1969. It's nothing new.

This may in fact be true. This person MAY have been using the idea for years already. Two things are worth checking, however. One is whether the idea they have been using really IS the same. The other is why they feel the need to pull date rank on the presenter.

A sub-category of this reaction is, "I'm sure I read a recipe for this in 1966 in a Delia Smith collection. This is not original" This participant implies that the presenter is trying to pass off plagiarised material as their own. The other assumption is that only totally original ideas are ever worth discussing.

Reaction eight. I've heard about this, I think. Cream cheese...it's the same thing isn't it?

Oh dear...a real scramble this one. The presenter will have to get into the other idea (cream cheese) and discuss its features in order to then unravel differences between it and the new idea presented. HmMMM!

Reaction nine. What size and colour of carrot do you need? Are small ones best?

I do this one myself a lot. I want so much to learn about the new idea that I ask a thousand questions. I have recently understood however that this is probably a control mechanism on my part. As I dictate the order and type of explanation by my questions, I effectively prevent the presenter from explaining things THEIR way.

Reaction ten. But I haven't got time to make this on top of everything else!!

This harassed participant seems to feel they HAVE to use the idea immediately. They see their busy life becoming ever more stressful as a result.

Reaction eleven. Have you learnt how to make carrot sorbet yet?

This participant knows more perhaps than the presenter and, if this is said in public rather than in private, also wants everyone to know that they know more.

Reaction twelve. Have you tried chocolate covered garlic?

This participant knows more perhaps than the presenter but, about a completely different subject! Again, if said in public, apparently they want everyone to know that they know more.

Reaction thirteen. It won't work. You can't make ice cream out of carrots. Well, not for children anyway. Er...well, not for adults then. Well then, not for adults in Outer Mongolia, where I come from.

Once it has been established that the participant does in fact have all the ingredients and equipment necessary for the situation they state they are in, there isn't a lot anyone can do to persuade them that the rules of the universe apply there too!

Reaction fourteen. That reminds me of the story about Peter Rabbit!

Free association from this participant. Most people seem able to ignore these, sometimes pleasant, distractions. It depends how many free associators there are in the group at one time.

Reaction fifteen. Are you telling me my raspberry yoghurt is no good?

This participant is in defensive mood and feels their normal practice has been attacked or demeaned. It's worth checking whether it has been or not.

Reaction sixteen. I've never made it but I think my uncle does something like this or maybe it's my neighbour...

Some participants learn best from friends, relatives and colleagues and so try to make a new idea more learnable by associating it to their significant others.

Reaction seventeen. How long does it keep for?

Ah! A genuine question from someone interested in learning! A breath of fresh air.

Reaction eighteen. Sorry what did you say?

There's always at least one participant who is so busy shuffling papers or talking to neighbours or thinking their own thoughts that they miss sections of a presentation.

Reaction nineteen. I'm sure that what the presenter says is quite true.

There is usually one participant who attempts to defend the presenter if they get the feeling that s/he is being subjected to a rough ride.

Reaction twenty. Ah! I see. Nice! I wonder, could I substitute squash with a little coconut added for the carrot, do you think?

This participant is willing not just to entertain the new but is also already mentally transferring it to their own situation and making changes to suit their context.

Some thoughts. What IS new?

As I have noticed different kinds of reaction in myself and others and have seen them rise again and again in different group settings, I have learned not so much about people or reasons or strategies for reactions, but mostly about what I think the "new" is. As a teacher and trainer, I have come to see that an idea is not old or worthless just because a person:

- is not interested in it
- can't understand it immediately
- loves it, hates it, fears it or is threatened by it on sight
- THINKS they already know about it
- knows about something else

Something is new, different and potentially useful, to me, if I can't already call it to mind, or use it in and adapt it for different situations whenever I want.

But of course I'm open to new or different definitions!

#### Author

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