

NLP. A focus on excellence.

I feel writing an article on NLP and coaching for readers who are professional psychologists is a bit like walking into a Lion's den. However for some reason, despite a rigorous chartership journey, I still find myself using NLP as my central model for coaching. In this article I would like to tell you a bit about NLP and why, for me, it has proved so effective in coaching clients.

Coaching is about assisting clients in an exploratory and non-directive way understand their reality, the reality that both enables them and hinders them. NLP contends, following Korzybski, (1933) in order to explore one needs a map, or indeed in exploring one creates a map. Here a crucial distinction is highlighted by both Korzybski and people who use NLP; the map is not, and can never be the territory it sets out to explore, and the utility of the map is directly related to the extent it isomorphically maps the territory it seeks to represent. NLP claims to have a map which isomorphically represents the way individuals construct their realities. To have a conscious understanding of such a map is to be able to control one's inner experiences within an infinite array of environmental contexts and therefore to determine the quality of one's own life. To have this competency, it has been said, is to be as close to happiness as a human can get.

About NLP.

NLP, (Neuro-Linguistic programming), started during a Spring evening in the early '70s, when Richard Bandler, a 4th year undergraduate from University of California, (Santa Cruz), knocked on the door of John Grinder, Assistant Professor of linguistics at the same university. Richard had been conducting a gestalt therapy group with Frank Pucelik, and said to John he and Frank were excellent Gestalt therapists, but were struggling to teach their group what they did. He asked John to observe, and build a description of what they were doing, from which they would be able to design a training program. Eventually from Gestalt therapy, observation of the language patterns used by Virginia Satir in family therapy, and links to transformational grammar made by John Grinder, the first model of NLP was designed, the Meta Model. A collection of 13 syntactic patterns in human speech along with the appropriate challenges. An example would be a "comparison" which is a subset of "deletion". A client might say "I handled that meeting badly". The appropriate challenge would be "compared with what?" The client literally deleted in the surface structure of the sentence what he/she was comparing his/her performance with. This model is designed to create a context where the client will expand his or her understanding of their experience, or quickly realise they do have not a clue as to what they are talking about, both useful for beginning the process of change.

The second model of NLP appears to have been equally casual in its genesis, a conversation in a car between the above about how funny it was that a counter clerk said "I **see** what you are **saying**". This was followed by an "experiment" where a group of people were allocated to samples based upon the verbal predicates used during an introduction of themselves. If a person used mainly visual language they would go to one sample, auditory language another, and kinaesthetic a third. Rapport appeared to be instantaneous between members of the same groups in the first 10

minutes. However when members of the groups were mixed up for the following 10 minutes, the tone of the meetings totally changed. In the words of John Grinder “we realized that we were tracking a very powerful pattern”. (Bostic St.Clair, C. & Grinder, J. 2001). In an equally casual manner the idea of a relationship between the use of visual representation and elevated eye position, auditory representation and lateral eye position, and kinaesthetic representation and lowered eye position was born, which indeed is taught as fact in all NLP practitioner courses.

The third model of NLP, the Milton Model, was based upon the modelling of the American Psychiatrist Milton Erickson. In two volumes, (Grinder et al 1975 and 1977), the model describes techniques for engaging the conscious mind whilst communicating with the unconscious mind using Ericksonian patterning. A typical pattern for example would be the imbedded command. “Many people will **spend time**, which often they may not have **to understand this article** when they are busy and need to prioritise tasks in their professional lives.” Theoretically the conscious mind is engaged in the content of the sentence, whilst the unconscious mind picks up on the tonally marked out (in bold) command to “spend time to understand this article”. As a result the target **spends time to understand this article!**

Since the early 70’s NLP has bourgeoned into a thriving international community, with workshops infiltrating the echelons of many organisations around the world. The techniques taught in these workshops are based upon the above 3 models, and a theoretical base which could be described as a constructivist psychology with a strong systemic and neuro-physiological element. In addition, coaching strategies have been developed by luminaries along the way as NLP has developed. For example the 6 step reframe discovered by the unconscious mind of John Grinder whilst running a temperature of 104. He says he had no conscious recollection of the time when he wrote on the blackboard the 6 steps which explicated the way his unconscious mind worked with 5 different schizophrenics at the St Paul’s psychiatric hospital in Vancouver. (p209 op cit 2001.) The technique is designed to uncover the positive intent of an unwanted piece of internal or external behaviour, and to use unconscious resources to discover a more effective way of obtaining the desired goal.

Modelling is the core activity of NLP. Coaching at present comprises of the two other activities of NLP; Application of and training in the patterns discovered by NLP in the modelling projects.

I am fully aware of the inadequacies of NLP. One can obtain a “practitioners” certificate in one day, followed by a “master practitioners” certificate the following day. (<http://www.nlpwhisperinginthewind.com/discussion/index.htm>). For some professionals like Dr Yapko, a clinical psychologist who trained in NLP with Grinder and Bandler in the 70’s this is what he describes as an abomination. (Rapport winter 2002 p21). However those who wish to practice in a more professional vein can take advantage of a rigorous training route with the well respected Psychotherapy Counselling and Services section of the ANLP which is under the umbrella of the UKCP, or the International NLP trainers association.

In my experience NLP has often been accused of lacking an experimental backing. This is not so. Interested parties can view 180 papers on the NLP research data base, (<http://www.nlp.de/research/>) One can see for oneself the equivocal experimental

evidence does not warrant the hyperbole and rhetoric current in much NLP literature and workshops, however the research is there to be built upon. An example of an abstract which does **not** provide evidence for the second model of NLP is mentioned below:

“The NLP hypothesis of eye movements does not seem to adequately account for the findings of this study. The pattern of obtained eye movements suggests that subjects are able to activate cerebral processes without regard for the cognitive demands made by the stimulus question, and elicited eye movements seem related to several undefined sources of variance. Since the NLP hypothesis of eye movements was not supported, caution is suggested in the application of eye accessing cues within a counseling or educational environment. Recommendations are made for further research concerning the phenomenon of eye movements”. (*Dissertation Abstracts International* 43(3), 883-B East Texas State University, 130 pp. Pub. = AAC8219481)

So being fully aware of many of the inadequacies of NLP and the alternative paradigms such as CBT, why do I stick to NLP as I develop my career as a psychologist?

NLP and Coaching.

A part of the answer would be in 1994 I answered an advertisement in “The Psychologist”, (July 1994 p327), for a British Hypnosis research recognized diploma/MA Degree, (Derby) in Hypnotherapy (Ericksonian Hypnosis and NLP). Having parted with all that money then, I am now in a Pygmalion manner going to make sure this NLP stuff pays off! I am sure if many of us are brutally honest our academic filters are created in similar ways?

However I have had time to lick my wounds and recover from the MA that never was.

Tony grant (2001) when suggesting a theoretical framework upon which to base a psychology of coaching talks of self regulation theory, goal setting theory, Brief solution focused theory and the metacognitive processes of Self-monitoring and Self-awareness. All of these being couched within the transtheoretical model of change. Prochaska & DiClemente, (1984). My experience is that NLP is ahead of the game here in that it has a tradition, albeit a skills based one, not academically nor theoretically oriented, that embraces all of the above. There is a strong behaviourist emphasis on synesthesias, (S-R connections and Hebb’s Law) and how the resulting patterning of our unconscious mind is used to interpret current sense data. It is these interpretations which prevent the coachee obtaining their goal. What then makes NLP ideal as a coaching paradigm for me is that it insists, whilst our problem was developed in the past and resides in the unconscious, one does not like many counselling traditions go to the past to seek a remedy. Following the gestalt tradition you “come to your senses” and talk about your current experiences, after identifying specifically what your goal is, you develop a keen awareness of how your present experience differs from the goal you seek. To put it succinctly as one must in a 2,000 word article, the NLP 3 minute seminar talks about OUTCOME, ACUITY, FLEXIBILITY. (O’Connor and Seymour). What NLP does very well in my opinion is by acknowledging the powerful unconscious patterning through which we interpret

present events it comes to terms with that which is missing in many other traditions, namely the important part emotion plays in the role of information processing and subsequent behaviour.

This emphasis is made more explicit by a past NLP trainer, now director of studies at the European therapies studies institute, Joe Griffin. He and Ivan Tyrrell have developed the APET model. This takes into account the neurophysiological fact that we process information emotionally much quicker than we do cognitively, and our cognitions are to a great extent determined by that emotional patterning. Replacing the A (activating event), B (belief), and C (Consequence) of the original cognitive approach we have A (activating event), P (pattern of neurological activation), E (emotional arousal,) and finally T (thought).

Using NLP as a coach I have found using the above understanding of how problems are created for clients useful. I can whilst remaining in the NLP tradition incorporate without omission the frame work suggested by Tony Grant mentioned above. A very brief example shows how I can incorporate goal setting and self regulation theory within the framework of NLP.

Goal theory and Self – Regulation theory. Incongruence Congruence
 Test → Operate → Test → Exit

In assisting clients NLP borrows the TOTE model from Miller et al (1960). which replaces the S-R as the basic unit of behaviour during change, (putting the **client** in control) However in order to test (the T of tote), one needs a goal to test against when operating, (the O). Just as it is incongruence that sets the TOTE in motion it is congruence that provides the signal for exit, (the E), of the behavioural unit, As behaviour and thoughts are hierarchically organised so TOTE's are nested and imbedded within each other, creating the individual complexities of us all. For NLP well formed outcomes, (goals) are an essential aspect for any healthy human. It is the formation of these goals which provide a creative tension, (incongruence), and it is this tension that drives the TOTE to it's congruent conclusion in the learning process of coaching. Well formed outcomes are those which have the characteristics of being specific, and therefore measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound, (SMART), however they also need to be owned by the goal setter who can take personal responsibility for them, (locus of control), they need to be phrased, or visualised in the positive taking account of Emile Coue's law of reversed effort, and they need to have an "ecological validity"; If when you ask your client, "so if you could have this now, would you take it?" you find only a 95% yes, then there is a part of the client that is not sure about this goal, and this needs to be checked out.

The NLP practitioner operates at a process level, listening and watching to understand how the client creates their personal reality as they readily spill their content. Which sense system, visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic, do they prefer? How does this client prefer, in their language to systematically distort, generalise or delete information. Systemically the practitioners ask themselves where does the problem lie? Within the environment, behaviour, strategy, or limiting belief? Concerning time the NLP practitioner will seek to understand how their client represents time and cognitively where does he / she spend that time, in the past, present, future? Perceptually it is useful to understand whether the client gets involved (1st position), sees things from others perspective (2nd position) or is a fly on the wall (3rd position) looking at the

situation from an objective disassociated viewpoint. All of these are useful levers to use with the coachee so that when they have their well formed outcome, when they have a stronger awareness of how their present experience differs from that well formed outcome, they can then begin to develop an emotional and cognitive flexibility, to begin to take control of their inner experiences, and therefore their behaviour and move more effectively through the TOTE to actualise the well formed outcome.

This account is very incomplete, but hopefully gives the reader an inkling of the richness and depth which I have found within NLP. Even though quantitatively much still needs to be done, the Co founder, John Grinder argues vociferously NLP is a qualitative discipline, with practitioners not focusing on the full range of the normal distribution, but on only the excellent beyond the 3rd Standard Deviation. When you meet one of these excellent people, for NLP the traditional verbal behaviour which accompanies a hand shake is not how do you do, but how do you do that?

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