

SO WHAT IS NLP?

Jonathan Priest © 2004

Company of Friends Meeting - Happy – 20th May 2004

So what is NLP? Is it, how can I put it, respectable? If you were at a polite dinner party, is it something you would openly admit to having engaged in? Whether black art or mainstream, there are lots of people calling themselves NLP practitioners these days.

I went along to this event with no preconceptions about Neuro-Linguistic Programming. As my later research revealed, this therapy is highly controversial; its advocates and critics equally vociferous. The advocates say it worked for us so what's the problem; the critics say it's charlatanry based on bogus science. Certainly, there have been no large scale randomised clinical trials to reveal its effectiveness and orthodox therapists are decidedly sniffy about NLP. However, there's no point rehearsing these arguments here; I can only report on the presentation given by NLP practitioner Penelope Else, which was interesting, informative and above all, down to earth.

NLP is actually quite hard to describe, even to a highly attentive group of CoFers as Pen (as she's known) discovered. But the fact that we kept her there till way past time demonstrated our eagerness to get to the bottom of NLP. While there are books galore, none convey its essence. NLP is apparently something you have to take on trust.

We learned that you're most likely to encounter NLP through a personal recommendation. Your life's in a mess, you have issues (that dreaded word) with relationships, colleagues, stalkers or an uncertain future and you don't know which way to turn. Everything else has failed, so why not try this?

NLP uses a variety of 'tools, concepts and structures for thinking' that enable you to understand what's bugging you about someone or something; or is preventing you doing that big project you've been putting off, like writing a book, ending a relationship or quitting the weed.

These tools have been hijacked from a variety of therapeutic schools including Freud, Jung, transactional analysis and hypnotherapy. NLP was founded in the mid '70s by linguist, John Grinder and mathematician, Richard Bandler. Their interests were in successful people, psychology, language and computer programming.

Magpie science

Bandler and Grinder (apparently now locked in litigation) observed that some therapists were markedly more successful than others and set about analysing what these were doing that was so much more effective. So NLP started life as a 'best practice' approach to psychotherapy, a magpie science that liberally picks and mixes. Hence there's no consistent theme or fundamental binding insight. Literally, anything goes. It's best known proponent today is Anthony Robbins, he of Ultimate Power and Awaken the Giant Within. So let's forget the theory and get down to the practice.

NLP is essentially a one-to-one experience; an intangible tango for two where practitioner and subject try out different steps, holds and emotional twirls to reveal what's going on within. As the dance progresses, demons are forced into the light, wrestled to the ground and tied up in psychological knots so that they can't trouble you any more. The original neurosis probably remains intact, but it has a much harder time getting its perverse message across.

NLP isn't just talk, it's very physical. You move literally from one opposing psychological position to another. You talk to your self, your self talks back to you. You talk to the people in your life and they talk back to you. You, the real you in the middle, listens to both sides of the argument and hopefully achieves insights. The idea is to identify those patterns, habits, negative self-perceptions and pessimistic expectations that predict the nature of our relationship with the people and temptations around us. NLP tools are designed to break down these gestalt behaviours into their component parts so that we may better understand and therefore control and prevent them. Our brains are literally being re-programmed.

One exercise was to write down the big project you wanted to finish and in three columns score your feelings about it at the level of head, heart and gut. You literally have to hold your hand on your head when filling in the Head column, on your heart when scoring the Heart column and on your tummy when scoring your Gut feelings. You score from 1 to 5, from the least to the most positive expectation. The following was not my big idea, by the way.

I want to retire a rich man

	HEAD	HEART	GUT
DESIRABLE Is it worth doing?	5	3	2
POSSIBLE Is it possible?	1	4	1
APPROPRIATE Is it ecologically acceptable	5	1	1
CAPABILITY Do you have the skills?	1	3	4
RESPONSIBLE Are you the main person responsible?	5	5	5
DESERVE Do you deserve it?	5	5	5

A coat of many colours

Other tools involve giving emotional powers to familiar everyday objects. For example a real or imaginary coat could be given the power to fend off unwanted thoughts or give you courage. When faced with a particular challenge you physically mime putting on the magic coat and that will enable you to deal with the problem more effectively. There are literally scores of similar tricks that NLP practitioners use to coax and cajole their subjects out of their troublesome behaviours, obsessions and addictions.

So if you are in a supermarket one day and a lady in front of you stops dead in her tracks, puts on an imaginary coat and then strides onward with an expression of smug satisfaction it's safe to assume she just had a close encounter with a packet of chocolate chip cookies.

For more information about the work of Penelope Else, see her profile on Ecademy or visit www.freer-mind.co.uk

<p>Jonathan Priest Creative Communication www.creative-writer.com solutions@creative-writer.com +44 (0)20 8767 0811</p>	<p>The Company of Friends is Fast Company magazine's global readers' network http://www.fastcompany.com/cof/</p> <p>Happy generously hosts London CoF events http://www.happy.co.uk</p>
--	--

Winner of the 2004 IVCA Gold Award for Live Events