



Introducing Neuro-Linguistic Programming

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Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), created in the 1970's, has achieved considerable popularity as an approach to communication and personal development. It is increasingly familiar in professional arenas of education, management training and coaching. However, there is little academic work to date on this innovative field of practice.

Here we offer a description of the field - we are not attempting a definitive history or definition of NLP. For the most recent, detailed, first-hand account of the origins of NLP see Bostic St. Clair and Grinder (2001)ⁱ; other prime sources on the origins of NLP are McLendon (1989)¹ and Dilts and DeLozier (2000). For a more detailed introduction and discussion of NLP as a model of learning, see Tosey & Mathison (2003)².

NLP was developed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder. Bandler, whose background was in mathematics and gestalt therapy (Dilts and DeLozier 2000 p.850), was studying at the University of Santa Cruz in the 1970's, where he developed a fruitful collaboration with John Grinder, a professor of linguistics (McLendon 1989).

¹ McLendon's account, written in popular style, is the closest to a contemporary published account of the development of NLP.

² Further articles are in preparation.

The title, coined by Bandler and Grinder, is understood to denote that a person is a whole mind-body system, with systematic, patterned connections between neurological processes ('neuro'), language ('linguistic') and learned behavioural strategies ('programming') (Dilts et al 1980 p.2)ⁱⁱ. NLP has been defined in various ways. In its promotional literature it is described as (for example) 'the art of communication excellence'. Alternatively, as in the subtitle to Dilts et al (1980), it is described as 'the study of the structure of subjective experience'.

NLP is a growth-orientated rather than pathology-orientated approach, emphasising learning as the key to personal change and development. NLP assumes that people are inherently creative and capable, and in important respects adopts a constructivist position that people act according to the way they understand and represent the world, not according to the way the world 'is'; Korzybski's (1941) dictum, 'the map is not the territory', is often cited. There is a strong emphasis in NLP on understanding the structure rather than the content of experience (Bandler and Grinder 1975:1).

We concur with Dilts and DeLozier's assertion (2000:849) that NLP can be seen as involving three layers; an epistemology, a methodology, and a technology or set of practices. NLP was originally claimed (Bandler & Grinder 1975:6) to be a methodology known as 'modelling'. Bandler and Grinder's earliest published work (Bandler and Grinder 1975, Grinder and Bandler 1976) was based on 'modelling' Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, Virginia Satir, the family therapist, and Milton Erickson, the hypnotherapist (Grinder et al 1977).

Therefore, while NLP is often perceived as a 'technology' - a working practice comprising a collection of frameworks, tools and techniques, originally it was developed as a means of understanding how people process information, construct meaning schemas, and perform skills to achieve results.

Underlying the methodology of NLP is an epistemological dimension – in other words, theory about the processes through which we perceive, know and learn. While most NLP literature generally does not present it as a theory, our view is that NLP can be seen to have emerged from, and to represent the application of, coherent principles. These appear to us (as suggested also by authors in the practice field, e.g. Bostic St Clair and Grinder 2001, Dilts and DeLozier 2000) to be based substantially on Gregory Bateson's multi-disciplinary, systemic perspective (e.g. Bateson 1973 – see page on this website). Intellectually, this epistemological dimension is the primary focus of this project's interest in NLP in relation to education and learning, and we do

not regard that epistemology as coterminous with, dependent upon, or solely captured by NLP. This website indicates a range of key theoretical links.

NLP is a contested practice in many respects (a detailed discussion of which is the subject of other articles in preparation). Briefly, the pragmatic and often anti-theoretical stance by the founders has left a legacy of little engagement between practitioner and academic communities and a need for both clarification and critique of NLP's premises. Bandler and Grinder were interested in theory in use, not espoused theory ('We have *no* idea about the "real" nature of things, and we're not particularly interested in what's "true". The function of modeling is to arrive at descriptions which are *useful*', Bandler and Grinder 1979:7). The academic literature on NLP is sporadic, scattered across several fields, and tends to report applications of NLP to the field of practice in question without critically reviewing its principles. Research into NLP is also thin so far, dominated by a number of experimental studies from the 1980's and 1990's. The significance of these studies is disputed (e.g.; Einspruch and Forman 1985; Heap 1988).

How widespread or popular NLP has become in practice is difficult to say with precision, as to our knowledge there is as yet no reliable or systematic data about the level of activity. NLP is now a recognised mode of psychotherapy in the UKⁱⁱⁱ. Its practical, accessible and goal-oriented approach has made it attractive in the business world (e.g. Knight 2002; Molden 2000), where it is used for training in (e.g.) negotiation skills, presentation skills, selling and goal-setting. Most recently, publicity from NLP training organisations shows evidence of substantial growth in NLP for coaching^{iv} and in leadership development (Deering et al 2002).

There are NLP training providers across the globe^v, and as a broad estimate it seems reasonable to suggest that more than 100,000 participants may have attended NLP training courses in the UK alone^{vi}. This is compounded by the fact that many practitioners report (from interviews conducted for this project) that they use NLP without naming it as such. There may be reluctance to be identified as using NLP, or this may reflect the way that NLP can be incorporated into any aspect of human communication and development. NLP has also diversified since its foundation; some trainers have developed NLP in their own fashion and then given their approach a different name^{vii}. A number of accrediting bodies exist, as do a number of associations. In the UK, recent developments include the establishment of the Guild of NLP Trainers and the British Board of NLP (see links on this website). However, there is no unified structure within NLP community. Probably in common with other emergent fields of practice there has been diversity in, and

dispute concerning, ownership of NLP and the right to authorise training providers to issue NLP certificates.

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ⁱ It seems ironic that this volume – which the authors regard as an important statement about NLP – has not been widely available. For academic researchers, it can be obtained via the Inter-Library Loans system.

ⁱⁱ The term 'neuro-linguistics' was, we believe, first introduced by Alfred Korzybski (1941 p.xxxviii; see also Dilts and DeLozier 2000 p. 849).

ⁱⁱⁱ Accredited by the UK Council for Psychotherapy assigned to the Experiential Constructivist Therapies section: [http://82.219.38.131/\\$sitepreview/ukcp.org.uk/home.asp](http://82.219.38.131/$sitepreview/ukcp.org.uk/home.asp), accessed 2.2.2006

^{iv} See for example <http://www.itsnlp.com/training/coach1.htm> accessed 2.2.2006

^v The website of the International NLP Trainers' Association (INLPTA) cites England, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Slovenia: <http://www.inlpta.com/>, accessed 2.2.2006

^{vi} The UK Association for NLP website (accessed 7.3.2005 but no longer available – the UK ANLP has been superseded by a new Association) stated that 'by the end of the year 2002 we estimate that around 150,000 people in the UK will have had some training in NLP'. Long standing UK NLP training association John Seymour Associates claims to have 'trained 10'000's of people in NLP over the last 20 years' <http://www.john-seymour-associates.co.uk/nlpcourseswelcome.php>, accessed 2.2.2006. Other long-established UK NLP training providers such as PPD (<http://www.ppdlearning.co.uk/>, accessed 2.2.2006) and ITS (<http://www.itsnlp.com/index.htm>, accessed 2.2.2006) have been running courses since the late 1980's.

^{vii} For instance John McWhirter's Developmental Behavioural Modelling (DBM) (<http://www.sensorystems.co.uk/dbma.htm>, accessed 13.2.2006); L. Michael Hall's Neuro-Semantics (<http://www.stuttering-specialist.com/documents/NeuroSemantics.html>, accessed 13.2.2006).