



NLP in training: the power to facilitate

How can NLP help to design and run a course that has a positive result for everyone – including you, the trainer? Deni Lyall outlines the processes, gives plentiful advice and shares her personal experiences.



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ate successful courses

I have a degree in electrical engineering and loved mathematics at school – a logical lady I felt. So there I was, one summer afternoon, listening to the voice of my coach gently encouraging me to walk along an imaginary timeline on the carpet of the hotel room. This was to help me with the problem we were exploring! I took one step and looked at him quizzically. What was supposed to happen? Another step, another look. And another and another. Then suddenly it happened. For some reason I felt a calmness go through me and the situation seemed to be settled. I knew it would be OK in the autumn.

This was my first experience of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) and, I have to say, I left that

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room feeling somewhat bemused. In the following years I heard more about NLP and realised that it is an emotive subject. Should I mention my experience with it to other people or not? Rather than being sceptical about something I knew very little about, curiosity got the better of me and I decided to find out more. Eventually I found a small group of like-minded people and a good trainer. Fourteen months later I had successfully completed both practitioner and master practitioner training. ➤



For me, NLP is a very useful addition to my toolkit. It's a little bit like the pizza slice a friend recently bought me; I don't know how I managed without it and it's handy for more than just pizza, but I've still kept all my knives. Rather than allow NLP to take over, I have integrated it into my toolkit and used it to enhance what I already do.

Put simply, NLP is about using the language of the mind to allow you to consistently achieve the outcomes you want. It comprises some philosophies,

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some tools and techniques, and some methodologies. As a basis it is useful to understand Figure 1 (see below). With around 2 million bits of data coming to us every second we generalise, delete and distort the information to cut it down to a reasonable amount. To do this we use our experiences, our values and beliefs, our attitudes, our use of language, our memories and 'metaprograms' (see Table 1, page 16). The information that is left is internally represented

in our mind (see Figure 2, opposite), which then produces our (emotional) state, which in turn affects the way we behave. NLP helps to provide choices as to how that information affects us. It also helps us to understand how and why others may react differently to the same information.

NLP is a large topic with many aspects to it and I don't intend to cover the theory here. There are many good books, tapes and courses on the subject. As a trainer, though, I have found it very useful in three main ways:

- my own self
- interacting with participants
- training design.

MY OWN SELF

A key aspect of NLP is about choosing how to react to what's happening to you. Therefore when I am training I make sure that I choose how I am feeling about it. I want to be in the best frame of mind for training so that I can confidently handle the situations that I am going to come across during the workshop.

First, I am always positive about the outcome. I put myself into the future, at the end of the workshop, using the present tense in my thoughts. I see the participants enthusing about what they have learned and I look around the room with all the workshop outputs. I hear laughter and good comments about what they have learned, and finally I feel very satisfied with what I have achieved. I understand that not everyone will feel like this about the training, but I focus my thoughts on the people who will feel like that. How does focusing on negative thoughts help you? It just makes you feel unhappy!

Tips

- *Make sure the feeling you have about the workshop is the one you get when you are feeling very satisfied and happy with something. Get the feeling first by recalling a past experience. Now keep the feeling, then imagine being in your successfully completed workshop.*
- *Imagine hearing good comments about the workshop in the voice from someone you respect.*
- *Usually making the picture big, colourful, bright and close up gives it more impact.*

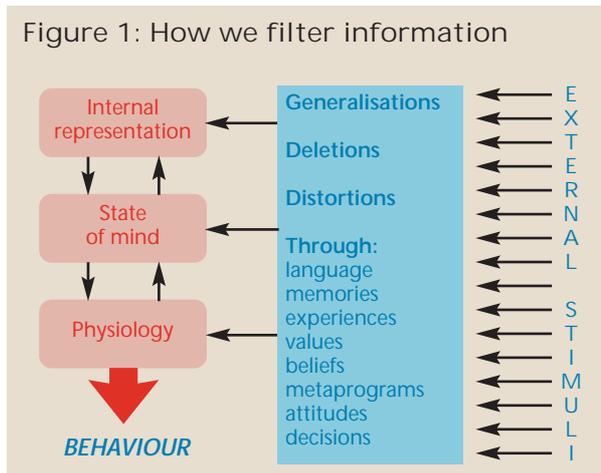


Figure 2: Representation systems

We mainly store information in our minds as pictures (visual), words/sounds (auditory) or feelings (kinaesthetic). We use all three ways of storing information, although people might have a stronger preference for one way. Just recall a meeting you had recently. Which has more impact for you?

- The picture of the meeting?
- The talking or noises in the room?
- Or the feeling that goes with that memory?

The way the information is internally represented is important.

- Is the picture bright or dim, black and white or colour?
- Is the sound high or low pitched and from which direction does it come?
- Where is the feeling and what size is it?

Changing these can change how the information affects your state of mind and therefore your behaviour. Recall two situations, one very happy and one slightly sad. Notice the difference in the internal representations.

People often show their preference in the language that they use. They also prefer to use and listen to that language.



Driving to the workshop I always listen to music that makes me feel good. I have recorded seven songs on to a cassette tape, and those songs really make me feel confident and 'on top of the world'. It's a great way to start the day. It is also a good way to end the day. Training can be very draining, and the tape is guaranteed to put a smile on my face and renew my energy.

When I am getting the room ready I always keep an open mind as to who might be participating. I actively think good thoughts about the participants such as: 'They are going to be interested', 'They will like the room' and 'They will find the workshop really useful'. When participants arrive I always smile and look for something positive about them – a face I know, an interesting brooch or tie, the way they greet me. And then I think to myself: 'They look interested to be here, so we're going to have a great workshop.' This keeps me in a positive frame of mind.

Tips

- *Smile a lot, even (especially) when things are getting you down. The mind and body are connected so you feel much better.*
- *Try this exercise.*
 - *Sit at the edge of your chair, knees together, hands clasped together on your lap, shoulders hunched forward. Bend your head down, look downwards on to your lap and keep your mouth straight. I want you to feel really happy and confident in that position! How are you doing?*
 - *Now sit back in your chair, back straight and upright, hands apart, shoulders down and head up. Look up at the ceiling and put a big smile on your face. Now I want you to feel really sad and unconfident in that position! How are you doing?*

It's difficult isn't it? You now know how to change your state, so now you have the choice!

If there is some incident during a workshop that causes me to feel particularly low, then I have a way to reduce the emotional impact of it. First, I visualise the memory and see myself in the picture. Then, I imagine framing the picture and making it black and white. Finally, I make the image go dim and fuzzy, and push it a long way away from me. This way, I can rationally think through what has happened without feeling emotional.

INTERACTING WITH PARTICIPANTS

I always use rapport-building techniques with participants. I am especially careful to match their spoken language and their body language. When you first match and mirror body positions it can feel very awkward. One way to overcome this is to sit beside a friend and get him or her to talk about something for 10–15 minutes. Match or mirror every move that friend makes. Then afterwards ask your friend how s/he felt the conversation went. After five minutes, mirroring becomes more natural so it works better for everyone. Anyway, when you have a good relationship with someone you tend to match or mirror that person nearly all the time without even realising it!

I adopt a lot of the 'presuppositions of NLP' (see Table 2, page 16). I have found these statements very powerful and the more I discuss them, the more I get out of them. It is these statements that allow me to avoid being judgemental about people and become curious about how and why they are doing what they are doing. Whether the presuppositions are true or not does not matter, as they simply make me open-minded and improve my people skills.

I also use the language of the participants. I get this information from them in two ways. I listen for their preferred representation system (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic) – the words they use and the way they speak. Usually I find it easy to tell if someone is visual (fast speaking, lots hand movements, visual words) or kinaesthetic (slow speaking, low hand movements, feeling/doing words).

If I am not sure, then I use auditory language and usually this works out to be right. I also listen for any prominent metaprograms in the participants, such as 'Away From or Towards' and 'Internally or Externally

referenced'. Then I phrase my language to match their preferences when talking with them individually. In group discussions, I consciously vary my language rather than just focusing on my own preferences.

Tip

- *Put some of the presuppositions up around the room as posters.*

During the workshop I find language patterns very useful. I am a great believer in that you get what you focus on. In language we often focus on what we don't want, then are disappointed when it happens. Consider the sentence 'I mustn't forget to smile'. The action verb in this sentence is 'to forget' and therefore subconsciously we are telling ourselves to forget. It would be much better to say 'I must remember to smile'. Therefore I am careful about the structure of what I am saying.

Once during a coaching course, a participant was saying how difficult it was to catch the juggling balls. I replied by saying: 'You're so right; it's not easy to catch the balls, not easy at all.' This changed the whole focus of the sentence to being 'easy'. While I said this, the participant's ability to catch the balls improved to the point where she remarked about how strange it was that catching the balls now seemed a lot easier!

NLP helps to provide choices as to how information affects us; it also helps us to understand how and why others may react differently to the same information

You need to be careful with language. I don't use exaggerated positive language. I am just careful in my choice of words. One of my favourite examples is about my sons. When they were three and five years old they would often splash in the bath. There I was saying 'Don't splash, don't splash', and the floor had two layers of towels on it just to keep it dry. Then I learned to say, 'Now tonight we are going to keep the water in the bath.' If they splashed I said, 'Let's keep the water in the bath.' I only had to use this type of language once and the splashing stopped.

I told this story at a training session and one of the participants tried out the technique on his daughter. He was delighted when it worked and I had one especially receptive participant for the rest of the workshop.

Language is also very powerful in helping participants to make forward progress. Many people will have practised the next two NLP techniques without even being aware of it. (This isn't surprising, as NLP is really about what we already do anyway.)

Technique 1: Sleight of mouth

This technique twists around wording to positive effect. For example, a facilitator heard someone say, 'We can't afford to do this', and she simply replied, 'We can't afford *not* to do this.'

Speaking someone's language can be very powerful. Look at this example ...

'Well,' I said, 'I get a picture of each section in my mind's eye and see myself clearly linking from one to the other.'

'I don't understand what you mean,' he replied. ➤



'Ah, in my mind I logically think through the training sequence, step by step, to check the order makes sense.'

'Oh yes, that makes sense,' he said.

Technique 2: Reframes

This is another powerful language tool, and there are two basic types.

- A contextual reframe simply looks at a situation from a different position. For example, a little boy throwing a rock at your car might seem very unacceptable, until you found out it was the only way he had been able to attract anyone's attention to his badly injured father.
- With a 'meaning reframe' the participants have the same information but interpret it in different ways. For example, a mother telephones her daughter everyday because she loves her. However, the daughter sees her mother as nosy and interfering in her life.

Sleight of mouth and reframes are valuable because they help people to think differently about situations. At the very least, they start to shake up a person's thinking and help that person to move away from entrenched positions.

There is no limit to the power of NLP to facilitate successful training courses

When these techniques touch the right spot they can result in complete paradigm shifts. If a participant has a favourite phrase that is not useful in helping him or her move forward, then work out your own reframe/sleight of mouth. Use it the next time that participant uses the phrase. For example, 'I am finding this difficult to learn' could be countered with the question, 'In what way could finding this difficult actually mean that you are learning more?'

Table 1: Metaprograms

Metaprograms are deep filters within us; we are normally unaware of them. For example, if you ask the question 'How do you know you are doing a good job?', one person may answer 'Because I know I am.' At the other extreme, another person may answer, 'I don't know unless someone tells me.'

So some people are internally referenced and keep their standards within themselves. Other people are externally referenced and need feedback. Of course, there is a connection between these two extremes. One person might know s/he is doing well if s/he knows inside and also gets good feedback.

Internal and external people respond to different ways of putting things across, so the language you use is important. There are a number of useful metaprograms, including:

- motivated by achieving goals (towards) or from solving/avoiding problems (away from)
- motivated by producing alternatives/following procedures
- looks for differences in things (likes variety and change)/looks for the similarities in things.

Table 2: Presuppositions of NLP

- No failure, only feedback.
- The map is not the territory.
- Every action has a positive intent.
- The person is not his/her behaviour.
- Everyone has the resources they need.
- Respect the other person's model of the world.
- The meaning of communication is in the response you get.
- The person with the most flexibility will control the system.
- People make the best possible choices with the resources they have.

Tip

- From the example opposite you can use the basic reply to create your own reframes/sleight of mouth. 'In what way could ... actually mean ... (the opposite of the problem).'

Changes in verb tense are also helpful and people tend not to notice the shift consciously. If a participant says 'I have a problem', then I will reply 'What was the problem that you had?' Subconsciously this puts the problem in the past and shifts the focus on to a solution.

You can also bring things from the future and put them in the present. The following sentence can be really effective in breaking a negative pattern of thinking.

'In the future when you will be using your new skills, now, you can see how easy and natural they have become, today.' If a participant says 'What do you mean?', I just repeat the whole sentence again and usually s/he just accepts it.

I have really improved my information-gathering skills by using 'precision questioning'. This can work well both during training and when designing a workshop with a client. Often clients are unclear about their requirements. I ask them what they want to see, hear and feel differently after the workshop. I won't accept subjective responses such as 'communicating more'. I use precision questioning to draw out specific descriptive answers such as, 'I want to see people phoning each other and asking for help.' During training I gently challenge sweeping phrases such as 'This will never work' with a question like, 'Do you really mean never?'

Technique 3: Anchoring

Anchoring is another aspect that I am aware of and make use of in training to improve the results. Anchors are environmental conditions that draw people back to feeling and behaving in the same way as they did some time ago – for example, a smell or a song.

I am particularly sensitive to the need to remove or reduce negative anchors. If I need to speak to someone about, say, his/her behaviour, I will do this outside the training room so the person does not associate it with the training environment. If there has been a tense situation or conflict, then it can help to have a break. However, the layout of the training room can be a strong enough anchor to rekindle the conflict later on. Therefore, during the break, I will rearrange the furniture in the training room so that the participants will not sit back down in the same place and feel the same emotions.

From 'can't' to 'can'

Sometimes participants are only too eager to tell you how they can't apply their new skills. 'Yes,' I say, 'You can't use NLP today, and tomorrow you *might not* be able to use NLP either. But in a few days there will come a time where you *need to* use NLP and then you will find that it is *possible* to use it.'

TRAINING DESIGN

Most of this article has been about ways of using NLP to conduct successful training sessions. However, I also incorporate two basic NLP techniques into course design.

First, at the start of the course I structure my language to use kinaesthetic, auditory and then visual representations to connect to everyone right from the beginning. I start with the deeper kinaesthetic processors first and finally pick up the speedier visual processors at the end. I might say something like this ...

'I was wondering as I was packing my training kit last night how you might all be feeling about the workshop. I certainly had that tingle of excitement before a first night. I was also wondering if you had had discussions with previous participants and liked the sound of the workshop or maybe you had just been thinking through some of the discussions we might have. In a few moments we will have a look at the agenda and then you can clearly see what we will be focusing on today ...'

Second, I design courses to include a lot of metaphors or stories to illustrate points. I purposefully include several stories right at the beginning to help set the scene. These really do help participants to be more open-minded to the workshop's material and style. The scene setters are to encourage participants to be:

- curious (like the night before Christmas)
- open-minded (a mythical story often helps here)
- aware that sometimes things are not easy at first and then they become second nature (like swimming or driving a car)
- confident that new skills can be integrated with existing skills (like children's building brick sets).

Many years ago I went on a coaching course and listened to the trainer tell a particular story about her daughter. I was somewhat disillusioned when my husband went on a different coaching course several years later only to hear the trainer recite the same 'true' story about his daughter. Therefore, unless the metaphors are mythical stories, I always refer to my own personal experiences.

Sleight of mouth and reframes are valuable because they help people to think differently about situations. At the very least, they start to shake up a person's thinking and help that person to move away from entrenched positions.

CONCLUSION

There is no limit to the power of NLP to facilitate successful training courses. I have already enhanced my workshops through using the aspects of NLP with which I felt most comfortable, such as representation systems, use of language and metaphors. The practical nature of the 'tool' makes it easy to introduce gradually as one becomes more confident that the outcome will be successful.

And what about that first experience of NLP with my coach when I walked the imaginary timeline and suddenly felt that the problem would be 'OK in the autumn'? Well strangely enough, or perhaps predictably with the benefit of hindsight, the problem did resolve itself during October that year. 🍂