

NLP as a tool for teaching in the new millenium

(Buenos Aires 1999)

Wouldn't it be great if the year 2000 heralded a breakthrough in the classroom where learning difficulties were minimised, students worked happily and efficiently and teachers had the satisfaction of achieving all their objectives? Wouldn't it be great to have real energy for teaching and time to do everything you wanted? Wouldn't it be great to reach those hard-to-get-to students and really find a way to motivate them to learn English?

Well, as we start the 1999 teaching year with the usual call for budget cuts and the juggling of jobs and timetables, it doesn't look too likely a scenario. The pressure on teachers and students to perform in an ever uncertain economic climate seems to be increasing and it is little wonder that media surveys show that many people feel less than optimistic about what the year 2000 is going to bring.

Teachers are among those groups which are experiencing difficult times in many countries as governments prioritise short-term budget balancing over long-term investment. Students themselves are increasingly aware of the need to perform within a system that may not reward their particular skills or intelligence. The malaise and frustration that this is causing today is a great shame if we consider that reaching such an important milestone in our civilization should be a cause for rejoicing. It should also be an incentive towards improving our lives even more in the decades to come. There is, nevertheless, a glimmer of hope. Ways are emerging in which we as teachers can continue developing and help to make learning more effective and pleasurable despite the conditions around us.

New approaches in teaching

In recent years there has been a grass-roots move towards making education more efficient and complete. I'm not talking of this in an economic sense as the administrators would no doubt like, but of the desire among teachers to find ways to help all their students and to develop a greater congruence between their teaching style and the learning processes of their different students. In the same way that in medicine there has been an opening up to include homeopathy and other remedies and treatment (based to a large

degree on patient demand), there has been a discernable interest in education in alternatives to traditional methodologies. Some of these alternatives are not in fact methodologies at all but approaches or techniques. Suggestopaedia, accelerated learning, photoreading, holistic teaching and neuro linguistic programming are some examples. The increased interest in these fields has been matched by the advances in the study of the brain made possible by technological progress. We can now know so much more about what happens in the brain and how changes in the physical and emotional state of a person effect the whole human system. These new areas respect this knowledge and have pointed to different paths by which learning may take place.

So far, so good. The challenge, however, has been to apply these new techniques for learning to school environments designed very clearly for more traditional teaching styles. Adapting some of these new techniques to a typical secondary school classroom is quite a task! Using them in their pure form just does not fit into the ecology, timetable and values of such institutions. Some of them involve intensive training of students in learning strategies that are very different to what they are used to. In addition, school budgets seldom free up money for the materials or training required to implement such new approaches.

Neuro Linguistic Programming

One area which does lend itself to enriching the life of both teachers and students is Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). It can be applied in any classroom, at any time without the need for any special resources beyond the training. The teacher can use it little by little as she becomes competent in NLP. It does not depend on training up students (although at some point you will want to share your techniques with them) and it needs no special equipment or material. Described as everything from a user-guide to the brain to a set of techniques for modelling excellence, NLP offers people ways to improve their communication, reach their objectives, turn challenges into opportunities and, in the case of education, literally programme themselves to learn better. Some NLP strategies are genuinely new discoveries, while others have been borrowed from linguistics, hypnosis, semantics, conditioning and systems thinking. Rather like TQM (Total Quality Management),

NLP is now a package of knowledge and techniques that is available to us in a more cohesive and accessible way than ever before.

NLP began in the early 1970's when Richard Bandler (a mathematician and psychologist) and John Grinder (a linguist) studied how exceptionally talented people in their profession achieved their results. The techniques these people used became the basis of NLP. They are techniques which can be learnt and adapted to your individual experience to help you achieve the same sort of results of excellence that the top people in their field enjoy. Since those days, NLP has spread all over the world and in an eclectic but principled way added a much deeper understanding as to how each of us perceive the world and structure it internally. It has had a particular impact in the area of therapy and medicine and can be distinguished from other treatments by its emphasis on process rather than content. For example, the problems a patient may have are dealt with by examining the physical sensations and mental images a person has and trying to change those rather than analysing and dwelling on the events or the causes that may have led to the illness.

Another area which has embraced NLP is that of sales. Techniques which lead to better communication and to finding out what people really want have been useful in commerce and in the service industries. NLP allows business people to better assess what customers want and to develop and realise projects more successfully and more economically. Sports people also use NLP techniques to improve concentration and performance.

There is really no limit to what someone can do using NLP. One of its presuppositions is that we have all the resources within us to achieve whatever we want and that if another human being can achieve something so can we. This thought may seem rather fanciful but it is in fact very functional as it allows us to consider the possibility rather than the impossibility of reaching our goal.

NLP and Education

What about NLP and Education? If it is so good, why has it taken so long to reach the world of teaching and learning?

The first reason is probably that the initial studies in NLP took place in the world of therapy and applying these learnings to the same field was a natural first step. The economic benefits were

clearly a spur to its rapid adoption in business spheres - not an incentive that is so applicable to education.

Another factor is that NLP is highly experiential. To acquire the skills to apply NLP in the classroom on a daily basis, training and practice is required and in many parts of the world this training is not funded by school boards, particularly as the courses are often aimed at the general public and not specifically at education. The lack of NLP trainers working in education has also slowed progress in developing specific courses for teachers.

Because of its emphasis on respecting each person's individual experience, NLP is not a methodology that you can buy off the shelf like a set of coursebooks and a cassette. A key feature in learning to be a proficient practitioner in NLP is the practice you get with exercises and role play-style situations which prepare you for operating in real-life conditions. Developing the awareness of what is happening in the classroom and the flexibility to respond appropriately is essential to the successful application of NLP techniques. Many excellent NLP books have been written describing exercises and outlining strategies to practise but it is the actual experiencing of them and adapting them to your inner processes which is the key. This skills training is described by NLP luminary and key researcher, Robert Dilts, as ensuring that the learning is 'in the muscle'. Then it is there for us to use whenever we need it.

Improving communication

One area in which we can see instant results with NLP is in our communication. In the rush of daily life, it is amazing how little we notice about the way in which we relate to others. After one or two simple exercises, we become aware of so much more of the information that is contained in people's verbal and non-verbal language. By developing our ability to enter into rapport with people and to ask the right questions at the right time we can improve communication with those around us and magically with ourselves at the same time.

NLP training also allows us to learn how to set goals effortlessly and to understand why in the past our goal setting and resolutions may have failed. It helps us to consciously understand our strategies for doing some things brilliantly. When someone asks you how you do something well, you are often stuck for an explanation. 'I don't know. I just know that it's right.' By bringing the

techniques you use onto the level of your conscious competence, you can then explain it to others so that they can model you and, what is even more enriching, you can apply that strategy to something you've always wanted to do but couldn't. Often there is only a subtle difference in the strategy you use between something you do well and something you don't and no amount of will power will bring success in the second activity. By studying and comparing the strategies you can find the difference that makes the difference. Practising the techniques under the supervision of a trainer who guides you ensures that you learn the right questions to ask.

Resources for teachers

There have been a number of texts written about NLP in Education, most of which are not available in Argentina. Michael Grinder (brother of John) has two books, *Righting the Educational Conveyor Belt* and *EnVoy*. They are aimed at teachers in the public school system in the United States and are not always easy to read but do contain some excellent ideas. Robert Dilts published *Dynamic Learning* a couple of years ago. It has some excellent work on strategies but is probably for people with some knowledge of NLP. Another leading NLP figure, Joseph O'Connor wrote *Not Pulling Strings* applying NLP to learning music. Many other titles exist, mainly written in the States, and range in quality from excellent to quite basic. Don Blackersby's *Rediscover the Joy of Learning* is one of the best.

Not surprisingly, ELT is leading the way in the rest of the world in applying NLP to learning. The work of Herbert Puchta and his team in Austria is based on NLP and has resulted in such superb materials as *Creative Grammar Practice* and the coursebooks *Conrad and Company* and *Magic Time*. Using these books following the Teacher's guide will give you an idea of the thinking behind NLP and produce the type of results that people who work with NLP in the classroom constantly are used to getting.

Another name familiar to Argentina is Jane Revell who has incorporated NLP techniques into her coursebooks like *Buzz* and has written a lovely book for teachers called *In your Hands*. It is primarily a book for the teacher's own development but it does contain materials that can be used in class.

Training for teachers

As we are all unique working in different classrooms with different students and as much as we can use Puchta and Revell as models, the most successful and most appropriate NLP for us is that which we learn and incorporate within ourselves. This is because good communication is made up of features beyond what you cannot find in books. The first feature is the process and content of our brains, which are uniquely ours with all our good and bad learning and experience inside. It is what we bring to any learning situation. Effective communication is also a question of voice tone, posture, eye movements, gestures, breathing, choice of words in the moment and feelings. Learning to recognise these in ourselves and in others helps us to choose appropriate behaviour and to avoid being locked into arguments or stuck in a negative state of mind. It gives us flexibility in how we handle the classroom and respond to whatever might emerge in the course of our teaching day. Simply being aware that we have this choice makes us feel better. We don't have to feel bad or blocked. We can choose a different way to view a problem or approach a challenge.

Most NLP training courses in the world are orientated towards people in business or working with health or therapy. Until now, there have been very few complete training courses in NLP specifically for teachers. One -off workshops for educators are reasonably common and a number have been held in Argentina. As good as these are, they lack the ongoing and repeated supervised practice that attending a regular course can give you. It can be very frustrating to be left wanting for more or to lack a forum to feedback on the discoveries that you will undoubtedly make even applying a little NLP! Trying out new techniques and comparing impressions with colleagues is one of the most valuable features of a regular course and reinforces learning. These longer courses are designed so that there is plenty of space for individual learning styles and speeds while keeping pace with the syllabus.

The advent of the new millenium needn't be a cause for pessimism or at best more of the same struggles and coping in school. If you are looking for something to give you optimism amd produce

results in the classroom and if you are looking for skills and techniques to improve your teaching and your life, investing in some 'low tech' NLP training is a good first step.

For further information, contact Resourceful Teaching who run NLP training courses for teachers.

Some references:

Blackerby, Don A. *Rediscover the Joy of Learning*, Oklahoma City, Success Skills, Inc. 1996

Dilts, Robert B. *Dynamic Learning*, Capitola, Meta Publications, 1995

Gerngross Gunter and Puchta Herbert, *Creative Grammar Practice*, Harlow, Longman, 1992

Grinder, Michael, *Righting the Educational Conveyor Belt*, Portland, Metamorphous Press, 1991

O'Connor Joseph, *Not Pulling Strings*, Portland, Metamorphous Press 1987

Revell, Jane and Norman, Susan *In your Hands*, London, Saffire Press 1997