The potential for examination success in the sixth form lies in belief

The application of neuro-linguistic programming in a learning context

Neuro-linguistic programming is seen by some as a highly motivational tool. A parting encounter with a student displaying low levels of self-belief led **Voldis Kudliskis** to investigate whether sixth-form students could benefit from such techniques.

Rationale

I distinctly remember the moment when Jake, a former student who had just finished his sixth-form study, came to say his farewells before leaving college. After a reflective review of his past two years in further education, Jake said: 'I'm really sorry I failed the exam, and I am even sorrier that I failed you. You're such a wonderful teacher, but I just can't do exams.' This saddening comment reinforced my belief that some students failed, not through a lack of *ability* (Jake was an articulate and insightful young man), but through a lack of *belief* in their ability to succeed. This poignant moment with Jake was one of a number of factors that led me to investigate individual perceptions about personal ability.

An introduction to neuro-linguistic programming

My quest to support students, such as Jake, more fully started when participating on a course that culminated in a Diploma in Coaching (education). One particular aspect of this course captured my attention: the concept of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).

NLP has been defined in various ways. Promotional literature has called it 'the art of communication excellence' (Tosey and Mathieson, 2006). Alternatively, Dilts *et al*. (1980) described it as 'the study of the structure of subjective experience'. NLP is a motivational device that, amongst other things, permits the *rewiring* of certain cognitive processes thus permitting the development of a positive self-belief system (Kudliskis and Burden, 2009). Bandler and Grinder first introduced the concept and drew their inspiration from identifying the factors associated with excellence and successful behaviour rather than abstract psychological theories (Bandler and Grinder, 1975; Grinder and Bandler, 1976). This in itself led to a number of commentators such as Beyerstein (2001) and Rosen (1997) referring respectively to NLP as 'pseudoscience' and 'psychobabble' and questioning the validity and scientific rigor of the claims made by proponents of the concept. In short, there was little, if any, scientific evidence to support the claims being made. In response, Bandler stated he did not 'do theory' (Bandler, cited in Singer and Lalich, 1996) and Jacobson, the long-

standing practitioner of NLP, said: 'NLP is not a theory or concept…it is a model' (Jacobson, 1986, p. 53). Proponents of NLP feel it is possible to model behaviours of excellence thus enabling *ordinary* people to be more successful with their lives.

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Key to NLP is appreciating and understanding that each person has available to them a number of different ways of representing experiences of the world. In particular, people draw upon five recognised senses (sense modalities) for making contact with the world and reality: visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), kinaesthetic (movement), olfactory (smell) and gustatory (taste). These are sometimes referred to as VAKOG. Each person has preferred modalities for perceiving and understanding the social and natural world (Bandler and Grinder, 1975; Grinder and Bandler, 1976; O'Connor, 2001; Churches and Terry, 2007). It is suggested that people tend to favour one or two of these modalities and they can be identified within the language a person selects and uses. Put simply, everybody has a modus operandi! By understanding how people use their sense modalities to interact and understand the world and, more importantly, how these sense modalities can be modified, it is possible to factor in success by

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removing barriers through applying a strategy that incorporates a specific language of success and self-belief. This, in turn, leads to enhanced self-belief and self-esteem, which engenders improved performance.

Beliefs about performance and strategies associated with NLP

It is very easy to dismiss or ignore the power of belief. However, belief systems motivate and shape our behaviour (Dilts, 1990). If we believe in something, we act as if it were true. These beliefs become guiding principles of behaviour (Dilts, 1990; O'Connor and Lages, 2004). In an educational context, if a student believes 'I can't do it' then the teacher can find it difficult to share information and knowledge. Key to addressing this is exploring the (limiting) beliefs of the student, and then discussing how particular beliefs misrepresent reality and that, with a different approach, anything is possible. This article reviews some key strategies for challenging existing limiting beliefs and developing more appropriate beliefs about ability.

Goal-setting

This is a structured way for a student to think about what they wish to achieve and how they wish to achieve their goal. The more precise a student can be when defining a goal, the easier it is for the student to programme the brain to seek out and notice possibilities for achieving the goal. Most importantly, in an educational context, goals must be created by the student and specific to him or her.

Techniques of change

Key to NLP is the concept of modelling in which a person copies and models behavioural patterns of excellence. Modelling is achieved through applying techniques of change (Kudliskis, 2008). These are specific strategies that can be learnt and implemented by a person to modify beliefs and help achieve set goals. In my study, six particular techniques were considered: affirmation, (re)framing, pattern-breaking,

anchoring, visualisation, and the use of a logbook (see Box 1 for an explanation of these techniques).

> ### Box 1 Six techniques of change
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> - An affirmation is a pithy statement of a goal that assumes the goal is possible, achievable and keeps the mind focused on the goal. Goals are like belief statements, they must be positive and carefully phrased.
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> - Framing refers to the way a person perceives an event. Reframing permits the person to understand an experience in a different way, giving it a different meaning and thus modifying a belief.
>
> - Pattern-breaking is an intervention to move somebody from an intensely negative frame of mind to a more neutral state. This enables the person to move on to a new and more appropriate belief system and pattern of behaviour.
>
> - Anchoring relates to any stimulus or representation that is connected to a *trigger*. A positive anchor stimulates and provides the basis for personal growth and development; anchors are timeless once created. Negative anchors must be changed to positive ones.
>
> - Visualisation refers to seeing images in the mind. Visualisation can generate positive beliefs leading to enhanced performance, especially when they are linked to a very specific goal.
>
> - A logbook (or journal) is an opportunity for personal and private reflection. It is important that honest, reflective entries are made on a regular basis.

The aim of the study

It would appear that it is all too easy for some young people to lack belief in their ability if they have been affected by a myriad of biological and social influences. This, in turn, affects their experiences of success. Proponents of NLP, such as O'Connor and Lages (2004) and O'Connor and Seymour (2003), see NLP as a highly effective motivational tool and I felt there could be a place for the application of aspects of this concept in education – especially given that some of the early work relating to NLP in specific educational contexts appeared fruitful (see Jacobson, 1986; and Grinder, 1991). I speculated that the teaching and learning of NLP techniques may enable students, both young and old, to break through self-imposed mental barriers and belief systems in relation to learning.

With this in mind, I decided to conduct an action research study over a period of six years (2001 to 2008) at the college where I teach. I initially explored the principles and presuppositions of NLP and then the value of specific strategies and techniques when applied in an educational context. The aim of this exploratory, interpretivist study was to systematically explore with students three small aspects of NLP: the effect of beliefs on performance, goal-setting and, what I refer to as, *techniques of change*. In short, this study endeavoured to discover whether the underlying principles associated with NLP could benefit learning for students in a sixth-form context.

The research method

This was a reflective action research study in the sixth form of a rural community college. It is a multi-voiced, single site, interpretivist study, and was created to capture the experiences and perceptions of NLP for those taking part. The sample used was a judgement sample of students studying A-level psychol-

ogy during the academic year 2006/07. The sample consisted of 36 first-year students who agreed to participate as unpaid volunteers over a period of nine months (one academic year). As this was an exploratory study, they were introduced to NLP via a number of after-school workshops. The workshops provided an awareness of the underlying principles of NLP, an exploration of beliefs and goal-setting, and an introduction to the strategies and techniques of change that might help with learning. After applying strategies associated with NLP to their learning and subsequent examination performance, the students took part in semi-structured interviews exploring their experiences and perceptions of NLP as an aid to learning. This was not conceived as a positivist experimental study so no attempt was made to construct a control group. Full details of the study are available in Kudliskis (2008).

Outcomes

A number of important findings emerged from the study, including the value of setting clearly defined goals (well-formed outcomes) in a sixth-form educational context. Evidence linked to student perceptions from this study suggests that goals that are specific, measurable and positive lead to enhanced learning outcomes for students.

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The techniques of change were perceived as having various levels of merit. It was clear that different techniques worked differently for different students. Even when students indicated that certain techniques did not work for them in a given context, they still broadly appreciated the value of these concepts.

The use of clearly defined goals and techniques of change suggests real potential for improving the learning experience of young people. This is exemplified in a comment from one of the students (names have been changed in all quotes to retain students' anonymity):

> *I did set myself goals because I found that once I had set down guidelines and goals of what I had to achieve I found it easier to achieve them because I knew exactly what I had to do and it really gave me a clear perspective on my learning and general activities.*
> Amy

Students tended to favour particular techniques of change. The following serve to give a flavour of students' perceptions. It is not the intention of this article to suggest that every participant found the same amount of value in every technique of change. However, it should be noted that, for the most part, all techniques received favourable feedback. One student spoke eloquently about how affirmations proved to be a useful technique for her:

> *I use affirmations the most and find them the most useful…I just kind of need back up – telling myself I can do something and so I found that affirmations were the best way to do it. Keep telling myself I can do it, keep reminding myself each time…Going into exams last year I sat down, opened the paper and thought "Oh I can't do this", and then I just calmed myself and told myself I could do it…I reread the questions and realised I could do it.*
> Sophie

In relation to the concept of reframing, one student explained that she thought of songs that she would typically sing or listen to when in more familiar surroundings. Recalling these songs made the examination room feel similar to her home environment. This, in turn, made the experience of examinations less threatening and she felt less isolated:

When going into the exams I used to think of songs in my head that I would listen to when revising. It would be songs that I would really enjoy. I would sit there with songs in my head as it makes you feel you're in the same environment, so I'm not so isolated in an examination room…Everyone likes being at home and I like being at home…My room is my safe house, so whenever I thought of these songs I would think of my room I studied in.
Deeanne

Deeanne continued by explaining that the songs also acted as a trigger to recall information relevant to her learning and for what was required in the examination:

Also, in a way, if I started thinking about the songs, some of the things that I was revising for would come back to me in the exam.
Deeanne

One student's comment, in relation to pattern-breaking, whilst somewhat idiosyncratic, did reflect the broader view of students. She found that, in a particular context, snapping twigs helped to break negative thoughts and patterns of behaviour:

I would use pattern breaking. I cut a load of twigs near me and if I felt a negative thought, I'd just snap a twig. The sound of it would bring me back to thinking positively. I got through a lot of sticks…! I think the process of breaking of twigs was quite helpful because I'm putting the energy into snapping the twig and the actual snapping sound kind of reinforces what you're trying to do.
Colette

The following comment encapsulates, more generally, how the anchor of a positive GCSE performance has been used to aid performance in further education in the sixth form.

I think I did use powerful anchors a bit when remembering the feeling when I got some of my GCSE results and how happy it made me. This anchor reminded me of why I'm working hard and the results I'm going to get in the

end will be good…Like with drama I was really happy…I sometimes use powerful anchors when I need to remind myself why I am doing this. Sometimes I think "What's the point?" I could be doing other things like going travelling, living my life and sometimes my anchor beings me back down to earth and reminds me why I am here and doing this. It does help.
Sophie

The importance of visualising their success on examination results day, and then further visualising how this would (positively) impact on their future, was important to the students. This observation reinforces this view:

I sometimes picture myself on results day, with a good set of results and getting a good feeling from that…If I'm visualising I'll visualise the top – the top goal that I wish to achieve. I don't visualise any of the short term goals. I think that's the goal I need to get to so that's the one I'll think about and all the others will just happen.
Sam

When asked about the use of a logbook many students were less convinced about its value. Nonetheless, the view of a significant minority is reflected in the following comment:

Well, I keep a diary but I normally write in it when something bad happens. And, when I look back at it, I think "Oh how stupid!" "Why did I get so upset about that."…I use a diary when I remember, or when I have time to, or when I want to get something off my chest…It kind of sorts everything all out and it becomes logical. I can actually sort it all out and it's not that bad…My diary helps as the next time that situation comes up I don't need to get that upset by it as it was nothing really…I'm just making a mountain out of a mole hill.
Jane

Finally, participants were asked to offer some general observations about NLP and their associated experiences of it. The responses proved to be very interesting in that all par-

ticipants indicated, in some form or other, the positive features that emerged from this collaborative study for them. It is acknowledged that there are degrees of positivity expressed in these statements; however, it is important to note that not one participant provided a totally negative response when asked about their perceptions of the elements of NLP to which they had been introduced. The comments selected for inclusion here have been chosen because they epitomise the more general views of the research group:

I think NLP didn't just influence my learning in school, it really helped in other situations like for instance when I was learning to drive. NLP really helped me pass my test first time. Also, when playing tennis, I've become more positive…I will definitely continue to use NLP. Especially things like reframing.
Matty

I did find NLP really interesting, it gave me loads of different techniques that I could use to change my personality, and my attitude. NLP has helped in a way as…I have changed in myself and become the person who I like now. I really found the workshops and lessons enjoyable as well as useful.
Amy

Implications

Whilst my research took the form of an exploratory study, the evidence contained therein suggests that aspects of NLP can benefit students and teachers. It is important for both students and teachers to be aware of the power of belief and belief systems in an educational context. As mentioned earlier, beliefs are so strong that they can create, shape and motivate behaviour.

If a young person says 'I can't do it', often they believe this to be true. This mental barrier or limiting belief has to be sensitively challenged through the application of appropriate techniques of change. It should be noted that given the nature of the human condition, different techniques of change work differently for different people. The 'magic' (to play on the words of Bandler and Grinder) is developing an understanding of these various techniques and applying them effectively in a learning context. If one does not work, simply try another. It is not that the technique has failed, it is simply inappropriate in this particular context at this particular time. There is no such thing as failure, only feedback.

Techniques for classroom application

If asked to give some advice on the application of NLP in the classroom, there are key components when applying it in professional practice.

• Appreciate the power of belief. Our beliefs and belief systems have a tremendous impact upon our behaviour; beliefs steer thoughts and subsequent actions. Create a learning environment in which limiting beliefs are challenged.

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- **Understand that there are different views of reality**. Our personal model of reality created via the senses combines with stored information that exists within the nervous system. The way that a person look at things is unique – the way students see their reality is unique to them. Therefore, listen to the student, identify the sense modalities they use (VAKOG) and acknowledge that their perceptions of a shared experience may be very different to yours.

- **Consider the way you communicate**. The meaning of a communication is the effect that it has. Sometimes you may think that someone is being awkward or difficult by not responding in the way you want. It may be necessary to change your communication to elicit an appropriate response. Also, communication is much more than just the words we say. Words form only a small part of our expressiveness as human beings. Ellerton (2006), amongst others, indicated that communication comprises body language (55 per cent), voice tonality (38 per cent), and words (seven per cent). When working with young people in a learning context, what they do and how they say something is often more important than the words they speak in a given interaction.

understanding the power of beliefs, goal-setting and techniques of change can contribute to enhanced performance

- **Look for information left out in a communication**. Students will often generalise, distort and delete (manipulate) information during communications and conversation. It is essential to ensure that you listen carefully to all that is said and endeavour to identify if elements of a communication are left out. Try to expose these generalisations, distortions and deletions, and reintegrate them into the communication. This will provide you and the student with a fuller understanding of the student's experiences and perceptions.

- **Encourage student-led goal-setting**. This is important for success in learning activities. In general, supporters of NLP insist that goals should be set by the student, not the teacher. However, the teacher can contribute to the process and offer guidance. Creation and ownership of goals must remain the responsibility of the student if success is to be achieved.

Reflection

Whilst my research study offers unashamedly small-scale evidence in the form of responses to a semi-structured interview, it does suggest NLP clearly has value in an educational context. My research indicates that understanding the power of beliefs, goal-setting and techniques of change can contribute to enhanced performance.

Time has passed by, but I cannot help returning to that poignant moment with Jake. Whilst Jake may have failed his exams in the technical sense, I feel that I may have failed Jake by not fully understanding his particular needs and fully appreciating the power of his limiting belief system at that particular time. However, given my quest to better understand the importance of beliefs over the past eight years, I feel slightly better equipped to deal with such needs when I meet them again. NLP has, for me, provided a new window on the world of education and indirectly on learning and educational theory.

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