

## NLP – the Evidence

Recent debate in the media has challenged the validity of NLP and its theoretical underpinning.

In a Radio 4 documentary, Richard Bandler (co-developer of NLP) was featured demonstrating his disdain for the established academic and psychotherapeutic tradition. And his totally originality of thought.

Then there was a paper by Tomasz Witkowski, who reviewed some of the published research on NLP and concluded that there is a woeful lack of 'empirical evidence' that NLP works or that any of its central tenets are true. (Incidentally he completely disregarded the NLP Research Conferences in the UK and their publications.)

I've been using NLP for almost 20 years. I support the value and validity of NLP. I also have sympathy with some of the criticism. It is true that, to date, NLP has not been adequately shown to be effective by using empirical scientific method. But does that really invalidate the whole subject?

One of the 'facts' cited by Witkowski is that NLP is absent from most Psychology textbooks. There are lots of aspects of Psychology that are not in 'most' textbooks. And NLP is not in traditional psychology textbooks because NLP is not traditional psychology. There are, however, plenty of books on NLP.

Furthermore, anyone with generalist knowledge of Psychology and of NLP can find the roots of NLP in traditional psychology. The notion that 'the map is not the territory' is aligned with Personal Construct Theory; the Meta Model was augmented with material from Transformational Grammar; Transactional Analysis, Hypnosis and Gestalt therapy have also contributed to NLP.

Should we ask if each of these psychological disciplines has been adequately demonstrated through empirical science? My memory of the hundreds of references I waded through as part

of my academic study is that human behaviour is difficult to model using empirical research and statistical methods. For every 'scientifically valid' piece of research there are at least two others that contradict it and several more that muddy the water. Opinion and hypothesis are almost as important as data. The ability to cope with ambiguity is essential in this field.

The majority of people trained in NLP are not trained in traditional Psychology and most of them are not trained in the 'scientific method' either. I am trained in both and I could nit-pick my way through Witkowski's paper quite easily to demonstrate that he has made false assumptions, gathered unrepresentative data, misinterpreted other articles and generally missed the point. I could do that.

However, I'm a Master Trainer of NLP. I respect others' map of the world. And I remember a party in my final year at University: an Engineering student regaled us enthusiastically with snippets from 'Manwatching' by Desmond Morris. He'd experimented with pacing and leading during lectures and found that it worked! He assumed that Psychology students would know all this. He was surprised that we did not.

I still remember the mixed emotions in my response. I remember how we greeted his enthusiasm with disdain and how we belittled his experience, telling him that, 'that's not what Psychology is about'. I also remember his certainty and his response, 'maybe that's what Psychology should be about'.

It's now 25 years since I graduated. Much of what I learned is now out of date, especially in the field of neuro-science. As an undergraduate, I was taught that treatment for a phobia was a desensitisation process that could take up to two years of once-a-week hour-long sessions to complete.

The NLP phobia model takes about 40 minutes.

Suppose you were a Clinical Psychologist. It took 5 years to get your qualifications. After 10 years of practice you knew that de-sensitisation was effective after months of treatment. How would you respond if a NLP Practitioner with a few weeks of training and hardly any experience told you they could treat a phobia in 40 minutes? The same as my response to the Engineer who'd read 'Manwatching'?

Witkowski says, "If the NLP claims on the duration and effectiveness of the proposed therapies proved to be true, the entire area of psychotherapy would experience a sudden shock and research reports with respect to the effectiveness of therapy would have to position the NLP therapy at the top. Regrettably, nothing like this is taking place. Instead we find NLP on the list of discredited therapies."

Regrettable, indeed.

Is this why Bandler has been so certain that academic verification of NLP was irrelevant? Surely the value of NLP techniques is that they can be learned quickly and do NOT require academic and theoretical knowledge in order to be useful.

Did anyone in NLP ever say that the core principles are true? At the very first NLP seminar I attended (with John Seymour in 1991) I was given a list of the NLP Presuppositions. The list had a footnote: *'none of the above are necessarily true, but if you behave as if they were, there may be interesting results'*. I have faithfully reproduced this footnote in my own training handouts.

I know that something does not have to be 'real' or 'true' in order to be scientifically useful. For example, the square root of minus one (which has no meaning in the 'real' world) is essential in some aspects of electronics.

What Bandler and Grinder were about, I believe, was increasing mental flexibility and agility. By observing the skills and behaviour of others, without judgement, we can learn to produce the same results they produce. We can do that only to the extent that we are willing to step outside of everything we think we already know and step into someone else's map, however temporarily.

Bandler and Grinder advocated an attitude of curiosity about what works and an open mind about what is discovered.

So maybe, in trying to 'measure' NLP by traditional empirical methods we're asking the wrong questions. Maybe we're doing the equivalent of trying to verify Quantum Mechanics using Newtonian Physics? It can't be done. It's a different model. Maybe we should be looking for a better way to measure what we're doing with NLP.

I suggest that those who require 'scientific' validation of NLP look to other methods and models than those already applied. Doesn't Quantum Physics tell us that the observer affects that which is observed through the very act of observation? And NLP tell us that every person has a different way of observing.

And to those critics of NLP who want it discredited and 'mothballed' I have only one more question: How would you know if NLP was valid but we just hadn't found the right way to demonstrate that yet?

Dianne Lowther  
NLP Master Trainer

*Dianne Lowther is a Master Trainer of NLP and Principal of Brilliant Minds. She specialises in applications of NLP for leadership and business results.*

Brilliant Minds  
Suite 440, 99 Warwick Street  
Leamington Spa, CV32 4RB  
01926 435609  
[www.brilliantminds.co.uk](http://www.brilliantminds.co.uk)