Modelling as an Introduction to NLP

NLP *is* essentially not a technique but an *attitude* toward the way individuals organise their experience via internal responses and external behaviour and how they represent that experience, principally in language, in order to communicate the meaning the experience has. It is an activity based on describing how people build models of understanding *their* world

NLP: An Introduction
NLP has been steadily developing for over 25 years from the work of its two early developers Bandler and Grinder. There are now numerous approaches, styles, techniques and methods that claim to derive from or are based on NLP's essential elements.

NLP has been applied to almost all contexts were people interact for almost any purpose whether strategic development in major organisations or 'flirting'.

Part of the appeal of NLP is that it makes things appear easy and sometimes it does make them easier, but *most of all it provides an approach* that helps you find the information you want if you are willing to pay attention to the effects of your own behaviour on a situation and learn to 'read' accurately the responses that others give both to you and those around them.

To this end, NLP developed its own jargon to distinguish itself from other methods of communication and specialises in creating new names for commonly known features of things. So learning 'to read' non-verbal communication is an aspect of '*acuity*' and spoken of as '*calibrating*' the subject. The term *rapport,* whilst not an NLP word itself has come in to general use almost directly as a result of the emphasis Bandler and Grinder placed upon the ability to *match* the client in terms of the language you use *mirroring* their postures and *pacing* the beliefs they have of their circumstances before attempting to *lead* them anywhere different, new or to improve matters.

This last feature can put some people off who look upon NLP as the 'Emperor's old clothes, never mind new clothes!' However for those who are interested in themselves, others and the interaction between them there's no doubt that NLP has brought a level of attention to the *structure of subjective experience* that is not promoted as strongly by another applied method of communications.

The Development of NLP
The founders set about answering for themselves the question: 'What makes a good communicator effective?' and they discovered, as they studied talked and observed some of the most eminent communicators of the period that it all depended upon...

They discovered that the most effective communicators couldn't actually tell you how they did it! They could however tell you things like 'What they thought mattered about being a communicator' – they could outline their credo. They could tell you 'what they believed was important about doing it the way the did it'; they could even emphasise some key features about what they did but their overall performance was beyond their (conscious) understanding.

How did Bandler and Grinder know this? Because all the people they studied, Fritz Perls, founder of Gestalt therapy, Virginia Satir the eminent family therapist, Carl Rogers, founder of Client-Centred therapy, and Milton Erickson the leading psychiatric hypnotherapist, many say, of all time, when observing how these people went about *what* they did, as opposed to what they *said* they did, what they *believed* they did or what they *claimed* they did, they all violated their own rules, did things that they didn't comment upon and otherwise made it up as they went along!

Except of course they didn't. When these skilled communicators were actually working they left behind their theories and instead offered responses that were strongly related to the client and the client's world. All had developed a willingness to get inside the client's world that meant there were times that their own theories and beliefs about communication were set aside in favour of responding the person and their needs.

This had many implications of course, but two of them were: One; great communicators never stop learning because they are always open to doing it differently. They are always paying attention to what is 'going on' rather than insisting on what ought to be going on. And second: great communicators have a model that they have absorbed over time and no longer call upon it consciously. They can 'trust' their internal understanding and draw upon it without being governed by it. This makes them extremely flexible.

From these kinds of observations Bandler and Grinder then set about *examining* more closely the work of these people in order to more clearly understand the *internal subjective experience* that enabled them to come up with the interventions they did.

From this phenomenological approach they then devised a systematic description of communication that drew largely upon contemporary linguistics (because a lot of communication takes place through language) and cognitive psychology. To give this approach a distinctive nomenclature *Neuro-Linguistic Programming* came into being: emphasising the link between *internal experience* and the *linguistic descriptions* people offer to *represent* the experiences they have had – an alignment that isn't always, and maybe not often, as direct as we imagine when we are communicating with others.

Modelling

Modelling is a fundamental aspect of NLP because it is through 'modelling' that the original 'model' came into being. Bandler and Grinder didn't work up a theory to account for what they observed. They didn't simply observe what others said. They asked themselves; 'What would have to be the case for us to be able to do what these people do - as well as they do it?' In short, they built a model of the ways others did what they did – a *model of excellence* (a term that we might now groan at from its over familiarity) and then devised a way to make that process of 'modelling' the basis for transmitting their findings.

A model is somewhere between a theory and a description. It is not an answer to the question 'Why?' but an answer to the question 'How?' If you want to know 'how' you do not need to ask 'why' first – though that is exactly what many people do and consequently they never overcome their limitations; being too busy trying to understand how they got them, why they have them and the part they play in restricting their world.

Approaching the task from the position of 'How does this work?' keeps the focus upon moving *toward* being able to do something new. In the process you discover all the limitations you could imagine! But you are doing so as you make progress towards your goal.

The comment in the last paragraph, immediately creates a simple model of change:

Present State – Interventions/resource needed – Desired State.

NLP Has been extremely successful in developing these kinds of models that make sense of tasks people want to accomplish in the world.

Applying NLP

NLP is a hugely applied approach. As NLP practitioners would point out, having a model of something that works works, but that doesn't men you can't add other things to it and have it work even better or differently. That way you can maintain the interest in the work, rather than continuously apply what has worked over and over to everyone and every situation until you start to believe it *ought* to work. That's how people get lost in all sorts of situations:

> They arrive with a model that worked some times for some things and simply 'run it off' in any old situation that looks remotely like it or feels vaguely familiar to it.

All models are only that; descriptions of things that have worked. A new model can be developed out of an existing one. It can be extended. It can be tweaked or it can be replaced. That's why it is called *programming*. You pick the 'bits' and you decide which 'bits' you want and where you want to put them in the activity you are looking into.

NLP Practitioners

NLP practitioners have been interested in finding out how human skills, attributes and processes are organised and then in devising ways of setting about building effective descriptions of such skills, attributes and processes so as to make it possible for others to learn and reproduce them. NLP has generated a number of models that can be useful for different communication activities. Depending on what you are attempting to do, in what context and with who will determine which model(s) you will draw upon. The most familiar aspects of NLP to most people are the eye movement patterns that are a small part of the NLP model that describes *"Representational Systems"*, or how we code experience internally and encode it in language and other systems

- NLP sets out to *find out what is the difference that makes the difference...*
- It is a set of tools or procedures, but above all, it is an attitude of mind.
- NLP is intrigued by the question, 'How do people do *it*?' ('It' being some attribute, state, activity or performance. *'How do you do that*?'- Not 'Why?'

As a model-making approach NLP is not out to discover the 'truth'; it is out to learn what works and how it works. NLP has generated a number of models that can be useful for different communication activities. Depending on what you are attempting to do, in what context and with who will determine which model(s) you will draw upon.

Introducing Modelling

Modelling is the procedure designed to *elicit* descriptions of activities, skills or competencies that are of use to people.

If someone wishes to learn how to ski, for example, they have to devise a way of learning how. However they do it they have to internalise a wide range of sensory based information about body movements, balance, conditions and so on – this is known as '*developing a model*' of 'skiing' in this case. Any successful participant at any human endeavour develops a model of how to go about it.

The basis for one person learning from another is the capacity of *transmitting* a model of how to do something from someone who can do it to someone who can then learn how, as a result of applying their own interest to the problem of acquiring the successful practitioner's model.

Modelling is an activity organised around finding descriptions of *functional relationships*, of finding how the elements in a system combine together to produce the result they achieve, so that you can use that description to go on to reproduce what it describes.

You can, for example learn about '*accessing cues*' or '*representational* systems', but they are not *the* NLP models: they are the by-products of NLP. They come out of the *activity modelling that makes up NLP.*

Modelling is about *pattern recognition*. It is a way of looking for the *underlying structure* of a process and the relationship of the elements involved in an activity. It is how these combine together and which are required to reproduce some of the most essential features of the task, activity or competency 'being modelled'.

In other words, it is about detecting the *organising principles* around which any given activity revolves. In language two key organising principles are syntax and grammar. It is through understanding *how* syntax operates (not why) that enables us to communicate well-formed sentences from one person to one another.

For example, it is not easy to understand people who speak 'word salad'.[1] When such people do not follow the 'rules' obey the model of language as we have absorbed it then we are left trying to work out *their* personal rules of speech. One of the underlying rules of language means that learning to speak we11-formed sentences reduces the possibility of mis-understanding what people are saying – though we still might not know what they *mean*. But unless we know what they are saying we are left having to make it *all* up! Following the internal rules of any activity, working within the limits of the model in question enables us to be more streamlined.

Another example of a model that we all have absorbed over the period of our growing up is how we in the west understand our concept of time. 'Before', 'after', 'yesterday', 'today', 'tomorrow' all have a broad general understanding according to the culture as well as specific meanings for individuals. Time frame orients our experience and helps make it communicable. One way to view the activity of 'modelling' is that it is an effective, way of discovering, whether something will work (for you) or not, given the required effort to master it.

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[1] Word salad': speaking in apparently random jumbles of words. 'Tomorrow happy Friday dancing giving be will you?' You will be (here) tomorrow and tomorrow is Friday.' 'You will be happy when you go dancing'. These are two possibilities contained in the original salad. There may well be others.

The Uses of Modelling

'It is unwise to make a doctrine out of experience though it doesn't stop people from doing so.'

Modelling
In any field of activity, whether it is in the field of relationships, in business, playing a game or having a meal, you have first of all to have an *operational plan.* An operational plan is *a way of making distinctions* so that you know how you are going to go about the activity.

In the beginning, the operational plan will be crude and inelegant. After a while, if you have sufficient commitment to the activity, it will improve with practice because you will notice what works and what doesn't.

In this way, you build up your *model* of how the activity happens. You won't know how you did this when it is all functioning smoothly because it will have been assembled bit by bit over a time period and much of what you had to learn in the beginning you will have forgotten. Anyone who has learned to drive knows this experience. Once you have passed your test and been a 'driver', for even a few months, the 'driving' changes beyond recognition.

If you are very good at an activity the way you go about it will become admired and appreciated by others as well as yourself. A good performance is a model that is put into practice and executed with flair.

The way individuals go about this is a unique and individual process. The principles around which they do it however are universal. For example, in order to play a game of football successfully everybody has to understand the external given rules. How they interpret those given rules, how they discover what is possible inside those rules and how they deal with challenges through those rules is what creates the activity and interest for both players and spectators.

In other words, what the *organising principles* are upon which the model is based gives rise to a way of generating meaning and possibility. It both makes things understandable and allows people to explore and extend what is possible.

A model is a way of *generating meaning*, making things understandable, predictable and to some extent safe. It then forms the basis of our *predicting* what is going to happen, what will take place, what we should then do about it and how we should respond.

It is therefore, a way of generating *from* our experience and it is a way of generating *about* our experience.

It enables us to look into what happened in a particular way and it enables us to read out of what happens to us the meaning we give to events in particular ways.

The important thing about models is that they should be useful.

In addition to the models we use we also employ a set of *conceptual* and *perceptual* filters that also *distort* or reduce the complexity of our experience. These things also have to be taken into account both when making models, using them or trying to understand someone else's model.

- Models are made of *distinctions* that describe functional or structural relationship within any particular system.

To establish their personal way of negotiating through life – to have a general 'model of the world', people are required to make distinctions about their experience and their understanding. They do this in unique and individual ways.

For a model to be useful it has to sort out the problem of learning to notice what is worth noticing at the *sensory level* in order for any operation that it describes or any process that it is revealing to be useful.

For instance someone saying, 'Turn left here' would be satisfactory in some situations as a model of behaving, (giving instructions to a driver, lets say) but it would be unclear or unhelpful to someone attempting to perform microsurgery. Driving a car and microsurgery may require directional movements of left and right, but at much different levels of sensitivity.

In the same way, a map with roads on may be very good for route planning, but not for studying the ecology of a region.

Models & Copying

We have in the last 250 years developed an enormous range of (scientific) models that extend our senses. We have devices, which enable us to travel into sound and look into space. *These are based on conceptual and theoretical models.*

When it comes to individual behaviour and activity, internal processes are largely responsible for generating behaviour; knowing what they are and how they are ordered into the performance of certain skills and then being able to reproduce them makes all the difference between poor or excellent performance.

If we can *detect the distinctions* individuals make *inside* their experience when they make satisfactory performances and reproduce them then it should be possible for others to do it if they follow the same sequence.

People generalise in very different ways but some of the common things that they need to generalise about are ways to:

1. Maintain coherence in their experience (or they risk living in chaos),

2. Sustain stability across experiences of a similar type (to ensure things have continuity of meaning),

3. Ensure predictability, across experiences (to maintain a feeling of being who they are).

Modelling is another term for copying - a way of taking any operation or any process that is useful and finding ways to reproduce it in such a way that someone else can accomplish the same skill, task or operation.

Modelling involves:

- *The selection of and*
- *The representation of experience.*

A crucial element in effective modelling is to get the size of the task 'right'. It is also important to establish which are the essential elements that make up the task itself

and to reproduce them in 'chunks' that the individual who is to learn them can reproduce satisfactorily.

Modelling is much simpler to describe than it is to do, since much of what makes for a skilled performance lies outside the knowledge and awareness of those who have it. Skilled performers are used to thinking of their 'performance' as something they *do "naturally" because they have forgotten just how they acquired their skills in the first place.*

When we are assisting someone to build a model (or to devise a method you could say) to accomplish something we must ensure that the maps, i.e. the descriptions we use are *appropriate to the task, the person and the context* in which they are operating.

Detecting Distinctions
By detecting the distinctions an individual makes *within* and *between* experiences - (In other words, learning how they 'sort' their experiences, separating the essential from the inessential when they make a satisfactory performance.) we can learn how to reproduce the sequence they follow. From this starting point it then becomes possible to enable others to do the same, if they follow the same sequence.

Distinctions are a result of recognising or creating differences.

A model does not have to be true: it only has to work; i.e. provide a description that represents what it sets out to explain, in a way that is capable of being adopted by others.

A model is a serviceable device. It is not expected to last forever or explain everything. When you find new questions that the model can't explain, you don't necessarily destroy the model you've got. You begin to devise a new model that includes the new data.

Whenever you encounter doubt in using a model, you go back to the database, the information from which the model is constructed. You do not have to attempt to make the information 'fit' - something most *theorists* attempt to do. People will die for their theories. No one needs to be injured when the limitations of their model are discovered. Models are expected to have limitations: that's part of their appeal.

However because our models are 'ours' we do get attached to them as fiercely as if they were 'truths' because in an important sense they are truths. They are 'our truths', but only for now. It is this provisional nature of our models that many of us forget at the very moment when our model is breaking down or demonstrating it is inadequate to the situation in which we find ourselves.

The model is inadequate, the consequence is we need to find a new response or string of actions, but that need comes secondary to dealing with the discomfort that arises when we experience the insecurity of the old certainties beginning to fade. The very time we need to be on the look out for a new resource is the very time when most of us find it hardest.

Key Points
A curiosity in the other person helps keep the 'outcome' constant so that you can vary your behaviour until you get the information you want.

- A 'model', in this sense, is somewhere between a description and an explanation.
- A model does not have to be true; it has to be useful.
- A model filters out the irrelevant from the critical.
- A model may be complex or simple – but the simpler it is the better
- A model will apply to a range of phenomena and not others.
- A model that works works.
- A model that does not work means it is not adequate (rather than it is 'wrong').
- If you already have a model to do something it does not have to become a limitation. You can have multiple models to do the same thing. This is called 'flexibility' and may be important – especially if you value 'creativity'.
- Having only one way to do something means having only one model, which inclines the person to be rigid.
- Believing in your model in the face of experience to the contrary - however common - is misguided.
- Models do not answer back – they just refuse to do what you want.
- A model that is good for some things can become a limitation if you attempt to apply it everywhere.
- Some models are inefficient – they can be streamlined to better effect.
- To develop a model you need to know what happens *when*, and to some degree *how* but not *why*. It is not what behaviour means (why) but what it is and how it happens, when, in what context.
- 'Why' questions lead you away from experience and into rationalisations – which are good in courts of law and when it comes to arguing, but not in helping someone accomplish something.
- The more you know your limitations the more choices you have about how to stay the same, or how to use the structure of those limitations as the raw material for changing.
- It is the way people make distinctions that generate what they attend to.
- What people think they do, what the fail to attend to, or what they overlook may have a lot more influence than everything they do notice. This is a demonstration of being interested in *how people make up their experience* and not getting lost in trying to decide what it means (interpreting and theorising).

- Often the resources someone requires lies in portions of their experience that they hold of little value. Helping them recover those resources is often much more important than developing alternative resources or teaching them some additional technique. In the same way, there are many of us who look where we know we cannot find whatever we need to help us.

- The more an individual realises they have what they need – only that it is not well 'sorted' or organised effectively, the more they can make a leap of self-esteem and stop feeling inadequate or incompetent. These are often neglected features of change work.

- All models help encourage *coherence, predictability and stability.*

- *All models are based on selection.*

- Having a model means you have a way of knowing what is significant and worth attending to and what is not (even if you do not know consciously how you do it).

- *A model is based on finding useful distinctions.* In terms of human experience, it presents problems at the level of description - too much detail and people get lost and confused, too little and they do not have enough to work with. *Sensory-based* descriptions are what we are after.

- With a model goes a set of filters *perceptual, conceptual, and linguistic.*

- A model is based on a set of *presuppositions.* They are what you work from. And most people are not aware of what those are and so do not question them but they are the very things that help establish *coherence.*

Key Elements of Modelling

- *Detecting*: noting the distinctions worth noticing.

- *Elicitation*: a way of finding if something you need to know is there or not: creating or delineating a context in order to discover some response or experience.

- *Flexibility*: The ability to create a context to find out if what you are looking for is there or not.

- *Leverage points*: the easiest place to change someone.

- *Accurate representation*: the description of the activity you are seeking to model.

- *Testing*: Remembering that once you think you have detected something you need a way to check to ensure it is there – n order to confirm you are accurate.

- *Task*: Identifying those things that are required to make the model operational.

Things to Pay Attention to:
Elements that have valuable influence in working with other people include:

- Understanding the concept of 'chunk size',
- Learning how to work with time frame,
- Learning how to identify time frames.
- Recognising people's movement in terms of direction: towards things or away from things
- Recognising whether people have an internal or an external reference for identifying the quality or importance of what is happening to them.
- Learning to identify how people 'sort' out the elements within their experience.

Summary
A key to the process of modelling lies in pattern identification - detecting the predictability of distinctions that recur in a particular context. Distinctions that re-occur are a way of indicating that patterning is taking place. Modelling identifies those patterns that form the basis of behaviour or experience that shape an individual's underlying way of responding.

- Beware of wanting to install what you think people need or what they say want.
- You have to find a *criterial equivalence* of an experience that convinces and is both equal to the experience and necessary for change.
- Modelling depends upon good information-gathering skills – separating what is worth knowing from what is not worth knowing.
- Most change efforts arise out of trying to convince the other person to change their beliefs and 'give in' to new and better reasons why they should change.
- *Detection* – noting the occurrence of useful distinctions, which, when, for what purpose, anything that is marked out as having value.
- How many distinctions people make is partly cultural. But individuals also make their own distinctions.
- If it is possible for one, it is possible for anyone.