

A reflection on planning a Summer Festival of Learning session to support students to develop their confidence and capabilities using Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect upon planning a session on 'being confident, powerful and resourceful' for the Summer Festival of Learning at the University of Lincoln in July 2021. The purpose here is to share the rationale for the session and discuss how the planning was rooted in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). There was also an appreciation of the wider purpose of education to support learners to develop their capabilities and capacity for navigating the post COVID-19 world. In this article, I highlight and recognise some lessons learnt exploring the importance of assessment to establish learners' attitudes towards NLP and benefits from resource sharing summarising the key takeaways from the session. This reflective discussion also highlights the mutual benefits in my own development learnt through planning the session, enabling reflection on my own ecology and state as a fellow student.

Keywords: Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), capabilities approach, confidence-building, communication skills, online workshop

Introduction

In July 2021, I prepared and delivered an online workshop entitled 'being confident, powerful and resourceful' as part of the Summer Festival of Learning (Wellbeing Strand) at the University of Lincoln. I devised the title, workshop content and presentation slides, drawing upon my experience of completing and achieving a Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Foundation Diploma under the instruction of an International NLP Trainers Association (INLPTA) qualified instructor and master practitioner in 2017. Completing the NLP Foundation Diploma marked a significant turning point in my personal and professional life. This brief article presents a reflective account of how I prepared the sessions, the considerations I took on board, challenges and what I would do differently if I were to plan and deliver future, similar sessions.

Background for the session

The rationale for my session was rooted in three interconnected strands. The first strand was my experience as Deputy Chief Executive Officer at a social enterprise, managing community development projects and services designed to support people improve their own health and wellbeing. The second strand relates to my reflections on being an undergraduate student from a widening participation background, ten years ago, attempting to navigate the new, unsettling landscape of university life. The third strand is my experience of completing and achieving a Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Foundation Diploma under the instruction of an INLPTA qualified instructor and master practitioner in 2017. I studied the diploma at NLP in the Northwest and will always be thankful to the trainers and all those who have shaped NLP. Completing the NLP Foundation Diploma marked a significant turning point in my personal and professional life, as it was the first time I learnt how to reflect on my own thoughts and not just accept thoughts as truths. I am passionate about sharing techniques and tools with others where I believe there is opportunity to do so.

These strands rooted and formed together and were underpinned by a belief that a way to support students to regain their confidence at university and beyond following the disruption of COVID19 would be to support them to develop their self-efficacy and abilities to draw upon their own internal resources more effectively. My overarching aim was to provide learners with ‘takeaway’ tools and techniques, which they understood well enough to deploy and use on a day-to-day basis.

NLP was ‘founded in the 1970’s by John Grinder and Richard Bandler...they studied the communication styles of very gifted communicators and modelled their behaviour’ (Elston and Spohrer, 2009, 2-3). I therefore planned to provide learners with an overview of the *communication model* and how this informs internal thoughts, internal emotions, and external behaviours. As Alder notes “*neuro*” relates to the mind or brain, the central nervous system, and in particular the senses with which we feel, see, hear, taste and smell. Through these senses we communicate with the outside world, but also “communicate” with our inner selves through memory and imagination’ (2016, 5).

Review of literature

My rationale for the session was underpinned by my enthusiasm for capability development as a way to navigate uncertainty. Lucas and Spencer suggest that ‘where once it was enough to know and do things, our uncertain world calls for some additional learning. We call them capabilities’ (2020, 1). They term the teaching of these capabilities as a philosophy of ‘dispositional teaching – that is to say, the attempt specifically to cultivate in learners’ certain dispositions which evidence suggests are going to be valuable to them both at school in later life’ (2020, 1).

The teaching of these capabilities is interlinked with what Lucas and Spencer call a 'zest for learning...the kind of engaged curiosity we see as being at the heart of all good learning' (2020, 11). Although the authors are primarily referring to the teaching of young people in schools, I am drawn to their belief that 'there are two essential outcomes of education: flourishing and real-world challenge-readiness' (ibid.) and believe that these principles apply to all forms of learning at all stages in life.

I was also guided by Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach' (2013, 18). As an alternative and a challenge to existing and accepted measures in human development, the capabilities approach treats each individual person as an end in themselves and focuses upon what each person can do and become (Nussbaum, 2013). I felt that there was a crossover with NLP because the capabilities approach 'is *focused on choice or freedom*, holding that crucial good societies should be promoting for their people is a set of opportunities, or substantial freedoms, which people then may or may not exercise in action: the choice is theirs' (Nussbaum, 2013, 18). In a similar vein, NLP tells us that 'We are responsible for what happens to us' (Elston and Spohrer, 2009, 8).

Methodology

Drawing upon the background and rationale for the session and for the Festival of Learning, the first activity I planned was an introduction to the communication model, inviting learners to identify the various senses via which we receive information and how this information is processed and informs our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Learners were then invited to list the first six things they notice about the room they are in. Here, I was aiming to cultivate the conditions for reflective learning; encouraging and enabling learners to reflect on their own subjective experiences, perceptions, and realities in a style consistent with 'evolutionary mentoring or coaching' (Brockbank and McGill, 2006, 25).

Furthermore, I was conscious of that fact that during the pandemic, the delivery of learning via video-conferencing had proliferated. I was conscious of the potential consequences of this, whereby video conferencing can cause over stimulation, exhaustion, confusion and 'zoom fatigue' (Sklar, 2020). Therefore, I kept the number of words on each PowerPoint slide to a minimum to reduce the chance of learners becoming overwhelmed (ibid.). I planned active learning activities to break the monotony of video calls (Levy, 2021) and secondly, to support learners to develop their 'leadership and innovation' in steering and directing their own learning experience as much as possible (Misseynani et al, 2018, 1).

Key areas of development from the experience

One of the activities I planned invited the learners to coach me into demonstrating three emotions through my body language, facial expressions, gestures and behaviours - stress, anxiety and confidence. In other words, I planned to ask the

learners to provide me instructions as to how to behave and act according to whichever emotion I named.

This activity followed an explanation of the *mercedes model* in NLP; a model which demonstrates the relationship between our internal thoughts, internal feelings and external behaviours. In summary, working on the basis that these three elements are intertwined, altering one of the elements, will cause a change in the other two and so it follows that if we wish to feel better and think better thoughts, we need only alter our external behaviour to bring about internal change. For example, walking tall, with purpose and smiling broadly can bring about the sensation of feeling confident. I chose to explore this idea because I believe it to be easy to understand, be impactful and have relevance to the aims of rebuilding a sense of confidence amongst students after a turbulent 18 months. In choosing this activity, I was motivated by Alder's recognition that NLP 'places emphasis on self-understanding, or intrapersonal intelligence' (2016, 5). I hoped to demonstrate to the learners that despite the challenges of the external world, they retained an ability to manage and improve their own state of being. As noted by O'Connor and McDermott 'the state you are in is very important. It affects your health, the quality of your decisions, how well you learn and how successfully you carry out a task' (2013, 61).

An unexpected development from the experience was that I had the opportunity to further reflect on my own state and ecology as a fellow student; engaging with the *mercedes model* refreshed my own sense of direction, capability, and resilience.

Challenges

One of the challenges in designing the session was choosing a title which provided a clear indication of the purpose, aims and content of the session in a succinct and appealing fashion. I overcame this by creating a session title which summarised the three key traits or abilities which I envisioned learners would be able to develop and foster for themselves as a resulting of attending the session. Furthermore, I ensured that the words chosen for the title were non-specialist, were inclusive and demonstrated that no prior knowledge was required. I deliberately chose not to include reference to NLP in the session title.

A further challenge was selecting the most appropriate content and topics. In choosing the topics of communication and the *Mercedes model*, I needed to balance the fact that I am not a qualified and certified NLP practitioner and trainer (and was not professing to be) yet wanted to provide an accessible introduction to the most relevant and useful tools and techniques learners would be able to reflect on and utilise in the day to day lives, to bolster their capabilities, relationship with themselves and others and their ability to excel (O'Connor and McDermott, 2013).

A further challenge was managing my own ecology and position as a University of Lincoln student. As an advocate of, but not a specialist in NLP my positionality was

someone who was still coming to terms with the collective trauma of the pandemic, but I wanted to utilise this opportunity to tentatively and optimistically seek the growth in the upheaval in our different, yet shared experience (Parker, 2020).

Lessons learnt and what might be done differently

If I were to design sessions in the future with similar aims and purpose, there would be some advantages with setting pre-work. If learners were to work on a pre-session activity of completing a brief reflective journal entry with an initial assessment this would be effective at preparing them for the session. The pre-session activity would serve to introduce learners to some basic principles of NLP and the purpose and objectives of the session. I would not necessarily expect learners to have pre-existing knowledge of NLP as it is an area which 'has not been systemized' (Grimley, 2013, 11-12) therefore, the initial assessment would serve to establish their attitude towards NLP and enable the learners to familiarise themselves with the subject before the session and make an informed decision as to whether they feel attending the session would be beneficial and enjoyable. Such developments would support the overall delivery of the session as it would increase the likelihood that learners would be able to pay attention to the structures of their experiences and move into a 'state' most conducive for accessing the opportunities and ideas presented during the session (O'Connor and McDermott, 2013, 61).

On reflection, although I am familiar with the techniques and believe in their relevance and effectiveness, there was further scope within the planning and delivery of the session to consider more deeply the learners' position - their 'map of the world' (O'Connor and McDermott, 2013, 155). Therefore, if I were to deliver the session again, I would bridge this gap by providing learners with a resource summarising the NLP presuppositions or guiding principles and pointers from the activities delivered to enable learners to practice the techniques beyond the session.

Conclusion

As a passionate advocate of NLP, I firmly believe that when it is practised and absorbed into daily life, it enables individuals to unleash their true potential and be the best, most authentic version of themselves. Although I am neither an NLP expert or practitioner, the opportunity to plan and deliver a session in the Festival of Learning provided a sense of joy and possibility, during an otherwise challenging time. Furthermore, the opportunity reaffirmed my belief in the role of higher education in supporting students to flourish, thrive and be ready for life in the real world (Lucas and Spencer, 2020,11).

Set against the challenges and turbulence of the pandemic, this opportunity to revisit and share the NLP presupposition of the *map is not the territory* was especially poignant. This presupposition is the recognition that we interpret the world around us according to our own preferences, beliefs, and experiences (Elston and Spohrer, 2009,

3-4). In sharing this concept and delivering activities which encouraged students to reflect on their own maps of the world, I aimed to offer some hope, however fleeting, that despite the suffering, chaos and confusion caused by the pandemic, ultimately, 'we are responsible for what happens to us', and we can redraw our map of the world whenever we choose (Elston and Spohrer, 2009, 4-8).

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