What is NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming)?

By: Steve Andreas (www.SteveAndreas.com)

The question "What is NLP?" is a bit like asking, "What is Physics?" because there are so many possible ways to answer it.

One answer is that NLP is able to accomplish what the beginnings of psychology promised a hundred years ago, and never quite delivered—a practical way of understanding our thinking and our behavior that can be used to make rapid and useful changes in our lives.

Another answer is that it is the study of the structure of subjective experience, the inner workings of our minds, and how to use that knowledge to enrich our choices. Much of this structure is typically unconscious, or preconscious; however, much of this structure can become conscious, altered, and then allowed to become unconscious and automatic again.

Someone once described NLP as "Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on steroids" because although it is fundamentally similar in orientation, NLP makes *much* finer distinctions and has many specific processes, principles, and presuppositions that make change much faster.

Yet another description is that it is a collection of methods for achieving specific personal outcomes, along with a common understanding of how they all work, which can be used to develop new methods.

NLP is sometimes described as a pragmatic methodology for modeling human excellence that can be applied to any context that includes at least one human being.

Once modeled, anyone can learn the model in order to learn the skill, an example of a much-overused term, "accelerated learning."

Someone once pointed out that "The human brain is the only self-maintaining, general purpose computer that can be manufactured by unskilled labor." It is also the only computer that is only partially programmed at the factory, and doesn't come with an operating manual. A child's brain doesn't have the kinds of programs that we have as adults, and there are no instructions about the operating system, or how to program it well.

Although there is still some disagreement about exactly what kind of computer the brain is, it is clear that we *input* information through our five senses, *process* it in a variety of ways, using our ability to remember, forecast, connect different experiences, and generalize about them, and then *output* behavior and responses. Our output of behavior and responses then become additional inputs to be processed, in a never-ending cybernetic process.

Since we have no operating manual—and no keyboard—each of us essentially had to program ourselves, with some help from our parents and others. Despite the best efforts of our parents, much of our programming was somewhat random, and was often the

result of accidental events, some supportive and some traumatic. Much of our programming operates reasonably well, while other parts usually don't work well at all.

So another definition of NLP is that it is an operating manual for the human brain, providing "software for wetware," that can be used to reprogram ourselves when we are less than fully satisfied with our responses.

The descriptions given so far may already be more than most people want to read. For those who want a little more specific description of what NLP is, and how it differs from most psychology and psychotherapy, read on. . . .

The Three Different Aspects of Any Field

We can use the field of knowledge and investigation known as physics as an example for understanding different aspects of NLP. Physics can be divided into three different levels:

1. A practical technology that is devoted to specific applications in the real world, from building bridges, cell phones, and spacecraft, to determining the properties of atoms, viruses, and life itself—and everything in between. This technology takes the form of recipes that tell us what to do to reach particular goals or outcomes—in the same way that a recipe for a cake is a dependable way to achieve that outcome. As Paul Valery said, "*The name science should not be given to anything but the aggregate of the recipes that are always successful. All the rest is literature.*"

2. A methodology or theory, a set of understandings that guide the further development and use of the technology. Methodology consists of all the ideas we have about the technology, how we think it all fits together. As Einstein said, "*There is nothing so practical as a good theory*."

One basic principle—well established by a wealth of psychological experiments—is that we can't know objective reality, we have only a "map" of reality provided through our senses. This principle was stated by Alfred Korzybski in his book *Science and Sanity* as, "The map is not the territory." There will always be gaps, errors, and omissions in our map. A map may be very useful and practical, but it can never fully match the reality that it attempts to describe. If it did match, it would be as complete, complex, and puzzling as the reality it describes, and it would no longer be useful as a map.

3. An epistemology is how we know what we know; a way of deciding what evidence to use to use to determine what is true or valid as we test *both* the technology and methodology. The epistemology of physics is that of scientific experimentation: *testing* our predictions and results in any way we can, with as many controls as we can. This testing is what distinguishes science from guesses, revelation, or superstition.

The Three Different Aspects of NLP

1. Technology

Like physics, NLP also has a large number of specific patterns, recipes, and instructions that can be used to help people reach specific outcomes. It does this by making

changes in our experience—in our perceptions, our thinking, our actions, and our feeling responses to events.

Educational applications include teaching people how to spell accurately, how to learn a foreign language quickly and fluently, how to remember facts and rules, how to be in a positive state to learn easily, and how to transform some kinds of "learning disabilities" into effective thinking and learning, etc.

Psychotherapeutic applications include how to transform unpleasant feelings, change unwanted habits such as smoking, overeating, or nail-biting, how to cure phobias, fears and anxieties, resolve grief, shame, guilt, and other internal conflicts, eliminate addictions, compulsions, PTSD, etc.

Communication applications include how to use language—both denotation and connotation, and both explicit and metaphoric—to sequence and combine information for easy learning, and accurate transmission of that learning to others, how to develop rapport, how to negotiate and resolve conflicts, how to become intimate when you want to, and how to set effective boundaries, etc.

Sports applications include how to be motivated to stay with a training program, concentrate fully on performance and ignore distractions, how to acquire excellence in any sport, how to use the same thought and movement strategies that top athletes use to achieve success, etc.

Business and organizational applications include how to develop creative new alternatives for solving problems, make satisfying decisions, and detailed plans to implement them, how to stay on track in meetings, how to identify and select potential employees and partners who have the skills needed for the team, how to dovetail outcomes, how to manage in a style that matches your company and employees, etc.

2. Methodology

NLP has a coherent set of ideas or understandings that can be used to understand the wide-ranging applications of the technology.

Modalities. One basic understanding in NLP is that *all* our experience consists of either sensory-based experience in the moment, or internal representations of sensory-based experience that are remembered from the past or forecast into the future. We can't know the world directly, only through the *representations* of the world that we build out of what we receive through our senses. These representations will always include one or more of the following five sense modalities: *visual* images, *auditory* sounds, *kinesthetic* feelings, *olfactory* smells, and *gustatory* tastes. While the last two modalities are very important in food selection, cooking, and certain other contexts like personal hygiene or perfume manufacturing, most of our thinking and responding is some combination of the three major sense modalities, *visual, auditory, and kinesthetic*.

These sensory modalities are the building blocks, or the "atoms," of *all* our experience. Even our most abstract words and conceptualizations are composed of some combination of images, sounds or feelings. These different modalities can be combined simultaneously in a moment in time, or they can be combined in a sequence, rather like a linear computer program, in which, for instance, an image of a singer is followed by the song that they are singing, followed by our feelings in response to those sounds. We

can learn how to voluntarily rearrange these "atoms" of experience in order to resolve problems, and reach the outcomes that we want. Let's examine one practical application of this methodology, learning how to spell.

Applying the Methodology of Modalities to Technology

Spelling is a simple rote memory task in which the outcome is to be able to access a correct sequence of letters in response to the sound of a word (or in response to an image of what a word indicates). Once that is done, the word can be written out, or the sequence of letters can be spoken, as in a spelling bee. A poor speller will typically use one of two methods that do not work well:

a. A *Creative Speller* will try to *construct* a visual image of the word to be spelled, using *creative* visual imagery, instead of using *remembered* imagery to visualize the word exactly as they have seen it in the past. Most right-handed people look up to their left to access the right hemisphere of their brain for visual memory, and look up to their right to access the left hemisphere of their brain for creative visualization. Creativity is a wonderful ability to rearrange experience and develop new possibilities, but it is not appropriate for spelling, because spelling is a rote memory task that requires *not* being creative.

b. Some people will try to sound out a word *auditorily*, in order to elicit the letters in response to the sounds in a word. In English this is impossible for about 40% of words, because our very strange spelling makes it very difficult to reliably sound them out. Despite this, many schools attempt to teach children how to spell by sounding out words auditorily, a method called "phonetics," a word which ironically can't be spelled phonetically!

Phonetics works well for *reading*, which requires going from the written word to the spoken word. But that is a different task than *spelling*, in which you have to do the reverse, and go from the spoken word to the written word. In Spanish, all words are written *exactly* the way they sound, so spelling auditorily works well, and is not a problem in school—it is almost impossible to find a bad speller in a Spanish-speaking country.

Accurate Spelling. The technology of teaching children how to spell well is ridiculously easy. You simply tell the child to look at the word written on the blackboard, and then to close their eyes and look up to their left to see an internal remembered image of the word, and then notice a feeling of familiarity that lets the child know that they have seen that word before. Then they only have to copy their internal image of the word onto the paper, or read out the letters if they are in a spelling bee. Even in Spanish this is more effective than sounding out the letters, because it is much faster to get a visual image of a word than it is to listen to the sequence of sounds. For more about the NLP spelling strategy and how to learn or teach it, read (1, chapter 2).

Submodalities: A further development of NLP *methodology* is the realization that each of the primary sensory modalities can be subdivided into smaller parameters or elements, called *submodalities*, each of which can also be changed to alter our experience. If modalities are the "atoms" of our experience, submodalities are the

"subatomic particles" of experience that make the atoms of experience have significantly different properties.

A *visual* image can vary in distance from the observer, location in space, and size. It can be flat (2-D) or 3-D (holographic), framed or panoramic, bright or dim, moving or still, color or black and white. You can be *inside* a memory as if an event were happening again, or you can see it as if you are an *outside* observer watching someone else experience that event; the same is true of your images of the future—you can be in them, or you can see yourself in them. A visual memory that is a large, close, 3-D, color panoramic movie will be much more impactful than one that is a small, distant, two-dimensional framed black and white still photograph. You can easily confirm this in your own experience by representing the same memory in those two different ways.

An *auditory* sound can also vary in distance from the listener, location in physical space, and loudness. It can be monaural or stereo, vary widely in tempo, tone, timbre and frequency range, and you can hear it by being inside that panoramic experience again, or being *outside* it, as if you were hearing it coming from a tape recorder or CD player. A sound that is loud, close, full, and panoramic will be much more impactful than one that is faint, distant, and coming from a point source. Again you can easily verify this in your experience by recalling a piece of music in both ways, and notice the difference.

A *kinesthetic* feeling can vary in intensity, duration and location. It can vary in temperature, pressure, texture, and extent. It can be still or moving—spreading from one location to another. It can be a surface tactile feeling or an inner emotional feeling. A remembered feeling that is intense, moving, and involving the whole body will be much more impactful than one that is weak, still, and involves only a very small part of your body. Again you can try this out in your own experience to verify that it is true by remembering the same feeling in both ways.

Modalities offer three alternative ways to represent experience, offering choice. Submodalities offer hundreds of different alternatives, which can be combined in various ways to create hundreds of thousands of alternatives, for even more choice. Let's examine a few practical applications of this methodology.

Applying the Methodology of Submodalities to Technology

Overwhelm When we are not happy about something in our life, and conclude that we "have a problem," often a major aspect of what is happening is overwhelm or confusion resulting from information overload. There is too much information, or it is coming too fast, for us to process it well. Imagine trying to pay attention to six people talking to you at once, and you will have a taste of one kind of overwhelm, but for some people it is even worse. Often someone may have a half-dozen movies playing in their minds simultaneously—large, close, and in bright color and loud sound. This is also true of some people who suffer from ADHD and other learning difficulties. With all those movies happening at once, it is impossible to process it all, and that makes it very hard to notice what is happening around you, or to accomplish anything.

It is relatively easy to learn to focus on just *one* of those internal movies at a time, allowing the others to recede into the distance and become smaller, dimmer, black and white, and quieter. When there is only one movie to attend to in the foreground, you can

more easily process that information, and then allow it to recede into the distance, so that a different movie can become foreground and be processed in turn.

Phobia/abuse Someone who has a phobia—or any other trauma, abuse, PTSD flashback, etc.—remembers a terrible experience by being *inside* it, as if they were experiencing it all over again. As a result, they have all the awful feelings that they had in the original experience. Others who have had equally horrible experiences can recall them comfortably because they see them as an observer watching a movie on a movie screen, as if it were happening to someone else. Since they are *outside* the experience, they don't have any of the feelings of being *inside* it. Either they feel neutral, or they have the feelings that a compassionate *observer* might have. It is easy to teach someone with a phobia to take their memories of a terrible event and project them onto a movie screen, so that they can respond to them neutrally. (1, chapter 7)

Grief The structure of grief is exactly the *reverse* of a phobia or trauma. In a phobia, someone remembers a *horrible* experience by being *inside* it, so they have all the awful feelings again. In grief, someone remembers a *wonderful* experience by being *outside* it, so they can't feel the treasured feelings that they previously had with the dead person, leaving them with only an empty feeling. Since the structure of grief is the reverse of a phobia, the resolution for grief is also the reverse—to remember being with the dead person by being *inside* their special memories of them, so that they can easily re-experience all the good feelings that they once had with them. (1, chapter 11)

3. The **epistemology** of NLP is fundamentally the same as that of physics, and all of science. We discover what is true through experimentation and testing, and this is a process that may pause, but never stops, and is continually used to expand, revise, and enrich the field. *Every* pattern or method in NLP includes ways to *test* whether each step has been successful or not, using nonverbal response as the primary feedback, along with verbal report.

However, most of NLP has only been tested "clinically" in the experience of those who have made changes in their lives. This is also true of most psychology and medical practice. It has not yet been rigorously tested in controlled experiments, and the same is true for the majority of other therapeutic and even medical interventions.

NLP has been developed outside academia, where most research takes place, and those who are most active in the field have been busy developing the methodology, discovering new ways to help people make changes. The kind of rigorous research that would validate NLP takes a great deal of time, money, and subjects, and it simply has not yet been done. However, many of the patterns in NLP could be tested *far* more easily than other psychological approaches, because each step of each process specifies both the intervention to be made, and how to evaluate whether or not that step has been successful. In addition, most NLP patterns achieve outcomes dependably, often in a session or two, which would greatly shorten the process of testing and follow-up.

Even though NLP is in its infancy—only some 35 years old—it already includes a wide range of practical processes, as well as a consistent and coherent methodology that underlies the specific methods. These broader understandings provide a framework for developing new methods and evaluating them. This methodology can also be used to

understand methods that have been developed by other people intuitively, or out of a different orientation, to discover how they work, and how to improve them.

I have been teaching NLP processes at national psychotherapy conferences for many years, and observing as many other presenters as I can, especially when they are willing to actually demonstrate what they do. In almost all cases, what I can do with NLP is vastly superior, and much faster and more thorough than other approaches. As the field continues to develop and differentiate, we are able to do much more every year.