

The Transforming power of NLP in Education

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As an NLP trainer, I get all kinds of unusual requests. One of the most interesting ones in recent years was when I worked with a group of science teachers from an inner city comprehensive school. This request came directly from the head of science who had heard about the kind of work I do and was particularly interested in how NLP could facilitate improved learning with students.

This article is about how NLP assisted in radically improving the quality of teaching in the classroom and how we produced measurable improvements in classroom grades. Throughout this article, I have included feedback and observations from Mick Statham the head of science. This feedback gives a fascinating insight into how our training sessions directly affected the student's performances. None of the teachers in question had any previous experience of NLP in any form whatsoever!

Here are Mick Statham's comments of the introduction of this training:

In 2001 our we employed Nick Kemp to deliver four days of training that would serve as a grounding introduction to the applications of NLP in the science classroom.

The training covered self management skills for teachers, improving learning for pupils and departmental management skills for managers.

*Mick Statham,
Head of Science*

Gathering information

From my initial discussions with Mick, it became clear to me that in today's world being a teacher could be extremely stressful, especially with the ever-increasing demands for achieving higher-grade levels. I therefore decided to visit the school, have a good look at the working environment, and speak to each future seminar attendee on a one to one basis. I quickly realised that there the following specific areas that we would need to address in our initial sessions.

These included

- Identifying and developing influential language for classroom situations
- The importance of "getting in state" to better communicate with students
- How to make lessons memorable using sensory rich language

Fortunately, I dissuaded the school from running the training sessions in the actual science lab, which of course would have had its own unique associations for those present! Instead, we opted for a more neutral hotel venue!

The strongest state wins the day

In talking to these teachers I discovered that each of them were desperate for practical skill development, rather than additional theory on “how best to teach”. I also quickly discovered during our very first session, the single word that would strike fear into the heart of any teacher and that word is “Ofsted” Bizarrely that very week it had been reported in the national press that a teacher had actually feigned leukaemia rather than face an Ofsted inspection!

Facing five classes of 25 students each day would be a daunting enough task for any person, so during the first session I demonstrated the power of generating resourceful states in communication situations. I asked them to think about the class they most liked to teach and to contrast this with the class that had previously been most difficult. This allowed us to collectively explore how each teaching situation had its own unique set of sub modalities which of course were the ingredients to generating a whole roster of different states, many of which were far from ideal in facilitating better learning opportunities!

Teaching a class of students has a lot of similarities with stand up comedy or any other form of presenting to a group, where the first few minutes set the tone for what is to follow. The successful outcome of many lessons therefore often depends on the very first few minutes, during which the state of the teacher is crucial. Its easy to forget that prior to any NLP training, many of us would be unaware of how powerful our own “self talk” is in affecting our overall state. This was certainly the case with this group and when I asked each teacher to detail what they said to themselves before taking a class here is some of the typical feedback -

“This is going to be hell” and “The sooner this is over, the better”

Unsurprisingly these kinds of comments do not contribute towards creating optimised teaching and learning states. We classified this section of the training as “self management” and I discovered that many of those present had previously found themselves in unresourceful states during classroom situations, which had caused them a considerable amount of stress.

Here are Mick Statham’s comment:

“The self management skills we learnt with Nick included state-control and we learnt that the state we are in is the single most important factor affecting our performance. Create the right state and everything else follows including eliciting good learning states from our pupils. Learning how to model pace and lead has been a vital element in developing our teaching capacities and has provided a menu of choice for managing the most difficult classes and individuals. It is fair to say that NLP has given us a conscious and deliberate choice mechanism that we did not have before.

Mick Statham

The art of the weasel in the classroom

When I conducted my initial interviews with the staff I noticed that a number of them used the following phrases frequently in their conversations, all of which presupposed failure.

We'll try to...
We'll aim to...
Hopefully...
All being well...

As we began to pay greater attention to language and state, each teacher noticed how by simply changing their language, they changed their thinking and their whole state in the classroom. Many present were amazed by the results of changing the modal operators and in paying greater attention to language structure in classroom situations.

In previous sales training seminars, I always included working with suggestive predicates. It occurred to me that each teacher was “a seller of ideas” and this would be a useful element to incorporate into these sessions.

The results were spectacular as each teacher used combinations of suggestive predicates to pace the students for the lesson ahead. Examples of suggestive predicates include

Are you aware that...
Has it ever occurred to you that...
Have you noticed that...
Have you ever wondered..

Have you...
Have you ever...
How would you feel if...
How do you know that...

I had each teacher experiment with using combinations of these phrases to set the scene for the start of each class. Never have I seen such an enthusiastic response to this language pattern and many present simply loved having this new set of tools!

Memorable lessons using VAK

*“Michelle was a girl who might be described as of average ability. When she was taught how to model her thinking, she was able to significantly increase the clarity of thought and hence her ability to write about things improved dramatically. The day she modelled a giant chromosome and traced a 4-foot high outline in front of me was one I shall not forget. “Of course I can see a f*****g picture” she said, “its right there in front of you if you look”. She had never been taught to learn in this way before. Very quickly, she had control of a completely new way of shifting her thinking and she absolutely loved it. Michelle's ambition is now to become a teacher.”*

Mick Statham

When I first spoke to Mick Statham, he indicated that the teaching staff had heard of the term VAK, but only had a rudimentary awareness of how powerful VAK awareness could really be! Any good NLP practitioner will appreciate that the VAK toolkit is essential in creating rapport and in developing accelerated and comprehensive learning. I had constructed a series of exercise to demonstrate the power of becoming more aware of sub modalities and how to create better learning

strategies by incorporating all the representative systems in the classroom. I also realised that one of the reasons that many students couldn't remember lesson material was because it "had not been made to be that memorable in the first place"

Here is another example of the extraordinary improvements that were made from developing greater VAK awareness

"The head girl was struggling with her revision. When I asked her what she said to herself when she sat down to revise, she said with a degree of surprise, "there is a voice in my head that saying to me why don't you go and do something more interesting instead? Curious as to why in 18 years no one had pointed out that this highly motivated and clever pupil that the way she was talking to herself could be influencing her behaviour, we followed through her representation of the situation. "What's the picture you have when this voice talks to you?" I asked her. "I see myself surrounded by books on either side of me going right up to the ceiling. I am between the piles of books with my head down and my body crunched up" "So how does it make you feel?" "I want to run away" and that's when I find myself doing some other activity like watching television.

We worked to change her voice and in the next 20 seconds she had rephrased her self talk so now she was saying, "although revision is challenging it's worthwhile" or something similar. This changed the picture to her receiving her A-level grades in a brown paper envelope, which, when she opened this, were high enough for her to go to the University of her choice. The feeling changed to one of intense satisfaction - which provided the new motivation for her to go and work. She surprised her self with the ease of this change.

Mick Statham

Feedback from pupils and teachers

"The key outcome for us as science teachers was the revelation that knowledge and understanding are representations or recreations of experience. By being in touch with our own ways of seeing the world and by modelling these are pupils were also able to instantly be in touch with their own mental resources the significance of which they had not only never understood that had never had pointed out to them. "No one else ever teaches us like this Sir" is frequently a comment."

The outcomes from this programme proved decisive turning point in the department. Three years later we have more than doubled our A-C pass rate at GCSE, have some of the largest post-16 science courses in the city and have presented our own developments in NLP in science education at local regional and national level to organisations such as the Association for Science Education as well as leading university departments.

Although many outcomes can be presented anecdotally, statistics don't lie!"

Mick Statham

The results of these sessions convinced me that the use of NLP can produce substantial improvements in learning situations, beyond even what I had previously considered. After these initial sessions, Mick Statham and I have combined insights up to present, a model of NLP in education called Meta Education. We will be presenting seminars on this in 2005, as well as producing a comprehensive website and specific products using NLP in the education market.

By identifying better learning strategies using the NLP toolkit, we give students a far greater opportunity in life. I am convinced that by paying greater attention to creating better inner and external learning environments and using sensory rich language, students can learn more effectively and teachers can teach more easily.

As we open our minds up to greater possibilities for better learning, we open up the possibilities for others to discover that often a few simple changes in our approach will produce quite extraordinary results for both teachers and students alike!

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