

# The How of Thinking:

## The Secrets of Neuro-linguistic Programming

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No two people perceive the world around them in exactly the same way. Each of us first filters the sights, sounds and sensations surrounding us through our sensory systems before sending these perceptions on to be processed by and stored in our brains. Understanding exactly how we make sense of the world around us caught the interest of the psychologist, Richard Bandler and the linguist, John Grinder in the 1970's. Working together at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Bandler and Grinder began to study excellence in communication in the field of psychotherapy. Based on the premise that modeling successful people and defining exactly what they do can lead to successful communication, Grinder and Bandler made video and audio tapes of the renowned therapists, Virginia Satir (family therapy), Fritz Perls (Gestalt therapy), and Milton Erickson (hypnotherapy). They then carefully scrutinized their speech patterns and developed a system of coding them, in order to be able to teach these isolated elements of communication to others. This was the start of what we know today as Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).



The name Neuro-Linguistic Programming refers to the relationship of the body and mind. «Neuro» represents the brain where all human behavior is created, «Linguistic» refers to the language we use to express our thoughts and feelings, and «Programming» deals with the organized patterns we use to produce results and achieve our goals. NLP suggests that it is possible to observe people, both through their habits and their language, in order to determine exactly how someone is thinking at the moment by becoming aware of their preferred channel of communication. This has proven to be invaluable information in the field of psychotherapy, as well as serving as a communication tool in the business world and increasingly in the world of education.

## HOW DOES NLP RELATE TO THINKING STRATEGIES?

It is vital to realize that each of us processes information differently. The world around us exists for us in our perceptions and memories that can be radically different for different people. In NLP we talk about «representational» systems. These refer to the way we «re-present» our external environment in an internal way. We are bombarded constantly with information and in order to keep from becoming overwhelmed we have to set up a form of filters. These filters can be put into the main categories of visual, auditory and kinesthetic, with gustatory and olfactory often regarded as «sub-filters» of kinesthetic. When we are in a relaxed state we generally have access to all of our systems. However, in stress situations we tend to use a primary system and a secondary system in which we perceive, process and store information. We express this thinking in various ways. One of these ways is through our eye movements: looking up indicates visual accessing of information, looking to the side indicates auditory accessing, and looking down to our right indicates kinesthetic accessing while looking down to our left indicates listening to an internal dialogue. In addition, when we look to our left we are searching for visual or auditory memories and to our right we are constructing pictures or sounds. (This is true in most right-handed people. Left-handed people may look to the opposite side for their memories or constructions, although looking up always indicates a visual search and to the side always indicates an auditory one.) Michael Grinder, National Director of NLP in Education, compares our brains to a large filing cabinet in which we have stored information in one of these systems. If information is immediately present, it is not necessary to search for it. If, however, we have to recall information which has been stored somewhere in our memories we begin to search for it. Another person can then observe this search as it is indicated in part by our eye movements.

Another hint that can help us understand in which system a person is thinking is the language he or she uses. We can take the neutral question, «Do you understand?» and ask it in different ways. «Is it clear?» is a visual question, «Does that sound right?» is auditory and «Do you get it?» is kinesthetic. When we begin to notice the language that we ourselves use and also start listening more carefully to people around us, we can become aware of these patterns emerging again and again.

We also demonstrate behavioral indications. Visually oriented people learn by seeing. They often use color-coded systems to help them organize material. They like to get handouts and need to take notes that they look at after a lecture or speech. They often remember where they last saw a particular item. They rely on an appointment book and need to have things written down. They flourish in a visually stimulating environment. They may, however, have trouble remembering oral instructions. Auditory people learn by listening and talking. They remember what they have heard. They often don't take notes because they prefer to concentrate on the voice and tonality of the lecturer. They can imitate voices or accents quite well. They love discussions and remember what was discussed. Sometimes they need to think aloud and talk through their thoughts. They may also be easily distracted by noise and prefer working alone, especially during times of high concentration. Kinesthetically oriented people learn by doing and feeling. They need to try things out for themselves and remember what an object feels like. These people tend to use gestures and movements while speaking and have trouble sitting still

for too long a period of time. They enjoy the social aspect of group work. They often play with small objects or doodle during class.

When we can understand the thought processes of another human being, it is much easier to establish and maintain rapport with this person and to communicate more elegantly. In addition, it is extremely helpful for an individual to understand his or her own capabilities and limitations regarding the process and storage of information. When we have determined for ourselves where our strengths (and weaknesses) lie, we can begin to gain understanding of how our own thinking processes work as well as understanding those of people around us.

### WHAT ARE THE PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF NLP IN THE CLASSROOM?

Today, NLP is used in various ways. Distinct branches of training and application have evolved. Therapists and medical professionals, business people, educators and administrators use it. My main interest in NLP is in training teachers. We need to become aware that how we teach is more important than what we teach. As Michael Grinder points out, we as teachers can determine input (how we present information) and output (how we check for understanding), but we can not determine processing or storage of the information by the individual learner. When we think back on our school days we most likely remember only certain subjects or teachers. Determining our own reasons for remembering particular classes can give us some insight into how we ourselves learn and remember best. We need to expand our thinking in planning activities for the classroom and give some thought to the different representational systems. Many of us prefer to teach in the way we ourselves learn, but we must remember that many of our learners have a style of learning which is different than our own. There are many ways in which we can help our different learners, however, and make our own teaching styles more creative as well. For the visual learners, we must write out the material or provide them with handouts and tape transcripts. We can use colors to help them remember and encourage them to find their own system of color-coding. When we make use of pictures, cartoons, sketches, and graphic organizers such as mind maps and charts, we are matching their world of experience. It is also important for visual learners to practice rearranging material, as they tend to remember where they saw a particular item on a page. If it comes in a different place during a test, these learners might be confused and have trouble making a connection to the picture of the material that they have stored.

For the auditory learners, we can speak rhythmically to help them remember material, encourage discussions in the classroom and tell them to read the material aloud at home. It is also helpful for these learners to repeat instructions aloud. When they study for a test it is useful if they practice for it with an imaginary person or learn aloud with friends. They can record texts and listen to them while reading along. As these learners tend to store sequentially they must be careful, however, that they have access to all the information. One problem for auditory learners is that they often need to go back to the beginning of the material they have learned and search for the particular information as one would on a cassette tape. They need to combine some pictures with their auditory storage in order to find the information more quickly. They also need to study for a written exam by writing as well as speaking, or

they might have problems in a stressful situation with a transfer of information from one system to the other.

For the kinesthetic learners we need to find activities that entail movement or emotions. They need to try things out for themselves. At home they can attach homework to a clipboard and walk around while learning. Making flashcards and using other manipulatives can be useful learning tools for them and can help to increase their understanding of abstract ideas. They need to take more breaks while studying and often feel more comfortable when they can hold small objects in their hands. We should encourage these learners to create personal associations to the learning material. Our kinesthetic students also need to have positive feelings about learning and are more dependent than other learners on their relationship with their teacher and classmates.

We may see, hear or feel the same things that our learners do, but the question remains if we see, hear or feel as they do. When we match our teaching styles to our students' learning styles, we can help them to acquire more self-confidence by making them feel that they are able to learn and understand more easily. When we find activities and teaching styles that incorporate all three representational systems, we increase our chances of reaching all our learners and creating a learning atmosphere of trust, cooperation and mutual understanding.

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