

Assessment Component No. 2 (Written assignment) Independent Study –

A critical reflection of an NLP Practitioner Programme

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INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a critical reflection on my experiences of a Practitioner level programme in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). In particular, I have focussed on two elements of the programme training approach itself, the NLP Communication model and the Perceptual Positions technique. In applying Gibbs' Reflective Cycle this paper outlines how the training approach was core to my absorption of the content and has been integral to my subsequent personal development as a trainer and a coach. I also explore how the NLP Communication model is both a foundational model in NLP and an effective tool to help individuals gain greater self-awareness, drawing connections between NLP and work in the fields of Neuroscience and Positive Psychology. I finally reflect on the Perceptual Positions technique as a simple and effective means of gaining insight into another person's perspective enhancing self-awareness and awareness of others to improve their interactions. Connections are also drawn between this technique and the role of Narrative Coaching.

MY MOTIVATION FOR COMPLETING THE NLP PRACTITIONER PROGRAMME

Throughout my life I have sought to help create positive and productive environments where individuals could flourish, leading me through studies in Psychology and childhood education and a career in communication. In my corporate career I found myself increasingly supporting leaders in a coaching context. A qualification in Executive Coaching started a new chapter in which I could, with greater conscious knowledge and skill, as Whitmore (2010, p10) so aptly says, "unlock people's potential to maximize their own performance". It was in these studies that I discovered NLP and I believed that focussed study of it could enhance my coaching approach by providing me with an additional structure and set of tools to help individuals (Bandler and Grinder 1975). I felt that NLP could help me make a difference on an individual level through my coaching, on a team level by integrating it into the leadership develop training I run, and hopefully for these efforts to have a positive ripple effect on an organisational level.

INTRODUCING NLP

Founded by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in 1976, NLP is defined as “the study of the structure of subjective experience” that explores “the patterns or ‘programming’ created by the interaction between the brain (‘neuro’), language (‘linguistic’) and the body” (Dilts and DeLozier 2021, p849-850).

John Grinder, a linguist and Richard Bandler, a mathematician with an interest in Gestalt therapy¹ (Madden and Sarantinou 2019) wanted to understand what made some individuals great at something and if that greatness could be modelled and replicated (Dilts and DeLozier 2021).

Grinder and Bandler observed the practices of family therapist Virginia Satir and Fritz Perls, co-founder of Gestalt therapy, in order to ‘model’ their approach. They also collaborated with Gregory Bateson, an anthropologist and social scientist, and Milton Erickson one of the founding hypnotherapists, all of which combined to create the basis of NLP (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck 2014, Madden and Sarantinou 2019).

The intent of NLP could be said to gain insight into our individual views of the world which subsequently influences our behaviour. NLP techniques can help us shift unhelpful perspectives and access more resourceful behaviours to help us fulfil our goals. However, the real benefit comes not in simply methodically and consciously applying these techniques, but in embracing the full concept of NLP becoming an implicit way of thinking about and interacting in the world (Bandler and Grinder 1975, Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck 2014, Knight 2014, Madden and Sarantinou 2019).

NLP AND ETHICS

As NLP works at a deeply personal level on components such as memory, identity and values, ethical application is essential (ANLP 2021). The Association of NLP (ANLP) is an independent professional body aimed at creating a best practice framework to provide both NLP practitioners and clients with confidence in a consistent level of skill and professional practice. The ANLP Code of Ethics provides a set of behavioural parameters for both practitioners and clients to refer to (ANLP 2021).

¹ A form of psychotherapy where a patient focusses on gaining awareness of their emotions in a given moment.

On a more granular level, The Encyclopedia of Systemic Neuro-Linguistic Programming and NLP New Coding (Dilts and DeLozier 2021) recommends an ‘Ecology Check’² is conducted before any NLP technique.

INTRODUCING GIBBS’ REFLECTIVE CYCLE

Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle (University of Edinburgh 2020), the critical reflection tool used in this paper, is considered as one of the most well-known cyclical models of reflection appropriate for use, both in situations of repetition as well stand-alone experiences.

Developed by Graham Gibbs in 1988 (University of Edinburgh 2020), the model aims to help structure the learning that can be derived from an experience. In the University of Edinburgh online Reflection Toolkit (2020) the cycle is shown to comprise of six stages as shown in Figure 1 below and encourages reflection on what happened, what worked well or not, and how the experience potentially informs future actions. I will be exploring each topic through the lens of the first five steps of the cycle with the sixth captured in my conclusion.

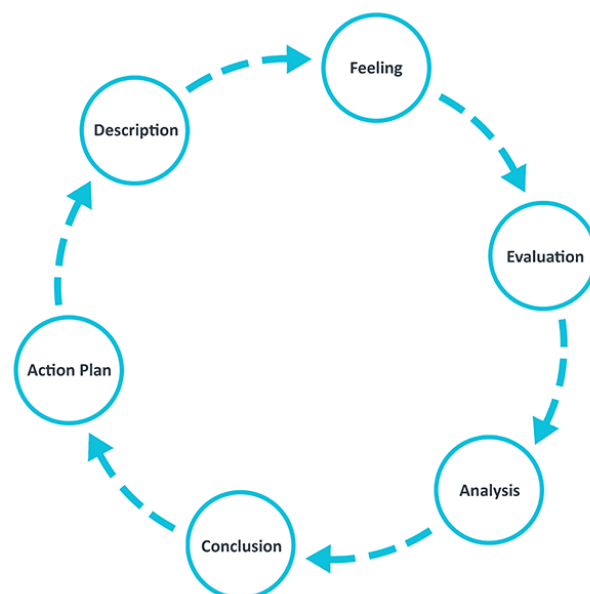


Figure 1: Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle
(University of Edinburgh 2020)

² The aim of an Ecology Check is to verify the participant’s full consent before commencing a specific NLP technique. The aim is to test for any potential unexpected impacts as a result of the technique’s efficacy.

REFLECTION ON THE TEACHING APPROACH OF NLP PRACTITIONER PROGRAMME

The ANLP certified NLP Practitioner Programme ran over six days in-person with a small group of participants. The programme content, an outline of which can be found in the matrix as part of the Portfolio section of this submission (Britz 2021a), aimed to provide solid foundational understanding and skill in the theory and practices of NLP. The programme concluded with a learning assessment and an overall feedback and reflection discussion.

I have come to believe the programme approach was a living demonstration of the principles of NLP. Two such principles introduced and used as an integral part of the programme delivery itself were 'framing' and 'feedback'. My experience of these elements in the programme has deeply influenced my future use of NLP.

Use of 'framing' in NLP practitioner programme

Description

The Encyclopedia of Systemic Neuro-Linguistic Programming and NLP New Coding (Dilts and DeLozier 2021) describes the use of frames as a way of guiding an individual's thinking on a particular situation. Figure 2 below provides an overview of some of the frames used (Madden 2015, pg. 16). In the programme, frames were used at different phases of the learning experience for example, when the trainer introduced a new concept, we were encouraged to apply a 'Discovery frame', suspending any judgement about what we were about to experience.

NLP Frames	Description
Discovery frame	Suspend expectations, judgements and attachment to a particular outcome in approaching a task.
Outcome frame	Focus on what you want rather than the obstacles and evaluating events in terms of how does this help me achieve my outcome
Open frame	Be open and accepting ask questions
Ecology frame	What is the broader effect of an action on yourself and others? Is it congruent?
'As if' frame	Act as if you have 'it' already
Backtrack frame	Use the other person's words to check the meaning (assume you are working with your assumption)
Relevancy frame	How is this relevant or connected (a good way to bring self and others back on track)
Agreement frame	Using AND rather than BUT to respect the views of others and yourself
Contrast frame	Contrasting a desired outcome with the present situation or an alternative to open up choices
Appreciative frame	Not part of 'traditional' NLP but work knowing about – look at any problem, situation or outcome in terms of what is currently working well, to maintain morale and help work out solutions

Figure 2: NLP Frames
(Madden 2015)

Feelings

I remember feeling a sense of curiosity in applying the different frames and the different types of insights gained by using them. It felt almost like trying on different coloured glasses and seeing how that influenced what we saw.

Evaluation

On reflection, I think the use of frames as an integrated structure of the programme was a useful way of introducing the concept of framing and in doing so, experiencing the power of focussing our attention with a specific intent. The use of frames provided a natural building block to exploring the practice of 'reframing', an NLP method of re-examining a challenging situation by applying a different 'frame' and in doing so gaining a new perspective (Dilts and DeLozier 2021, Kotera and Van Gordon 2019, Madden and Sarantinou 2019, Zamfir 2016).

Analysis

In a training context I believe framing can be helpful in directing students' attention to deepen their reflection. However, it raises the question of what other type of information might have been gained through the use of a different frame. For example, at the start of a day when we used an 'Open frame' (as shown in Figure 2) to reflect on the learning of the day before, I wonder what our reflections might have been if we had used an 'Outcome frame' (as shown in Figure 2) which would have compared what we had learned to the learning goals we set out at the start of the programme (Madden 2015). I also wonder if there might have been an opportunity for the trainer to run an exercise where we used two different frames on the same content to see how the results differed. This might have given us a deeper understanding of just how differently our perception of a situation might vary depending on the mental frame we use.

From a team or organisational context, I consider frames a helpful tool to challenge the risks of conformity bias³ (Kahneman, Lovallo and Sibony 2011, Germar, Albrecht, Voss and Mojzisch 2016) in decision making. Carol Dweck (2017) describes this behaviour as Groupthink⁴ and shares a number of examples where significant risk or opportunity has been identified by an individual challenging the consensus with a different perspective. In my

³ An individual's desire to be accepted by the group will cause their decisions to be heavily influenced by the opinions of others.

⁴ A term popularized by Irving Janis in the 1970s that refers to when everyone in a group context agrees with no one opposing the general consensus exposing risk of not identifying potential flaws in a decision or way of thinking.

leadership development work (Britz 2020a) I will sometimes get a team to use a 'Contrast frame' (as shown in Figure 2) to compare their existing thinking with alternative perspectives.

I have also found reframing a powerful tool in my coaching practice (Britz 2021b), helping an individual shift their perspective and resulting emotions and actions on a situation (Kahneman 2011). For example, one client was struggling with a feeling of overwhelm in their role (Britz 2021b), we explored applying a 'learning lens' on the situation. In doing so the individual reframed the situation from one of challenge and fear of failure, to one of adventure and possibility from which they were able to map out how to move forward. The situation itself hadn't changed, but in the individual reframing their perspective it had changed their emotional response and as a result their actions.

To Judith DeLozier's view, "An ounce of framing is worth a pound of reframing" (Dilts and DeLozier 2021, pg. 426) one of my core aims in coaching and training is to help build an individual's growth mindset (Dweck 2017) so that when they encounter a challenging situation they are able to independently recognise the challenge in that moment as an opportunity to learn versus using the process of reframing after the fact to help shift a negative view to a more helpful one.

Use of 'feedback' in NLP practitioner programme

Description

Another core component of the programme structure was feedback. With each new element introduced participants replicated the technique followed by a process of feedback and learning reflection (Madden 2015). In addition, 'appreciations' were offered by each participant to conclude each day and a final feedback process at the end of the programme.

Feelings

When I first experienced the feedback component of the programme, I noticed feeling uncomfortable which I now know was my amygdala⁵ registering a perceived threat (a fear of criticism) manifesting in anxiety (Kahneman 2011, Peters 2020, Wright 2020). I have heard a similar sentiment expressed by a number of the leaders I coach (Britz 2021b), that the act of feedback is challenging. And yet, feedback is widely believed to be essential for ongoing learning and performance improvement (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck 2014, Dilts and

⁵ The Amygdala is the part of the brain believed to be the integrative centre for emotions, emotional behaviour and motivation. When the Amygdala is stimulated it can produce intense emotion such as feelings of fear or aggression.

DeLozier 2021, Knight 2014, Madden and Sarantinou, 2019, Whitmore 2010). So how then can we manage the process of feedback, so it doesn't trigger a defensive response but rather nurtures greater learning?

Evaluation

The turning point for me was the use of the feedback format outlined in Figure 3 below (Madden 2015, pg. 137) that we used following the application of each technique.

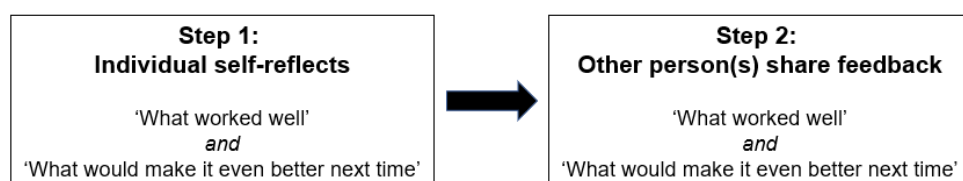


Figure 3: NLP Practitioner feedback approach used

(Madden 2015)

In using this format, I felt my comfort level growing and with it increasing appreciation and appetite for the times we don't 'get it right' as they are the times we truly grow (Dweck 2017).

Analysis

On reflection I've realised that throughout the NLP programme feedback itself was actively being reframed, shifting my perspective to view it as a gift, information that we might not otherwise get and which we can use to learn (Dweck 2017, Madden 2015, Knight 2014). It is also another NLP component that has become an integral influence in how I interact in the world (Bandler and Grinder 1975; Madden and Sarantinou, 2019).

I do wonder whether a more overt reflection of learning in the programme itself would reveal this reframe sooner and enhanced the value in the moment.

On a personal level I now use the same feedback format with my daughter when she is practicing for a particular event such as a speech competition. In doing so I have noticed how her growth mindset is emerging being more forgiving of her mistakes and instead focussing on the learning (Dweck 2017).

On a professional level I now build feedback practices into the workshops I run (Britz 2020a and Britz 2020b). I also role model the framing of feedback as a gift by personally actively and overtly seeking feedback on my own performance with my clients.

REFLECTION ON LEARNING OF NLP COMMUNICATION MODEL

Description

A core NLP belief (Bandler and Grinder 1975; Charvet 1997; Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck 2014; Knight 2014; Madden and Sarantinou, 2019; Zamfir 2016; Zamfir 2015) is that we all experience the world differently and this creates a unique picture or 'representation' of the world which then influences our behaviour. This unique perception is shaped by a combination of our cognitive processes⁶, the social conditions that we live within and our personal life experiences (Bandler and Grinder 1975; Charvet 1997; Madden and Sarantinou, 2019; Zamfir 2015). This theory was expanded by Tad James and Wyatt Woodsmall to create the NLP Communication Model in Figure 4 below (Madden and Sarantinou 2019, pg. 47).

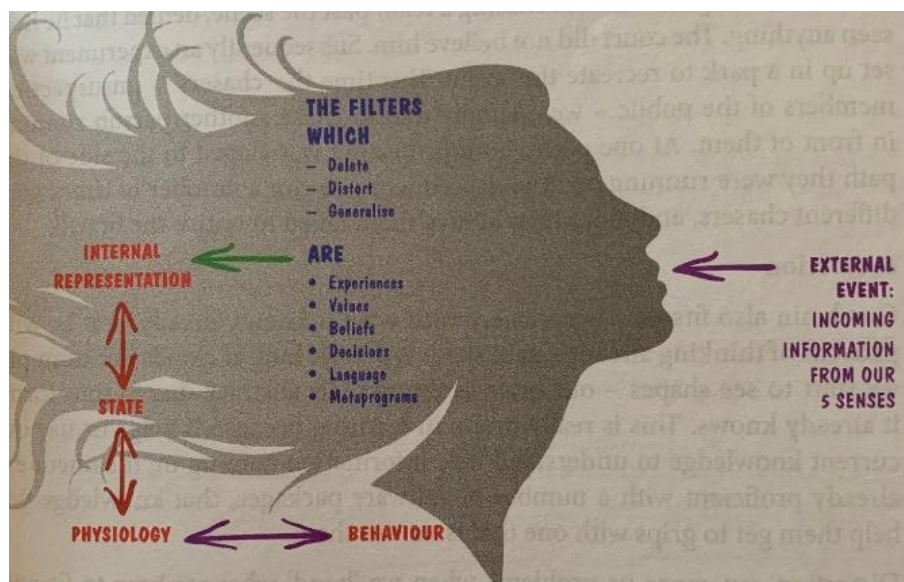


Figure 4: NLP Communication Model

(Madden and Sarantinou 2019)

The model is embodied in the NLP Presuppositions⁷ (Madden and Sarantinou, 2019, Madden 2015) 'The map is not the territory' and 'Everyone has a different map of the world'.

⁶ The brain uses a series of cognitive processes to absorb, filter and make sense of the information it receives as a result of our experience of the world.

⁷ The NLP Presuppositions, also referred to as Beliefs of excellence or Empowering beliefs are a series of statements or beliefs, inspired by the work of Gregory Bateson, Virginia Satir and Milton Erickson that if applied seek to model their success.

Feelings and Evaluation

The NLP model resonated with me as a simple and powerful depiction of how our unique perceptions or 'map' of the world drives our emotional response and behaviour (Charvet 1997; Bandler and Grinder 1975; Madden and Sarantinou, 2019; Zamfir 2016; Zamfir 2015).

It felt as if what I had instinctual known and been advocating in the coaching and training work I had been doing was clearly depicted and explained. However, I also found myself looking for the scientific evidence to verify these theories. It was this question that led me to the field of behavioural science and more specifically the emerging field of neuroscience.

Analysis

The field of neuroscience has revealed the concepts of cognitive processes/ biases (Kahneman 2011) that 'filter' the information our brain's absorb and influence our resulting perception of the world. These appear to closely correlate with the delete, distort, generalise filters of the NLP Communication Model (Madden and Sarantinou, 2019). For example, 'attention' bias (Abramowitz and Blakey 2020) correlates with the NLP 'deletion' process (Madden and Sarantinou, 2019) with both purporting that our unconscious brain filters out information to help the conscious brain focus on processing information considered 'important' to us. Correlating with the NLP 'distortion' filter (Madden and Sarantinou, 2019) is 'confirmation' bias (Kahneman 2012) with both maintaining we will seek information to verify our view of a situation. Another correlation is the 'Halo effect' (Prera 2021) and the NLP 'generalisation' filter (Madden and Sarantinou, 2019) both finding we can take our experience of one specific trait, for example a person's physical attractiveness, and apply a general judgement to their whole personality for example that they are a beautiful person overall.

Another element that Neuroscience teaches us is how the neuro-chemical shifts in our brain influence on how we process information and behave as a result. For example, in times of stress our Amygdala is activated releasing adrenalin and cortisol which influences our perception of the situation and triggers an instinctual 'fight or flight' reactive response (Peters 2020). The emerging application of Neuroscience in the field of Coaching (O'Connor and Lages 2019) explores how coaches can help individuals build awareness of how our brains respond to experiences and how neuroplasticity can help create improved ways of responding to situations. In NLP, the concept of being 'at cause' versus being 'at effect'⁸

⁸ 'At effect' is when one is feeling 'threatened' responding defensively and relinquishing autonomy and accountability in the situation. Being 'at cause' is when one takes complete accountability for one's state of mind and resulting actions in a situation and is considered a far more resourceful state to be in.

(Madden and Sarantinou, 2019; Zamfir, 2016) is similar in how it prompts an individual's awareness of how they are perceiving a situation and, with that awareness, is the opportunity to choose how they want to respond.

On reflection, the NLP Communication Model has proved a foundational building block in my development as an individual, a coach and a trainer in how it helps us understand how we process information to form our perception of the world and our resulting responses. On a personal level, I have learned how to identify when I am slipping into being 'at effect', in doing so I catch myself and shift into being 'at cause' and access a more resourceful state of mind.

On a professional level in my coaching, I have found this awareness a crucial first step for personal growth (Britz 2021b). For example, a client was struggling to connect with a new manager who appeared to have a very different communication style. In considering that we 'all have a different map of the world' she obtained a clearer perspective of the differences and committed to applying greater flexibility in her next interaction which helped progress the relationship.

The NLP Communication model has also become a foundational framing concept in all my training (Britz 2020a and Britz 2020b). For example, I use it to set expectations at the start of a workshop encouraging greater acceptance to different ideas and perspectives; how to flex one's behaviour to connect with others; and how to consider an audience to create a message that connects.

REFLECTION ON LEARNING OF PERCEPTUAL POSITIONS

Description

The Perceptual Positions technique⁹ (Madden and Sarantinou 2019, pg. 163) is a core NLP method that we experienced for ourselves, aimed to help us tap into different perspectives to inform our next steps. We were invited to use a situation that hadn't gone as well as we had hoped and then worked through the three positions outlined in Figure 5 below.

⁹ The Perceptual Positions technique created by John Grinder and Judith De Lozier modelling the therapists Milton Erickson and Virginia Satir, involves having an individual taking up physical positions in order to gain new perspectives in how another person may have experienced that situation.

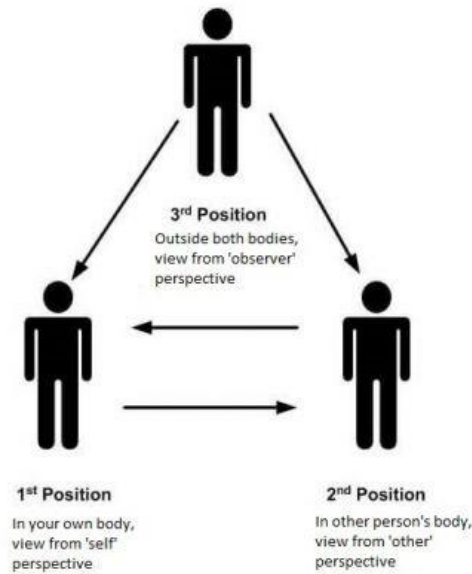


Figure 5: The Perceptual Positions
(Madden and Sarantinou 2019)

Perceptual Positions applies the NLP Presupposition 'the mind and body are part of the same system' (Madden 2015) encouraging one to use both physical and mental memories in moving through the each of the positions to amplify the richness of the perspective gained. It is important to stress that the process is not 'mindreading', rather by associating into the situation one is able to gain helpful additional insights (Madden and Sarantinou 2019).

As with any NLP technique ethical consideration is vital (Dilts and DeLozier 2021). This begins with the ecology check outlined in section one and is then carried though in the careful management of the process including guidance to:

- Ensure the individual 'associates' into the situation by speaking in the present tense and using prompting questions to help the individual recall the sensory experiences to help step back into that moment.
- For the NLP Practitioner to remain out of line of sight of the individual to not interfere with the individual's association into the moment.
- To 'break state' between each position – a process of using a question or statement to bring an individual back into the present moment so they are do not transfer the sensory experiences from one perspective to another.

Feelings and Evaluation

Applying the technique, at first it was challenging stepping into the '2nd position', however with the NLP Practitioner's encouragement I found an inner curiosity in what I was noticing.

This increased when I viewed the situation from the '3rd position'. And on taking my insights back into my own position I was able to 'see' the situation with what felt like a far richer perspective and importantly with options on how to move forward.

I use this exercise with a number of clients such as in the coaching recording part of this paper's submission (Britz 2021c). As can be heard in the coaching recording, one challenge can be to get the client to associate fully into the situation. I considered addressing this in the moment however did not want to 'insert' myself and risk influencing their reflections and so chose to reinforce the process of 'associating' at each step of instruction.

Analysis

On reflection, the Perceptual Positions technique also demonstrates the NLP Presuppositions 'the map is not the territory' and 'everyone has a different map of the world'. A person gains a deeper, more tangible understanding of other perspectives on a situation and can take that learning into their future interactions. For example, a client (Britz 2021b) experienced this benefit when we used the Perceptual Positions technique to explore a challenging stakeholder interaction. The result of the exercise was not only greater insight into how they might have handled the situation differently and what they could do in preparation for the next meeting, but they also gained greater empathy for what those individuals may be experiencing themselves which then influenced their broader stakeholder planning activities.

The Disney Strategy (Dilts and DeLozier 2021) is another NLP technique that can help an individual evaluate on an idea by physically stepping into different positions to view it from different positions. By viewing the idea from the perspectives of the 'Dreamer', the 'Realist', the 'Spoiler'/ Critic one is able to imagine, test and refine an idea using the insights gained by looking at it from those different views.

This process of 'stepping out' of one's reality to view a situation from a different perspective is also seen in Narrative Coaching (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck 2014, Drake 2007, Vogel 2012) which aims to help individuals identify the 'stories' they are telling themselves about their lives, themselves and their interactions. It acknowledges that one of our challenges is that our 'stories' can blind us to other perspectives or alternative narratives. The role of the narrative coach is to help introduce the awareness of possible alternative narratives for a client to incorporate into their thinking. I have found this approach helpful with some coaching clients (Britz 2021b), for example one individual who was going through a divorce. In using the prompt 'thinking of two years from now, when you look back on this

time, how do you want to have been?’ enabled the client to consider the type of story they would like their lives to tell of that period. In considering the situation from that different perspective they were able to tap into the resources they needed to show up as their ‘best self’ in the very challenging situation.

CONCLUSION AND ACTION PLAN

In reflecting on the NLP Practitioner Programme, I feel deeply grateful for the experience. It was the start of a learning journey into the beliefs and practices of NLP as well as leading me to explore other fields such as Neuroscience, Positive Psychology and Narrative Coaching. I have personally benefitted from incorporating the principles and practices of NLP into my daily life and interactions, and NLP extensively informs my professional practice as a coach and trainer.

In applying the final ‘conclusion’ step of Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle, specifically asking ‘what can be done *differently* next time?’ what occurs is for the NLP Practitioner programme to have encouraged more overt reflection of the learning versus the more organic process. On a personal level, improvement for my future learning experiences is to allow more time during and following a learning experience to consciously reflect on the learning process, possibly using Gibbs’ cycle itself to help embed the knowledge gained. For example, using the cycle in this MA is helping me do just that.

Reflecting on the Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle, I have found that often in learning experiences it isn’t always about difference, but rather prompting the thinking to go further, building on what has already been gained. In Nancy Kline’s (2010) work on the Thinking Environment the question, ‘what more would you like to think, or feel, or say’ is used to help a person’s thinking go further. In the case of a critical reflection tool such as Gibbs’ cycle I wonder if a question asking ‘what more’ could support deeper reflection. For example, ‘what more do have you learned from the experience?’ as an additional prompt.

Looking forward, I feel there is still so much to learn both in the field of NLP and Neuroscience to help me build even greater understanding of how we all make sense of and interact with the world. In particular, I am actively exploring how these concepts apply in a multi-cultural context and to what extent the ‘social constraints’ Bandler and Grinder (1975) referred to influence our maps. This MA Professional Practice is also an important part of my action plan as, when I was undergoing the NLP Practitioner, I commented how I would like to

contribute to strengthening the academic study of NLP through an MA. I look forward to realising this goal.

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