



New Approaches to Post-Secondary Learning

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Formal, post-secondary academics and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) have often found themselves in conflict. NLP was developed by academics who wanted to explore learning in ways that seemed impossible within the confines of formal education forty years ago. Both NLP and post-secondary education have changed since then. As neuropsychology gives us new ways to think about how the brain learns, we have new ways to move between models. In many ways, NLP is ideally suited to boost learning within the tight time frames and rigorous systems of post-secondary education.

In the early 1990s, a Canadian Royal Commission on post-secondary learning equated the quality of education with the quality of teaching. Having graduated from a small university with a great community spirit, I thought that a culture of learning was as important as the quality of teaching in determining how undergraduates learn. It might be that great teachers inspire great conversations, but it doesn't seem inevitable. It's worth asking the question: are there cost-effective ways for universities to be better at developing great learners?

NLP provides practical answers to questions like: what makes one class better than another? How can professors influence what students do outside the classroom? How can students get more learning from brilliant academics who are, at best, mediocre teachers? It's worth considering how answers from outside the system can bring new practices (and breathe new life) into post-secondary classrooms.

There are three basic presuppositions of NLP that challenge the status quo in post-secondary education and open the door to fresh perspectives.

1. The meaning of a communication is the feedback it gets. This means that professors who fail a third of their students are failing to communicate one third of the time. That may work for the system as a whole without working for individual professors or students. By exploring the nature of feedback loops between teachers and students, NLP-trained members of the post-secondary could develop more effective models for maintaining high standards.
2. Learning is most efficient when it makes use of the senses and physiology of the learner. While it is widely accepted that human beings are integrated systems of mind and body, much post-secondary education still acts as if learning occurs in a relatively small part of the brain. NLP practices encourage the use of physiology and the senses in learning to do what another human being does to produce the results that person produces.
3. Language makes sense and has impact only within relationships between fully functioning human beings. NLP models of language depend on unconscious, ecological rapport between the people communicating. Fully effective communication occurs when the verbal and non-verbal messages are aligned with a desire to connect and share knowledge. Technical specialists are effective teachers only to the extent that their students are able to discover common ground with them and use that ground as the foundation for new learning.

If you are a student who wants to learn more and learn more quickly, NLP practices provide you techniques for connecting with the people who have the skills and knowledge you want to have. In NLP, this process is called modeling, and it does not depend on the "models" being able to explain fully their strategies or decisions. This makes it possible to learn effectively whether or not your teacher is skilled at teaching.

If you are a college or university professor who wishes to teach with less stress, foster learning outside the classroom, and produce better results, then NLP can provide you with a toolset that will enhance and develop your current skills and perspectives. You already have many strengths: that's how you earned your position as a post-secondary teacher. NLP provides fast, effective, stimulating ways to make those strengths work more effectively for you and for your students.