Neuro-Linguistic Programming in Religious Education

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1. Objective

The purpose of this paper is to present Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), describing its origins, development and principles, and to demonstrate how this method can be used in Religious Education in order to foster and facilitate the teaching-learning process.

2. Origins & Developments of NLP

NLP (Neuro-linguistic Programming) was developed in 1970 by John Grinder —whose background was in linguistics— and Richard Bandler —whose background was in mathematics and Gestalt therapy. They coined the term "Neuro-Linguistic Programming" to emphasize their belief that there is a connection between the neurological processes ("neuro"), language ("linguistic") and behavioral patterns that have been learned through experience ("programming"), and that these can be organized in order to achieve specific goals in life. In few words, we can say that NLP is a method of modeling how to manage our brain in order to achieve the goals we desire.

Grinder and Bandler were students at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where they started studying the work of Gestalt therapist Fritz Perls, and therapists Virginia Satir, Gregory Bateson, Milton Erickson and Alfred Korsybski. By studying the standards of excellence represented by these individuals, through videos and the spoken words, they worked out what strategies each should adopt in order to achieve excellence in their professional fields. In decoding these strategies, Grinder and Bandler sought to pass these standards of excellence on to other generations (Dilts, 1983).

As the popularity of NLP increased, a development group formed around the co-founders, including Judith DeLozier, Robert Dilts and Connirae Andreas, and which made important contributions to NLP. It is now an important field of study and has evolved considerably since its first beginnings.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) studies the structure of how humans think and experience the world. Obviously, the structure of something so subjective does not lend itself to precise, statistical formulae but instead leads to models expressing how these things work. From these models, techniques have been developed for quickly and effectively changing the thoughts, behaviors and beliefs that limit people.

NLP is about self-discovery, and provides a framework for understanding human experience and how to reach excellence in everything we do.

3. Two main Principles in NLP

NLP is founded on two fundamental presuppositions:

A. The map is not the territory

This principle, formulated first by Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950), a Polish-American

philosopher known for his work on semantics, states that our perception of reality is not the reality itself but our own version of it: our "map". Therefore, we do not interact directly with our world, but through the perceptual map of the world that we have created.

We cannot contain every bit of information that comes to us in the world, so we have to create a "map of the territory" (a representational system) and then refer to the map for our information. We experience the outside world only through our sensory representational systems, by seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, tasting. It is our "neuro-linguistic" maps of reality that determine how we behave and how we give meaning to the outside world.

No two people can have an identical map, and we cannot say that one map is more true than another one. But if we learn to recognize the structure of another person's map, then, we will be able to see the world though their eyes. This will lead us to understand and relate to others in a better way. In reality, each person responds to his/her own perception of reality.

So, one important concept in NLP is that by changing a person's map, we change their reality. Hence, we can say that NLP is a model of the mapping processes (Grinder & Bandler, 1980).

B. Life and mind are systemic processes

The second major principle of NLP is that our life and mind are "systemic processes". We do not exist as individuals alone. This means that there is a constant interaction between our mind and the world around us. In this interaction, we find a problem, we search for alternative solutions, and then we choose the best alternative that will decide our course of action. But what is important to realize is that if we are not getting the result we wish, then we must try other alternatives (Grinder & Bandler, 1980).

From these two principles, we can state the main conclusion of NLP: The people who are most effective are the ones who have a map of the world that allows them to perceive the greatest number of available choices and perspectives; hence, excellence comes from having many choices. According to this view, there are no "failures.", as such, only "feedback" information.

A consideration of the first principle of NLP leads us to recognize the existence of different ways of perceiving reality by people, *different kinds of learning*. To be aware of this can help us establish a better communicative or teaching process with others. And a consideration of the second principle of NLP leads us to recognize the importance of establishing *the best process of learning that will lead to success*. I will proceed to describe these two processes (numbers 4 & 5).

4. Different kinds of learning

According to NLP, our representational system is based on our five senses. We represent the world using the visual (images), auditory (sounds), kinesthetic (touch and internal feelings), gustatory (tastes) and olfactory (smells) senses. Our thinking is based on these images, sounds, feelings and usually to a lesser extent, tastes and smells. The entirety of our experiences is recreated through these senses in our memories and govern our capabilities and beliefs. The brain needs the senses in order to interpret reality; each person responds to his/her own perception, to his/her own internal cerebral representation.

Richard Bandler discovered that some people have a preference for learning by sight and called them *visual* learners. Others who use hearing as the preferred sense are known as *auditory* learners. And still others prefer touch or whole-body involvement in their learning and are called *kinesthetic* learners. In other words: *visual* learners learn best from what they see; *auditory* learners learn best from what they hear; and *kinesthetic* learners learn best from physical manipulation. A learning style is a preferred way of thinking, processing, and understanding information with our brain.

Now, our representational system is present or evident in our language. In fact, we communicate through a verbal language (what we say in words) and a non-verbal language (what we say in gestures, the movements of the hands, arms, legs, posture and the angle of the body, eye movement, and the tone, volume and speed of voice). (Ibarra, 2001)

By paying attention to the verbal and non-verbal language, it is possible, according to NLP, to identify each of the different kinds of learners.

A. Visual learning style

Visual learners can be identified by the following characteristics: they think primarily through images, whether static or dynamic; they tend to memorize images more easily, they are drawn more to colors and spatial relationships, they like order and organization; they feel the need to have clear goals and plans for achieving those goals; and they like to read, especially when the text includes images.

Other characteristics of visual learners are: they have in their brain a sort of movie about what they are learning, they build or recall images, and if these are in color even better, they like order and are well organized. They generally use words such as: "see", "observe," "look," "objective," "outlook," "clear," "perspective," that is, words that relate to images. And when they speak, they do so quickly and with a sharp pitch, holding their body very straight, gesturing rapidly in front of their face, moving at the speed of the words and breathing from the highest area of the lungs. (Ibarra, 2001)

When these characteristics have been identified, NLP suggests that teaching be based on student preference. For example, the teacher may use visual words; write the most important ideas on the blackboard so that they can be seen; give an overview of the topics covered; use visual technology such as photographs, image presentation, projection of movies, video, use puzzles, bulletin boards, colored letters with motivating phrases, encourage the use of diagrams, mind maps, and drawings, or make collages of images and magazine clippings. (Ibarra, 2001)

The teacher should begin with an overview of what will be covered in class; he/she must use colored markers, diagrams, summary tables, symbols and drawings to assist in the presentation. They can use visual gestures to support learning and change position while presenting the class. They should encourage visualizations through stories, meditation exercises, or simply ask for a drawing that sums up the previous class. That is, for a group of visual learners, the teacher must use everything that supports visual learning (Ibarra, 2001).

B. Auditory learning style

Auditory learners are characterized by a preference for learning through listening, and

have the ability to memorize better when they listen. They are easily distracted by noise, and listen to music and the tones used by the educator. They like speaking rhythmically and with harmony because they breathe from the middle of the lungs and therefore vocalize very well.

Usually they cross their arms in order to listening more attentively, their gestures are at the level of the ears and instead of using their eyes to see they tend to have their ear as the main focus. They speak with auditory words such as "listen," "hear," "silence," "murmur", "enjoyable conversation", "speak", "tell me", and so on. (Ibarra, 2001) They acquire knowledge by reading aloud, and they remember by verbalizing lessons to themselves. They like to read and listen to someone else reading; tone of voice is important to them.

When these characteristics are present, it is important that the teacher choose auditory words to communicate with them with a medium tone of voice and without speaking quickly. To facilitate auditory learning the teacher must change his/her tone of voice to emphasize what is important, make oral summaries and talk to their students about their achievements.

Use auditory gestures and ensure that students in some way repeat what they have heard in the presentation. Use motivating words that will allow auditory learners to more easily assimilate learning; similarly make up songs or speeches with the key concepts. The use of riddles and also anecdotes, biographies, and stories, will be key to learning. Music will also be important during learning, such as Baroque music, Mozart or even modern music. Music that has rhythm and is pleasant to listen to can be used as background music to accompany learning (Ibarra, 2001).

C. Kinesthetic learning style

Learners who are *kinesthetic* learn by using the senses of smell, taste and touch, and learn best by moving, doing and touching. They memorize better while walking, and like to feel close to people, touch things and also express themselves through touch.

They show coordination and rhythm and their bodies have good timing. Movement allows them to express themselves, since they learn better by doing. They speak using feeling-related words like "feel", "stress," "what a treat!", "how delicious", "smells good", "this is comfortable," "I love it." They can be alert but not for long. They touch people while they are talking and have tactile contact also with themselves. They point their finger while reading, and they express themselves with physical responses such as caresses or striking. Their gestures are performed from the chest down and the voice is low and husky. When they greet someone they come close to them and they bump into things more easily when walking because they do not have a highly developed visual sense (Ibarra, 2001).

They speak with their hands and with gestures; they remember what was done, but have difficulty recalling what was said or seen; they enjoy field trips and tasks that involve manipulating materials. They sit near where they can get up easily and move around. They communicate by touching and appreciate physically expressed encouragement, such as a pat on the back

Consequently, the teacher must be aware that a kinesthetic person has a greater need to experience the sense of touch in class, and can therefore with respect pat them on the back when they have succeeded. It is a good idea to use aromas (such as lavender) during lessons, and organize drama or theater that encourages students to move, express themselves and feel part of

the group. The teacher should speak using feeling-related words, using a serious tone and a slow speed, and should use touch with respect and facilitate sharing, interacting, and creating games that allow learning and research in groups. Have on hand items to touch like a ball for asking questions which they themselves can pass around the room, or simply change the shape of the room so they can move more easily (Ibarra, 2001).

D. A Comprehensive Teaching Approach

As NLP has identified these different types of learners, an important goal is to try to create a comprehensive or inclusive approach in the communication or teaching process. In fact, since any group of learners is likely to consist of members with different styles, the most effective lessons are those that include elements suited to each. The more senses involved, the easier learning becomes. A teacher must be expert at facilitating a rich sensory experience for students.

In fact, learners score higher on tests when learning in the way that fits their preferred style. That is why a religious educator must reach all learners by providing both variety and choice covering all different styles of learning.

5. The art of "rapport." or "empathy."

In order to be successful in the teaching learning process, good communication has to be established between the teacher and the student. "Rapport" means empathizing with others, being attuned to others. When people relate with each other, they unconsciously mirror each other's body language, adopt the same posture, gestures, breathing, etc., as thought they were one with the other person

When religious teachers tailor their teaching style according to the way students' brains represent images, sounds and sensations, this approach proves extremely successful. When teachers are empathetic with their students, they enter into real communication with them, beginning to speak the same language, i.e., mirroring their posture, words, gestures or even breathing. This powerful tool, called in NLP "rapport.", improves communication between student and teacher and makes learning more effective.

If we succeed in reflecting someone's body language, it creates bonds of neurological relationship establishing a climate of trust and harmony, and fosters a deep relationship when doing it with respect.

(Ibarra, 2001).

TABLE: Suggestions for establishing rapport during a group presentation.

Imitating verbal idioms :	Visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory
Imitating body language:	Eye movement, body posture, type of breathing, gestures

Imitating auditorily:	Tone of voice, volume, rhythm, word-emphasis, speed of talking
Mirroring feelings:	Any feeling
Matching thoughts:	Points of view, worldview, values and beliefs, focus of attention, objectives, strategies

Building rapport is an art that allows religious educators to relate in a more empathetic way to their group while still being themselves, and at the same time it enables them to understand and facilitate visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles. One practical piece of advice is to establish rapport and then add one's own style. In this sense, the word "and" or the word "also" or "besides" can be excellent words that allow the teacher to add whatever needs to be added. (Ibarra, 2001)

Rapport is like a dance where one leads and the other follows. If the person has picked up our lead, we know we are on our way to establishing a good relationship based on mutual respect. By matching posture, gestures, and voice tone, we send signals to the unconscious mind saying: "I am like you." Since we like people who are like ourselves, it is most important to be able to establish a good rapport in order to be successful in our communication with others, especially in the field of education.

We find how St. Paul makes use of the technique of "rapport" to present the essence of Christianity. In the Letter to the Philippians we read:

"Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born *in human likeness*." (Phil 2:5-7).

6. Conclusion

The awareness of the techniques and results of NLP will certainly enhance our teaching skills in the field of religious Education by enabling us to better communicate with our students.

NLP makes us aware of the uniqueness of each student in his/her individual style of learning, and the need to pay attention to the specific abilities of each student.

NLP makes us also aware of the fact that each person creates his/her own perception of reality and, by acting on this perception, we can help our students to obtain access to the achievement of excellence.

NLP calls our attention to the need to establish an adequate rapport with our students if we want to be able to communicate to them religious values that will help them to live their lives fully.

What I have described about NLP, is mainly that it is a method of learning through the

modeling process. That is evident in the way God has interacted and communicated with humanity. In particular, for the Christian believer, God has established an excellent "rapport" with humanity through the person of Christ. Indeed, Christ took our own flesh and communicated to us in our own language and in our own culture. By doing this, we discover that "Religion" is not something obscure or far away from our own daily life. Religious Education must be deeply involved and touch every aspect of our lives.

As NLP helps us to pay attention to the connection between our brain and the world around us, we learn better techniques for improving the teaching-learning process.

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