

Transcript: **Power to Persuade: The Story of NLP** (Radio 4, 29 November 2010)

Trailer: *Thousands claim Neuro Linguistic Programming has changed their lives, but what exactly is it and is there any evidence that it works? Journalist William Little takes a closer look.*

Introduction: Cutting edge pseudo science or neuroscience? Neuro Linguistic Programming has found its way into all walks of life from management coaching to psychotherapy but is it a powerful tool for change as its proponents claim? William Little looks at the evidence in *The Power to Persuade – The Story of NLP*.

Bradbury: “What I want you to do is to imagine yourself sitting in a cinema, an empty cinema, all on your own, so you’ve got the choice of where you actually sit and there’s going to be a film shown so when you look up at the screen you see a film, and the film is your hand with some pills in it and it’s coming up to your mouth and because you have certain feelings about this I want you to feel how you would be feeling not just something you’re looking at on the screen.”

Little: “That was NLP Practitioner Andy Bradbury trying to help me with my long-term fear of swallowing pills using a technique known as the Fast Phobia Cure. NLP or Neuro Linguistic Programming is a practice that is rapidly growing. Though you may not know it NLP has been adopted by some doctors, teachers, HR departments and even the police to improve their performance. It’s been called the science of success and many of its proponents claim it can produce dramatic life-changing results. I want to know if such grand claims stack up but first I need to pin down what exactly NLP is so I asked its co-creator, Richard Bandler, its definition.”

Bandler: “NLP is the study of subjective experience and, in particular, its’ models of successful behaviours. You take those models, you model successful behaviours and you teach other people to repeat it. It’s like a computer programme – there are good ones and bad ones – and if you look at the best pieces of all of them you can write a more elegant programme.

Little: “But getting to grips with that programme isn’t easy. Five years ago as a jobbing journalist I edited an NLP magazine and despite meeting many people who had said it had transformed their lives I was still left with questions. In this programme I’ll meet NLP sceptics and advocates and find out what it is, how it’s used and if there’s any good evidence it works.

Exchange between Fritz Perls and client:

Client: “You didn’t get to me!”

Perls: “Louder”

Client: “You didn’t get to me!”

Perls: “Louder”

Client: “You didn’t get to me!”

Perls: "Louder"

Little: "In 1960s California, Fritz Perls took up Gestalt Therapy, one of several new forms of psychological interventions that emerged around that time. A common theme to many of these was an attempt to find a shorter alternative to the long and often painful process of psychoanalysis."

David Pilgrim is Professor of Mental Health Policy at the University of Central Lancashire.

Pilgrim: "During the middle of the twentieth century, we got this move towards an emphasis on cost effectiveness, short term therapies, a direct attack on symptoms so, for instance, a model like NLP really nestles within a wider movement which would include cognitive analytic therapy, cognitive behaviour therapy, Gestalt, solution focused therapy – there were many many models."

Little: "The seeds of NLP were sown in the 1970s when Richard Bandler, a student at the University of California, Santa Cruz, started to observe the work of the successful family therapist, Virginia Satir."

Bandler: "It was one of those quirky things where I lived in a house that was owned by a psychiatrist and he knew Virginia Satir. I kept asking her what she did and of course her explanation sounded absolutely ludicrous to me. You know, she kept on talking about parts of people and I'd go, like "Your foot!" and she'd go "No, parts of their personality". And I'd go "Your personality comes in pieces!" – I'd never heard that! She finally said, "Well, why don't you come and see what I do?" so I drove her and she went and did something. Within a few moments I was able to write calculus to the point I could predict what she was going to say."

Little: "The way therapists like Satir used language to build rapport with clients was something Bandler played close attention to and would go on to form the basis of NLP."

Bandler: "We understand our language without knowing how we do it - there are mathematical rules to language - and so I started out mapping with Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir just their linguistic patterns to show that it was predictable so that people could actually start asking questions in that way and as I started teaching I met John Grinder who was a transformational grammarian. When we began it was a fun time because we were experimenting – we had lots of students who would come in and volunteer to be guinea pigs, basically!"

Little: "Richard Bandler and John Grinder observed - or to use the NLP term modelled - these top therapists, Virginia Satir, Gestalt founder Fritz Perls and hypnotherapist called Milton Erikson. In doing so, they distilled something which they thought was even more powerful."

Bandler: "Psychotherapists were mostly in denial. There were 160 schools screaming they had the right approach when none of them could systematically get a single result so it was fertile ground to have a good time. And soon we got result-driven and started measuring what we did by whether or not it got results. We chose phobias originally to begin with because it was so testable".

Little: "Lucky then I've got a phobia for Andy Bradbury to test out my fear of swallowing pills"

Bradbury: "I want you to think now very carefully how does the film start, what happens and when do you stop it OK I want you to take that film now, start from the beginning again but this time run it through twice as fast as it was when you first looked at it right now Now start it through from the beginning and run it through five times as fast Now I'm going to make a noise the next time you do it so fast that when I tell you to start, it's going to go SWISH!"

Little: "Maybe Andy has cured me what I won't know for sure because I'm still too anxious to try. Like many people when work gets interesting I have trouble getting to sleep straight away. Maybe NLP can help with that. This time I met a medical professional, GP, Dr Natheer Interasan, who as well as working in a busy North London practice has also found time to be an NLP Master Practitioner.

Interasan: "Getting yourself nice and comfortable

Little: "I'm lying on the floor – on a BBC carpet – the height of luxury ..."

Interasan: "So you're focusing on that point above you – just maybe say out loud five visual things you're aware of one after the other with your eyes still up there."

Little; "I can see the window of the studio, I can see Cathy"

GP: "Because of the way I work in the NHS as a GP I like to teach patients techniques they can take away and use. This is a highly effective technique"

GP: "Any sounds?"

Little: "My breathing, there's a hum in the room"

GP: "If you look at what Neuro Linguistic Programming is, it's about Neuro – using your sensory system – the visual, auditory, kinaesthetic system - to program your subconscious mind."

GP: "If you just want to do it slowly to allow your focus to just move gently from one to the other"

Little: "Both Andy and Nathira focused on my senses – visual, auditory and kinaesthetic – which is what NLP calls the senses of touch and movement. I'm not being very scientific here doing these techniques in a cramped BBC studio and it's probably not the best way to test them but I was interested to see what mainstream psychology would make of these sessions so I played them to Peter Kinderman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Liverpool."

Kinderman: "I live near Hebden Bridge up in West Yorkshire, you see. Up in Hebden Bridge there are lots of people who wave crystals over you and there are signs – I'd nearly go as far to say as – "Has your GP told you you've got cancer? So why don't you hold this amethyst and it will go away." You think, well, you know, not terribly kosher therapeutic techniques, I wonder if NLP is the same but no it wasn't – the techniques that were used on you for insomnia and for phobias were perfectly

reasonable – they just seemed to be slightly random. I couldn't see the coherent scientific rationale of why they were being incorporated into a formulation driven therapy – and I think that's where NLP kind of goes wrong really, in that there are some nice ideas there but unlike the mainstream psychological therapies the evidence base is lacking.”

Little: “The internet is awash with evangelical testimonials with the good NLP does and there’s no doubt that many people believe that NLP has helped them in all sorts of ways but anecdotes aside lack of scientific evidence has so far prevented NLP being embraced by mainstream psychology. In the 1980s when NLP was still in its infancy, psychologist Dr Michael Heap reviewed some research on one of its claims.”

Heap: “The thing I was particularly interested in as a psychologist were the claims about the use of language and how language is reflected in the way we move our eyes from left to right, and up and down. And I wondered whether anyone had actually bothered to do any research on what they were claiming and sure enough there were quite a few research projects coming out testing these claims. Now on balance these research projects did not support the NLP models.”

Little: “Although these were reviews of studies done over twenty years ago, Michael Heap is quoted, even today, by people wanting to label NLP as just another pseudo-science. But is that fair? Richard Bandler is certainly keen to stress the scientific approach of NLP, particularly his work with submodalities where you increase or decrease the intensity of mental pictures, sounds or feelings to bring about a change for the better.”

Bandler: “We were very methodical about everything we did. We took groups of people with claustrophobia and jammed them into MRIs and taped them down and looked at what their brains looked like. And we studied every innovation in the field of neurology to find out how the motorcortex functions in relation to the hormone system and the enzyme system and how neurotransmitters work. Every year the neuroscientists come back and give me more information and I relate it to behaviours and how they function and how they work that studying the relationship between the function of submodalities, you know, the difference between the submodalities and sound, and the submodalities in the visual system and the submodalities in the variety of kinaesthetic systems with the advent of understanding the enteric nervous system [commonly known as the "second brain"]. We know that what people call feelings actually has a whole brain of its own. The relationship between the neurology that functions between your intestines and your solid organs is as sophisticated as the neocortex works and understanding how to consciously manipulate these things helps people to be able to make their lives so they function better and more efficiently”.

Little: “You’re using very impressive scientific terminology there but I was under the impression”

Bandler: “You can look it up – I didn’t make it up!”

Little: “I believe you but I was under the impression that when NLP was developed in the late 70's there was a movement that was quite anti the scientific process in the way”

Bandler: "Well, it's not anti scientific process – I went heads to heads with social scientists, and my joke is you can get over all social diseases including social science. They were hung up on a model called statistics, they made every poor psychologist to get his degree do statistics and quite honestly I've never had a client walk through the door that needed statistics. They don't need to change three out of four times, they need to change now and the person with a phobia of elevators isn't phobic a percentage of the time, they're phobic all the time, and over the years I've developed technologies to teach people to control their brain so they can alter their internal response and grow new cortical pathways.

Little: "I asked Peter Kinderman as a clinical psychologist what he made of the neurology underpinning NLP. "

Kinderman: "In some ways NLP says things which cannot possibly be criticised so, you know, we learn using neurological processes – well of course we do! So there is a link between neurological processes, language and behavioural patterns that have been learned through life. I mean of course we use neurological processes to learn, of course we communicate with people using language and of course those language patterns and those neurological processes that we use to guide us through life are shaped by our experiences. Life could not be anything other than that but that's not quite the same as having a detailed theory about human emotions."

Little: "As yet the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) doesn't recognise NLP training on its own as the basis for accreditation but as a developing field NLPt or Neuro Linguistic Psychotherapy has been trying to set professional standards and its own professional body is a member organisation of the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). I asked Lisa Wake, a neuro linguistic psychotherapist about the difference between NLP and NLPt.

Wake: "NLP Psychotherapy is about the provision of psychotherapy using the principles, in other words, the ways of thinking which is encouraged in NLP, that is, the attitudes, an attitude of being curious about a therapy client as opposed to being judgemental about them. It's about using and utilising some of the tools and techniques within a therapeutic framework".

Little: "So being a therapist, just neuro linguistic programming, isn't enough?"

Wake: "Not for me, it isn't. Some of the issues that come up, I think because I'm an adviser and work on behalf of ANLP in a voluntary capacity for some of their complaints processes, I tend to hear the stuff that's unuseful rather than the stuff that's useful, and well-meaning NLPers will provide interventions to individuals who have psychological distress or disturbance at varying levels and those individuals actually end up in a more difficult or uncomfortable or challenged place because of those interventions by a well meaning NLP Practitioner or Master Practitioner."

Little: "I wanted to know whether Richard Bandler also thought NLP could be harmful in some cases. He rejected the idea particularly in light of what he perceived to be the damage done to patients over the decades by the mental health system".

Bandler: "What they don't like is that that there are lots of people out there getting lots of success and we're not using their techniques".

Little: "You sound quite angry when you"

Bandler: "I'm pissed off to tell you the truth – this is a field that has screwed with people for three generations that I know of. They've locked people up, they've drugged people up, they've abused people mentally, they've had people beating pillows and humiliating themselves and they're telling me my techniques are dangerous! I've had to repair their work for four decades! This should be fun and learning should be fun and this is what we should be teaching people. I teach my paranoid schizophrenics how to enjoy overcoming their fears."

Little: "So the idea that there could be any set of standards"

Bandler: "There should be standards, the standards should be set by everybody and the standards should be "Is my client better today than they were yesterday?"

Little: "But some people are unscrupulous...."

Bandler: "But what ...?"

Little: "Some people are unscrupulous, some people are making a lot of money out of ..."

Bandler: "You know there are people who sell cars who are unscrupulous."

Little: "Well interestingly I did actually drive a car that was bad and reported them to the trading standards and if I went to see an NLP Practitioner who sent me psychotic I wouldn't know who to go to. Maybe you, maybe I could go to you".

Bandler: "I'll go get your money back – in a heartbeat, let's see if the psychologists and the therapists could actually set standards for themselves then they can talk about my work".

Little: "NLP has sometimes been compared with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or CBT, a treatment often used in mainstream mental health care. They were both developed around the same time but there's one big difference – CBT has a large body of conventional research to support its claims while NLP does not."

CBT Spokesperson: "I would like to think that psychologists and psychiatrists who practise psychological therapies remain continuously linked to the developing scientific theoretical evidence base so that the techniques they use get integrated with newer and other techniques as the theory develops. If NLP Practitioners were more linked to scientific methodology of clinical psychology I think that applying the scientific method to some of the ideas of NLP could be very productive."

Little: "Imagine that CBT wasn't put through the academic system to accumulate evidence, could you imagine what CBT would be like today?"

CBT Spokesperson: “I think it would look very much like NLP. There would be a combination of techniques that are effectively placebo – visualisation or self-affirmatory statements can fit into that category – so people feel really good but it didn’t really change their lives. There would be a few techniques that worked like graded exposure and possibly Socratic questioning of negative automatic thoughts would be really effective but if CBT hadn’t been through the academic and scientific process, if it wasn’t still embedded between those clear links of theory and practice then I think it would be a bit of a scatter gun.”

Bandler: “NLP is not a form of therapy, it’s not a self-help tool – I look at **NLP as an evolutionary tool** and that people who are really doing NLP as opposed to people who are just using it for self-help things are the people who are exploring how to improve the educational system, they’re coming up with ways to make the **best of people better**. I think the best thing NLP offers is how to optimise athletes, how to optimise artists, how to get business men to function more efficiently. It does a lot of what psychotherapy was supposed to because we don’t look at people as being broken but we look at them as **people who could learn if given the right tools**”.

Little: “Maybe it’s unfair to concentrate on whether NLP has the approval needed for health services funding. But Bandler mentioned education and as it happens education is an area where research is attempting to underpin practice.

Teacher 1: “It’s the first time as a teacher I’ve ever been at an NLP conference.”

Teacher 2: “As an advanced skills teacher some of the buzz words going around”

Teacher 3: “I’m hoping I’m going to be able to use the techniques I learn today in my teaching to become a more effective teacher, hopefully to reduce the stress levels a little bit by using NLP”.

Teacher 4: “I see the benefit in NLP in encouraging better classroom practice but also for myself as a leader in influencing other people”.

Little: “How important do you think NLP is in influencing classroom practice?”

Teacher 4: “It’s another strategy that adds to a range of strategies that teachers should be aware of.”

Churches: “As I said to many people before I don’t train NLP, I’m a teacher. I’m fascinated by NLP and other things because it’s so practical”.

Little: “Richard Churches isn’t your average Richard Bandler or John Grinder devotee – he’s never met either of the co-founders and works for the resolutely mainstream charity, CfBT Education Trust which run the fast-track teacher training on behalf of the government. “

Churches: “It was one of many many things we trialled with teachers – it just happened to be the thing that teachers said was useful and practical and they could take away and use tomorrow in the classroom”.

Teacher 5: “Today in this lesson we’re going to be thinking about this word – responsibility – [Class shout back RESPONSIBILITY]. Who can tell us what this word means? Chantelle?”

Chantelle: “Like if your friend’s in a fight you’re going to try take responsibility for your actions.”

Little: “Surrey Square School in South London is a fun place to learn. After experiencing this first hand in the classroom I met headteacher Liz Robinson to find out what part NLP played in the school success.”

Robinson: “So I first came across NLP as part of the fast track training programme and that was partly looking at how you could develop yourself as an individual, how you could learn to manage your state when it’s very stressful and all those things and also looking at NLP to support a range of different training techniques”.

Little: “Which NLP techniques do you think are useful for teachers?”

Robinson: “I think it’s not just about techniques in NLP - I think it’s more about approaches which are more helpful so one of the most important things I’ve taken from NLP and worked with the teachers on is the use of language so there are certain key words that hold in them a whole load of presuppositions so a good example is ‘BUT’. If I say to you “That was a really good piece of work BUT next time you need to do this ...” Our brain finds it very difficult to process the complement that was the first part because our brain has negated it. If I say the same sentence to you with the word AND instead, you process that in an entirely different way, “So that was a really nice piece of writing AND next time I’d like you to do this” So that is a really simple example and is a way we’ve worked with the staff to find ways to offer feedback and comments to children to have the intention we mean and not that our language lets us down.”

Little: “You had an outstanding OFSTED report and in the report it said the core values are modelled from the top and shared by everyone. Is that an example of NLP working in practice?”

Robinson: “Absolutely, I mean I wouldn’t give all the credit to NLP because the point is it was myself and the staff who have done those things. Undoubtedly, NLP enhanced what we were already doing and gave us the confidence and some additional techniques and skills to see through our vision of making this an outstanding learning community.”

Churches: “This month the first large-scale randomised control trial investigating NLP in the classroom has begun in Sussex and essentially the learners will be tested in a single level Maths test at the beginning of the research and at the end of the research. There will be teachers who have been trained in NLP language patterns and teachers who haven’t and there will be proper control groups as well so that we can unpack some of the things that are going on and of course as with any experimental design we don’t really know what the outcome will be.”

Little: “To me that sounded like the kind of research government and funding bodies might take seriously but it didn’t sound like the kind of research Richard Bandler would like. I was right!”

Bandler: "They're trying to test it the way any good social psychologist would."

Little: "So how would you test it?"

Bandler: "By cutting everything – well I would test it totally differently. I would build a new school from the ground up – that's how I would test it and I would take lots of the kids that are doing badly at school and lots of the kids that are doing good at school and I'd mix them all up together in a new formula and I'd get rid of the grade level notion and I'd make a race to the end of the education system to find out how fast how many of these kids take to hit the cross line."

Little: "I don't know how well that would go down with the Department of Education, yet there's something about Bandler, his charisma, his passion, his wild ideas that clearly effects people deeply. Could it be the strength of his personality rather than the techniques he helped develop that have made him and NLP so successful?"

Professor David Pilgrim: "We do know that after thirty or forty years of research into the relationship between process and outcome in psychological therapy that the best predictor of outcome is the quality of the working relationship. That's more important than the model adopted by a therapist so that bit of evidence is really quite important and the reason that's important is that for NLP and other models based on techniques – or bags of tricks – is that it tends to displace the emphasis on the working relationship but the caution is that models do matter and the reason for that is we also know that adherence to a model provides consistency, reliability and trustworthiness in the relationship so what's sometimes called treatment fidelity or programme fidelity is important but it's actually important because it builds up a good relationship."

Bandler: "It's not a person NLP - it's an activity."

Little: "There's quite a lot of research saying that it's actually the relationship that's more important than any techniques used .."

Bandler: "Yeah, prostitutes say the same thing."

Little: "But you come across as a charismatic man so maybe you're so successful because you're an excellent therapist."

Bandler: "Boy, that's really desperate – that's so desperate! Excuse me, oh well, it's just your personality, it's not the technology you've been teaching to people for forty decades – well then it must be that all the people doing well with it, it must just be their personality!"

Little: "But personalities do count in NLP. The guru-like status of people Bandler and co-founder John Grinder have led to intense rivalry between different societies and associations running NLP courses. It seems that who you're trained by is more important than the research base and the fight over legitimacy goes straight to the top."

Bandler: "There are people doing NLP who are exquisite. Every year they get more training – we call them licensed trainers and licensed Master Practitioners."

Little: "Who are they licensed by?"

Bandler: "They are licensed by the Society which is something I set up many years ago. Now there are lots of people who say they are NLP Practitioners – they have a certificate in their office that say they are NLP Practitioners but if it doesn't say Licensed Practitioner then all they really need to qualify for that is a printer."

Little: "Michael Carroll works closely with John Grinder, the other founder of NLP."

Carroll: "NLP was created by two people, so you know, John Grinder certifies trainers through the International Trainers Academy. Those trainers can issue certificates to their participants through the ITA signed in ink by John Grinder, just as in the same way as the Society of NLP certificates are signed in ink by Richard Bandler. So to be properly trained in NLP you have to attend a good course – I'd say a course is a little bit more authentic if it is by one of the co-creators of NLP because you're actually connecting with one of the creators in NLP or it's run by somebody who has been endorsed or certified by one of the co-creators of NLP."

Little: "Yet there is something more to Bandler than ownership of NLP training – a strong anti-establishment message runs through his ideas. If nothing else, he and John Grinder have freed a group of psychological techniques from the medical profession and let everyone have access to them in books and seminars."

Bandler: "I'm not in the business of deciding how your government spends money. That's not my job. My job is to create new techniques that do things, to test them to make sure that they work and to teach them to the people who want to learn them. No-one is required to learn anything I teach and nobody is required to go to anybody who teaches what I teach. There is no obligation. The government can't force you to go to a neurolinguistic programmer and have them work with you. That's why I won't let governments have my intellectual property rights because I don't want this enforced or done by governments."

Little: "Libertarian ideas aside Bandler says that he created NLP scientifically but is the guru in him stronger than the scientist? You say that you're interested in 'what works' so what's the problem with researchers and scientists trying to find out what works in NLP?"

Bandler: "I have no problem with it – I just don't like the fact they're trying to measure what works and they're going about it in an idiotic way. Here, four decades and no-one has ever asked me when they do research about my work. Doesn't that strike you as a little odd? The more you look at how they construct these research projects, they're not researching what they think they're researching. As a mathematician, we use modelling to do that. We study behaviour, we build a calculus that represents it and then compute what other things would be there. That's how we extend the range of what we know and social scientists don't use that model."

Little: "If Richard Bandler continues to reject the social science model then it's hard to see how his brand of NLP can be reconciled with mainstream psychology. It will still be available for self-help in the home but the scientific world is increasingly trying to put NLP on a surer footing, whether Bandler likes it or not. With leaders in psychology and education increasingly putting NLP to the test under scientific method it won't be long before we know how effective it really is. Will it disappear completely or become an evidence based therapy, like CBT. With that kind of knowledge NLP could look very different in the years ahead."