Effective methods of learning and teaching: a sensory approach

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Abstract

The premise from which we started our study implies that the best impact of teaching is represented by the involvement of the main sensory systems. Thus, the person who learns has to see what he learns (maps, graphics), has to hear what he learns (the teacher’s voice) and has to experiment what he learns (by practice). Our point of view is that the favourite sensory system determines the learning style. In order to be efficient, education should represent a multisensory experience because what motivates learning is feeling in a good mood. A challenge that we will develop in the following lines.

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1. Introduction

The two American researchers who provided the bases for the science of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) – namely Richard Bandler and John Grinder - defined neuro-linguistic programming as being “...the ability to master the feelings that you live by controlling your own brain” and “...the study of human excellence and the way in which it can be reproduced” (Szekely, 2003). NLP denotes that a person is a whole mind-body system, with systematic, patterned connections between neurological processes (neuro), language (linguistic) and learned behavioural strategies (programming) (Dilts, Grinder, Bandler & DeLozier, 1980).

According to Robert Dilts, "The primary approach of NLP has been to model effective behaviours and the cognitive processes behind them. The NLP modelling process involves finding out how the brain is operating by analysing language patterns and non-verbal communication. The results of this analysis is then put into step-by-step strategies or programs that may be used to transfer the skill to other people and areas of application" (Dilts, 1998). Therefore, "...while NLP is often perceived as a "technology" - a working practice comprising a collection of frameworks, tools and techniques - originally it was developed as a means of understanding how people process information, construct meaning schemas, and perform skills to achieve results" (Tosey & Mathison, 2006).

The expression, NLP, contains three simple and, at the same time, fundamental ideas. Hence, “neuro” refers to the nervous system, the mental ways of the five senses through which we can see, hear, feel, taste and smell, “linguistic” refers to our capacity to use a specific verbal and nonverbal language which reflects our mental worlds, while “programming” is a borrowed term from informatics to show that our feelings and actions can be modified by
Undoubtedly, NLP is preoccupied with the way in which the thoughts, emotions, internal experiences and behaviour of the individual are organised and articulated. The theory which neuro-linguistic programming is founded on refers to the fact that the information that we accumulate throughout our life is imprinted with the aid of the synaptic connections of the neurons. Subsequently, this is stored in the subconscious, and can be accessed at anytime through language. It is interesting that this deposit of information can be modified or re-programmed, hence the term neuro-linguistic programming (Iordănescu, 2006). The conclusion that can be drawn is that NLP is an epistemology; it is not permitted to make important decisions, nor is it permitted to offer the comfort of the right way. In exchange, it offers the opportunity to explore in the sense that it offers a set of instruments which helps an individual find the way. It is up to us to select and explore these ways, be they comfortable, challenging or hopeful.

In a technical, fragmented society, which does not have that adjustment between “the exterior emanations and the interior emanations”, the individual has the task of developing his personal culture, in the sense of the ethical environment in which he can use his instruments (DeLozier and Grinder, 1987).

The fundamental observation of NLP refers to the fact that every person develops his own representation system, through which he perceives the environment. The sensory channel on which a person relies predominantly shows the favourite representational system. Efficient communication implies being on the same “wavelength” with our interlocutor, agreeing with him, answering in “his own language”, namely using his communication channel in order to finally create a relationship with him. When we have a predominantly sensory system, it is preferably to show flexibility and to adjust to the other’s sensory system. A classic example is that of a couple who fight over the fact that their flat is untidy. The man is a visual individual, sensitive to the aesthetic aspect, and consequently, when he sees a messy space, it drives him mad, unlike the woman who favours tactile input. Her communication channel is different from that of her partner, and that is why she does not understand his point of view (Juès, 2006). The visual disorder does not bother her. In this case, he needs to modify his language so that it is on the same “wavelength” as her partner, as in the example: “What would you feel if you sat in a bed full of small crumbs?” By exchanging the sensory register from the visual to the kinaesthetic, communication becomes efficient.

The direct result of the process of creating a positive contact is known in NLP under the name of relationship. When two persons discuss we often notice that they have similar attitudes, respectively the posture, mimesics and gestures blend, and, in some situations, even some elements of the paraverbal (tone, volume, rhythm etc.) match. They complete mutually and when one stops the other one continues. If one of the two persons modifies his volume, rhythm or posture, the other person will do the same. It is what in NLP is known under the name of leading, respectively pacing, the two components of the relationship. In order to enter a relationship with a person we must find common elements, according to the proverb: “Birds of a feather flock together”.

In the educational system and not only, establishing a good relationship between the teacher and the student is an absolutely compulsory condition, because what stimulates learning is good mood. A suggestive example is offered in this direction (Liesse and Lassus, 2004): “One day when I finished my classes, I saw a student crouched, in the street, near a motorcycle. On his right side, on the street, parts which he had removed were strung. Everything was in order, which initially led me to lecture him. Then I remembered about the importance of harmonization before the intervention. So I started asking questions about the role of the pieces on the street. After a few verbal exchanges and establishing the strong connection that is frequently referred to in NLP, I said: I notice that, in order to fix your motorbike, you arranged the pieces in an order which, of course, is convenient to you... His answer came as a nice surprise: Thank you, madam, for the supplementary lesson you offered to me. I understood!”

What we have to understand from this example is the importance of physical and verbal timing, which, in its turn, will determine a positive interaction which is beneficial to its development. As we can see from the example presented, the simple harmonization, closer to the interlocutor’s language, facilitates building a strong connection presented previously. Harmonization is accomplished in relation to the sensory systems, visual (notice, arrange, pieces, order) and kinaesthetic (convenient). The proof of this harmonization materializes in the answer received. Establishing an optimal relation implies, in the first stage, the interlocutor’s calibration, observation of his verbal and nonverbal clues (the words used, the details of the face and of the body, gestures, position), respectively physical and verbal timing with him, using the same language, especially the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic expressions, in the next stage.
2. Research design

This paper presents the design of the sensory research regarding the effective methods of learning and teaching. The main objective of this study is to evaluate the efficiency of sensory systems, channels of communication, in the learning and teaching process.

2.1. The research hypothesis

The premise from which our study starts refers to the fact that the best impact of teaching represents the involvement of the main sensory systems.

2.2. Description of concepts and variables

The fundamental observation of NLP refers to the fact that, with regard to each sense that a person owns (sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste) we have a favourite communication channel, which is the basis of our system of the representation of reality. NLP appeals especially to the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic systems – namely the VAK system – as proposed by Bandler and Grinder (Bandler & Grinder, 1982). Thus, a person can have a perception of the world and implicitly, a form of expressing of what he sees, which emphasizes visual information, another person can be focused on the auditory system, while another person can use the kinaesthetic system, which favours tactile, gustatory and olfactory sensations. The language that we use represents the expression of the way in which we think. Every person has his own way of thinking (Knight, 2004). Respectively, these are:

- **visual**, which means that a person thinks in images; ideas, memories and thoughts are represented as mental images (for example, the image of a cup of coffee);
- **auditory**, which implies that a person thinks in sounds. These can be voices or noises, rustles, etc. (for example, the sound produced by coffee when it is poured into a cup);
- **kinaesthetic/sensitive**, the person “thinks” in sensations, either internal emotions, or physical touch. Here we can include taste and smell (such as the taste of the coffee or its flavour). Accordingly, when we understand the nature of these representations, we will be able to influence the way in which we think, communicate our emotions and implicitly both our own and the others’ experience. We are what we think.

The question that is asked is the following: **How can we manage to identify the interlocutor’s sensory channel?**

In this case, the answer resides in identifying the “predicates”, respectively the verbs and the expressions used preferentially by every person, according to the sensory communication channel. The sensory system also acts language of personal experience, through words and sentences which correspond to the favourite sensory system.

2.3. Participants

We have used demonstratively **the sensory perception test** envisaged by Catherine Cudicio (Cudicio, 2006), aimed to indicate the predominant system of sensory representation (Falzett, 1981), specific to a certain category of persons (Şurubaru, 2004).

2.4. Methodology

The test was applied to a number of 35 subjects (a group of students from the Communication and Public Relations section) in order to establish the clues of the predominant system of sensory representation and implies responding to a set of 15 questions, compared with a grid assuming a four-choice answer: A, B, C or D. As a result of applying the test, the subjects opted for one of the four choices, which correspond to the four items that quantify the directions of **sensory perception**, namely: **visual**, **auditory**, **kinaesthetic** and **interior dialog**.
3. Results and discussions

From the statistics and the interpretation of the test results, we can draw the following findings. Firstly, from the *quantitative point of view* (statistics), the 35 students did not respect the initial requirement of the questionnaire to choose only for one of the choices, sometimes they circled two or even three choices within the same question. This results from the final statistical situation, which reveals that the overall number of the answers distributed on the four directions is bigger than the number of the subjects questioned, namely 35 subjects and 44 answers, which means that a number of 9 subjects is at the limit of two tendencies, more often being both visual and auditory (they checked two out of three choices within the same question). Secondly, from the *qualitative point of view*, the interpretation of the quantitative aspects mentioned above suggests the subjects’ indecision and the impossibility to choose only for one dominant choice, which shows that, in certain aspects, two types of sensory perception are combined, existing a relation of complementarity and not one of exclusion, thus the possibility of different individuals with totally different reactions within the same state (Petrovici, 2009).

The analysis of the questionnaires shows that approximately 48% of the subjects are predominantly visual, 25% auditory, 16% interior dialog and 11% kinaesthetic. Mainly, these results are according to the general order of results already known, with the mention that, within absolute values, the share of the persons tested is smaller than 80% (Andronic, 2009). This situation can be explained naturally by the fact that the subjects tested are students of the Communication and Public Relations specialization, where the method of communication is predominantly verbal, thus auditory. This fact balances the general predominance of the visual communicative behaviour.

The practical conclusions which are drawn from applying the test suggest that the didactic-communicative strategies which appear to be the most profitable for the efficiency of the communication with students from communication and Public Relations specialization are the ones in which the auditory system (based on lectures, discussions, debates etc.) – for which they are trained predominantly – is permanently accompanied by the visual system (backed up by images, plastic representations etc.). Even if a range of 35 subjects does not allow pertinent conclusions, but at least suggestions/indicative observations, the results obtained open directions of actions both on the plan of future measures, and on the plan of empirical research. Beyond the indicative aspects of the research, a firm conclusion can be nevertheless stated regarding what makes situations be different from one situation to another. It is about the subjects’ different psycho-behavioural particularities, respectively modifying the assessment/communication context, on the one hand, by correlating it with three possible alternatives: cultural frame, natural frame or combining the two situations. By correlating the indicative conclusions with the firm ones, the test justifies the fact that its application and interpretation permit stating some practical strategies of optimization the didactic communication.

The maximum efficiency of communication is accomplished by the synesthesia of the means of sending messages, in which – according to its content – the visual practices (non-verbal, for example) are adequately correlated with those emotional (paralinguistic including: silence, accents, voice modulations etc.), respectively with the emotional ones, which allow the continuance of receiving explicitly the meaning sent linguistically through emotional strategies possible to interiorize, and – as an ultimate gesture of conviction – the tactile act: shaking the hand, a symbolic touch etc.

Displaying the type of predominant reaction at the individual or group level allows a more efficient (non)verbal interaction with the receiver taken into consideration, through: miming his behaviour by the issuer, to create a communicative state of empathy; the use of the type of language (visual, auditory, tactile, conceptual) adequate to the receiver’s dominant characteristics, in order to accomplish a maximum communicative opening; the possibility of accomplishing some predictions of the receiver’s type of behavioural reactions to the context, to stimulate it, so that the performance of the communicative act be best sustained by the environment.

4. Conclusions

Identifying our interlocutor’s sensory preferences represents an important step in establishing an optimal interpersonal relationship and, implicitly, efficient communication. It has been proven that almost 80% of people think in images, which does not exclude the possibility of thinking in other representation systems (Iordanescu, 2006). Therefore, those persons oriented to the visual system use words and expressions that illustrate this language (landscapes, images, photos, perspectives, whole pictures, vision, etc.), the persons oriented to the auditory channel will use a characteristic language (sounds, music, voices, tranquillity, silence, frequencies, flows, noise, etc.), while
the persons oriented to the kinaesthetic channel will appeal to a language of sensations, feeling and emotions (contact, touch, feel, pleasure, pressure, aggression, anger, pain, sweet, sour, taste etc.).

In the learning process, building a good relationship is an extremely important aspect for the capitalization of communication and accomplishment of the envisaged objectives. Physical and verbal harmonization represents a decisive factor in this direction. Creating an interactive environment, beneficial to the learning process, stimulating creativity, cultivating respect, establishing a balance between speaking and listening are elements that ensure the efficiency of this process. These aspects guide and control the communication process, determining the public to be receptive, interested and motivated, involving it in a harmonious and constructive interaction. At the same time, the attention must be focused on details related to language, to the sensory systems implied in the learning process, selecting the predominant communication channels and using them efficiently for the anchoring of the learning process. The relationship represents a fundamental premise of an efficient communication because success in communication is ensured by the relationship and, by comparison, failure is determined by its lack.

The capacity of learning a good relationship becomes fundamental for the efficiency of this approach. The difference that makes a difference resides in the efficiency of the actions performed (Koch, 2000).

Our point of view is that education must represent a multisensory experience because the process of learning is accomplished with the aid of an amount of factors which interact and sustain mutually. In order to be efficient, it must combine usefulness with pleasure, to (re)create an efficient interaction which is benefic to the educational process, through a sensory approach. It regards a mirror process which implies at least two major aspects. On the one hand, developing sensory accurateness, imagination and creativity, selecting and anchoring the proper emotional state, inducing states of curiosity and interest, behavioural flexibility, namely exploring the best learning potential by identifying the predominant sensory systems in the educational act and, implicitly, of the main learning style, changing the perspective and adjusting to the specific of the situation (reframing), approaching differently the methods and strategies used, taking into consideration certain impact factors, for instance: target audience, message, context, aim, finally, on the other hand. Exploring the maximum potential and identifying the most efficient stimulating methods must represent a reference point and, at the same time, a source and a resource for each of us. An invitation which remains open to new challenges.

References