

# Richard Churches



## To research, or not to research? That's a good question!

**Richard Churches, Principal Consultant at CfBT Education Trust and researcher in the School of Management at the University of Surrey offers some reflections on where neuro-linguistic programming is at the moment and the challenges it faces in becoming recognised as a serious field for academic research.**

In an interesting article in the Times Educational Supplement recently, Michael Heap made the following observations about NLP. To summarise: it is not mainstream psychology, some of it is just common sense and finally, that much of it is completely unproven. As someone closely involved in the development of research into NLP and its effectiveness you might be surprised to hear that I am not unsympathetic to Michael's positions. In fact, to be completely honest, you don't have to get very far into an NLP research project to begin to become a bit dismayed about the vast inconsistencies that exist in NLP. Take a few of your NLP books off the shelf and compare what is and what isn't in the Milton model – not to mention what is considered a generalisation, deletion or distortion. Just this aspect of NLP alone, the fact that it has been a largely oral tradition for the last 30 years and a 'community of practice', provides enough ammunition for the critical academic to dismiss NLP. Of course, this doesn't mean that the principles of presupposition and suggestive language don't work.

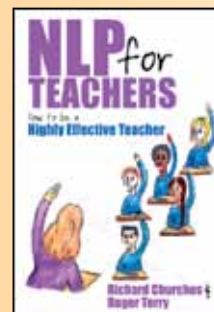
This said, the real issues for NLP are deeper than that. Much of NLP is a collection of approaches to indirect and covert influence that were modelled from ethical fields of study such as family therapy and hypnotherapy. Therefore NLP needs to begin to address the paradox of being an area of study that understands aspects of suggestive language and indirect influence and at the same time one that sees itself as being an ethical field. Before I elaborate on this, I should acknowledge the fact that I would be a hypocrite to suggest that anyone delivering NLP shouldn't use effective structures to build audience response potential, or use positive presuppositions in the books that they write. The point, however, is this (and it is both principled as well as pragmatic) when you begin to look at some NLP techniques from a research perspective you have to begin to ask whether it is the tool or technique that is really being effective or whether it is the language and presuppositions that surround it that are having an effect. These types of questions, which quickly begin to emerge when you start designing a research project using NLP, are challenging and require an answer. In my view it is no longer good enough to just say that NLP 'is what works'.

So is it all 'bleak' on the NLP research front? ... far from it. In the last two years there have been two International NLP Research Conferences at the Universities of Surrey (2008) and Cardiff (2010) and in September this year the first NLP in Higher Education Symposium was held at Bournemouth University. Alongside this, the first peer-reviewed NLP research journal is now in existence and the second edition is now in press. Furthermore, it is also clear that much university-related NLP research has taken place but has not been published in journals (so called 'grey literature' – conference papers, PhD theses etc.) – as we discovered when we recently did a literature review for the CfBT Education Trust paper NLP and Learning (available at [www.cfbt.com](http://www.cfbt.com)).

Researching NLP is not simple, however. Firstly, as a study of subjective experience it looks back to earlier times in psychology and the period when introspection was considered valid. This means that there are only a few emerging models of how to do this effectively. However, some really interesting pieces of research have been published lately which have avoided the question of demonstrating the theoretical ideas in NLP and have gone straight to testing its effectiveness using a 'proxy' measure. A good example is research that has demonstrated that an NLP phobia cure can save the NHS money by reducing the number of fMRI patients with claustrophobia who fail to complete a scan (Bigley and colleagues, 2010, Journal of Radiology). In relation to education research we have taken a similar approach. Last month the first large-scale randomised controlled trial, which aims to see if NLP trained teachers were able to improve maths scores (compared to other teachers) began with 350 adult numeracy learners (all of whom are 'blind' to the content of the research). So watch this space for some interesting results (one way or the other!).

*Richard Churches*

### Richard's books include:



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**Richard Churches & Roger Terry**  
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