Using NLP to Grow Confidence and Motivation in School

Ron Piper

rcpiper@btinternet.com
www.ronpipercoachingandtraining.com

Every Tuesday morning, I coach teenagers who find school challenging. For some, exclusion is a real possibility. And because I've had the benefit of doing this work for over five years, I've been able to reflect on numerous conversations and notice common patterns of thinking. Confidence and motivation surface time and time again.

In his book *How Confidence Works* (2021), Ian Robertson presents evidence that confidence is a function of three feelings: agency, control and efficacy. For many of the students I work with, few have a sense of agency – the ability to act independently and make their own choices – and neither do they feel that they are in control. Many have an operant belief that they cannot regulate what happens. Underpinning these feelings is a further belief that they have no personal efficacy: whatever they do will have little, if any, effect. The overwhelming feeling of being done *to* at school and at home, and for some, by external agencies, creates a vacuum which is sometimes filled with unhelpful behavioural choices. Given this, much of my coaching has focused on confidence, and scaffolding more positive thinking around agency, control and efficacy. So, how have I done this using NLP?

NLP coaching for confidence

I frequently use future pacing and contrastive analysis. With several students, I have re-run past troublesome incidents and focused on how far they were acting independently and making their own choices. We have then run the incident again but with an edit function so the student can create a preferred outcome based on *their* choices. Of course, the key subsequent question is always *What were you assuming about yourself that stopped you from taking the preferred route in the first place?* This often reveals many more disempowering beliefs, which I challenge by asking for evidence. At the same time, I draw attention to, and talk through, negative generalisations about themselves.

> **For many of the students I work with, few have a sense of agency – the ability to act independently and make their own choices.**

Running alongside this approach, and sometimes in separate meetings, we look at upcoming events (a future formal behaviour review meeting, perhaps) and explore how they can gain some control over the process and what that would feel like.

Using the modalities to see and hear the future meeting enables the student to experience and feel something very different and worth working for. It's like whetting the student's appetite for behavioural change: *This feels good – I'm making choices that are having an impact on my life!* The empowering feelings are a huge carrot and sustain progress towards building greater confidence.

However, when there are lapses in behaviour in between meetings, the go-to question is: *And how has what you've done helped you in the process to make your own choices, given you control over your situation and made you feel like you can produce a positive effect in your life?* Here I am indebted to Miller and Rollnick (2002) and their research around motivational interviewing. Asking clients to explain how their actions contribute towards achieving their goals is an effective personal accountability question.

NLP coaching for motivation

Motivation is the other recurring discussion point in my coaching. Why is it that so many students are just not motivated? Edward Deci's book *Why We Do What We Do* (1995) helps a lot here. Deci presents evidence that we have three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness. When those needs are satisfied, we're motivated, productive and happy. When they're thwarted, our motivation, productivity and happiness nosedives. Deci says that people (and students!) yearn so strongly to feel competent or effective in dealing with their environment that competence could be thought of as a human need. He further says that autonomy enables us to embrace activity with interest and commitment: we are being authentic. When controlled, we are pressured and act without personal endorsement:

We have three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness. When those needs are satisfied, we're motivated, productive and happy.

Confidence

↑

Agency

↑

Happiness   Control   Well-being

↑

Efficacy

Learning

we are alienated. Finally, he points to relatedness: the need to love and be loved, to care and be cared for.

There is some clear overlap with Robertson's confidence work here. But how does Deci's thinking impact what I do? Again, some of the NLP tools lend themselves beautifully to dispelling limiting beliefs around competence. So many students have ill-founded beliefs about themselves and their capacity to learn. Many, for instance, believe that their ability is fixed. *Why should I bother trying because I'm not clever?* And of course, these beliefs are evident in huge generalisations about themselves – *I've never been good at maths, I always get things wrong* – and distortions – *The teacher looks at me like I'm stupid.* Challenging these beliefs often leads to more productive audits of what students have achieved and thus provides evidence for competence. The question *What would your ten-year-old self think about your maths and English skills today?* provides the opportunity to see just how far the student has progressed in a relatively short time. *Would the ten-year-old self be proud of the sixteen-year-old self?* You bet! This, of course, debunks the belief that there is a fixed quotient of intelligence. We are learning works in progress! Use of the meta model, contrastive analysis and future pacing, again, are useful tools in proving this.

NLP coaching for autonomy and relatedness

So, how do I coach to develop feelings of autonomy and relatedness? Students are surprisingly unaware of what they do autonomously. For some reason there is a belief that being autonomous in school is different from being autonomous outside of school. The same mindset is evident in both cases, and this is the platform for the coaching. *So, tell me about the choices and decisions you make out of school … Are there times in school when you are making choices and making*

decisions? The coaching is intentioned on finding similarity. Making comparisons, perhaps literally holding 'in school' in one hand and 'out of school' in the other and noticing the similarities, is often a revelatory moment. The opportunity to feel the *weight* of autonomy, and to see its *colour*, inside and outside of school is always a moment and often brings to light some ill-conceived beliefs. But of course, autonomy comes with maturity: a lot of decisions are made *for* teenagers, and this is at the root of much disquiet. But what's wrong in helping teenagers rehearse for autonomy by asking *If you could make this decision, what would you do? And what might be some of the consequences? How would you engage with those?* How can we ever expect teenagers to develop an autonomy muscle if we never provide a

safe (coaching) space to practise?

And what of relatedness? We know that for teenagers, friends are especially important: being part of the 'in group' is paramount but it doesn't just happen. My questions then are *And what do you do to care for your friends and show that you value them?* and *What sort of relationship do you want with your teacher and what can you do to get it?* Answering these questions enables students to understand that they have capacity to grow and curate relatedness. And this changes much.

For the purposes of writing, I have treated confidence and motivation separately. In practice though, my coaching interleaves the two strands to help my students meet their challenges in school. ■