

Messing with your head: Does the man behind Neuro-Linguistic Programming want to change your life – or control your mind?



You got a problem? Go see Richard Bandler. As the founder of the controversial, multi-billion-dollar therapy NLP, he can get inside your head, and quick. But how did a former cocaine user and murder suspect become a guru to over 30,000 people in the UK? Kate Burt signs up for a session

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Mind games: Richard Bandler is the co-creator of the modern self-help phenomenon Neuro-Linguistic Programming

How, exactly, does one go about interviewing a man who has dedicated his life's work to the art of mind control? Are difficult questions going to be swept under a carpet of charm? Can his answers be trusted? Will this piece, mysteriously, write itself as a glowing appraisal?

All of which are valid considerations in advance of meeting Richard Bandler. Bandler is the American co-creator of the modern self-help phenomenon Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), a discipline developed to quick-fix life's problems by "reprogramming" one's brain. In crude terms, NLP explores the relationships between how we think (neuro), how we communicate (linguistic) and our patterns of behaviour and emotions (programmes). The idea is that, by studying these relationships, people can adopt more successful ways of thinking, communicating, feeling and behaving.

Even if you think you don't know much about NLP, the chances are you'll have witnessed it at work in instant phobia cures, shouty-titled management-skills books, "life coaching" and those unsettling conversations with sales people who seem to be mirroring your every move (because they quite possibly are – it's a classic NLP trick). Bandler has mentored Britain's favourite change-your-life hypnotist, Paul McKenna, and his work has influenced illusionist and master mindbender Derren Brown. Bandler himself still teaches NLP regularly, and claims to be able to "erase" traumatic memories, improve your relationships and even "cure" schizophrenia and paralysis (he taught himself to walk again using NLP after a stroke put him in a wheelchair).

Since Bandler invented NLP in the 1970s, it has grown into a multi-billion-dollar industry, influencing the way many people now understand psychology and psychotherapy (cognitive behavioural therapy, the increasingly popular "fast-track" style of psychotherapy, shares certain principles with NLP). But what inspired NLP's founding father to create an alternative to traditional psychotherapy, and does he practise what he preaches? What, too, of NLP's patients – or "students" as Bandler

prefers to call them – are they in safe hands?

Some people don't think so: critics have accused Bandler of everything from running a cult, failing to provide scientific evidence for his claims and brainwashing his clients. He's admitted drug abuse and even stood trial for murder. But in NLP circles Bandler is hailed as a sort of Messiah; indeed, while researching this piece, I lost count of the number of times I was told by its proponents that "NLP changed my life". Which is surprising, perhaps, given our national, deep-rooted suspicion of anyone too happy or self-assured, and antipathy towards motivational speakers, self-help gurus and the sorts of people who run "positivity workshops". And NLP practitioners – whose vocabulary is littered with phrases such as "installing strategies", "behavioural technologies", "cybernetics", "deletion", "content reframing" and "hypnosis" – seem scarier than most. Yet NLP is big business in the UK. The movement's not-for-profit representative body here claims that there are "at least 30,000 qualified NLP practitioners in the UK".

"It amazes me some of the stories I hear about myself," says Bandler, 59, a smartly dressed stocky man with piercing blue eyes and longish grey hair, a little thin on top, wearing a bulky gold and gemstone ring. I meet him in a bland, corporate-style hotel in Orlando, Florida, where he is speaking at a nine-day course – one of many he runs each year – to teach others the "tools" of NLP. "One student told me someone had said, 'Don't go to Richard, all he wants to do is control everyone.'" Another critic, he says, claimed Bandler beat up his students. He sniffs briskly: "But all I have ever tried to do is make people happier."

Bandler's ideas were revolutionary. In the wake of the Summer of Love, as a university student in Santa Cruz, California, he joined forces with a young linguistics professor called John Grinder. Pooling their passions – neuroscience, Noam Chomsky, hypnosis and early information technology – they created the NLP blueprint and began gathering case studies. The overarching motivation was scorn for traditional schools of psychotherapy – a burgeoning American industry at the time. "How is forcing a person to relive a bad experience going to help them get over it? It's just cruel," says Bandler.

Each day of the course, Bandler leads the morning session with a demonstration and a talk (Grinder is long since out of the picture; the pair acrimoniously parted ways following a bitter copyright lawsuit in 1997 – proof that even NLP experts don't have solutions for everything). At 10am on the dot, the hotel conference-room doors open to a loud blast of emphatically upbeat synth music: our call to action. As students amble towards their seats, some do jiggy little dance steps, others clap to the beat; there are sporadic whoops of enthusiasm. Of the 100-odd here for the course, people have travelled from as far afield as England, Japan, Australia, Turkey and Baghdad. Others have volunteered to be course assistants, paying their own flights and accommodation, just to be close to Bandler. (Which is not all that surprising when one considers that "students" can pay up to £10,000 for one of his intimate, three-day courses.) I'm intrigued to see him in action.

"How many of you are not artistic?" he asks from the stage, Hands are raised. "Is that because you weren't born with the 'art gene'?" It's a leading question. A table on the stage is kitted out with brushes, paints and paper and four non- artistic volunteers are plucked to sit at it, then put into a trance. "Every time you hear yourself saying 'I'm not the kind of person who...'," he murmurs to the budding artists, "I want you to laugh because it's just like masturbating one stroke at a time, it'll never get you there..." This is typical of the way Bandler talks. Crude quips, detailed anecdotes and seemingly random digressions spill out relentlessly, punctuated by sound effects, imitations and expletives. There's the one about how he punched a man ("Thwack!") who hit his own daughter because she was speaking to invisible angels (the girl was cured, naturally, by Bandler); the smut (the following day on stage he'll motivate a young man to clear out his garage by thinking about breasts) and the tales to discredit psychotherapists (cue the account of the time he smuggled rubber snakes into a schizophrenic's shower at a mental hospital to prove that he didn't require drugs for sanity, but simply the opportunity to differentiate between hallucinated and actual serpents).

"You all know my cure for schizophrenia is to alter reality not hallucinations," he says to his audience. "A lot of patients with

mental issues simply don't have proper strategies." He's a little scary, but his thinking is persuasive. And it seems to be working on stage, too – the budding artists are – surprise surprise – confidently expressing themselves via the medium of acrylic paint. There had been similar turnarounds at the end of yesterday's session: the woman from Baghdad who thanked Bandler for "giving [her] life back" after he'd erased a horrific image from her mind; the delegate who had been petrified of heights but, by day three, was embracing several of Orlando's most dramatic rollercoasters. It's like watching a cross between Bernard Manning and Jesus.

Bandler doesn't work alone on these seminars. Also travelling with him are husband and wife John and Kathleen LaValle, who run his NLP training business and met Bandler around 20 years ago when they took one of his courses. John, a corporate coach, who specialises in NLP for business, is an imposing New Jersey native with the thick Sopranos accent to match, a ponytail and a fondness for Hawaiian shirts and Gothic bling. He fell for NLP while searching for a "better way to train" explains his lovely wife Kathleen (blonde with a streak of purple – NLP is also all about recognising the individual). She joined John after noticing that "communication at home really improved" since he encountered Bandler. Her sweet nature seems strangely at odds with the fact that one of her specialist areas is "sales and influence" – the area of NLP that involves techniques such as "mirroring" and "pacing" (matching the way someone else communicates, essentially, to get what you want from them).

"Richard may not be famous to the average person – but if you know NLP, he's a celebrity," confides Kathleen over a glass of Merlot later that evening. "He's the Tom Cruise of the industry." Given his Messiah-like reputation, he must get some interesting fans, I suggest... "Uh-huh. There are some pretty whacked-out types who'll go up to his [hotel]

room at three or four in the morning," she says, "or claim to be an old friend and try to get his number. We have to be careful." Some people also want to hassle him, she adds, particularly on religious grounds. "They think that fate is something you can't control. They get angry."

In life, Bandler has certainly wanted to control his own fate, it seems. "My mother is a wonderful person," he says of his childhood, "but she married a few bad drunks." He grew up in a tough part of New Jersey and says that, as a child, he had "every bone in his body broken by adults". His musician father "just took off one day" and they've never had a relationship. He sounds like a psychotherapist's dream. Is it his bad childhood that gave him the drive to help other people to get over difficulties? "Excuse me," he says, leaning forward, indignant. "The fact I was beaten up by adults as a child means I've never laid a hand on my kids. This nonsense about if your parents are alcoholics you're going to be an alcoholic – that's a bad post-hypnotic suggestion to live by."

But he does talk a lot about violence, I suggest. "I can be violent," he says bluntly. "If someone attacks me I will hurt them – and any person who's a pussy is frightened by that. I've popped a few shrinks, but I've never hit one hard enough to knock him down. [And] I've slapped a client across the face – just to wake him up, but I never hit 'em hard enough to leave a mark. In the supermarket I whacked some guy with a can of peas – but he was beating the crap out of a six-year-old kid." One can't imagine it helped his case when, in 1988, Bandler was charged with the murder of a woman – Corine Christensen, a prostitute and NLP student – shot dead in the face with Bandler's gun, while only he and a friend, allegedly his cocaine dealer, were present. The publicity surrounding the case painted him as a nasty piece of work.

"What pisses me off," he says, is that none of this has anything to do with any of the good work I've done." Bandler says he was set up for the murder (and, accordingly, the court acquitted him – "in 20 minutes!" he points out). "And yes, I took coke for a while. But I also went on a binge of Hershey bars for a while too, and I was addicted to peanuts for a year, probably far more than I was to cocaine." He doesn't shy away from discussing the case, and yet he has a way of being "upfront" about things that is quite disconcerting.

One thing (among many, it seems) that winds Bandler up is when people criticise him for not being perfect. "Well, I've got news for you," he says, "if I wasn't this imperfect I wouldn't have

had room for improvement." He used to get irritated when people pulled him up for smoking – a habit NLP is popular for ridding people of. "I knew how to stop, I just didn't want to!" he says. "I'm not trying to get people to be enlightened. I'm not a guru. I'm not even terribly sociable, to tell you the truth." This is also part of the reason he says that he shies away from television: "I want to be able to walk down the street." Then he smiles: "Paul [McKenna] loves all that, though. The autographs, his phone constantly ringing. He's just moved to the Hollywood Hills and it suits him."

The two met after McKenna came along to a seminar and was so impressed that he immediately booked out his diary for three weeks to complete the whole course. "He was a good student – and it's really changed his career," says Bandler. "He used just to be a stage hypnotist – now he's a real agent for change." Bandler tells a story of the time they went for dinner in London and McKenna was glued to his mobile. "In the end I went to the bathroom and called him – it was the only way I could get his attention."

It's hard to steer Bandler off rambling anecdotes that don't a) belittle psychotherapists, and b) illustrate the successes of his work – but when you do, he talks affectionately about his family and how he feels his greatest achievement – far greater than inventing NLP – was his long marriage (to his late wife, Polly, who died after a long illness eight years ago) and raising two well-balanced children who don't need to use NLP. He beams when he describes how lucky he is to have recently been remarried, to Glenda, a good-looking doctor who has "whipped [him] into shape".

But just when you think you're getting to know Bandler, he's off on a tangent: safety on the streets of New York, John Lennon's murder, the time he "installed" vegetable phobias into a room full of vegans because they hadn't let him eat meat all day... Talking to Bandler one to one is much like listening to him on stage. "I've no secrets, nothing to hide," he cheerfully points out (I'm no NLP expert, but surely that's a phrase that should ring linguistic alarm bells).

And yet, open as he appears to be, there's a sense that the stuff

you hear is somehow a well-managed distraction from the stuff you don't. Which, of course, given his vocation, is precisely what one would expect.

Back in the UK, I track down a few Brits who've been "Bandlered", hoping for some dirt. No luck: they are universally evangelical. "He put me in a trance," recalls one woman. "I don't remember what happened, I just remember Richard saying: 'The floodgates of happiness are now open.' Then he touched my face and from that moment all of the rubbish of my life suddenly went," she says. "It was weird."

It's a common reaction. In Orlando, over a conference break for lunch, there was a moment when a concerned-looking student, also a highly successful business coach, came over having seen me scribble down some of Bandler's rhetoric. "I'm not a groupie," she began, "but I just wanted to say that when I first heard Richard speak – all that sexual innuendo and stuff, I was offended and appalled. But it's deliberate, you know. It's all to create a heightened state – a state in which you're more aware. All the while he's talking, he's changing brain chemistry and implanting ideas. Since I've done you a favour," she continued carefully, "perhaps you might be kind enough to send me a copy of your piece."

It was probably a perfectly innocent request, but it was impossible not to wonder whether I was being NLP-ed.