

Evaluating Students

Melody Cheal & Reb Veale

An excerpt from

POWERED BY NLP! 2



The Evolution of NLP

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Evaluating Students

Learning and Skill in NLP: An Exploration of Current Practice

Melody Cheal & Reb Veale

Introduction

In *Powered by NLP* (volume 1) Lisa de Rijk and I (Melody), began a modelling project of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, (CBT) and Transactional Analysis, (TA). We were specifically modelling what both of these fields had done to establish their credibility in the wider community and academically. One way that both these fields have done this is by establishing a consistent way of evaluating students and awarding certifications.

In NLP there is a vast range of evaluation methods and little to no consistency. The awarding of certifications is equally diverse. Some NLP providers undertake little or no evaluation while others have rigorous evaluation processes.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a “map” detailing many of the evaluation methods currently used globally by NLP Institutes with some discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of each.

Whilst some may understand ‘evaluation’ to be ‘the process of judging something's quality, importance, or value’ (Cambridge dictionary) and hence, largely about measuring and number-crunching; in their book on educational evaluation, Gitlin and Smyth (1989) highlight the word's Latin origins meaning ‘to

strengthen or empower', which we will seek to demonstrate is also an essential aspect in evaluating students' learning in NLP.

Ultimately, what is our purpose for evaluating in this context? Of course, there are multiple, overlapping purposes. We wish to assure a standard of competence for those wishing to work with members of the public – safety and responsibility are an integral aspect of the ethical practice of NLP for which the Leadership Summit stands. We also see evaluation as part of the ongoing integration and learning process; there is no 'sell by' date on reflective practice. Evaluation is an opportunity for all those engaged to discover strengths and identify weaknesses for action; feedback is most empowering when based on fair evaluation. Rogers and Smith (2006) stated that evaluation is either about *proving* something is working or needed or *improving* practice.

It could be argued that before we can agree consistent methods of evaluation we need to, as a field, agree what quantifiable competencies this evaluation is measuring. While this is a valid point it is not covered by this chapter and may well be useful as a topic in a future volume in this series.

Theoretical Considerations

The problem that evaluation is designed to resolve may largely be perceived as a contributory factor in NLP's current poor reputation, or the (unfair) accusation of being a pseudoscience. In the past, some trainers of NLP may not have attended to rigour or standards in the students, which has sadly led to a 'pay – attend – certificate' mentality.

Hence, we see evaluation as a means to discussing standards for the benefit of all engaged in using the technology of NLP and moreover, those likely to be receiving support using it. The concept

of benchmarking a level of competence as acceptable is one that, when put into practice, will lead to the professionalization of our field.

Note that here, we are not suggesting a new hierarchy of 'levels' or titles within NLP, merely that we understand what 'safety to practice' looks like as an NLP Practitioner, for example and move towards shared quality assurance methods.

Typical principles that underpin evaluation of learning activity in NLP training are that the evaluation method can be seen to measure or assess that which is sets out to (e.g. does it 'do what it says it does on the tin'), that we can differentiate between levels of performance using behavioural indicators (i.e. to be as subjectively objective as possible, whilst being human), that assessment is ongoing, deliberate, meaningful, transparent and timely and also that it is improvement-oriented.

One methodology commonly used in evaluating training effectiveness in the corporate sector is Donald Kirkpatrick's 4 Levels model (or his son Jim Kirkpatrick's updated model more recently).

- 1) Participants' reaction (often referred to as the 'happy sheets' at the end of a training)
- 2) Participants' learning (knowledge, skill and attitude)
- 3) Changes in behaviour and on-the-job performance
- 4) Return on investment (ROI) and improved operational performance

The limitations of this form of evaluation activity is that it seeks to constrain knowledge, behavioural, and attitudinal aspects of personal growth into measurable numerics and thus, can feel somewhat limited in its fit and ultimate value. This is a topic that Leadership Summit member, L Michael Hall addressed in his book 'Benchmarking Intangibles' (2011). In the past, whilst some NLP

trainers have used only (Level 1) questionnaires to evaluate how satisfied participants are at the end of the programme, we found this to be very much less common amongst the Leadership Summit members consulted. We will discuss further, more complex ways of evaluating in the next section, but for now, some of the *criteria* that were identified that we may seek to evaluate include (and are not limited to):-

Attitude	Progress	Effort
Outcomes	Ecology & Ethics	Skill
Understanding	Congruency	Flexibility
Integration of Presuppositions	Awareness of Impact	Rapport
State Control	Response to Feedback	Calibration

Gane et al (2018), suggest that in the realms of science education assessments need to allow students the opportunity “to demonstrate evidence of multidimensional science proficiency”. In particular this relates to the integrated use of conceptual knowledge and scientific practices. It could be argued that there is a parallel in the assessment of NLP in that students are expected to move beyond conceptual knowledge to practical application.

Because it is not possible to really know what a student knows assessment is about generalising what students know and can do from their performance on a series of tasks including both written and practical (Pellegrino et al 2001). If the student has the required knowledge, skills and abilities this will be reflected in their performance on said tasks. Pellegrino et al (2001) have developed a model called the assessment triangle that provides three vertices:

Cognition, Observation and Interpretation. This model provides a useful foundation to consider the evaluation of NLP students.

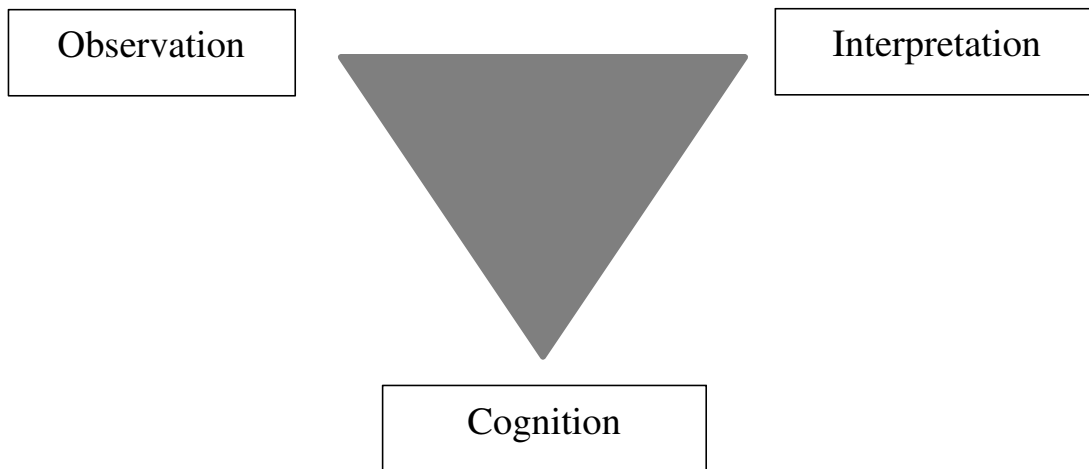


Figure 1: The Assessment Triangle. Adapted from “Knowing what students know: The science and design of educational assessment” by J. Pellegrino, N. Chudowsky, & R. Glaser (Eds.) 2001, Washington DC: National Academies Press, p.44

Cognition is related to the student’s ability, knowledge and skill to articulate and engage in appropriate reasoning and discourse of the subject. Observation provides the opportunity for the assessor to see the student in action demonstrating knowledge in action. Finally, Interpretation features the student’s response to the knowledge, skills and ability articulated in the Cognition vertex.

The alignment of these three vertices provides a framework for assessment and evaluation that could be adapted and applied to NLP.

This model may provide the NLP community a good starting point to begin to create a consistent set of evaluation and assessment tools for each level of NLP learning. Potentially this chapter could continue the conversation that began at the NLP Leadership

Summit in January 2018 moving us toward a shared map and greater consistency in evaluation methods

Types of evaluation

In our summit discussion, there was a range of perspectives and preferences, likely relating to our differing learning styles and values. What we did agree upon was that ongoing evaluation via multiple channels was preferable, rather than simply relying on one model, one time.

Before considering what methodology is used in assessment and evaluation it is worth considering some bigger perspective factors.

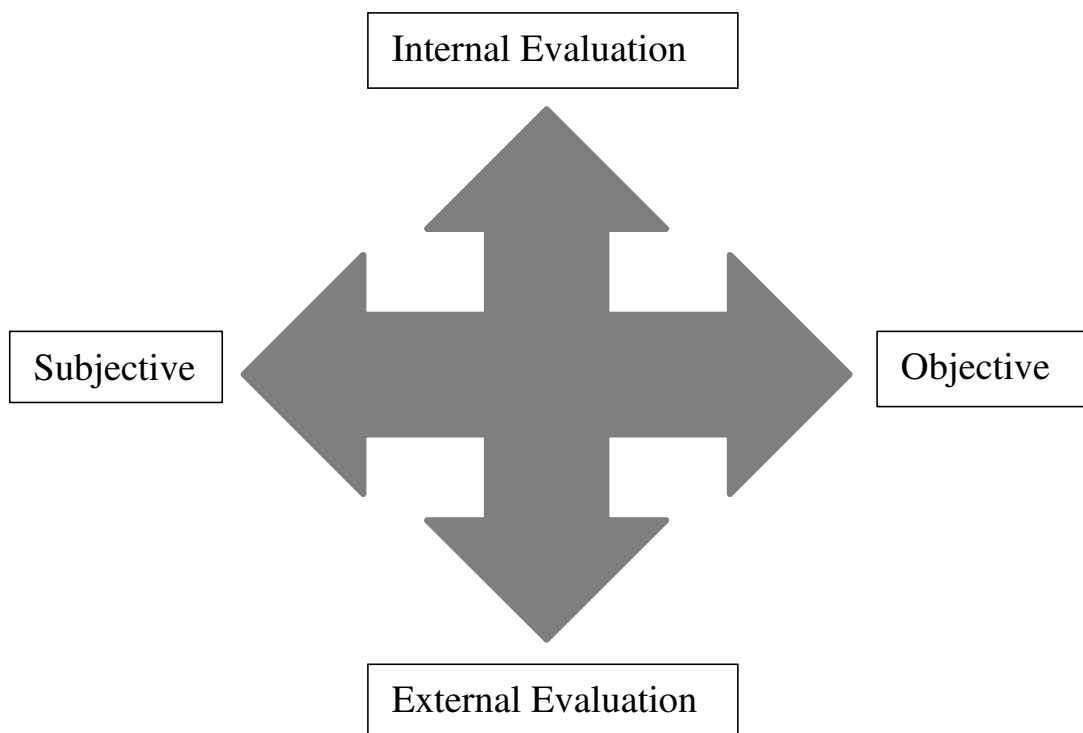


Figure 2: A matrix to consider evaluation of NLP students.

NLP has been described as the “study of subjective behaviour”, does this mean that evaluation and assessment is also necessarily subjective? Within the field there are NLP Trainers working with either subjective measures, objective measures or a mixture. It will not be the scope of this chapter to explore this aspect of the process merely to comment.

In many NLP Institutes evaluation and assessment is conducted by the NLP Trainers delivering the training. This internal evaluation has the advantage of convenience and is relatively easy to monitor. The drawbacks can include a risk of bias and a lack of objectivity. External evaluation or verification introduces an extra layer of complexity and may have a cost implication. Having said that the use of external assessors or verifiers may be a necessary step if NLP is to improve its credibility in the wider community and academically. Using a peer NLP Trainer to come and assess students ‘blind’ also helps guard against trainer familiarity / scotomas and will be a useful source of feedback afterwards about any themes emerging.

The importance of a mixture of practical versus theoretical evaluation was acknowledged within the work group. After all it is possible for a student to be able to produce excellent theoretical papers and still be unable to work with a client effectively and vice versa. This makes creating a process of evaluation that accounts for differing strengths essential.

- **During Training Courses** – observation of practice with one-to-one feedback given in time for the participant to incorporate and develop (using Ken Blanchard’s ‘catch them doing something right’ principle). This feedback is designed to motivate, encourage and support learning and is seldom used to determine a “pass” or “fail”. Often experienced assistants or NLP Trainers in training deliver this feedback on behalf of the course NLP Trainers while in other schools

this feedback is only ever delivered by the primary NLP Trainer.

- **Written Tests**

- Open book versus closed book – of course, there are pros and cons of each, with some adult learners still operating with unresourceful ‘school’ anchors in closed book situations. Open book learning is generally used to consolidate learning and teach students how to find information in their manuals. Closed book tests are more valuable from an evaluation perspective in that there is a measure of what information has been internalised and retained by the student. Such results can also easily be used to form the basis of statistical analysis and benchmarking.
- Multiple Choice – while the answer is in the question, this method of evaluation does provide clear evidence of the student’s knowledge base provided enough questions are used and the correct answer is not always glaringly obvious. Statistical analysis and benchmarking can easily be applied to multiple choice question formats.
- Short answer tests – this kind of test, when closed book, really starts to pull the learning from the student’s memory and so is a good measure of knowledge retention.
- Essay style tests – will suit the more academically minded student but may be less useful for assessing students who are not used to academic study. It could be argued that both short answer and essay style tests are just a test of memory rather than a test of competence. Many main stream education providers are moving away from this type of testing for this very reason.

- Written Essay (e.g. as for a degree) – particularly as evidence of integration in practice, as in a case study report post-course, for example. More about case studies later in this chapter. When the written essay option is applied students will undertake detailed self-directed study in order to research the information needed in order to answer the essay question. This more qualitative form of assessment moves beyond a test of memory and encourages students to critically evaluate methods, processes and topics in a way that will have value for the field of NLP. The field could be further enhanced if outlets can be provided to publish student essays.
- **Assessed Practical Session**
 - With other students as client – the risks are that students can lapse into the dreaded ‘role play’, particularly if they have to ‘make up’ something for the practitioner to work with. Where well framed assessed practical sessions with other students can provide a useful way to evaluate how well students are able to apply the learning. It could be argued that the student is unlikely to be particularly challenged by such sessions however at the NLP Practitioner level the measurement of competencies can still take place. One of the advantages of this approach is to avoid the challenge of providing enough “clients” for the practical assessment.
 - Role Play using actors –. Actors with very clear briefs act out an issue as client with an NLP Practitioner (also an actor). Students observing identify what is being presented and how it should be handled. An interesting option that many of us may use in the corporate setting already. This method does provide a somewhat objective measure of student’s abilities

- to calibrate and assess a client however it can be costly.
- A less costly version involves briefing a student to act as the “client” ‘act’ out a problem using specific meta model violations and eye accessing cues / predicates. E.g. “I have someone at work who is always nasty to me and either they leave, or I do...” Other students then analyse and identify linguistic patterns, eye accessing patterns etc. In this way a relatively low-cost assessment centre is created provided there is an expert assessor ensuring that the notes match the performance.
 - Clinical session - With members of the public as clients
 - Directly supervised – on an assessment and integration module, each practitioner brings a ‘body’ (in practice, a neighbour, friend, consenting family member) with them with a real thing they wish to address or explore, who is then allocated to a different student practitioner they do not know. This adds reality and the need for basic rapport-building, consultation skills and the flexibility to use an appropriate approach / technique(s) with the ‘guinea pig’, rather than the student’s ‘favourite’ technique.
 - Video session (ensuring that all permissions have been appropriately gained relating to data protection and confidentiality in advance). – the assessment of a video a full session provides the opportunity for a full evaluation of skill. There are some drawbacks with such evaluation, for example the student may video a number of sessions and submit the “best” example. This may mean

the evaluators are not getting a true exemplar of the students work. Issues of video/ sound quality, positioning of camera and other technical factors may also obscure evaluation.

- One-way mirror sessions (with appropriate permissions and disclosures) – in other psychology modalities students and qualified therapists may work in a room with a one way mirror. The student can be assessed in real time working with the client. This type of set up may not currently be available to anyone in the NLP field and may bear consideration.

- **Learning logs** – this method of self-evaluation has been popular in education for some time. When effective, the student evaluates their own progress when working with clients by noting what they learned, what they did well and what they would do differently. This is usually in shorter form than a full case study. Learning logs can also be used for students to record self-directed learning such as reading, watching demonstration videos or listening to audio recordings. When effective, the student records particular learning points and how they have applied the knowledge to their own practice
- **Case Studies** – in some ways a case study may be the most effective way of collecting written evidence from the student with regard to application of therapeutic or coaching processes. A good case study will follow a well-defined frame providing context, content, outcomes and learning. The learning will include critically evaluation of own approach and skills plus action points for future development and refinement.
- **Project** – Application of NLP – this provides a way to evaluate student's written application outside of therapy or

coaching, for example business skills application. It will be similar to a case study in many regards and could be applied to self.

- **Supervision** – (present cases) – this part of assessment may not involve evaluation as such but still be an important part of assessment. Students present cases either in one to ones with a supervisor or in a supervision group. They receive feedback, support and encouragement designed to consolidate learning and strengthen professional practice.
- **Document evidence** – this may involve the creation of a portfolio to demonstrate accredited prior learning and self-directed study. There are likely to be many different formats used within the NLP community.
- **Modelling Project** – both carrying it out and presenting it back to the group or trainer. It could be argued that modelling is the foundation of NLP and so should be the main assessment process and evaluation should be based on a student's ability to model excellence. Yet around the world many schools spend little or no time on modelling and instead focus on the techniques identified by the originators of NLP in their early modelling projects of Erickson, Satyr and Perls. There are also many forms of modelling so there could be a value in expanding how modelling can be used to evaluate students and which frames and types of modelling would be most appropriate.
- **Tasking** – this can be used where a student has not reached the required standard in one or several of the above. The form the tasking takes will depend on what additional evidence is needed for assessment and evaluation.

There are many other evaluation methods not included here that might be worthy of further investigation. Firstly, the practice of testing student pre and post training. This provides a baseline of what is already known before training that can be compared to post

course learning. Thus a measure of what value the training as provided.

Secondly the use of electronic assessment or computer assisted assessment (Simmonds 2003). The benefits in terms of speed of response and time savings need to be weighed against the lack of responsiveness the approach offers.

Thirdly the use of assessment centres could be considered for assessing students more thoroughly for practical application. Well designed and staffed assessment centres offer a strong evaluation process however they are costly and require a lot of logistical organising.

We are sure there are many other evaluation methods we have not yet considered and so invite you, the reader to let us know of other tools already in use for evaluating NLP Training.

Conclusion

The purpose of evaluation, as Everitt *et al* (1992: 129) is to reflect critically on the effectiveness of personal and professional practice. It is to contribute to the development of 'good' rather than 'correct' practice.

In addition to the manifold purposes for evaluating students' learning in NLP, one observation that I (Reb) have made in my own trainings is that, when I am able to reflect on and discern a pattern of skill, knowledge or attitudinal gaps in my own students (or indeed, a strength), it can highlight a learning for me in order to hone further my own training materials, my teaching style, methods, or perhaps even my student intake process. After all, if I do not walk the talk of 'continual learning and improvement; who am I to preach it?!

The discussion at the Leadership Summit colloquium in Alicante 2018 highlighted that there is a broad range of evaluation and assessment practices currently even within our group, but the consensus was that ‘wisdom comes from multiple perspectives’ (Heraclitus) and that, ultimately, using more than one form of evaluation is in the interest of students, trainers, standards within NLP itself and the general public alike.

The key part of evaluation may be how we frame the questions we wish to ask, and the information we want to collect, such that the answers provide us with the *indicators* of change. (Schön 1983).

The Leadership Summit has begun the process of collating different examples of evaluation practice and assessment methodology and in the future, we aim to work towards a shared, open access repository that all NLP trainers and participants alike can use for increasing transparency and standards of evaluation in NLP training.

Thanks and acknowledgements

To those colleagues (both Leadership Summit and otherwise) who generously provided us with inputs, comments, offers of support, examples of evaluation and student assessment proforma and methods...our gratitude and admiration. Through writing this topic up, we discovered that there is already much for the world of NLP to be proud of and much still to learn and share with each other. We see this pursuit as adding positively to the external perception of NLP as a substantive field worthy of study and also as a fundamental part of how we wish NLP to continue to develop. This is merely a stake in the ground, a starting point. We continue to learn.

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Her personal focus is humanistic and she enjoys helping students and clients find their authentic self. Her new book, *Becoming Happy* is designed to provide simple easy to follow steps to enable even more people to become the best version of themselves. She is also co-author of "The Relationship Dance", "The Model Presenter" and "The Little Book of Persuasion".

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Most likely to say: “so what?!” Least likely to say: “whatever!”