

Models of Persistence and Innovation – James Lawley and Penny Tompkins talk Clean

James Lawley and Penny Tompkins command a huge amount of respect in the NLP community. Whilst much of their practice is in communicating and developing Clean Language and Symbolic Modelling, their background and heritage is in NLP which underpins all they do. They talked to *Andy Coote* about modelling the originator of Clean Language, David Grove, using NLP, in the process developing their own modelling process, developing Symbolic Modelling – centred on Clean Language – and continuing to work with leading NLP trainers and the community.



By Andy Coote

Penny and James first met in 1991 taking NLP Practitioner with Ian McDermott. Penny had been joint MD of an oil field equipment manufacturer in Dallas, leaving both her relationship and her role to move back to Britain. The NLP Course, ‘changed my life, right there’.

James had left BT during a series of downsizings and spent a year exploring New Zealand. En route, he picked up and read *Transformations* by Richard Bandler. ‘I thought either this stuff is magic or they’re complete charlatans, but I’m going to see if I can find out. So that’s when I came back and signed up for the NLP courses.’

Their NLP timeline together began there. ‘We met on Ian’s Practitioner, our relationship started on the PPD Master Practitioner and we married in Santa Cruz whilst at NLP University on a Trainer’s Training with Tod Epstein,’ Penny recalls.

James and Penny set up practice groups in London to reinforce the learning. Penny had lost a lot of weight on the practitioner program and her friends noticed and wanted to talk about it. ‘We started seeing people. One would take notes and the other work with people. We’d comb the notes for metamodel violations, for VAK, for different aspects of NLP. We were learning from everyone we saw and, as we improved, we started charging.’

James was applying more and more NLP in his role as a consultant in the telecoms industry. ‘There’s a huge depth to NLP and you don’t get that in five minutes. You get it through working with processes and people in different contexts and getting feedback. And through learning. Between us, Penny and I have trained with almost every one of the early major NLP figures. Penny and I were involved in getting NLP accredited as one of the accepted psychotherapies by the UKCP and applied to go on the register in 1993. The NLPTCA was a subsection of ANLP and then became its own independent organisation and we’re still both members today.’



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James and Penny published *Metaphors in Mind* in 2000 based on David Grove’s work. David was a New Zealander with Maori roots and was living and working mainly in the USA visiting Britain every 6 months, delivering the latest version of his work. Both went to a talk at Regents College in the early 1990s. Penny says, ‘None of my NLP prepared me for what I saw when he worked with people on that stage. Something profound was happening. I made a commitment to find him and work with him. I couldn’t find him for a while but I didn’t give up.’

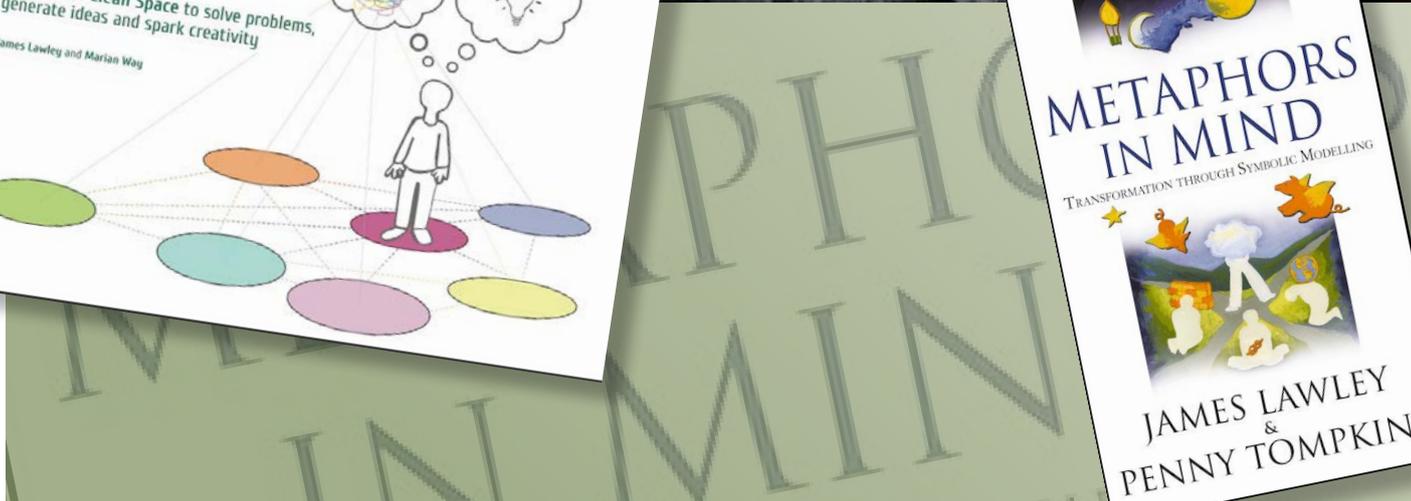
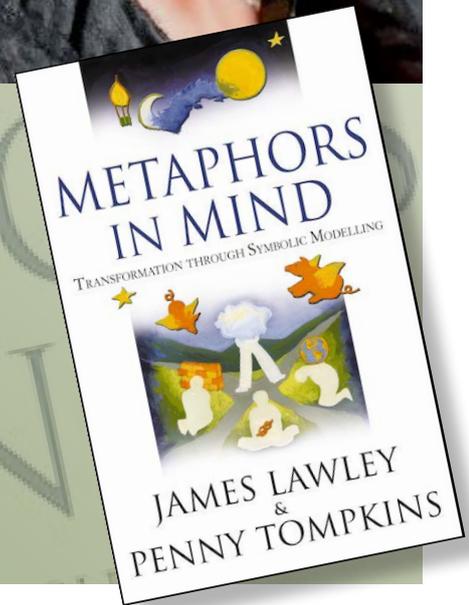
Penny eventually went on a personal development workshop with David in 1995. James takes up the story. ‘Penny called me and said, “I still don’t know what he’s doing but he’s doing some amazing stuff. Come up here, I can get us on another workshop in the next couple of days.” He worked with us personally in a therapeutic group and didn’t explain much about what he did. Something deep and meaningful was happening for me. That’s when we decided to find out how we could do this.’

That decision committed them to a lengthy process of working with (or at least in the presence of) David. David set some rigid ground rules when Penny proposed doing a formal modelling project with him. ‘David said, “You do whatever you want, I don’t want to know you’re in the room. I don’t want to see you doing what I do, I don’t want you asking questions. You come along as a participant and you get what you get. Other than that, it’s up to you.”’

Penny tells how they began to work out a way of modelling him by going back to reverse engineer what Bandler and Grinder had done to come up with the early models. ‘But there’s nothing ►



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► in there about what they did. We had to ask, what would need to be true for them to have come up with these models? We had to design a way to model him and we could not have done that without NLP.'

Early thoughts that they could model David in a year soon dissolved because David changed his material every time they saw him. Fortunately, the notes and audio of their encounters with David were supplemented by recordings from before they met him including recordings from him in the 1980s. By showing up, taking notes and begging people to take notes of their sessions, Penny tells me. 'David got curious because we didn't ask questions. Then he started a little conversation with me. He had to initiate it, but we became friends and we got to ask questions eventually.'

James tells me that he has never seen anybody relate to someone's inner world in the way that David Grove did. 'We had to build a model bottom up, out of the material that we got from David.' Penny adds: 'We realised that there was value in using Clean Language in contexts outside psychotherapy. So that's why we didn't just replicate what David did, we called our model Symbolic Modelling. We incorporated elements of Systems Thinking but at its heart, Symbolic Modelling is Clean Language. The approach we teach now is a honed down version of David's. You can stay with the essence of the clean approach and get fantastic results and that's been a real awakening for us in the last 20 years.'

Clean Language, symbolic modelling and the newer elements of clean are a continuous process of fluidity to solidity. James comments, 'David didn't slow down on changing his method. When we brought out the book in 2000, it was as if he thought, "I'll show them, they think they've got me in a book". What he then started to bring out was radically different. He started developing Clean Space and Emerging Knowledge. We stuck with him, trying to figure it out. A new book that Marian Way and I have written on David's work in Clean Space – *Insights in Space* – was sent to the printer recently.'

The method that James and Penny adopted to keep developing, James tells me, was in part inspired by not wanting to write another big book. 'We put ourselves into writing articles and ran the Developing Group of people who were already well trained in our work. It is an exploration of whatever ideas we're working on and then, with feedback from the group, we turn a lot of those into articles. Until you write it down, you don't know what you really do know. And more importantly, you don't know what you don't know.'

As Clean Language has developed, it has been taken into many non-English languages and cultures. James tells me, 'it may be now about 20 languages that it's been translated into and every one of them hits the challenge of translating. No matter how good a professional translator you are, you cannot translate the clean language questions unless you know how to use them, because you must translate their function not the words. What is universal is that people think and speak metaphorically, and if you look at non-verbals, we all use our body and our gestures to express ourselves symbolically. You don't need language to understand those things because we all know how the body works and whether things are up or down or over there or in

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or out. It's only a challenge once you get into language.'

Clean is taking advantage of the Internet which, I suggest to James, must have involved a series of shifts and changes in modality. 'We had to bow to the way people want to learn these days. It allowed us to put in many more demonstrations than we had time for on a face to face training and to de-brief the demonstrations in detail. We have an equivalent of a three day introduction to Clean Language spread over 12 modules. That doesn't mean people can go out and do it after three days, but they get the essence of how the process works and how it flows over a whole session. We enable people to follow it further when they wish.'

Penny notes the need for a book on Clean Interviewing. James adds, 'It's been a big focus of mine over the last three or four years. People have been doing bits of what we now call clean interviewing for a long time, going way back. Any interview can be clean from academic research interviewing, job and appraisal interviewing. Anything that gathers information is a kind of interview.' Penny adds, 'We have a documented process for assessing those interviews for cleanness. If a question helped, to what degree it might have influenced the interviewee. The academics are so excited about this, James has an academic writing partner and they have articles published in high level academic journals, peer reviewed. So we're getting a strong academic base for a lot of the clean language processes. There are people who are interested in researching clean language with different methodologies. There's an academic who wants to write an article with James on the use of clean language with mindfulness, we've had someone who's done a PhD interviewing Sufi masters who wanted to learn clean language in that context.'

James and Penny don't do much training in England any more. 'There are plenty of good trainers who can train clean language and symbolic modelling and various offshoots,' James tells me. 'So we leave it to them and we now are spending much of our time abroad, supporting new areas to develop. One that's completely taken off in the last year is Russia, Caitlin Walker and Marian Way have also been out there. Japan and Australia, too. We're developing these different areas and trying to build up a core of expertise because it's absolutely got to be the people who are natural speakers who teach it, but they need some support to get started.'

David Grove never trademarked Clean Language and wanted people to use it and make it their own. James and Penny, support David's ethos. As Penny notes, 'It's a spirit of generosity that he proposed. We also encourage people to take the process, learn it well and make it their own and let us know what they're doing. We're happy to support them. There are about 10 or 12 different modelling methodologies in NLP. Ours is one. We have written that up freely online, if you want to do a modelling project here's how we did it'.

That spirit of generosity comes through in everything they say and do. It, too, is a model and one from which we can all learn. ●