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Metaprograms for Literacy Development and Critical Thinking

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This paper presents the concept of metaprograms as a useful tool for exploring critical thinking skills and literacy development. Metaprograms can be defined as mental processes which manage, guide and direct other mental processes. The first four metaprograms are more commonly known as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a common personality assessment tool in schools and workplaces. This paper presents a comparison of data from the U.S. and Japan on the MBTI in order to highlight the differences in cognitive style between different cultures. This is followed by a practical activity showing how metaprograms are useful in examining and discussing people's cognitive and social strategies.

本稿はメタプログラムの概念をクリティカルシンキング(批判的思考)能力やリテラシーの開発に役立つ道具として紹介している。本稿におけるメタプログラムとは、心理プロセスを指令、誘導、指示する心理作用と定義する。最初の4つのメタプログラムは学校や企業において普及している性格検査、MBTI(Myers-Briggs Type Indicator)としてのほうがより広く知られている。本稿では異文化間の認識スタイルの違いを明らかにするために、アメリカ合衆国と日本のMBTIデータの比較を提示し、人の認識・社会的戦略を検証・議論するにあたってメタプログラムがいかに役立つかを例示する実践的アクティビティを紹介する。

Keywords: Critical thinking, literacy development, metaprograms, NLP

What are Metaprograms?

Metaprograms have their origins in Carl Jung's concepts of psychological types (Jung, 1953, 1971) and Myers-Briggs personality typing (Quenk, 2009), and they were later developed by the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming into a comprehensive framework for identifying and utilizing over 60 personality characteristics (e.g. Hall, 2003).

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Metaprograms can be defined as mental processes which manage, guide and direct other mental processes. They may also be conceptualized as the underlying strategies which control our habits and cognitive thinking patterns, and they are useful in examining and discussing people's cognitive and social strategies. The first four of the metaprograms discussed in this article correspond to the traditional Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which is widely used by schools and company personnel departments around the world as a 'personality test' or aide in helping people to find a suitable kind of work. The second half of this article briefly introduces three more metaprograms from NLP.

TABLE 1
The Myers Briggs Type Indicator

Type Indicator Parameters		Description	Standard Elicitation Question
Extrovert E	Introvert I	Attitude towards external world	“When it’s time to recharge your batteries, do you prefer to be alone (Introvert) or with people (Extrovert)?”
Intuitior N	Sensor S	Internal process	“If you were going to study a certain subject, would you be more interested in the facts and their use now (Sensor) or would you be more interested in the ideas and relationships between the facts, and their applications in the future (iNtuitior)”
Thinker T	Feeler F	Internal state	“Do you make decisions relying more on logic and reason (Thinker) or on personal values and feelings (Feeler)?”
Judger J	Perceiver P	Adaptive response	“If we’re going to do a project together, would you prefer that it were outlined, planned, and orderly (Judger), or would you prefer if we were able to be more flexible in the project (Perceiver)?”

Myers Briggs Type Indicator

The full MBTI test usually involves about 90 forced-choice questions. The results of the test assign a person a four-letter indicator such as ENTJ or ISFP (see Table 1). There are sixteen possible combinations of MBTI. Information is widely available online. For example, the Personality Page website (2012) offers an enormous amount of descriptive information for each of the MBTI types which teachers and students may find useful. It includes succinct summaries which we have found useful in the classroom such as:

2. ISTP - The Mechanic

Quiet and reserved, interested in how and why things work. Excellent skills with mechanical things. Risk-takers who live for the moment. Usually interested in and talented at extreme sports. Uncomplicated in their desires. Loyal to their peers and to their internal value systems, but not overly concerned with respecting laws and rules if they get in the way of getting

something done. Detached and analytical, they excel at finding solutions to practical problems.

The description above is just a summary, and each type can also be described in much greater detail. This type of information is routinely used by careers departments at schools and universities, or at human resource departments in companies to give advice to job-seekers or make personnel decisions. While there are dissenting voices about the overly widespread use of MBTI (e.g. Pittenger, 1993), there is considerable research indicating that it gives good insight into cognitive style (e.g. Lawrence & Martin, 2001). While the full test may give higher accuracy, James (1988) suggests that the concise elicitation questions shown in Table 1 can usually be considered equally effective.

Comparing Distributions in Japan and the US

As one indicator of the relevance of MBTI to

ISTJ 6.3% 12.5%	ISFJ 7.2% 11.5%	INFJ 7.4% 2%	INTJ 10.1% 3%
ISTP 8.8% 5%	ISFP 14.6% 7%	INFP 11.0% 4.5%	INTP 9.4% 4%
ESTP 0.9% 4.5%	ESFP 4.5% 6.5%	ENFP 11.1% 7%	ENTP 1.9% 3.5%
ESTJ 1.2% 10%	ESFJ 3% 11%	ENFJ 4.6% 3.5%	ENTJ 3.1% 3.5%

FIGURE 1. Comparison in MBTI between Japan and US

critical thinking and literacy styles, we carried out an international comparison of the MBTI in two countries. Figure 1 provides a comparison between MBTI distribution in the United States and Japan. We have compiled this data from two sources. The U.S. data is drawn from the Center for Applications of Psychological Types (2012a). This research institute offers data on the distribution of the MBTI types in the United States drawn from “more than a million records from people who have taken the Indicator” (Center for Applications of Psychological Types, 2012b) The data for Japan is drawn from the Sociarc website which offers user-generated data on the distribution of MBTI in Japan. This is a popular site and the sample size was almost 136,000 people when the page was retrieved in July 2012.

While variations exist between different data sources, and the MBTI can even vary for a person from one testing to another, there are very clear and strong differences between the overall figures when comparing Japan and the United States. For each MBTI type, the figure for Japan is shown on top and the US below.

While a full analysis of this data is beyond the scope of this paper, some of the more obvious

differences that can be highlighted include:

- 50% of people in the U.S. are classified as Introvert. In Japan, this leaps to 75%. This is a very significant difference and some researchers including Bouchard and Hur (1998) suggest a genetic basis to these differences.
- In Japan, the number of Intuitors (59%) is twice that of the U.S. (31%). Conversely, the U.S. has a much higher percentage of Sensors. In the EFL classroom, this suggests that Japanese students are likely to want to learn the big picture before they learn the details.
- 63% of people in Japan are classified as Feeler, compared to 53% in the U.S. This emphasizes the importance of positive affect in EFL in the Japanese context.

These significant differences between the U.S. and Japan are very useful in beginning to understand how the critical thinking styles of our students can differ greatly from Western norms.

Three More Metaprograms

The standard four distinctions of the MBTI have been expanded, especially by Hall (2003) and others in the field of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).

TABLE 2

Three Additional Metaprograms

Type Indicator Parameters		Description	Standard Elicitation Question	Sample Answer
Towards	Away	Direction of motivation: A person will usually talk either about what they positively want (Towards) or what they don't want (Away).	"What do you want in a job?"	<u>Towards:</u> "I want to get job satisfaction and a high salary." <u>Away:</u> "I don't want to be working overtime."
External	Internal	Frame of reference for success: A person will usually judge success based on either Internal or External criteria.	"How do you know when you've done a good job in learning something?"	<u>External:</u> "Because my teacher tells me that I've done well, or I get a good score in a test." <u>Internal:</u> "I just feel inside that I have really learned it well."
Matcher	Mismatcher	Relationship: A person will either describe similarities (Matcher) or differences (Mismatcher).	"What is the relationship between what you were doing last year and what you are doing this year?"	<u>Matcher:</u> "It's pretty much the same. I'm a student – learning the same kind of stuff." <u>Mismatcher:</u> "Our subjects are completely different and I'm learning all new things."

Hall expanded the number to more than 50, but most of these are not commonly used, and only three additional metaprograms have been given below which illustrate how metaprograms can be useful in exploring critical thinking and literacy skills.

Using Metaprograms for EFL

These metaprograms can be utilized in EFL in many ways, one of the most obvious being to help our students to develop and apply critical thinking and literacy skills to the comprehension of texts. The metaprograms can be introduced by having students elicit each other's MBTI in pairs or groups using the standard elicitation questions. This can also be done

kinesthetically as a fun whole-class activity by having students move to one side of the classroom or the other depending on their forced choice for each of the metaprogram elicitation questions.

The development of reader awareness and writing for a specific audience can be greatly facilitated by using the concept of metaprograms. The appendix shows a sample activity for use in a business communication class. One sequence of tasks that can be used is shown below:

1. Have students become familiar with the seven metaprograms by asking the elicitation questions in pairs or groups.
2. Have the students analyse the target

metaprogram combination of the sales letter (see Appendix). Discuss the results to ensure that they have understood the distinctions correctly.

3. Ask students to decide a product that they would like to sell. It can be a real or imaginary product. They can even be 'selling' themselves in a job interview.
4. For homework, have them prepare a sales presentation (or a letter if the course focus is on writing). Their sales presentation should deliberately target one combination of seven metaprograms in a similar way to the sales letter that they have already analyzed.
5. The following week, have the students give their presentations and analyse the target of the sales presentations that they hear.

Drawbacks or Potential Pitfalls

The MBTI and additional NLP metaprograms could easily be used to assign labels to people and to place them into little boxes of one personality type or another, but this misses the primary point that metaprograms are strategies that we run within ourselves, just like any other strategy, and that we can potentially change them. A big component of critical thinking skills is the ability to take multiple perspectives on an issue and to consider the pertinent points from each perspective. The metaprograms are all best considered as a continuum running from one extreme to another. Each extreme can be useful in certain circumstances. For example, when considering a major change in your life, it is useful to consider the negative points as well as the positive ones, and when the "Towards" person (who wants to move towards goals) begins to realize that the "Away" strategy (moving away from problems) can also be a powerful tool, each can begin to incorporate that strategy at the most appropriate times. Rather than being caught in little boxes, awareness and growing flexibility in moving between metaprograms allows us to gain the benefits of every position.

Conclusions

We have found the MBTI and other metaprograms from NLP to be of great value in helping our students to develop literacy fluency and critical thinking skills. The comparison between data from the U.S. and Japan illustrates just how deeply thinking styles can vary between cultures. When we begin to notice these differences and help students to do so, too, we have taken a big step towards helping our students to adopt the most appropriate critical thinking strategies for any situation.

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Appendix - Sample Reading/Writing Activity

This letter has been written carefully to match the seven metaprograms of a potential customer called John. Identify the correct metaprogram from each of these seven pairs.

To help you get started, consider the first paragraph. Do you think that John is an Intuitior or a Sensor?

Extrovert / Introvert

Matcher / Mismatcher

Intuitior / Sensor

Towards / Away

Thinker / Feeler

External / Internal

Judger / Perceiver

Dear John,

I am writing today to tell you about a great training opportunity that could change your whole business – not just a few little things, but the way that you look at everything.

Our training seminar is set up so that you have the chance to interact and learn from other people. Group learning is powerful and can help you to energize yourself with the knowledge and expertise of others.

When you think logically about this offer, I am sure that you will come to the conclusion that this will really help your business. Each step of the training is rationally planned to help you make the changes required for higher sales.

We have also attached a full schedule for the training program which breaks down the activities hour by hour to give you a complete picture of what you will be learning.

When you think about what you were doing last year, do you really want to be doing the same thing next year? We are sure that you would much prefer to be doing something new – to be really increasing your sales rapidly.

This training seminar will help you to move towards your goals easily and quickly.

You know that others around you may doubt the value of yet another training program, but when you consider your own values, you will realize that it is your own decision and that you can take that decision yourself regardless of external criticism.

Sincerely,

Abe Michaels