

## **Maintaining Flow**

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In the first article “Getting into Flow” we presented accounts of different resources used by people in many walks of life to achieve peak performance. The common denominator in these different stories was the ability to get into a state of flow through sharply focusing attention. We suggested that the flow state also occurred naturally within classroom situations and gave examples of how we had turned this to our advantage in teaching.

However, the question still remains : once you have successfully entered into the flow state how do you remain in it?

After more than a decade of studies on flow, Csikszentmihalyi, a researcher on the flow state at the University of Chicago, is the person who may be able to help us most with this question. In one of his books on the subject “Beyond Boredom and Anxiety”, Csikszentmihalyi describes its main components as : centring of attention, balance and control.

In part one of this article we discussed how to centre attention. In this second part we will demonstrate the applications of the two other factors which maintain flow : balance and control.

Kathy Kozel is a multimedia expert who uses flow to decide how to build the products she sells. Following Csikszentmihalyi's work she has built up a model that she calls the multimedia spiral. After getting the user hooked into the multimedia game Kozel says that subsequent trips through the spiral must work to generate increasing interest in the same or new topics. Thus the program next begins to gather valuable user information that she uses to customize the interest phase in the cycle. This focuses on how the user perceives the "cool stuff" they get to do, not on what the program wants to tell them. To a prospective customer, a passive "reading" experience most likely will not feel engaging or personal. But an activity the user controls according to his or her own needs will have immediate perceived value. In short, in order to engage the customer more deeply her games gradually hand over control to him thus hooking him into the game to an ever greater degree.

She also advocates using activities that provide a perfect balance between perceived effort and payoff, the other virtuous circle which keeps the user in flow. As the game requires the player to make more effort the winnings are more

spectacular. This initiates a success spiral encouraging the player to accept ever bigger challenges. However, payoff is not always necessarily restricted to winning immediately. It is used in the much wider sense of feedback. When the player receives payoff in the form of interactive feedback from the game he can then adjust his effort enabling him to improve his playing. Within flow, feedback is a form of control.

In contrast, Larry Hirschhorn, a psychiatrist, explains that the sensation of control in flow comes from the experience of freeing yourself from the sense of psychological time, from clock time. Hour-long activities can pass like minutes; a minute of focused attention can be so engrossing that hours seem to pass. The experience of the future comes under psychological control. In flow, control is not simply equated with dominating but with a deeper, more human aspiration, control over your own destiny.

Hirschhorn also points out that the sensation of balance is achieved in flow because people feel immersed in the activity. They are not conscious of themselves, or as we say in the common language, they are not "self-conscious." This lack of self-consciousness significantly reduces their anxiety. Nor are they bored, because they are caught up in the activity. Balance, which is so fundamental

to keeping flow going, is, according to Hirschhorn, a delicate equilibrium between self-conscious anxiety and disinterested boredom.

Thomas P. Novak and Donna L. Hoffman in their study “Measuring the Flow Experience Among Web Users” for Vanderbilt University also insist that to experience flow while engaged in an activity, consumers must perceive a balance between their skills and the challenges of the activity. However, both their skills and challenges must be above a critical threshold. Not a simple task.

What makes this task even more complex is Csikszentmihalyi’s addition that the person's evaluation of the skills and challenges is typically thought of relative to other activities the person performs, rather than an absolute scale. For example, how challenging surfing the Web is, compared to other options the person has of spending their time. Csikszentmihalyi also states that skills and challenges must be above a certain critical value. In other words to maintain flow, skills and challenges must not only be congruent, they must also be high.

Diana McNab, the former US racquetball coach, gives players vivid instructions as to how to achieve both control and balance. She tells her players to come to their senses by absorbing the feel of the racquet, the sound of the ball bouncing, the smell, taste, touch, and sound of racquetball. She instructs them to focus on the "now," the moment, with no outside thoughts of the past (mistakes) or

the future (score). In short, they manage control through sensory feedback. She instructs them on balance by telling them to relax and let their unconscious take over. “Play one shot at a time,” she says. “Turn on to automatic pilot and play from your instincts, gut, and intuition. Slow everything down so that it becomes bigger than life. Smile! Relax! Enjoy yourself! Remember, it is your choice to play racquetball! Allow the hormonal endorphin rush to enter your body and mind and a sense of euphoria or invincibility will take over.”

Daniel Goleman in his book “Emotional Intelligence” also recognises the need for balance to maintain flow. He suggests engaging in a task you are already skilled at but at a more taxing level. He equates boredom with an activity that is not taxing enough and anxiety with an activity which is too taxing. Flow requires the maintenance of this delicate balance.

Howard Gardener, the Harvard psychologist who developed the Multiple Intelligences model, suggests applying flow at an individual level through implementing the Multiple Intelligence theory in teaching. This, he says, would get students into their own personal flow at the level best suited to each one. Once achieved, he says, this experience of flow could be transferred to other subjects

Goleman, however, also recognises the limitation of flow. He quotes Csikszentmihalyi’s study in which maths students at a Chicago high school were

rated by their teachers as high or low achievers. The teenagers carried beepers which signalled them to write down their mood and activity at certain moments of the day. The activity results showed that the high achievers spent an average of 27 hours a week studying, compared to the 15 hours a week of the lower achievers. The key difference between the moods of the two groups was that the high achievers experienced a pleasant flow feeling during 40% of the hours they studied, whereas the others only felt in flow during 16% of their study time where more often than not they experienced anxiety and inadequateness. These low achievers found their flow moments in socialising, not studying. Goleman concludes from the study that the high achievers are motivated by the flow they find in study. However he berates the low achievers for not honing the study skills which would stand them in good stead in the future. Goleman seems to be suggesting that flow is something to be worked at. This is precisely what the high achievers did during the other 60% of their study time when they were not in flow. They mastered the moves and worked on the skills until they could slip into peak performance. McNab's detailed advice to her racquetball players also assumes time and dedication on their part. Flow is the outcome of practice and effort. In the first article "Getting into Flow" we described some classroom activities which took advantage of a natural flow observed among students when doing certain exercises

including watching a film in a foreign language, an oral crossword exercise and a creative writing activity. Looking a little further into these activities it becomes clear how the initial focus of attention developed, through balance and control, into a flow state.

The fine balance between boredom and anxiety in the case of film-watching, is kept through the sheer variety of the different elements of the film : the visual effects, the developing storyline, the soundtrack, the dialogue, the subtitles, the rhythm and pace of the narrative and the classroom summaries of the plot. Students have a wide choice of how to follow the film which includes the three main VAKOG elements. This rich range of presentation allows something for everyone to focus on, and stimulation is constant.

This is also true in the creative writing activity which is no less a film, this time made up in the student's head. To help students write a narrative we invite them first to make a rich mental movie of their story including sounds, smells and feelings, then to simply rerun their film and write it down. Balance and stimulation come from within in this case, giving an added sense of control. Each student is free to pitch their challenge at their own level. In our experience most are able to do this and in the cases where the students overchallenges or underchallenges herself the teacher intervenes to negotiate a more fitting level. Vocabulary to

describe their inner films can be an obstacle for some people, but we make sure that previous lessons prepare appropriate vocabulary and we teach students how to circumvent this difficulty by using other words, through periphrasis or by choosing elements in their film that they can comfortably describe. We are also on hand during the actual writing to solve expression problems and of course we recommend students to bring dictionaries for the writing class.

We have found that if the medium is rich enough and allows the student a wide enough choice then each can find their own level of challenge. This contributes vitally to maintaining a balanced flow. Teacher intervention is only necessary to keep the focus on the task or ensure that the challenge chosen is neither too high nor too low.

The other element maintaining flow, the sensation of control, is built into the narrative part of a film or written story. Fiction invites you into a timeless zone in which you often identify with the main character or at least you empathise profoundly with him or her. This fictional quality of being in another time and place is constantly upgraded by the feedback you receive from interacting with the story. The film and the creative writing activity participate in this quality of being out of here and now, of escaping from the humdrum into a magical world.

Another surprising moment of flow is when we return the compositions to the pupils. Before handing them back we read out a couple and comment on them so that everyone can get an idea of how others are coping with the task. During the readings there is normally a surprisingly hushed silence, a focus on a peer's efforts. For a moment, listening becomes the centre of flow.

If you want to begin observing and taking advantage of flow states in class one way is to actually induce flow in your students then pay attention to what happens next. To do this you can use what we know about flow. The important point is to centre your own attention, promoting a flowing state in yourself. You may try this out by deciding on a clear goal in a particular hour of class. Plan the classwork of that period carefully so that you can rhythmically pursue your goal from the beginning of the class until the end. It may be helpful to have notes on your plan or to make a mental mind map of it, to talk it through to yourself or with someone else and to act it out. If you know where you are going you will lead and if you lead in flow many of your pupils will follow in flow too. Remember, of course, that this is not a military exercise and that you will gradually hand over control of their own flow to your students themselves : your ultimate aim is to lead them into learning so that they can learn to learn.

Returning to the story we told at the beginning of the first article on flow where we peeked into a games arcade to see flow in action as teenagers huddled over the bright screens of computer games, we have found that the computer is certainly a source of flow for many. One of us gives a class using the Internet the aim of which is to familiarise students with the creative side of new technologies as well as to give real world practise of the foreign language. After a term of gradual introduction to the multimedia possibilities of web weaving the students are asked to cooperate in small groups to produce a website on their choice of subject. (The results can be seen at:

[http://www.att.virtualclassroom.org/vc99/vc\\_78](http://www.att.virtualclassroom.org/vc99/vc_78) ) I don't claim that there is a games arcade atmosphere in the class but many get into a creative and cooperative flow very quickly and the centre of attention is their own creation.

In these two articles we have alluded to how business ventures are investigating flow on the computer as commercially sound. Why don't we begin to harness this future source of flow to benefit education?

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