

## Getting into Flow

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The other day we were walking up Main Street to school when we heard some curious beeping sounds coming out of a doorway. As we approached the sounds doubled in volume and number. When we reached the entrance we just had to look in to see where they were coming from. What we saw was something extraordinary - groups of young teenagers clustered around video games with their eyes glued to the screen. Everyone was following each twist and turn of the game with an air of cooperative complicity, no need for speaking. The extraordinary thing, of course, was not the sight of rapt attention they had but the thought that that quality of attention could do wonders for classroom learning.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist working at the university of Chicago, may have helped to bring us closer to the day when we will be able to master this state of attention observed above. He calls it “flow” and describes it as, "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement". (This is indeed an accurate description of what we saw when we peeked into the games arcade.) However Csikzenthmihalyi goes further. He found that flow state is an everyday occurrence. It requires no special skill or particular setting, just a piece of good work. It is also a universal human experience. As people described to him how it felt when they thoroughly enjoyed themselves, they repeatedly mentioned the same dimensions of experience. These same aspects are reported by Hindu yogis and Japanese teenagers who race motorcycles, by American surgeons and basketball players, by Australian sailors and Navajo shepherds, by champion figure skaters and by chess masters.

This certainly sounds like a skill we could put to good use in education. If we could master, and induce learners to master, a flow state at will, their learning potential would be enhanced exponentially. So how do we go about this?

Kathy Korel is a multimedia programmer in California and she applies Csikszentmihalyi's research insights to designing her products using what she calls a spiral method to engage the player and keep her playing. Csikszentmihalyi found that people achieve an enjoyable flow state when they are engaged in activities that focus their concentration. Korel translates this into the first phase of her interactive spiral: attracting the player's interest. The program is designed so that it entices the user by offering the chance to experience something he or she perceives to be of value. The first time, the program sets the initial expectation by hinting at or demonstrating the kind of experience the user will have and what the payoff might be : Korel lures her player into the flow spiral by hinting at the exciting experience she might have if she participates. This motivates the gamester to focus on the promised excitement and hooks her into the game spiral

Diana McNab, former official sports psychologist for the U.S. Racquetball Team, also describes a precise technique for what she calls "psyching up" or entering the flow state previous to playing the game. The player must first be physically warmed up, stretched out, and aroused to obtain maximum oxygen and blood flow to all working muscles. Abdominal breathing vitalizes all body parts and opens and stills the mind. Breathing in through dilated nostrils opens their lungs to their fullest capacity. There is a pause to allow "Prana," or nature's life force of water and oxygen to flow into all parts of their body; and by contracting abdominal muscles, slowly exhale carbon dioxide, wastes, toxins, and stress out of the mouth. Then the player breathes in for a three count, holds for six, and exhales for three.

On the psychological side McNab tells racquetball players to replace all negative thoughts with positive affirmations like "I am a power hitter!" Players also visualize themselves playing with the exact technique, strategies, and skills that they want to be using in the game. They pinpoint focus on the ball, blur out all other distractions and zero in on a spot on the ball. In short they concentrate on the here and now of the game.

A similar entrance into flow through concentration is also proposed by Daniel Goleman in his book "Emotional Intelligence". For Goleman sharp focus on a subject creates a feedback loop which reinforces the original concentration to the point where it takes on a force of its own. This state of flow leaves emotional turbulence behind and the task at hand become effortless. Neurologically Goleman explains that in the flow state the brain adjusts cortical activity to the minimum level necessary conserving energy and keeping the brain "quiet". The person in flow thus avoids superfluous stimulation such as occurs in a state of anxiety and anger when the cortex is hijacked by overstimulated emotion.

Advice on how to attain this prized entrance state into flow comes from an unusual quarter - a dentist. In his self-help book "How to do Everything Better", dental surgeon Marvin Mansky gives detailed instructions on how to practise focusing attention. The exercise is deceptively simple and centres on giving your full attention to your breathing. In particular you concentrate on the rise and fall of your stomach as you breathe in and out. Each time you realise your attention has wandered you bring it back to the stomach movement. You practice this for up to 20 minutes at a time. The goal of this exercise is to be able to focus your attention on your attention, to be aware when your mind has wandered, and to be able to bring your attention back to your stomach as soon as you realize you mind has wandered. You practise this exercise until you are comfortable bringing your

attention back to your stomach, the focus of your attention. Once you can consistently become aware when your mind wanders, and you can bring your mind back to what you want to focus on, you start focusing your attention on any current task instead of your stomach rising and falling

For prospective writers Susan Perry suggests a different entrance door which she calls going back to go forward. She invites the writer to start by looking over the work at the point where he left it last time without any specific idea in mind. Perry says that this is the way to get the creative activity of your mind to gently return to the same state in which you wrote the previous day's work.

To back up her claim that going back sets you on the road forward she quotes several writer colleagues. Some re-read the material they were last working on; others prefer to trace over the typescript with a pencil before gradually recapturing the creative mindset she calls flow.

Be it creative writing, playing a sport, designing interactive multimedia or managing your emotions in an intelligent way, several authors have found a common door to the flow state : focusing of attention.

Flow occurs naturally in certain situations and teachers can take just as much advantage of this as sports psychologists, writers or multimedia experts do, this time with a view to enhancing learning. In our own foreign language classes we have observed several recurring instances of this state of attention induced by putting the students into circumstances where flow would happen naturally.

Watching a film in the cinema or on TV is a typically hypnotic experience. A well constructed plot gradually leads us into the cinematic fiction world, leaving our actuality behind. As teachers we thought we might try to harness some of the power of the cinema to learn a language. In order to practise listening skills, for example, each week we watch part of a film for about 25 minutes. The film is a

video reproduction of a commercial film and is in English or French with subtitles in the same languages. Every now and then we stop the film and check whether the pupils are able to follow the story. We remind them at these breaks that understanding is being able to follow the storyline using language, visual clues or simply their knowledge of how stories go. As we get further into the film, shorter comprehension breaks are necessary as a silent entrancement takes over with students' eyes glued to the screen. Those who have experienced it know that watching a film in a foreign language is no easy task. However comprehension tests consisting of reviewing a clip from the film and writing a summary of it show that students have indeed understood what they have seen, some in more detail than others, of course. We feel that the flow students experience while watching the film in a foreign language enables them to understand the film in question and, more lastingly, boosts their belief in their own learning powers.

Another example of where the teacher can apply flow in the classroom is in the area of enhancing speaking skills. The goal is revision of foreign language vocabulary done in pairs using crosswords. Both participants have the same crossword but each has the words filled in where her partner has blanks. The task is to give your partner oral clues in the foreign language to enable her to fill in the blanks; she does the same for you. Students turn their attention to getting the message over in a communicative way and quickly get so swept up in the task that many become oblivious to the passing of time, even the bell ringing. This has been a recurring experience over the years with different classes, not a one time coincidence. We are able to measure to some extent our students' learning in this activity because they later write an essay based on the vocabulary practised.

One of the most powerful instances of flow takes place precisely when pupils are writing essays. In order to induce the slightly hypnotic state where flow

will occur you can play some music while inviting students to daydream to its rhythms. Later you ask them to recall their daydream in detail describing colours, shapes, sounds, smells and their feelings during it. This recall will return them to the light trance state induced by the music. We have found that the writing done under these conditions is a joy to read and extraordinarily well written, considering that it is in a foreign language. Induction is also possible through guided visualisation or even simply asking students to make a still picture or a movie in their heads then describe it in writing. Fixing the student's attention not on the mechanics of writing but on the images, sounds and feelings he has to write about, is one of the keys we have found to triggering flow in classroom writing. (A teacher spin off is that you will also have an enjoyable time reading the essays.)

Experienced in our classes tells us that it is fairly straightforward to incorporate flow into some classroom activities - to the great benefit of the students. As teachers we can all learn to observe at what times flow occurs naturally and so be able to exploit it to enhance learning.

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(Read the follow-up to this article: [Maintaining Flow](#))

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