

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow

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One student is in her room doing her homework. Another is downstairs watching TV. Which one is really enjoying herself? According to Hungarian American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced chick-sent-me-high-ee), it's more likely to be the former. If course material is well organised and logically presented, will students learn it? Only if they are motivated, says Csikszentmihalyi. In both cases his answer depends on the extent to which the students are in a state of 'flow', a concept that has implications for human happiness in general and teaching G&T students in particular.

What is flow?

In his book of the same name, Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as 'the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.'

Csikszentmihalyi has devoted his professional life to the study of happiness and how we can attain it. As a youth in Europe he met people who had been crushed by their wartime experiences and others who had taken them in their stride. He wondered what could explain this difference. By the early 1960s as a psychology student in the US, he had made a 'discovery': happiness doesn't depend on chance or external events but on our perception of them. As such happiness has to be cultivated. But this does not mean that we should recklessly pursue pleasure. The best moments are not those of passive pleasure but those when we feel exhilarated by achievement – when we are in a state of flow.

Flow first came to Csikszentmihalyi's attention while he was studying artists for his postgraduate thesis. As they worked the artists seemed to go into a trance-like state. To his surprise he found that the finished product was less important to them than the process of doing the work itself. External rewards were less important than intrinsic pleasure, an observation that went against the grain of psychological thinking at the time.

At first it seemed that this state might be confined to rules-based activities such as games and creative professional activities such as art or music. However, in the following years thousands of interviews by his research team at the University of Chicago and other colleagues around the world revealed that flow was experienced by people from all walks of life and across many different cultures. What people did and why they did it varied immensely, but the quality of the enjoyment produced by investing attention in an activity was remarkably similar.

The research found that when they were asked what made the experience enjoyable, people cited at least one, and often all, of the following factors. Csikszentmihalyi commends them to readers as knowledge that will help them 'achieve control of consciousness and turn even the most humdrum moments of everyday life into events that help the self grow.' Flow involves:

- **A challenging activity that requires skills:** This requires a fine balance: too high a challenge will produce anxiety; too easy an activity will produce boredom.
- **Clear goals and feedback:** Good, immediate feedback allows the individual to know they have succeeded. Such knowledge creates 'order in consciousness'.
- **Concentration on the task at hand:** When one is thoroughly absorbed in an enjoyable activity there is no room for troubling thoughts.
- **A sense of control:** Here the actuality of being in control is not as important as the subjective sense of exercising control in difficult situations.
- **Loss of self-consciousness:** The individual feels he or she is merging with the activity.
- **Transformation of time:** Seconds may seem like hours. Hours might seem like seconds.

Flow and the cultivation of talent

In the late 1980s Csikszentmihalyi and several colleagues undertook a longitudinal survey of over 200 talented teenagers to discover why some are able to develop their talents while others give up. One of their principal findings, published in *Talented Teens – The Roots of Success and Failure* was that 'flow was the strongest predictor of subjective engagement and how far the student progressed in the school's curriculum in his or her talent'.

The authors suggest three 'promising steps for promoting optimal experience in the classroom':

1. The most influential teachers were found to be those who always **continue to nurture their interest in their subjects** and do not take their ability to convey that enthusiasm for granted. Learning was found to flourish where the cultivation of passionate interest was a primary educational goal.

2. Attention should be paid to 'conditions that enhance the experience of maximum rewards'. **Everything should be done to minimise the impact of rules, exams and procedures and to focus on the inherent satisfaction of learning.**

(In a more recent interview, Csikszentmihalyi has stated that although it makes some sense to work on students' weaknesses, it makes even more sense to work on their strengths, 'Because once someone has developed strengths, then everything else becomes easier.')

3. Teachers must **read the shifting needs of learners**. The flow state is not a static one: once a skill has been mastered it is necessary to add more complexity if the student is not to become bored – there must always be a close fit between challenges and skills. The teacher's sense of timing and pace, of when to intervene and when to hold back, is therefore crucial. There must be freedom wherever possible for the student to control the process, but teachers must also draw on their experience to channel students' attention.

I think Csikszentmihalyi is right on at least two accounts: flow experiences are

refreshing, but many of us need to make a conscious effort to cultivate them. Once I knuckled down to writing this article I lost my sense of time, felt mentally stimulated, and experienced 'order in consciousness'. But that was only after I'd thoroughly cleaned the kitchen, done a stack of ironing and performed various other displacement activities. Achieving flow is by no means simple.

Further information

- Csikszentmihalyi, M (2002), *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness*, Rider, London
- *Thoughts about Education* on www.newhorizons.org
- Csikszentmihalyi, M, Rathunde, K, and Whalen, S (1997), *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Scherer, M (2002), 'Do students care about learning? A conversation with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi' *Educational Leadership* 60 (1)