

Could flow psychology change the way we think about vocational learning and stem the tide of poor wellbeing affecting our students? Ask the students, they'll tell you.

It's final period on Thursday, the exams are looming and you've dusted off that PowerPoint from last year. It's not the most exiting teaching you've ever done but hey, it's got all the relevant information and you just didn't have time to get your head around Prezi or any of the other fashionable techno-pedagogy doing the rounds. Your students are there; groggy, eyes glazed in post lunch reverie. You do the active learning stuff, the peer assessment, the clear aims and objectives. The lesson is fine but flat. Everyone goes on their way a little short of plasma but without any ill will. OFSTED have described how an outstanding lesson can be characterised by 'The enjoyment and engagement demonstrated through the faces of the learners.' You or the students weren't 'in the zone' this time and the enjoyment will have to wait for another day. So how can we capture that intense engagement or go even further and lead students into 'the zone'? What do we mean by being in the zone anyway and how could we repeat the conditions that allow students to experience 'flow' in the classroom?

Flow, by its very nature it is part of the learning process, a by-product even, of good teaching and learning. Guy Claxton has argued in his book 'Wise Up' how, 'good students tend to be those who can gain access to the state of flow whilst they are studying.' It was with this in mind that I began my research with emCETT (East Midlands Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training) into whether or not students experienced flow whilst in college. Could they give us clues about how our teaching could better induce these levels of *engagement*, the holy grail of modern teaching?

Being in the zone. Flow. Call it what you will but you've probably experienced it at some point in your life. Have a think. Ever done an activity filled with meaning that you loved so much, but at the same time took you to the limit of your abilities in order to meet the challenge? Flow is when, like a surfer catching a wave, the difficulty and complex processes that allow you to perform the task fall away and your awareness is transformed into a sense of joy and effortless excellence. One of my music students described it for me when talking about composing, 'The music tells me what to do. I become it.'

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the leading theorist in this field explains flow like this: 'People are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable'. He uses the word autotelic, to describe the pursuit of an activity for its own enjoyment. The antitheses of the scenario we began with. He argues that for flow to flourish the person must have a balance of interest, skill and challenge that engages the limits of their ability. Not a million miles from Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' for those of you who remember your PGCE theories of learning module.

There is another emerging dimension to why flow may be of significant interest to the educator. [Public Health England](#) released a report in 2014, which indicated that 20% of children and young people report themselves as having poor wellbeing, 10% have a mental health issues with peak onset of mental health problems falling in the 8-15 age range. At the same time there are, according to the charity [Young Minds](#) significant cuts to child and adolescent mental health services (Camhs) in up to two-thirds of all NHS trusts. According to many there is a crisis in children and young peoples mental health, which [teachers have been managing on the frontline](#).

The PHE report also goes on to recommend that interventions are embedded in school and college curriculums and that intervention takes place early. Following experiences of working with young people in distress I decided to train as a [Mindfulness in Schools](#) teacher with the 'b' program and have used mindfulness successfully with many students to help them get perspective, reduce stress and even get a decent nights sleep. As has been reported in Professor [Katherine Weare's influential review](#), mindfulness has a growing and integral part to play in education. However, mindfulness is not for everyone and in my experience, is difficult to embed in an FE timetable already overburdened with exam commitments, UCAS preparation and coursework. Which is where I began to get interested in flow.

I studied a sample of 35 students aged 16-19 who studied on BTEC Media and Performing Arts courses and asked them about their experiences of flow: did they experience it, when did it happen and significantly, were there any types of teaching and learning that encouraged it in college?

My favourite response was from a student who said that he liked teachers who, 'lived for the question'. He was more engaged when his teachers were passionate and appeared to be in flow themselves. No surprises there perhaps but as we delved further some notable trends emerged.

85% of Students experienced flow most often when they were left alone to work on practical, workshop style projects that had a tangible goal (often long-term) rather than conventional classroom based modes of learning. Some even went so far as to suggest that the timetable needed to be more flexible to allow for more real-life working practices. They also discussed how flow was best experienced when they had built confidence whilst at college in preparation for a performance or project outside college in the real world: a gig, film shoot, recording a real client. Once it became real the stakes were higher and concurrent with Csikszentmihalyi's theory the incidences of flow increased.

Flow is too much of chameleon to conform to one model and true to form students also identified that lessons where there was a sense of an integrated whole promoted flow; they liked joined up learning that had an arc and a connected structure. However, distraction was also an issue for many who could be categorized as introverted-flow responders. Like [Susan Cain's silent army](#) of introverted learners uncatered for by mainstream experience, they felt flow most when they were working on their own on meaningful, goal-focused tasks and found that the classroom environment in general was too distracting. They wanted smaller class sizes. If anything the classroom was the most ambivalent flow-environment; 50% of learners said they had experienced flow in a classroom-based lesson whilst 50% said 'not at all'.

One model for repeatable flow experience has emerged from the research recommendations that could be applied without large-scale alteration of timetables and infrastructure. Begin by building trust so students don't fear failure, encourage autotelic and autonomous activity within a structure of joined up lessons that make significant allowances for practical work. If you can, design at least part of your curriculum around long-term projects with meaningful or appropriate industry-focused goals. The realisation of these goals should be a final, glorious leap of faith from the classroom to the real world.

I'm not suggesting that flow should be the rubric by which we gauge good teaching and learning but the students themselves have some interesting things to tell us about their experiences of learning from the mundane to the peak experiences of flow.

Indeed, for teachers of vocational subjects where 'being in the zone' would seem to be essential for developing a lasting professional commitment, it could be argued that we have a profound opportunity to make young people aware of this aspect of experience and make it central to our curriculum design. In the current climate of [data overload](#), spending cuts for mental health services and the perceived crisis in youth mental health, greater awareness of flow alongside other interventions such as mindfulness could also provide young people with a tool for self-emancipation unavailable to them elsewhere. These experiences stay with us through life and provide us with a true north for our endeavors. Just don't use PowerPoint. They don't like it. At all.

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