

# Flow: The Secret to Getting Your Students “In the Zone”

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“We have all experienced times when, instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate. On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like. Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times. The best moments occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

## Defining Flow

- “When are people most happy?”
- The best moments did not happen by chance.
- “Optimal experiences”
- Experience Sampling Method

Date:	Time Beeped:	Time Filled Out:	am/pm
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### As you were beeped ...

What were you thinking about? \_\_\_\_\_

Where were you? \_\_\_\_\_

What was the MAIN thing you were doing? \_\_\_\_\_

What other things were you doing? \_\_\_\_\_

WHY were you doing this particular activity?

I had to    I wanted to do it    I had nothing else to do

### Indicate how you felt about the main thing you were doing:

	<i>low</i>									<i>high</i>
Challenges of the activity	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Your skills in the activity	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Was this activity important to you?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Were you satisfied with how you were doing?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

### Describe your mood as you were beeped:

	<i>very</i>	<i>quite</i>	<i>some</i>	<i>neither</i>	<i>some</i>	<i>quite</i>	<i>very</i>	
Alert	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	.	-	.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Drowsy
Happy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	.	-	.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Sad
Active	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	.	-	.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Passive
Involved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	.	-	.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Detached

## Musical Considerations

- What motivates our musical intentions?
- What enters our consciousness?
- How strong are our intentions?
- What do we do with our musical attention?
- Quality of experience is guided by the amount and kind of psychic attention it gets.
- Pleasure (Homeostasis) vs. Enjoyment (Fulfillment)
- Control over consciousness leads to the quality of experience.

## Flow Components

1. Challenge-Skill Balance
2. Action-Awareness Merge
3. Clear Goals
4. Clear Feedback
5. Concentration on the task at hand
6. Sense of Control
7. Absence of Preoccupation
8. Transformation of Time
9. The Autotelic Experience

Dimensions of flow	Percentage frequently or always		
	Total sample N = 205	Amateur students N = 125	Elite students N = 80
Challenge-skill balance	66.2	54.4	82.5
Merging of action and awareness	55.7	49.6	65
Clear goals	79.6	71.9	91.2
Clear feedback	70.1	70.2	77.5
Concentration	61.7	61.2	62.5
Sense of control	49	45	55
Loss of self-consciousness	29.1	31	26.2
Time transformation	61	63.3	57.5

Sinnamon, Flow Among Musicians: Measuring Peak Experiences of Student Performers, 2012

## Science of Flow

- Norepinephrine and dopamine - heightened awareness, energy, tightening focus
- Gamma-aminobutyric acid produced - Neurotransmitter that blocks unwanted stimuli, lower signal to noise ratio, so our ability to link ideas faster grows.
- High ratio of dopamine to receptors in the thalamus), which may lead to more urgent connections.
- Elevated alpha-wave levels in the brain - Can retain cognitive consciousness for far longer
- Flow becomes 'addictive', or 'autotelic' - an end in itself. A source code of intrinsic motivation.
- The more chemicals that come into the brain state, the longer this process can happen, possibly refuting Gladwell's 10,000 hour thesis. Creativity is product the combination of novel information and old thoughts for new concepts.

Adapted from various materials by Steven Kotler, Executive Director: Flow Research Collective

## Musical Predictors of Flow in Individuals

1. Ability to play without self-criticism
2. Ability to maintain focus
3. Specific goals
4. Desire to feel an experience, be expressive while playing\*
5. Self-confidence and self-trust while playing\*\*

## Strategic Corollaries to Predictors

1. Enhancing the Ability to Play Without Self-Criticism
  - a. Learn to become nonreactive to self-criticism, in other words, be a silent witness to it, and learn to refocus attention on the musical activity.
  - b. Set realistic standards and avoid imposing impossible or perfectionistic demands on your playing.
  - c. Acknowledge any mistakes nonjudgmentally and matter-of-factly.
  - d. Decrease the perception of threat. Use humor to maintain a sense or perspective.
2. Enhancing the Ability to Focus on the Music:
  - a. Create explicit performance, learning, and experience goals before you begin playing.
  - b. Learn to physically relax just before playing by for instance, taking a deep breath or two.
  - c. Accept that physical symptoms of nervousness are normal and usually most intense just when one begins to play - especially with or for others.
  - d. Learn to gently, and nonjudgmentally, bring the focus back to the music when it wanders.
3. Creating or Enhancing Experience Goals:
  - a. Set a goal of being aware of feelings or bodily sensations as the music is played.
  - b. Embrace the process of playing, rather than just the outcome.

- c. Be okay with whatever feelings about the music may arise (including negative ones).
  - d. Allow yourself to move with the music (and to be moved by it).
  - e. Pay attention to any imagery and stories your mind may want to create to fit the music.
4. Boosting the Desire to Experience and Express Feelings Through Music:
    - a. Before playing a piece of music, bring attention to body sensations, posture, and breath.
    - b. Choose musical settings that can provide you with new feelings, experiences, and insights.
    - c. Embrace an attitude that encourages experimenting with different ways of playing the music.
    - d. Allow your feelings about the music, and awareness of them, to flow and change as the music progresses, without trying to interfere.
  5. Increasing Self-Confidence and Self-Trust While Playing:
    - a. Practice sight reading to acquire self-confidence in approaching unfamiliar musical situations.
    - b. Recall times when you have played similar music successfully and acknowledge that these capabilities are still intact.
    - c. Nurture an attitude of openness about discovering new things about your abilities and the music.
    - d. Suspend self-judgment and self-criticism whenever possible.

Adapted from Bloom, Skutnick-Henley, *Facilitating Flow Among Musicians*, 2005

## Responses to Flow in a Musical Setting

- 45% of collegiate musicians experience flow in ensemble (in an average of 27-minute sessions)
- Total Absorption: “I was able to lose myself...”, “The music was captivating...”
- Emotional Connection: “I wanted to share the music with my friends...”
- Alignment of Action/Awareness: “It didn’t seem like I had to work hard...”
- Transcendence: “Floating, observing...”

## Flow Detractors

- Energy is always being expended to restore order
- Psychic (Mental) Entropy: What pulls us away?
  - External factors – Flat tire, bad weather
  - Internal factors – “The Self”
  - Risk : Danger :: Artistry : Biology. The perception of risk becomes the physiological reality.

## Frequent Inhibitors in a Musical Setting

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-optimal preparation</li> <li>• Negative self-talk</li> <li>• Side conversation</li> <li>• Authoritative figure</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instrument malfunction</li> <li>• Bad mood</li> <li>• Not listening</li> <li>• Over thinking</li> </ul> |
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## The Autotelic Experience

Challenge finding and skill building are supported by different, sometimes even opposing traits or processes which are simultaneously present in autotelic personalities: pure curiosity and the need to achieve; enjoyment and persistence; openness to novelty and narrow concentration; integration and differentiation; independence and cooperation... Where non-autotelic individuals may see only difficulty, the deep sense of interest aids autotelic individuals to recognize opportunities to build their skills. They open their attention to new information (the play of challenge finding) and focus it on those units of information just far enough ahead of current skills to be manageable (the work of skill building). The autotelic personality is a conjunction of receptive and active qualities.

Nicola Baumann, *The Autotelic Personality*, 2012

## Musicianship Constructs

- If attention is directed away from the music, performance is likely to be automatic and uncreative.
- If attention is directed toward the music but focused on errors, performance is likely to be uncreative.
- Skilled performers seem to construct a structure of attention cues during rehearsal that relate to different aspects of expression and technique. These cues help musicians focus their attention during performance and allow for conscious interpretive decisions to be made.

Danek, *Novel Approaches for Studying Creativity in Problem-Solving and Artistic Performance*, 2020

## “Group Flow” and “Emergence” as Ensemble Performance

- Emergence - When a group performs in a way that its attributions cannot be made to an individual.
- A study by Hart et al. (2014), examined performance on the “mirror game” (Noy et al., 2011), a task for dyads that involves moving a pair of horizontal sliders back and forth along a track to create coordinated patterns of improvised movement. Periods of smooth, highly-synchronized motion emerged, which a subsequent study found to coincide with increases in heart rate and increases in correlation of heart rates between performers (Noy et al., 2015)
- While playing, performers monitor the disparities between their intended and output sound; disparities create a sense of tension, which is alleviated when the intended and output sounds match. The alleviation of tension enables a reduction in self-consciousness and perceived effort, allowing performers to focus on musical output in a way that is characteristic of flow. Thus, maintaining (and overtly realizing) intentions could enable the development of flow states. Further study would be needed to test this hypothesis.

Selected / Adapted from Laura Bishop: *Collaborative Musical Creativity: How Ensembles Coordinate Spontaneity*, 2018

## Some Practical Notes Regarding Ensemble Flow

- Theory of Zone of Proximal Development confirms challenge/skill balance in repertoire selection.
- Self-structure can be needed in individuals within a large ensemble context to facilitate ongoing flow.
- Ensembles build a shared sense of comradery and elimination of self-pride.
- Personal connection to the ensemble increases flow opportunities by mitigating risk.
- Collaborative flow makes music making unique and the concept of “emergence” can make music within the curriculum to be totally unique.
- Individual music making is inseparable from the whole.
- Longer rehearsals with fewer stops facilitate flow.
- A well-functioning large ensemble develops a provable perceived sense of community.
  - Psychologically less mature brains require compelling instruction with pedagogically structured goals to increase their awareness of musical contribution.
  - The factors of clear goals and challenge-skill balance are the most noticeable factors for high school students to identify.
  - Students who perceived an appropriate level of challenge to their skill level felt a stronger presence of self within their band programs.
  - Higher self-awareness and perception of flow through pedagogical sequencing directly influences the cohesiveness of a band.

Murthy, *An Analysis of Flow Theory Factors in High School Band Programs*, 2021

“The sooner we realize that the quality of the work experience can be transformed at will, the sooner we can improve this enormously important dimension of life.”

-Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

### LONG Dispositional Flow Scale (DFS-2)–Physical

Please answer the following questions in relation to your experience in your chosen activity. These questions relate to the thoughts and feelings you may experience during participation in your activity. You may experience these characteristics some of the time, all of the time, or none of the time. There are no right or wrong answers. Think about how often you experience each characteristic during your activity, then circle the number that best matches your experience.

When participating in: _____ (Name Event/Activity)		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
1	I am challenged, but I believe my skills will allow me to meet the challenge	1	2	3	4	5
2	I make the correct movements without thinking about trying to do so	1	2	3	4	5
3	I know clearly what I want to do	1	2	3	4	5
4	It is really clear to me how my performance is going	1	2	3	4	5
5	My attention is focused entirely on what I am doing	1	2	3	4	5
6	I have a sense of control over what I am doing	1	2	3	4	5
7	I am not concerned with what others may be thinking of me	1	2	3	4	5
8	Time seems to alter (either slows down or speeds up)	1	2	3	4	5
9	I really enjoy the experience	1	2	3	4	5
10	My abilities match the high challenge of the situation	1	2	3	4	5
11	Things just seem to happen automatically	1	2	3	4	5
12	I have a strong sense of what I want to do	1	2	3	4	5
13	I am aware of how well I am performing	1	2	3	4	5
14	It is no effort to keep my mind on what is happening	1	2	3	4	5
15	I feel like I can control what I am doing	1	2	3	4	5
16	I am not concerned with how others may be evaluating me	1	2	3	4	5

cont...	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always	
17	The way time passes seems to be different from normal	1	2	3	4	5
18	I love the feeling of the performance and want to capture it again	1	2	3	4	5
19	I feel I am competent enough to meet the high demands of the situation	1	2	3	4	5
20	I perform automatically, without thinking too much	1	2	3	4	5
21	I know what I want to achieve	1	2	3	4	5
22	I have a good idea while I am performing about how well I am doing	1	2	3	4	5
23	I have total concentration	1	2	3	4	5
24	I have a feeling of total control	1	2	3	4	5
25	I am not concerned with how I am presenting myself	1	2	3	4	5
26	It feels like time goes by quickly	1	2	3	4	5
27	The experience leaves me feeling great	1	2	3	4	5
28	The challenge and my skills are at an equally high level	1	2	3	4	5
29	I do things spontaneously and automatically without having to think	1	2	3	4	5
30	My goals are clearly defined	1	2	3	4	5
31	I can tell by the way I am performing how well I am doing	1	2	3	4	5
32	I am completely focused on the task at hand	1	2	3	4	5
33	I feel in total control of my body	1	2	3	4	5
34	I am not worried about what others may be thinking of me	1	2	3	4	5
35	I lose my normal awareness of time	1	2	3	4	5
36	The experience is extremely rewarding	1	2	3	4	5