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IST 663: Integrating Motivation and Information Literacy

Assignment 1

October 8, 2009

Motivational Theory: Flow

The theory of flow was developed by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, as described in his 1990 book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Butler-Bowdon, 2003). The essence of Csikszentmihalyi's notion is that a person who experiences flow is completely absorbed by an activity for the pleasure that it provides, and all other stimulation and activities are imperceptible to that person (Marsh, 2005, p. 78). In this state of being, people are motivated by inherent enjoyment of the challenges provided by the activity, and are subsequently more productive and happier.

Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow is defined by seven characteristics that indicate a heightened state of focus and enjoyment:

- Completely involved in what we are doing - focused, concentrated.
- A sense of ecstasy - of being outside everyday reality.
- Great inner clarity - knowing what needs to be done, and how well we are doing.
- Knowing that the activity is doable - that our skills are adequate to the task.
- A sense of serenity - no worries about oneself, and a feeling of growing beyond the boundaries of the ego.
- Timelessness - thoroughly focused on the present, hours seem to pass by in minutes.
- Intrinsic motivation - whatever produces flow becomes its own reward.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on Flow, 2004

In his study on flow, Csikszentmihalyi's subjects were provided with pagers that went off at random intervals throughout the day. Each time the pagers activated, participants documented their exact activities, and the emotional response that those activities elicited

(Butler-Bowdon, 2003). The spectrum of each individual's responses is documented in the accompanying chart.
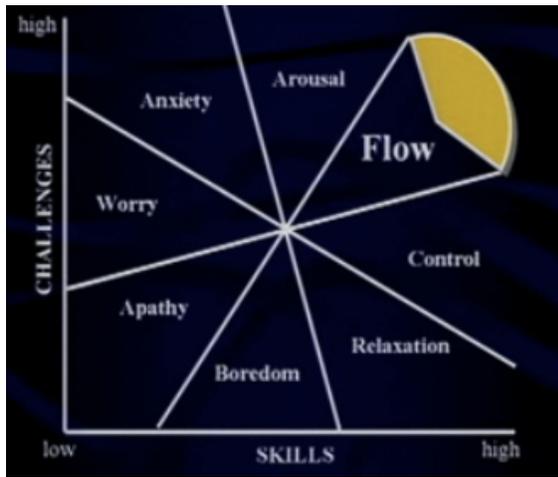
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on Flow, 2004

In the graphic, the axes are those indicated by subjects' perceptions of their levels of challenge and skill competency during each activity. The central point varies for each subject, but the overall outcome is ubiquitous: as events occur closer to the flow range, happiness increases (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on Flow, 2004). This increase in happiness perpetuates an intrinsic desire to replicate that state of being, which leads to increased challenges and skill sets in activities that are pleasurable to the individual.

Those who actively seek experiences that result in flow benefit from personal growth, but they also improve the communities that they live in. "The growth in complexity entails both awareness of your uniqueness simultaneous with renewed understanding of how you fit into your world and your relationships with other people" (Butler-Bowdon, 2003). If many people participate in flow-centered activities, the entire group will benefit from increased skills and relationship awareness.

One major component of the flow experience is detachment from societal pressures. This is most notably seen in one's ability to release from the "constraining concerns of the ego", such as the fear of failure and a consciousness of others' perceptions of us (Farmer, 1999). When we engage in challenging activities that we enjoy, we forget those forces that prevent us from reaching our goals.

The most definite component of the notion of flow is the sense of ecstasy that it creates. As Csikszentmihalyi states, the Greek meaning of ecstasy is "simply to stand to the side of something" (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on Flow, 2004). This is characterized in flow by one's ability to enter into an alternative reality. Csikszentmihalyi describes such an occurrence in his 2004 TED talk: "His body disappears, his identity disappears from his consciousness, because he doesn't have enough attention... to really do well something that

requires a lot of concentration and at the same time to feel that he exists" (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on Flow, 2004).

While this seems like a strong divergence from our ordinary existence, it translates on the daily level as "participating in a reality which is different from everyday life that we're used to" (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on Flow, 2004). In simplistic terms, achieving flow is experiencing a notable state of happiness. The aforementioned account of flow is that of a professional musician, working within his ideal creative atmosphere over a number of years. His incidence represents flow at its zenith, but individuals can discover their own degrees of this state of being.

Teaching Flow in the 21st Century

Attaining an individual flow for all students in a classroom may seem like an arduous task, but instructors can establish an environment and curriculum that fosters students' propensity to work in a flow-centered manner.

To set a foundation for a 21st century school media center that encourages flow, librarians can devise a mission that reflects the goal of free learning. In the business world, Sony co-founder Masaru Ibuka expressed that employees "be aware of their mission to society and work to their heart's content" (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on Flow, 2004). This unique vision can be carried into a school media center through open language that allows students to choose learning methods and subjects that are desirable to them. Even if the mission is solely to guide the school media specialist, having an concrete set of values can ensure that the school media center remains conducive to flow.

Csikszentmihalyi (1991) emphasizes intrinsic motivation in the flow theory, and asserts that a lack of motivational consideration is one of modern education's greatest flaws: "...the chief impediments to learning are not cognitive in nature. It is not that students cannot lean, it is that they do not wish to." This reinforces the need for an increased focus on intrinsic motivation. If educators focus on flow, the priority on intrinsic motivation will improve the quality of work that students produce, and help them become lifelong learners.

In order to achieve a sense of intrinsic motivation, school media specialists need to be "sensitive to students' goals and desires" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). When this occurs, "they are thus able to articulate the pedagogical goals as meaningful challenges" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Far from teaching simply to meet mandated standards, school media specialists can take a flow-centered approach to instruction that will inevitably result in students' mastery of a variety of skill sets.

Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow may appear to be a radical theory as applied to a classroom environment, but some parallels can be drawn between flow and a common educational paradigm. In Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development*, "successful learning occurs when children are guided by adults towards learning things that they could not attempt on their own" (State of Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007). Through instructor-guided challenges, school media specialists can help students complete learning tasks that will help them reach a state of flow, creating an enjoyable and effective learning experience for students.

Just as in Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory, the Zone of Proximal Development is contingent on a specific emotional spectrum. When depictions of each are compared, the similarities are encouraging:
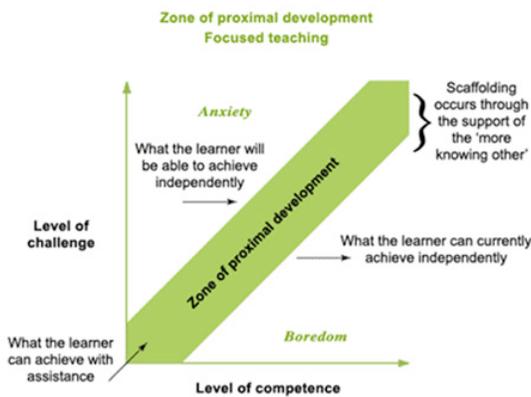
Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development
State of Victoria Department of Education and Early
Childhood Development, 2007.
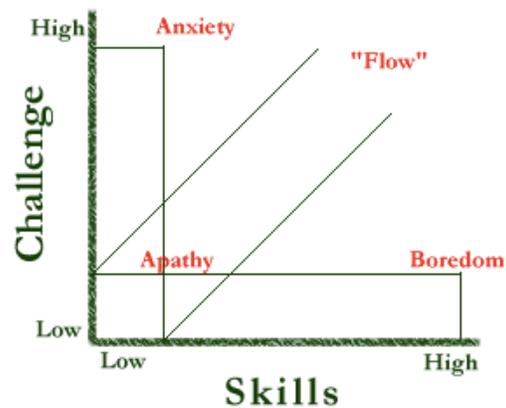
Csikszentmihalyi's Flow.
Farmer, 1999.

Many educators are familiar with Vygotsky's work, and can apply the same principles to flow. While Csikszentmihalyi's theory must be achieved by the individual student, the Zone of

Proximal Development can help school media specialists guide students through challenges that help them reach flow.

Csikszentmihalyi (1991) declares that demonstrating the pleasure of learning to students is one main way to improve motivation. "It does not require expensive technology, although it does require sensitivity and intelligence, which might be harder to come by than the fruits of technology" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). While technology can be implemented to enhance student enjoyment, especially in the 21st century school media center, it is vital for instructors to realize that this fundamental source of intrinsic motivation can be overlooked when the focus is strictly on teaching technological skills.

The school media center has natural potential for generating flow among students. It is an environment that contains myriad media and access to a broad range of subjects that can appeal to any young learner. In the 21st century, a time inundated with information and technology, the school media specialist can use these resources to help students achieve flow. This will result in more effective learning, a happier school environment, and an increase in students who are motivated to learn simply by the pleasure it provides.

Teaching Strategies

- Guided Practice: Collaborate with classroom teachers on particular units. For each unit, introduce students to learning materials that are related to the topic, but are at a higher skill level. Facilitating the learning, the school media specialist can increase students' comfort zone with the material.
- Independent Practice: After a lesson on the OPAC or Dewey Decimal System, allow students to have an extended period of time to check out books. In this time, students may independently explore the OPAC, the stacks, one book, or a number of books. During this period, students can dictate the content to meet their interests, but will also acquire an understanding of the library system.

～ Reflection: At regular intervals throughout the school year, the school media specialist can ask students to journal their perceptions of their library experiences and overall learning progress. In this activity, students are critical of their learning journeys, can can provide suggestions and feedback to the school media specialist.

DIscussion Questions

～ Have you ever experienced a state of flow? What types of activities were you engaged in during these periods? What factors contributed to your flow?

～ In what ways can you, as a librarian, promote flow in the school media center? Are there small changes you can make to the physical structure of the space? What are some additional ways that you can implement this theory into your curriculum?

～ How can we integrate technological resources to help students achieve a sense of flow in regards to becoming information literate?

References

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