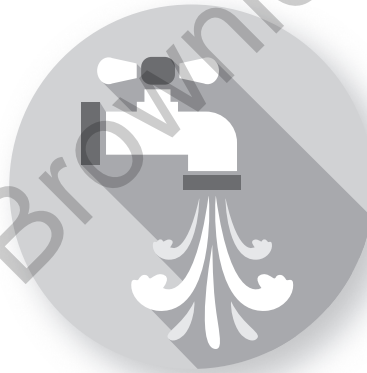


Solutions for Creating the Learning Spaces Students Deserve

Making Learning Flow



John Spencer

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Introduction

What Is Flow?

It's a warm May afternoon, and my students have just sauntered in after lunch. They pick up their novels and individually sprawl out all over the classroom. I know, I know, students are supposed to sit up. Lying down and reading can lead to dreariness and lethargy. But that doesn't happen. Fifteen minutes into reading, the room is pin-drop silent. Nobody is falling asleep. Eyes stay glued to the pages. All students are technically in the room, but they all go off to various worlds. Some fight Voldemort. Others join Katniss in a fight against the Capitol. One student tears up over *The Fault in Our Stars*.

Ten more minutes roll by. Nobody says anything. Nobody looks up from a book. A group of screaming fourth graders passes our classroom, and still nothing happens. The room feels calm, but it has a buzzing intensity. The place feels electric. I glance at the students as they flip through pages faster and faster, dying to know what will happen next.

This goes on for an hour before I finally ask for their attention. Students groan.

"It's already been twenty minutes?" a girl asks.

"It's been an hour," I point out.

"No way," she says, shaking her head.

I point to the clock.

"I swear that we were only reading for, like, ten minutes," she argues.

"You think the clock is lying?" I ask with a smile.

"Maybe," she shoots back.

Fast-forward an hour. Frantic movement and intense discussions have replaced the quiet hum of reading as they design cardboard arcade games. This activity is louder, more cooperative, and more outwardly creative than the silent reading. Students tear off duct tape with their teeth (despite warnings to use scissors) and bend cardboard as they get closer and closer to having a makeshift pinball machine

or Skee-Ball game. But despite the noise and chaos, the students' eyes have the same intense look that they had during silent reading. They stay locked into learning.

The truth is this learning experience rarely occurs. It's one of those little gifts teachers get, and it's hard to replicate on a daily basis. Yet we've all experienced moments like this before, where every student seems in the zone. Time seems to simultaneously slow down and speed up all at once. The class has a sense of challenge and urgency but also a sense of relaxation. You can intuitively feel something is different. The class is fully engaged. Students get lost in the task at hand, and they have no desire to walk away. The class feels different because student engagement is happening on a whole new level.

It turns out this type of in-the-zone engagement has a name: *flow*. When an athlete seems focused and dialed in, she is experiencing flow. When an artist gets lost in his craft, he is in a state of flow. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2002), the theorist who coined the term, describes flow this way:

The flow experience is when a person is completely involved in what he or she is doing, when the concentration is very high, when the person knows moment by moment what the next steps should be, like if you are playing tennis, you know where you want the ball to go, if you are playing a musical instrument you know what notes you want to play, every millisecond, almost. And you get feedback to what you're doing. That is, if you're playing music, you can hear whether what you are trying to do is coming out right or in tennis you see where the ball goes and so on. So there's concentration, clear goals, feedback, there is the feeling that what you can do is more or less in balance with what needs to be done, that is, challenges and skills are pretty much in balance.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defines flow as a state of *optimal experience*. In other words, flow happens in the moments when someone is fully engaged, present, focused, and alert—he or she gets in the zone. He mentions the following seven components to create a state of flow.

1. **A challenging activity that requires skills:** These activities tend to be goal directed and bound by some type of constraint. So they might involve a difficult problem that one needs to solve, a muse that an artist searches for, or a set of rules that an athlete must follow. These constraints provide a sense of challenge that makes the task enjoyable. However, a mere challenge isn't enough. Flow is most likely to happen when the challenge level matches the perceived skill level. If the challenge is too high, people grow anxious and give up. If the challenge is too low, people grow bored. So balance is critical.

2. **The merging of action and awareness:** When people experience flow, they often have a sense of losing themselves. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes, “They often stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing” (p. 53). They feel a sense of command over what they do. The merging of action and awareness can feel effortless. However, the situation is often inherently challenging.
3. **Clear goals and frequent feedback:** When experiencing a state of flow, people have a clear picture in their mind of what they want to accomplish, and frequent feedback determines next steps. In any work, people must always have a mental picture of their goals and a sense of progress toward those goals. The feedback can be objective or subjective, internal or external, or physical or mental. Regardless, a sense of progress is a critical part of engaging in flow.
4. **Concentration on the task at hand:** Flow is not simply concentration. It’s actually a hyperfocus on the now. It goes beyond simply staying present in the moment. When someone experiences flow, he or she has the ability to tune out anything that doesn’t matter and focus on the critical elements of what matters.
5. **The paradox of control:** When experiencing flow, people feel in command of their situations. However, often people can’t control these types of situations. For example, during a game, an athlete might feel in control, but the game’s outcome remains totally up in the air. This sense of feeling in control but also working in uncertainty makes a task more engaging. While the work challenges the person and the task daunts him or her, flow makes the situation feel effortless in the moment.
6. **The loss of self-consciousness:** With flow, people feel like part of something bigger. They get so lost in a book or a work of art that they stop thinking about themselves.
7. **The transformation of time:** During flow, people lose all sense of time. Sometimes, a conversation with a friend is so engaging that hours go by but it only feels like minutes. Or someone may work on creating something all day and realize in the evening he forgot to eat lunch. Distortion of time is a critical element of flow.

Don't these components describe what we want in our classrooms—fully engaged students? Don't we want students to get lost and so engaged in what they do that they never look at the clock? Don't we want them to work with a sense of command and self-direction? Don't we want them to get fully motivated? Don't we want them to become passionate, creative, and empowered learners both inside and outside of school? But how do we pull it off? How do we make this happen?

Sometimes, it helps to look at examples outside of school. One of the most famous examples of flow in action occurred in one of the most legendary performances in sports history.

Flow in Action

I remember watching the first game of the 1992 NBA Finals between Portland and Chicago. The Trail Blazers dominated early by hitting seven straight field goals. The Bulls lagged behind, lost and unfocused. The typically dominant Michael Jordan trailed behind on defense and struggled to get the ball to the hoop on offense. Nothing worked. He looked shaken and nervous—hardly the larger-than-life legend we had grown accustomed to seeing.

Finally, Bulls head coach Phil Jackson called a time-out. Instead of screaming at and berating his players, he asked them to calm down. He talked about getting into a rhythm. They didn't change the strategy. They didn't get psyched up. However, even as a kid, I could see the change in Jordan's face. He looked calm and confident. He was entering the zone. You could see it in his eyes. Something had changed.

Then, it happened. Jordan flew around the court stealing passes, dishing out assists, and hitting every jump shot. The Trail Blazers double-teamed him, but even when they fouled him, he'd hit the shots and make the free throws. In one ten-minute stretch, the typically short-range-shooting Jordan hit six straight three-pointers. It was a classic case of an athlete hitting a state of flow.

Those moments of peak flow are admittedly rare. Michael Jordan wouldn't replicate a six-three-pointer evening ever again. A pitcher who throws a no-hitter probably won't repeat it on the next outing. An artist will have many days of feeling uninspired.

Even when it's not over-the-top impressive, many high performers can regularly maintain a state of flow. Serena Williams might not win a tennis Grand Slam every year, but she can get into a state of flow that regularly propels her performances. Neil Gaiman might not write perfectly every time he picks up a pencil and paper. However, he can hit a general state of flow that allows him to be a prolific writer.

This experience transcends disciplines. In a state of flow, a person's body just seems to do exactly what his or her mind wants it to do. Things feel effortless. Everything just clicks. It feels otherworldly. It happens with authors who can spend

hours crafting a world in their head. You see this with coders, engineers, chefs, and accountants (yes, there are actually people who love numbers enough to hit a state of flow while solving complex financial problems).

So why not in our classrooms? Why don't we craft environments where students feel more focused, energized, and alive on the learning journey? Why does reaching a state of peak flow seem to occur only by happenstance, rather than through planning?

We want to see students get locked into learning in the same way a Broadway singer locks into a live performance or a chess master zones in on the game. We want to see students solve complex problems without zoning out or quitting in frustration.

Flow in the Classroom

Ask a student to describe a time when he or she felt in the zone, and chances are the answer will involve an activity outside of school. It might involve fixing a car, playing a video game, or reading a book. It might involve a deep conversation with friends, an art project, or a video that a student filmed for fun. What you won't hear is, "In the middle of that mathematics packet" or "When I was answering those reading comprehension questions to prep for the test."

Most flow experiences occur outside the school setting. This is due, in large part, to the industrial model of schooling. The designers of our factory-style education system didn't think about engagement. Horace Mann first introduced the industrial school model with the goal of unifying school into a common experience (as cited in Rose, 2012). Borrowing from the German system, he pushed for grade levels, common curriculum, and standardized procedures. Students were supposed to fit the system rather than the system fitting the students.

As Joel Rose (2012) describes it:

The factory line was simply the most efficient way to scale production in general, and the analog factory-model classroom was the most sensible way to rapidly scale a system of schools. Factories weren't designed to support personalization. Neither were schools.

As the system evolved, schools valued compliant factory workers who could follow directions. They employed a system of punishments and rewards that ignored the intrinsic drive to solve problems, make things, and fully engage with the content.

The factories no longer remain, but the system does and, with it, the legacy of student disengagement. In fact, it's getting worse. Student engagement has been dropping steadily starting in fifth grade, before bottoming out at just over 30 percent midway through high school. See table I.1 (page 6).

Table I.1: Percentage of Students Engaged in School by Grade

Grade	Percentage
Fifth	75 percent
Sixth	67 percent
Seventh	55 percent
Eighth	45 percent
Ninth	41 percent
Tenth	33 percent
Eleventh	32 percent
Twelfth	34 percent

Source: McLeod, 2016.

Educational institutions often respond to disengagement by focusing on skills interventions and making the content easier to understand—with the assumption that students disengage because they struggle with the content. However, that gives an incomplete picture. Often, the low achievement stems from low engagement. Disengaged students fall behind, growing more frustrated, less motivated, and less engaged in an ongoing instruction cycle. Boredom, frustration, and anger can lead to deeper behavioral issues over time (Stanney & Hale, 2012).

But not just struggling students disengage. We often see high achievers as students who get things done, who self-regulate their work habits, and who have a firm understanding of the material. Yet many high achievers aren't fully engaged. They do what they are supposed to do but nothing more (Schlechty, 2011).

We can do better.

About This Book

It's time to reimagine student engagement to go beyond compliance. It's time to rethink the current, most prevalent student engagement strategies. Often, the very structures we have set up to increase student engagement act as barriers to flow. Sometimes, even our helpfulness as educators disrupts the process.

Flow theory provides a lens that can complement our thoughts on behavior management and pedagogy. Flow starts with student buy-in and intrinsic motivation. It includes thinking about areas that we often neglect in the classroom. In this book, you'll learn how to help students reach a state of flow every day in the classroom.

Chapter 1 is all about motivation. You'll discover how to tap into students' intrinsic motivation instead of using extrinsic rewards as motivation. In chapter 2, you'll learn how to personalize instruction to match students' perceived skills with

equivalent learning challenges to empower them as learners. Chapter 3 offers suggestions for shifting classroom pacing and moving from action to suspense to encourage meaningful conflict and growth. Lastly, in chapter 4, we'll analyze feedback and the importance of shifting from top-down to horizontal assessment.

The goal of this book is to demystify the learning experience to recreate the conditions that regularly foster a general state of flow. In other words, when you reimagine student engagement, it's less about dreaming of something new and more about making sense of those amazing flow experiences you've seen in the classroom.

When students fully engage in the learning process, they'll become the naturally curious, critical-thinking, creative people we want them to be. They'll view learning as inherently fun, which is ultimately what we all strive for: students who love learning. They'll take the desire to think, create, and question outside the classroom and into their world. That's what we want as educators.

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