

Flow at School

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I read an interesting book recently from the self-help-inspirational-get-your-life-in-order section of the library. The book is called *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. I think the book has some interesting ideas that are applicable to the lives of teachers and the educational process. In the book, the author writes about how we can use our time and energy more effectively. I've found that applying his ideas to the classroom has helped me create some engaging learning experiences.

The author explains "flow" as the state of mind we are in when we are totally absorbed into what we are doing. You can probably think of times when you are so engaged with an activity that the passing of time, outside thoughts and worries do not come into consideration. To help us evaluate the quality of our experiences, he developed a chart that describes the relationship between the amount of skill an activity requires and the amount of challenge it presents. Activities that require low skill levels and have low challenge lead to apathy. Those that require a high level of skill but low challenge lead to boredom, or at best, relaxation. On the opposite end, with activities where the challenge is high but the skill involved is low, we begin to feel anxiety or frustration. The optimal combination, therefore, is at the junction of high skill requirements and high challenge—this is where "flow" happens.

I think it is a good idea for us to identify for ourselves where we experience "flow." I know for me, I'm there when playing competitive volleyball, or mountain biking or hammering out a piece of Chopin on the piano. I think we can use these times to enrich our lives, and perhaps there is spillover into the classroom as inspired living leads to inspired teaching.

I've also found that this idea becomes particularly useful in the classroom. To be able to identify where the students experience "flow" is truly valuable. It will vary greatly because of differing ages, personalities and learning styles, but the principle is applicable to all different kinds of people. I've found it challenging to build "flow" lessons for my class of grades 7,8 and 9—an age group that seems to naturally plunk itself uncomfortably in the mire of apathy. However, one activity that I have had a great deal of success with is design and technology challenges. These are very simple lessons to teach and they allow the students to become self-directed and motivated.

The concept is simple. First, give the students a task, such as to build the tallest possible freestanding structure using only newspaper and tape, constructing a model bridge to support as much weight as possible, create a mousetrap car—there are lots of possibilities. Next, put them into small groups of 2, 3 or 4. Give them some materials to work with: I like to give each group the same amount of materials so that they have to be purposeful with the limited amount of materials they have to work with. They have a time limit and often have to present a drawn design before beginning construction. It is not necessary to create competition, and though I don't emphasize it, some students

thrive on the idea of competition and often their favourite part of the activity is at the end when they get to see what everyone has created, present their own creation and test it.

Here is a type of lesson where the process is equally important or more important than the product. The students learn how to cooperate in groups. They learn to think and share creatively. They take pride in what they've accomplished. They learn from trial and error and often learn as much from what doesn't work as from what does. It brings the students into that "flow" experience as it allows them to be successful at a task that challenges them to use many skills. And that, I believe, is as rich as a learning experience can get.