

Find Your Flow – A Pedagogical Self-analysis:
Investigating Student Engagement in the Psychological State of Flow

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Description of Research

Find Your Flow, a Contemporary class series, differs from the typical Master Class in the way that the lesson plan is directly influenced by and founded upon Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory of Psychology. With the increasing popularity of Master Classes in younger generations of dancers and dance communities, dance educators find themselves presented with new opportunities to influence artists for shortened periods of time, often serving as a breath in the midst of the chaotic routine of their seasonal performances and responsibilities. Through extensive research and concentrated course selection, I designed a lesson plan to be taught at each of the three classes which were a part of this series, appealing to a variety of populations and training levels.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is responsible for recognizing and defining the concept and state of flow. This flow state and its dimensions are carefully laid out in Csikszentmihalyi's published work, "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience." According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow is "a state of intense absorption and involvement with the present moment" (Lyubomirsky 181). To attain a successful flow, there are eight characteristics that must be present: (1) complete concentration on the task at hand, (2) clarity of goals and reward in mind with immediate feedback, (3) transformation of time, (4) the experience is intrinsically rewarding, (5) effortlessness and ease, (6) balance between challenge and skill, (7) merged actions and awareness leading to loss of self-conscious rumination, and (8) a feeling of control over the task(s) (Cook). When experiencing this flow, people are alert and feel as though they are at the peak of their abilities – often leading them to return to the activity in the future due to the

love that is gathered from such a heightened experience (Lyubomirsky 181). Essentially, this feeling of flow is the scientific synonym for "...because it just feels good," an answer that we so often give to the common question, "Why do you love to dance?"

Flow also exists as one of the four motion factors of dance – space, time, weight, and flow – according to Laban Studies. Flow can be either bound or free, differentiating clearly between two types of movement, though all falling under the same umbrella. This movement state leads to a complete synchronization of both body and mind, engaging the dancer fully in each intricacy and detail. In her book, "Harnessing the Wind," Jan Erkert describes this experience as the body making deep connections that listen to the wisdom it already possesses, but has yet to discover (Erkert 104). Mia Michaels, on another hand, describes the sensation as connecting the body, mind, and spirit, creating a flow between the breath and the heart – keying into this wisdom that stems from a deep place which is already, and has already been, present within the body (Michaels 25). Essentially, the body tunes into movement deeper than before as the mind falls into this state, previously defined by Csikszentmihalyi.

I chose to host/teach "Master Classes" due to their ever-growing popularity within the field of dance education. Over the past four years, much of the teaching I have done has been short time frames spent with populations of students where I leave immediately after teaching class and perhaps do not see them for another year or so. My curiosity with this fad is how to effectively structure these short time periods (usually 2 hours) with students in a way that can benefit them in the long term. Developing a year-long lesson plan for weekly classes is one thing, but how can teachers make a similar impact on students that they see only once? As I continued to pursue my Developmental Psychology minor and take courses such as Psychology of Creativity and Positive Psychology, I began to see the benefit in this flow state as a medium of

getting the most out of such shortened time. If your brain is fully engaged in material to a point of lost consciousness, it would only make sense that new intellectual, artistic, and kinesthetic discoveries could be made by students involved – or at least that was the initial thought that prompted this series.

Each of the three classes taught followed the exact same lesson plan, based off of the previously stated eight characteristics of the flow state. An example of this finalized lesson plan can be found at the end of this document (St John 12). To facilitate complete concentration on the task at hand, class consisted of only a warm-up, combination, and cool down, rather than including other aspects such as across the floor, technique, etc. This was then stated as a clear goal at the beginning of class, laying the class timeline out on a poster at the front of the studio for students to view at all times. To further promote this clarity of goals, we set personal goals at the beginning of class through a guided mindfulness technique and checked in with these goals after each aspect of class to assist in immediate, intrinsic feedback – in addition to the immediate feedback offered by my verbal cues. In order to transform time in the two-hour period, I taught the combo very specifically – first quickly, then slowly with details, and then a quick review – and followed a carefully timed out lesson plan to ensure that students would be constantly moving from the start of class to the finish. For the intrinsic nature and ease that the flow requires, I monitored my verbal cues and experimented with various forms of positive feedback. Additionally, I created a “Flow Board” – a posterboard used for silent conversation which students could write their thoughts on throughout class and use as a mode of in-time reflection. The center combination is where the balance of challenge and skill was extremely evident, as each combo was specific to the skill of the population I was expecting and incorporated a section that repeated at least once. In choreographing this way, students were able to focus more on the

movement rather than the process of memorization. Finally, students were able to engage in the last two characteristics – loss of consciousness and control over the task – through our personal goal setting and check-ins throughout the class. There were no expectations of performance set by me, as an Instructor. Rather, I functioned as a guide throughout the experience through verbal cueing, physical demonstration, and the use of the timeline posters at the front of the studio space.

Summary of Results

After reaching out to a multitude of studios – some who I have had previous relations with and others who were new to me – I successfully scheduled and taught 3 *Find Your Flow* classes, all about a month or so apart. These classes were taught at Magnificat High School (Rocky River, OH), Sullivant Hall – OSU Dance (Columbus, OH), and Dublin Dance Center (Dublin, OH), all for two-hour periods. Class sizes ranged from 9 – 25, with the majority of the population being female on all accounts. The age range of participants was 11 – 23 years of age, with the singular eleven-year-old being an outlier in the larger population. The individual statistics for each class are laid out in the table below:

Location/School	Date	Number of Students	Age Range	Dance Background
Magnificat High School	10/12/18	26 female students	11 – 23 years	Studio/Competitive dance training, High School Dance Team, training in Magnificat High School Dance Performing Arts curriculum
Sullivant Hall – OSU Dance	12/6/18	20 female students, 1 male student	18 – 22 years	OSU Dance Major, OSU Dance Minor, OSU Theatre Majors, OSU Theatre Minor, experience/training in studio and concert dance, musical theatre – very wide range of training for this particular class

Dublin Dance Center	1/4/19	9 female students	13 – 16 years	Studio/Concert dance training at Dublin Dance Center, part of the performing company and training program
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With each class, I found myself engaging with students in ways that I have not before in my previous teaching experiences. For lack of better word, it seemed that this lesson plan and the themes and motivations that supported class material were an exaggerated version of my pedagogical personality and a heightened version of the Instructor that I work to be. Conclusions were drawn simply from observing students in all class activities, watching video recorded from class periods, taking the time after class to read through the Flow Board, and reading the anonymous feedback provided to me by students at the end of class. Of these aspects, the Flow Board and feedback notes proved the most beneficial and seemed to provide me with the best understanding of the students' experience – specifically their engagement in the flow state.

When it came to the Flow Boards, I found myself analyzing language. Upon entering the studio space, students were prompted to write a one-word description of how they were feeling prior to the start of class. Throughout the time following, they could come and go from the Board as they pleased, writing whatever and whenever felt right. Below are some of the responses that stuck out to me:

“I love how open we can be in this class. You let us be who we want to be!” – Magnificat High School

“feeling other people’s energy” – Magnificat High School

“internal connection & grounded” – Magnificat High School

“felt tension built up in my body over the week being released” – Magnificat High School

“it was kinda hard to improv to a fast song but it was fun to try since it was way out of my comfort zone” – Magnificat High School

“feels amazing to let go of expectations and just move” – Sullivant Hall, OSU Dance

“light in every way possible” – Sullivant Hall, OSU Dance

“connect mind and body” – Sullivant Hall, OSU Dance

“rejuvenating the soul” – Sullivant Hall, OSU Dance

“I exist...and I’m thriving” – Sullivant Hall, OSU Dance

“genuine” – Sullivant Hall, OSU Dance

“leave an impact on the world” – Dublin Dance Center

“intention” – Dublin Dance Center

“in control” – Dublin Dance Center

“I feel cared for...” – Dublin Dance Center

From these statements, and others, I gathered that students felt connected to, yet challenged by, the class material. Their responses identifying the “feeling” of the movement keyed into their experience of flow, placing emphasis on experience rather than physicality. Reading the Flow Boards reminded me of the reason that I teach and the impact that we are called to make as educators in this field. With very little white space left on every board, it was clear that this class structure was catalyzing something new that students had yet to experience, but were latching onto very quickly.

Furthermore choreographing the final combination for each individual class and population, I focused on creating material that would challenge that specific group of dancers. For example, at Magnificat High School, I incorporated more technical elements and extensions – which this group of students is skilled in performing and tend to feel more familiar with due to

to their training. For my class at OSU Dance, I focused more on movement and connection to lyric. At Dublin Dance Center, I worked to find a balance of modern and contemporary dance within the combination, basing this off of my experience in working with one of their main contemporary dance instructors and her style of movement. These familiar elements were found mainly in the repeated sections of each combination, leaving students with an overwhelming feeling of success and accomplishment despite any struggle that they may have experienced with the more challenging elements I incorporated: those which directly worked to contrast those elements which are familiar. From this commentary on the Flow Board, it is clear that the sense of success and generated positive affect proved to be the strongest overall result of the material, as intended, due to this choreographic process.

The anonymous feedback, on another hand, was gathered on post-it notes that I left out for students to write on at the end of class. I was overwhelmed by the amount that were willing to share with me and their feedback was essentially in the consistency of material and figuring out what it was that made this structure so special. Many students commented that the class allowed them to be free and simply enjoy dancing, igniting their existing passion for this art. A few students commented on the fact that they never felt rushed – a direct indicator of the transformation of time, knowing that I had taught some aspects much quicker than others and that the balance of sudden/sustained movement and instruction contributed to this aspect of the flow state. From an educator standpoint, it was humbling to hear how many students recalled feeling empowered and inspired, bringing me back to the description of this project as an exaggerated experience of my pedagogy. It seemed that of all aspects of the class, the lengthened improvisation (the tail-end of the warm-up) is what students commented on as being the most challenging, but those who identified this challenged explained the joy they felt in overcoming

this struggle and the new discoveries that were made as they used their skills to combat it – flow at its best.

In observing each class, I could feel my passion for education re-igniting as I witnessed students embracing the material in their own way. For some, they were incredibly comfortable with the new challenge that this class brought to their studio. For others, they were hesitant at first, but slowly became the leaders of the group: reflecting on the Flow Board after every exercise and ultimately volunteering to perform the final combination as much as they could before class time came to a close. Perhaps one of the greatest variations in embrace was seen in the class taught at OSU Dance, where there was an extreme diversity in training backgrounds amongst the students taking class. From people pursuing their BFA Degree to those who have only had dance training in the musical theatre realm, students worked with one another on the sides and encouraged each other to brave the new challenge with an open mind and heart. It was truly amazing to witness those who had never experienced contemporary dance end up at the front of the group as they performed the final combination for the last times. By the end of the class, the varied levels of training and technical proficiency were less evident, and the sheer desire to move and share space with one another became the most prominent. Not only were these artists learning from one another, but they had created a community, flowing from one mindful movement to the next.

Future Goals/Relationship to the Field

With all of this in mind, it is my hope to continue to teach *Find Your Flow* classes in other locations and to other populations post-graduation. I think that there is a need for the environment that this class structure creates and there was a clear appreciation by students who participated. As I move on in this field, I hope to market these classes as a workshop that can be

brought to other studios and schools as a way for students to find a new sense of artistry and vulnerability, therefore leading to a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the technical and physical work that they do in the studio on a regular basis.

Through focusing in on a Master Class structure, my ability to write lesson plans was challenged in the sense that I had to truly prioritize which aspects of the class would be most beneficial to those involved. With a shortened time frame, it was important that I stay aware of every choice made – from movement, to musical support, to time frame of each individual exercise. This intense focus translates, then, to my work in a non-master class structure as I work to be sure that each minute of class is being used to its fullest potential. Furthermore, in translating this focus to a semester-long or season-length dance course, this exercise in prioritizing will help me to effectively structure class series which build upon one another rather than jump from one topic to the next. In doing so, students not only gain new skills, but they are better able to comprehend and connect material, leading them to future success.

Ultimately, this project served as an inspiration to me to bring the underlying theme and value of flow to the forefront of my pedagogy. Throughout my time at The Ohio State University, my studies in Psychology have led me to making adjustments to my teaching styles and strategies, in addition to the Dance Education courses taken in the Department. The importance of finding and feeling this flow is something that has led me to edit lesson plan structure, timing, and the way I choose to segment material throughout the year. This project, however, granted me the permission to make flow the priority, and the results I saw in the students' fully embodied movement and engagement in class led me to deciding to continue with this pedagogy. I believe that this is what makes me unique as an Instructor and what will continue to set me apart from others in this field. As educators, we are all essentially teaching the

same techniques and methods, but we have to find ourselves in the material that we teach in order to connect to our students on a deeper level – and this project helped me to do just that.

LESSON PLAN EXAMPLE

Find Your Flow: Contemporary Master Class Series

Class #1: Magnificat High School, Rocky River, OH

October 12, 2018 3:30 – 5:30 PM

Paige St. John

Theme/Focus:

The theme of this lesson is to engage in a positive mindset that allows for students to challenge themselves with the material presented to them and give themselves the grace to make mistakes in the process. The focus of this lesson is for students to dive into the material with their artistry and physicality in a way that guides them into experiencing Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow State (Psychology).

Major Objective(s):

The major objective of this lesson is to focus energy on fewer sections of a class in order to give full energy and attention to these aspects of the class rather than being overwhelmed with material. At the end of the class, it is the goal that students will voluntarily perform the final combination with confidence rather than the usual hesitation that arises towards the end of a Master Class environment and experience.

I. Warm-Up and Introduction to Lesson Theme

The Warm-Up/Introduction portion of this Master Class lasted from 3:30 – 4:25 PM:

- *Discussion and Introduction (15 minutes): Upon entering into the space, students were asked to sign in and write their initial thought or feeling on the Flow Board. At the start of the class, we gathered around the Expectation and Goals Boards to discuss what our time in the studio would consist of. During*

this time, I explained the warm-up and improvisation in detail, as well as the incorporation of the Flow Board throughout the entirety of the class. Students listened while seated on the floor, occasionally coming to standing to learn portions of the warm-up.

- *Warm-Up (about 15/20 minutes): The first exercise in the Warm-Up started in silence, keying into a state of mindfulness. Here I instructed students to close their eyes and set a goal for the class. From there, we moved into the exercise of the five different dimensions – self, stage, audience, horizon, and universe. The next exercise in the Warm-Up was a plié combination facing each direction of the space, which then led into the rest of the warm up which involved students following along with my prompts through stretches and strengthening activities. The Warm-Up portion ended in an X shape on the floor, where students were prompted to key back into their goals before we began with the improvisational exploration.*

II. Context: (Exploration of Theme with consideration given to major objectives)

The exploration portion of this lesson occurred heavily during the improvisation, which followed directly after the Warm-Up with no break in between. For studio and competitive dancers, improvisation is usually only about a few eight counts to 2 minutes long in a normal Master Class. However, we spent about 15 to 20 minutes improvising, and I explained this to students during our “expectations” discussion. In fact, I even mentioned that the improvisational portion would likely feel like it was lasting longer than many of them would have liked.

Throughout the time spend exploring, I led students through a series of prompts. From telling them to move in a low, then to medium, and then to high level, they were able to progress through their exploration in a way that was both beneficial artistically but also physically as their heart rate rose and their muscles, which had just been stretched, were able to generate some heat for the remainder of class. In addition to guiding students through levels, I also offered suggestions and thoughts that they could ponder through prompts such as “Key into your goals,” “Find something in your body and stick with it longer than you feel necessary,” “What does it mean to repeat?”, “Explore the space behind you, not only around you,” etc.

III. Dance Making/Culminating Activity

The final combination was taught in two parts. With each part, I would teach it at a semi-quick tempo, then divide students into groups to try the material with more space, and then we would come back together to slowly go through all details. The first part was the densest material, whereas the second half of the combination contained a repeated section – directly applying the idea of a balance between challenge and skill which is necessary for the Flow State to be achieved.

As a whole, the combination was about 1 minute and 20 seconds long. The style was contemporary, much of what this population is comfortable with and interested in. However, rather than incorporating a large amount of technique and trickery, it was more about the physical movement and experience. As students became more comfortable with the material, we continued to go through groups and even arrived at a time where students would volunteer themselves to dance again and dance with new people because they felt comfortable with the combination. With each round, I offered

new challenges: finding new spaces in the room, shifting “fronts,” dancing with a new intention, etc.

The final performance as a group acted as a punctuation mark on this combination and then led us into a Cool Down which was the plié combination from Warm-Up at a slower tempo as well as a shortened X series. Finally, students were prompted to key back into their goals, as well as their many accomplishments over the two-hour period of the class.

IV. Teaching Methods

a. Motivational Strategies

To motivate my students, I used verbal feedback. I took myself out of the combination and allowed myself to watch them move and essentially cheer them on. However, I also took the liberty to jump into the space and dance with them when I felt necessary. Above all, motivation came from the use of the Flow Board as a means of communication and discussion without actual words.

b. Instructional Cues, Questions, and Imagery

From cueing different exercises to cueing the combination in the first few rounds of performance, I did my best to help guide students through both the physical movement and the way that it felt and was hoped to be experienced. I used imagery directly related to the Flow State – touching on focus, concentration, projection to the universe, engagement of the soul, etc. Imagery often stemmed from me describing the true beauty that I found myself witnessing in the room and the energy that was felt from the gorgeous exploration that was happening in front of me.

c. Behavior Management

As these students were in Junior High or older, behavior management was not an issue that I needed to tackle. Additionally, I had taught some of these students before so they were already aware of portions of my pedagogical persona.

V. Supplemental Information: Musical Support and Visual Aids Used

Musical Support: (Spotify Playlist and iTunes)

- *Filler Music (for entering and leaving the space)*
 - *“Don’t Wait” Mapei*
 - *“Multiplied” NEEDTOBREATHE*
 - *“Sweet Disposition” The Temper Trap*
 - *“You Are Enough” Sleeping At Last*
 - *“Bubbly” Colbie Caillat*
 - *“I Lived” OneRepublic*
 - *“My Girl” The Temptations*
 - *“Connection” OneRepublic*
 - *“Shotgun” George Ezra*
 - *“New Soul” Yael Naim*
 - *“Rise Up” Andra Day*
 - *“Don’t Worry Be Happy” Bobby McFerrin*
 - *“This Is Me” The Greatest Showman*
 - *“XO” John Mayer*
 - *“Little Giant” Roo Panes*
 - *“Sun (Instrumental)” Sleeping At Last*
 - *“Parallels” Sleeping At Last*
 - *“Her Joy Was Complete” Sleeping At Last*
- *Warm-Up/Improvisation*
 - *“This Is the Way God Loves You” Sleeping At Last*
 - *“Light” Sleeping At Last*
 - *“Put Your Records On” Corinne Bailey Rae*
 - *“Taste” Sleeping At Last*
 - *“Halo” Ane Brun, Linnea Olsson*
 - *“Going Going Gone – Acoustic” Maddie Poppe*
 - *“Send Me On My Way” Rusted Root*
- *Combination*
 - *“Scars To Your Beautiful” Alessia Cara (Cut Version, edited by me to focus on a particular portion of the song)*

- *Cool Down*
 - *“Stand By Me” Ben E. King*
 - *“Overture (Instrumental)” Sleeping At Last*

Visual Aids:

- *Expectations Poster*
- *Goals Poster*
- *Flow Board*
- *Feedback Jar*

Other:

- *GoPro Video Camera*
- *Phone*
- *Senior Project Journal – Lesson Plan*
- *Lighting (not all lights on, but a controlled dim so that students could stay engaged but also key into their experience)*

VI. Population Profile

a. Number of Dancers and Gender Breakdown

There were 26 students in this class, all female. The age range was originally set to be ages 13 and up, but I was up for a bit of give and take based on those who would be interested. As a result, we ended up with an age range of 11 – 23.

Though this may seem like a large range of ages, I do not think I could have asked for a better variety of experiences to share in this space together.

b. Participation, Responsiveness, and Attention Span

I was originally concerned that the students would be a bit hesitant to dive into this structured class, especially the use of the Flow Board on their own time and on their own accord. However, they dove into the material immediately and kept their focus and attention from the start of the class all the way through until the end, which is especially impressive given the fact that this Master Class was offered after a long week of school.

c. Student to Student Interaction

Students were eager to interact with one another. They cheered each other on throughout the class, especially during the rounds of performing the combination. Earlier in the class during the improvisation section, they even danced with one another and began to create new relationships and communities in the space.

d. Student-Teacher Rapport

I felt very connected to the students from the start of this class through the end. In fact, in just the beginning stages of the improvisation I found myself close to tears feeling the genuine joy and energy that was beginning to form in the studio.

Needless to say, I felt incredibly full throughout the class and can honestly say I learned so much from those who I had the pleasure of teaching and interacting with in this short amount of time.

VII. Flow Board Phrases (A few quotations from the phrases and thoughts that students wrote on the Flow Board from the start of to the finish of the class period)

- *Initial Feelings (written in black, grey and brown upon entering the studio for the first time):*
 - *“nervous”*
 - *“so excited!”*
 - *“inspired”*
 - *“excited”*
 - *“cold”*
 - *“calm”*
 - *“excited”*
 - *“relaxed”*
 - *“great”*
 - *“overwhelmed”*
 - *“pumped”*
 - *“unflexible”*
 - *“relieved”*
 - *“tired”*
 - *“relaxed”*

- *Phrases written throughout the class (all different colors, except those in the initial feelings)*
 - *“loving how relaxed I am!”*
 - *“confident”*
 - *“I AM...FULL”*
 - *“I feel inspired and motivated!”*
 - *“GROWTH”*
 - *“I NEEDED THIS”*
 - *“reminds me why I love to dance”*
 - *“whoops”*
 - *“release”*
 - *“mistakes are ok”*
 - *“music is giving me life”*
 - *“This is so lit!”*
 - *“In the improv I discovered a type of movement I related to a wet bar of soap that could not stop slipping. It was really beautiful to discover and not stop. There was so much I released in my body that I normally wouldn't have.”*
 - *“felt tension built up in my body over the week being released”*
 - *“internal connection & grounded”*
 - *“I felt free of everything that was happening today”*
 - *“we all need more classes like this”*
 - *“feeling other people's energy”*
 - *“I feel motivated to do my homework and conquer life”*
 - *“grateful I have abilities to learn and dance”*
 - *“I DIDN'T GET IN MY HEAD”*
 - *“freedom”*
 - *“oof...but it's all good”*
 - *“overjoyed”*
 - *“connected”*
 - *“it was kinda hard to improv to a fast song but it was fun to try since it is way out of my comfort zone”*
 - *“full heart”*
 - *“I love how open we can be in this class. You let us be who we want to be!”*
 - *“humble”*
 - *“open minded”*
 - *“ahhh!”*

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