

## Session 2: (Flow)

You are going to be moving around the room several times today.

Leave coats and anything you won't need until leaving, on the side or front of the room.

Take with you, whenever you move, whatever you need including pen and paper (in a bag, or a pile you can carry).

L4 Positive psychology  
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23 Jan 2014

<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/fun.html>

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## Evaluation of well-being

Siobhan Lynch

Healing over,  
Forgetting you had a problem,  
Forgetting when and where you learn anything

*This is an aside, but it relates to awareness vs. importance in your life. And is a CT point for consideration when looking at any eval. in any PosPsy expt.*

## Recap: nature of this course

Get a sense of what PosPsy is

Of what happiness and/or well-being might be

Learn in depth by reading papers from the literature

And develop the ability to discuss PosPsy as a whole, and individual topics, critically

Select topics, aided by using other students' group wiki pages

And develop a sense, and skill, for how to create such a page that is as useful as possible.

The wiki critiquing homework was to start you learning to judge this new sense of usefulness.

## Wiki critiquing exercise:

## Discussion

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## Wiki critiquing exercise

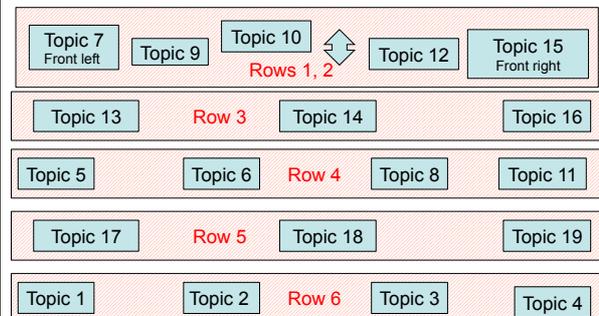
You were asked to read one of the 12 topics from an earlier PosPsy course, and critique it by the standards laid down for it, and for your own group wiki page: mainly, how useful it is to fellow students.

The point is to get you thinking about this kind of writing, consulting your own wishes as a reader, in preparation for your own coursework. This kind of writing is not particularly hard to do in the end, but it takes an effort to switch your writing skills at first.

Think about what you personally take from this exercise to apply to your own group's wiki.

## Coursework groups 1-19

*Front of room, screens, podium, presenter, ....*



## Overall Plan for discussion

- A. Move to your main coursework wiki group.
- B. Discuss what lessons you learned.  
Do this for each page you critiqued (discuss them in turn).
- C. Plenary: We'll go round some groups asking about conclusions.
- D. Type up your own conclusions and send to your group's private forum as a reminder, and/or for further discussion.

## Plenary

What do you personally take from this exercise to apply to your own group's wiki?

## Homework 1

Type up your own conclusions and send to your group's private forum as a reminder, and/or for further discussion.

## Consciousness

Brief (1 min.) talk by students about why they think consciousness is (or isn't) an important concept and topic in psychology.

*Lead in to Flow, which is an account of consciousness.*

## Flow

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## Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1934-)

1975 Investigation (from "Beyond boredom and anxiety: Flow") had Csikszentmihalyi interview people from different professions.

And see how they felt, acted and thought throughout their work day.

Interestingly, They experienced very similar effects at the most engaging part of their job.



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## What is “Flow”?

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience* (New York: Harper & Row)

[Hereafter Mihály Csikszentmihályi (who is Hungarian) will be referred to as “MC”]

An attempt to describe the mental state humans most value. Being fully absorbed in an activity.

“Flow” is a metaphor from an interview participant.  
“Autotelic experience” is a technicalisation of the name.

First study interviewed sculptors immersed in sculpting.

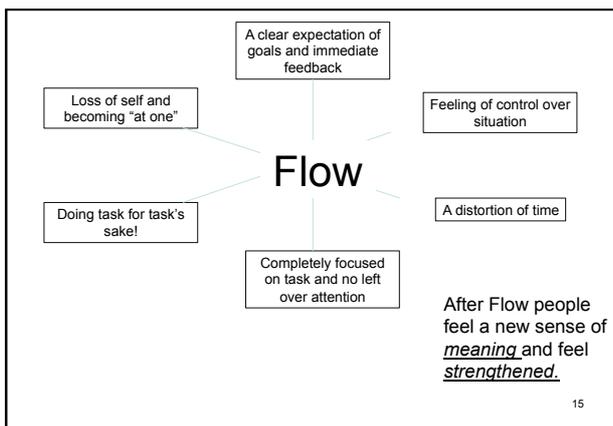
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## Flow

a state of consciousness where attention is undivided and motivates action to fulfil the goal of expressing self. This means being fully immersed in the task at hand.

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## Microflow Activities

- Social: unnecessary talking and joking with other people, browsing shops, visiting galleries, sexual activity.
- Kinesthetic: involves all those activities that involve primarily body movements e.g. touching, fiddling with objects, walking, pacing, running and any games or physical activities engaged in alone.
- Imagining: daydreaming, humming, singing, playing music in one's head.
- Attending: all the passive forms of spectatorship such as reading a book, watching people walk down the street, watching television.
- Creative and oral areas were also identified.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000) *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. Jossey-Bass.

## (re: what is positive psychology?)

By the end of this course, you should be able to summarise your own brief view on what PosPsy is; and on the relationship of:

- Pleasure. Direct sensation
- Joy. The emotion of self-efficacy, following plan success.
- Happiness. Plus “values” or “meaning”.
- Well-being. ??

MC's Flow among other things definitely concerns the engagement of a person's highest values, and so meaningfulness (to them) of the activity.

## My personal analysis of flow

What follows is not what's published, but my own thinking.

I would define flow as the state (w.r.t. a task) of always being confident about what to do next: never being stumped for a suggestion, nor worried about having to choose between several and avoid the bad ones.

Flow is close to play:

You know what you will do next, you are interested in what happens but don't know what it will be and do want to find out.

There are several aspects to flow.

- One is the balance between having too many and too few possibilities for your next action. [Burden of Choice]
- Another is the balance between the activity requiring too many or too few mental resources/effort.
- Another is how important the activity is to the person's values.

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### The burden of choice: too many / too few alternatives.

Barry Schwartz argues, on the basis of some empirical work, that people enjoy choice more with only a few alternatives. More choice is NOT generally good.

Schwartz et al. (2002) "Maximizing Versus Satisficing" J.Pers and Soc Psy 83 (5) 1178-1197

(See the wiki on this in the 2009 course moodle.)

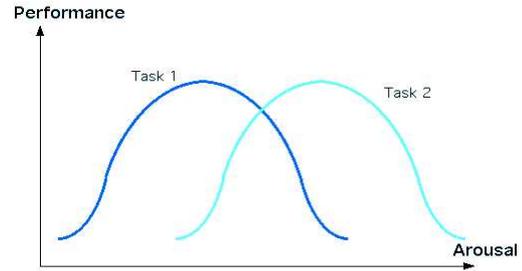
Certainly, although making a choice makes us feel in control (self-efficacy), it is mental work. And also, it tends to make us **more** worried about whether we made the right choice.

Two types of strategy: Maximisers, Satisficers.

Flow however seems to correspond to having no doubts about the one choice to make.

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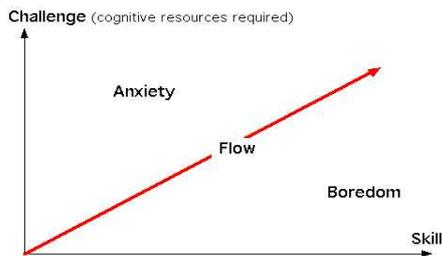
### Performance & Arousal (Yerkes-Dodson law)



1. For fixed task, and attainment, what arousal is optimal?
2. For a given arousal level, what task matches?

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### Skill & Challenge



For fixed task, and attainment level, and arousal level.

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### Flow: 'Passive' vs. 'Active'

#### Passive

Little effort required  
e.g. Watching TV

#### Active

More effort required  
e.g. Sport, reading, painting

### Three types of flow

U-flow [unconscious] Body engrossed (fully occupied)  
You walk to work, using your eyes, but thinking of other things.

C-flow [conscious] Body and mind engrossed.  
Your consciousness is fully focussed on the activity.

MC-flow [plus values, optimal] Body & mind & "values" engrossed;  
and have no more valuable aim in life.

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### Human-Machine Interface design

Designing computer games, or computer-human interfaces: flow is a good description of the criterion of good design.

However, the aim is u-flow for the controls, allowing c-flow for the work itself. I.e. you do want full engagement; but for the engagement not to be about how to make the machine work, but about the writing or drawing or accountancy or human communication that is the purpose of using the machine in the first place: "transparency" of the machine.

We know some of the features that are required:

- Instant perceptible feedback on every action
- Undo (so you don't have to plan ahead and worry)

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## Organisation of human action

Surprisingly, in many many cases, humans do NOT adopt fixed action sequences for highly practised tasks. They use perception-action rules, and practised activity is typically flow-like.

The notion of flow thus describes something about much well-learned behaviour.

This is consistent with some psychology theories (Anderson's ACT-R and ACT-\* theories).  
But equally shows we do NOT learn many things we are nevertheless repeatedly exposed to and indeed engaged with: we just re-perceive, re-decide each time.

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## Exercise

1. Draw, without peeking at your neighbour's attempts, a sketch of the Boyd Orr building as you approach it from the QM side.

2. Picture to yourself the "Edit" menu in WORD. List the commands on that menu in order.

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## Emotion, consciousness, awareness

Flow states are valued, sought after, but are states of no emotion (at least in the sense that you aren't thinking "I'm having a great time" but are immersed in the task until you pause).

The person is conscious of the task, but oblivious of everything else: so it is a state of low awareness in most senses.

It is a state of zero reflection:

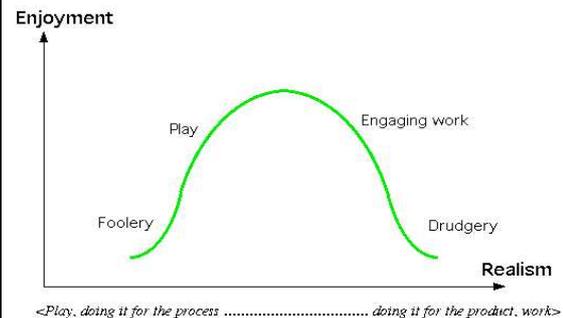
This statement was rebutted by the class. Truer perhaps is that in flow, you aren't reflecting on the problem of how to do the task. But reflection itself (on past events) may be the task.

It is a state of no pre-planning, just going with the flow.

It is probably true that there is always significant learning going on in flow; but that other important kinds of learning cannot be done within it.

## Dewey: Realism & enjoyment.

Work & play. Learning and producing.



## Fun

A side-issue, or related topic, is what to make of the concept of "fun". (Of course, just because we use the word and the idea frequently does not necessarily mean it is a serious concept with any definable academic meaning.)

It is clearly related to play; which in turn is related to learning.

In the previous diagram of Dewey's concept, flow probably corresponds to the mid-point on the enjoyment axis (play — work; silliness — realism); but the high point of enjoyment.

But for MC, (if not for other kinds of flow), flow is not only intensely enjoyable but is intensely serious and valued at the same time.

## Video games

- 32% of all adults (34% of men, 31% of women) in the UK describe themselves as 'gamers' (Interactive Software Federation of Europe)
- One child in two plays games every day (ISFE, 2010)
- 2011's *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* out-grossed the last four *Harry Potter* films combined (GFK Chart-Track, 2011)
- The average age of a gamer is estimated to be somewhere in the mid-thirties, with the Entertainment Software Association placing the current figure at 37.

## Video games consist of learning tasks

- Best-designed games typically comprise a series of **coinciding or intersecting goals**, with **short-, medium- and long-term conclusions**
- This arrangement of goals, which **permits the student to progress on a number of fronts** – even when one goal is seemingly out of reach – has some significant advantages for **student engagement**
- More difficult to implement in a structured, often didactic, educational environment such as a school or university?

## "Meta-flow"

A different kind of flow is the type that may be experienced when learning, not doing (or scoring) is the real goal.

When you are trying to get a job done, maximise your score, then impasses drop you out of flow, make you frustrated.

But when the real goal is puzzle solving, then flow is at one higher level: you may frequently be halted in the task, but always know an action that will get you some relevant information to move you on.

I call this "meta-flow"; and it seems a relevant concept because when people want to learn then they don't get frustrated because no-one just tells them the answer. On the contrary ....

## Summary of (possible) dimensions

It's possible that the phenomena connected to flow concern more than the 2 dimensions that fit conveniently into a simple diagram.

I've counted these dimensions:

1. Enjoyment. In many diagrams this is the invisible 3rd dimension
2. Skills (of the person w.r.t. the challenge or task)
3. Arousal level
4. Challenge / difficulty (for the person at that stage of learning)
5. Realism: utility in the practical world
6. Meaning / value (of the task or activity to the person)

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## Homework for next time

Individually do the Strengths questionnaire, and come with a note on what it says your own strengths are.

<http://www.viacharacter.org/www/> VIA website

### Homework:

1. Type up a note on what you took from the wiki critiquing and post it in your group's forum
2. Do the Strengths questionnaire.
3. Progress your group's wiki work (as on the groupwork handout)

## A place to stop

<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/courses/posl4.html>

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