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Happiness and the Blank Page: Csikszentmihalyi's Flow in the Writing Classroom

Cover Page Footnote

Gina Briefs-Elgin is Associate Professor of English at New Mexico Highlands University. Her interests include humanistic psychology, writing in non-traditional settings, and aesthetics.

Happiness and the Blank Page: Csikszentmihalyi's Flow in the Writing Classroom

Gina Briefs-Elgin

*If, then, there is some end of the things we do,
which we desire for its own sake (everything else
being desired for the sake of this) . . . clearly this
must be the good and the chief good. Will not the
knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life?*

Aristotle
The Nicomachean Ethics

In his *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke (1908/1993) advised his disciple to "hold to the difficult." If he did this, what he most feared would be transformed into great happiness: "How should we be able to forget those ancient myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses . . . ?" (p. 69). Rilke's advice to this young writer is not new. Throughout time, teachers have tried to convince young people of the apparently absurd and certainly unsettling proposition that happiness lies in seizing the difficult. I would like to suggest that recent developments in psychology may help us as writing teachers (particularly as developmental composition teachers) in this struggle.

For a long time, psychology wasn't much interested in happiness. The study of mental illness preempted the study of mental health. But in the past two decades interest in the phenomenon of happiness has blossomed (Swanbrow, 1989, pp. 37-38). At the center of this endeavor is University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "the father of flow psychology." In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990) which crystallized for the lay person twenty years of research in the field, Csikszentmihalyi used the tools of modern psychology to provide statistical evidence for what thoughtful people have generally maintained: that happiness may be found not in relaxation and freedom from difficulty but in growth-producing encounters with difficulty. He examined what happens during individual encounters with difficulty: episodes of "flow," an enchanted state we enter when we engage in any meaningful, difficult activity that stretches us to the limits of—but not beyond—our skills so that we

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are poised perfectly between boredom and anxiety. He demonstrated that, while some activities, such as rock-climbing and chess-playing, are naturally conducive to flow, any activity, through our decision to make it our own and to tease meaning from it, can be transformed into a flow activity, and he invited us to create the conditions of flow in work and in leisure.

Because the theory of flow involves issues at the heart of teaching—difficulty and mastery—its interest to educators should be obvious. Reed Larson (1985), Csikszentmihalyi's coauthor of studies on adolescent development, demonstrated that students in flow write better than students who are anxious or bored and that successful student writers instinctively monitor their processes to achieve a flow-producing balance between anxiety and boredom, and S. McLeod (1987) called for research into the ways Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow can guide writing task design.

I would like to suggest that flow theory can also be valuable to improve student motivation to write. I believe emphasis on the rewards of engagement with difficulty can be useful to all teachers and particularly to those who teach English composition, the subject many students consider most difficult.

What has composition got to do with happiness? Students would no doubt respond, "Very little." Recently, I surveyed my basic writers on their attitudes towards writing papers. One question had them number these activities in order of preference: writing a five-page paper, painting five rooms, digging a ditch, or undergoing root canal. Writing a five-page paper came out first on only 17 of the 71 surveys. Painting five rooms beat writing a five-page paper 33 times. Digging a ditch beat writing a five-page paper 28 times, and at least 10 students chose the root canal over the five-page paper.

We don't need surveys to tell us that many students don't enjoy writing papers. They dread it because writing can be a laborious task involving complex performances and—worse—riddled with unknowns. "The maker of a sentence," wrote Emerson (1834/1960), "launches out into the infinite and builds a road into Chaos and Old Night" (p. 59). Surely, since time immemorial students have approached writing assignments unhappily, scowling over their clay or wax tablets, making despondent ink blots in their *cahiers*. But in the late twentieth century there are new wrinkles. Because they live in the thick of consumerism, students are less experienced in the challenge of making things from scratch than were young people formerly; what's more, our consumer culture actively discourages them from including "difficult-making" in their definitions of happiness.

Our country's success has depended on each individual's energetic productivity. Children were raised with the uncomfortable notions that idle hands were the devil's workshop and that happiness lay in accomplishing difficult tasks. They learned from their parents the rewarding work of wrestling raw matter and data into shape—often into complex patterns. Jefferson's Monticello, at the plutocratic level, and the *Foxfire* series, at the popular level, remind us that our predecessors were intimate with difficulty and with the exhilaration of difficult making.

But contemporary culture affords scant opportunity for what Irving Stone once called "the agony and the ecstasy" of creating. The Industrial Revolution took away our need and ability to create manually—our own houses, furniture,

food, clothing—and the media revolution has virtually taken away our ability to create mentally—ideas, music, stories, images, entertainment, adventure. In a society where agribusiness, corporations, and the media meet every need, making is severed from any relationship to necessity and reduced to mere hobby. Our country's economic success seems to depend on passive consumption and has redefined it as happiness. We are assured that if we are free of the labor of making things (not just dinner but plans and love), if we are carefree, we will be happier. And so, as Charles Reich notes in his perennially relevant *Greening of America* (1970), we are “sold artificial pleasures and artificial dreams to replace the high human and spiritual adventure that had once been America” (p. 40).

“We have a new joke on the reservation,” the shaman tells author Richard Erdoes (Fire & Erdoes, 1972), “What is cultural deprivation?” Answer: “Being an upper-middle-class white kid living in a split-level suburban home with a color TV” (p. 110). Our adolescent students are particularly bombarded with the media credo that happiness lies in consuming someone else's products, images, dreams.

Besides disparaging hard work and promoting consumption, TV swallows the hours students might otherwise dedicate to the pleasures of carpentry or gardening, of making models, clothing, poetry, or art. A 1995 government report on adolescent use of time offered these statistics: “American adolescents aged 12–17 spent an average of two-and-a-half hours per day watching television, but only 27 minutes a day doing homework, . . . and 9 minutes a day pursuing hobbies or arts and crafts . . . weekday and weekend days combined” (Zill et al., p. 7).

For students with little experience in creative difficulty and ample experience with passive consumption, it is easy to understand the misery of freshman writers, slumped like a question mark at midnight over the white page of an open notebook. That blank white page might as well be a blank cassette or a TV screen with snow—because composition, more than most other college subjects, requires the anguishingly difficult and ultimately exhilarating creation of something from nothing, the very opposite of consumption.

Unless we're sadists, we don't enjoy this image. We want our students to want to write, to be happy, that is, motivated to write. We find some useful methods to ease students into writing: journals, prewriting techniques, engaging topics. But no matter how valuable, such strategies for easing the writing process ultimately hit a brick wall. We can't eliminate the difficulty—but by taking a page from Csikszentmihalyi, we can tackle the other end of the problem: helping our students reject “the strongly rooted cultural stereotype” (1990, p. 160) of happiness as ease and redefine it to include difficulty.

Let us take a closer look at Csikszentmihalyi's research. He began in the seventies to look for the answer to a simple question: “When do people feel most happy?” He felt that if people knew the answer, they could shape their lives in more satisfying directions. With the help of an international network of colleagues, he interviewed people from dozens of countries and every walk of life—collecting over one hundred thousand records—to discover when they felt happiest. From this data, Csikszentmihalyi composed the first scientific profile of happiness (or as he also calls it, “optimal experience” or “flow”). His central findings (1990, 1994) were:

Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times—although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we make happen. (p. 3)

Regardless of circumstances or background, people all over the world—chess players, telephone operators, shepherds, CEOs, weavers, pilots—offered descriptions of their flow experiences which Csikszentmihalyi found astonishingly similar. Using their reports, he compiled a list of the major components of enjoyment:

1. Tasks are manageable
2. Environment is conducive to concentration
3. Goals are clear
4. Feedback is immediate
5. Involvement is deep but effortless
6. Individuals feel in control
7. Individuals are free from sense of self
8. They lose an awareness of time
9. A stronger self emerges after the experience.

(p. 49, 71)

These optimal experiences “are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur,” wrote Csikszentmihalyi:

The swimmer's muscles might have ached during his most memorable race, his lungs might have felt like exploding, and he might have been dizzy with fatigue—yet these could have been the best moments of his life. Getting control of life is never easy, and sometimes it can be definitely painful. (pp. 3–4)

We see how different this definition of happiness is from the definitions of many of our students (and even our own!). This happiness has nothing to do with ease. Rather, it has difficulty at its very heart. And yet, it is crucial that our students understand this: that the happiness Csikszentmihalyi is talking about is no sacrifice-and-struggle-someday-you-will-thank-me sort. No, this is upfront happiness, happening as they do an arduous, perhaps even painful, thing—or immediately after—like the runner's high.

The issue is how to achieve the biggest rush of happiness, or, in Csikszentmihalyi's term, flow:

In fact, when we struggle against entropy, we do get an immediate and very concrete reward from our actions: we enjoy whatever we are doing, moment by moment. The self is flooded with a sense of

exhilaration In those moments we feel that, instead of suffering through events over which we have no control, we are creating our own lives. (1994, p. 175)

Csikszentmihalyi believes this sense of exhilaration is one “that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like” (1990, p. 3).

And the most enduring rush of happiness. As did Maslow (1968), Csikszentmihalyi pointed out that pleasures as food, drink, shelter, and relaxation do not satisfy for long because they do not lead to the growth of self. Homeostatic experiences merely eliminate an organic need and restore the self to its previous condition. But the happiness that arises out of our conscious engagements with difficulty endures, according to Csikszentmihalyi, because each occasion of flow adds “complexity to the self” (1990, p. 46). What Csikszentmihalyi’s research thus demonstrates is that difficulty is, in fact, an essential condition, which, over a lifetime, add up to self-actualization.

An exploration into the paradoxical inner workings of happiness can help students discover its rich realities. But we must clear the air of a question. If flow occurs naturally when human beings engage with difficulty in a personally meaningful endeavor, what does it matter whether students learn about the psychology of happiness? What does it matter whether or not they redefine happiness to include difficulty? A good question, particularly since writing assignments based on sound composition theory meet all of Csikszentmihalyi’s conditions of flow: they challenge students to nudge what Larson (1985) calls their “performance envelope” (p. 40).

Not necessarily. According to Csikszentmihalyi, being involved in a flow activity is no guarantee of a flow experience: “How we feel at any given moment of a flow activity is strongly influenced by the objective conditions; but consciousness is still free to follow its own assessment” (1990, pp. 75–76); a professional football player, for example, might be bored in the middle of a game most people would rank high among flow activities.

No matter how carefully we design for flow, many students may fail to experience it in writing because the powerful myth prevents them from noticing the evidence from their senses. People’s workday experience exemplifies this phenomenon. Certainly, one reason people are reluctant to get out of bed on Monday mornings is because many jobs are neither self-generated nor personally meaningful. But Csikszentmihalyi noted:

On the job people feel skillful and challenged, and therefore feel more happy, strong, creative, and satisfied. In their free time people feel . . . their skills are not being used, and therefore they tend to feel more sad, weak, dull, and dissatisfied. Yet they would like to work less and spend more time in leisure. (1990, pp. 159–160)

An observation of Maslow (1968) further illuminates this point. He described the central role of perception in a person’s ability to have “peak experiences”:

My experience is that whenever I have lectured approvingly about

peak-experiences, it was as if I had given permission to the peak-experiences of some people, at least, in my audience to come into consciousness. (pp. 88–89)

What I am recommending, then, is a little benign tinkering with our students' definitions of happiness. By sharing Csikszentmihalyi's findings with them, we can help students recognize what actually does make them happy rather than what their cultural programming tells them will make them happy. Csikszentmihalyi can teach them to anticipate flow in their laborious work so that they will embrace rather than dread writing assignments and (using Alice Brand's apt term) "recruit" (1983, p. 441) emotion into their encounters with the blank page.

Each of us can think of ways to include these new/old discoveries about the nature of happiness in our pedagogy to help our students approach even the most arduous project as a source of happiness. What follows is a miscellany of projects that I have used in basic writing, freshman composition, and research classes.

The first has students examining media definitions of happiness, thinking about their elders' definitions and articulating their own. Later projects introduce students to Csikszentmihalyi's findings on happiness and ask them to examine their own lives in light of flow psychology.

As classes began, I told my students that happiness would be a recurring topic during the semester. I made Aristotle's point, in Book I of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, that happiness is the mother of all motivations, and added that for this reason I consider it a central educational issue. In another project, I asked my students to bring in and present three images or artifacts representing aspects of the media's definition of happiness. Among their exhibits the following week were Bud bottle caps, copies of *Sports Illustrated*, dollar bills, Marlboro and Camel coupons, autographs of sports heroes, a *Star Wars* video game, CDS, and ads for a wedding dress, a strip club, and Absolut Vodka.

As students presented their items, I asked them to look for recurring themes. For example, advertising images mimic sensations in flow—the refreshment of novelty ("NEW!"); heightened senses of color (camera/film ads) or sound (stereo ads); and the sense of being lighter than air (bubbly soft drink ads and those using images of sailing and ballooning). Advertisers market sensory simulations of flow/happiness in lieu of the Real Thing, which, of course, is not for sale but can be obtained with ease by engaging with difficulty. This assignment prepared students for further discussion of the idea of happiness by making visible the narrowness and easy glitz of the media's definition.

Another definition exercise provided a sharp contrast. One day I put two columns on the board: "happiness for our elders" and "happiness for us." Then I asked students to compare the way they and their grandparents find happiness. After filling the two columns, my students concluded that for the older generation central ingredients for happiness were work, family, religion, cultural traditions, and patriotism. An important insight was the connection between happiness and work. "In our free times, we watch TV," commented one student. "But my grandpa, he'll go to work. He loves to work." When students recognize how free the elderly can be from media stereotypes of happiness,

it may be easier for them to relinquish these stereotypes.

After my students had examined their definitions of happiness and those of their elders, they write their own. Most felt happiness lay in loving relationships, financial security, relaxation, entertainment, and sports. A large number defined happiness as the absence of difficulty: happiness was having “no worries,” “no troubles,” “no problems,” “feeling carefree.” Certainly, loving relationships are central to happiness and the “no worries, no problems” definitions might reflect the serious health, family, and financial crisis our students so often face. The disheartening thing is that of the 67 students responding, only 17—one quarter—included challenging themselves or pursuing goals anywhere in their extended definitions of happiness. And yet we’d want every university student to say, I feel like I’m walking on air when I take on a really laborious project, struggle with it, and make it my own. What is a university if not a place for people who find happiness in the rigors of discovery and creation?

Once my students had consciously defined where in their lives they expected to find happiness, I hoped that exposure to Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow* would help them expand those definitions. At every opportunity I brought into the classroom—under the guise of diagnostics, essay prompts, exercises, and even grammar drills—passages from Csikszentmihalyi that addressed the connection between difficulty and happiness. Productive essay prompts may be found throughout *Flow*, for example: “Periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives” (p. 6) and “[e]njoyable events occur when a person has gone beyond what he or she has been programmed to do and achieved something unexpected, perhaps something even unimagined before” (p. 46).

A unit on paraphrasing and summarizing provided an occasion for students to work closely with important passages from *Flow*: I teamed Csikszentmihalyi’s “contrary to what we usually believe” (p. 3) quotation with Rilke’s on “dragons that in the last moment turn into princesses.” Students paraphrased the passages and then wrote about times in their own lives when they had experienced its truth (sports excluded!)—a job, volunteer work, a chore, or a challenging project they had set for themselves.

Like much of the wisdom we wish to pass on to young people, the truth of this unglitzy message may not be immediately apparent. It may be years before students actually stretch to experience this truth. Or it may be the next day. Or it may never be. As composition teachers, we can only remind students, over and over again and in different ways, of this expanded idea of happiness, give them opportunities to push their performance envelopes, and wait.

The research paper class may be what we wait for. The terrifying rigors of this first serious, professional paper, the sense of its importance, the terrific sense of accomplishment any student even half successful feels on printing out the crisp white final pages—these make the research paper a perfect candidate for a first conscious experience of flow in writing. In the first weeks of this class, I reiterated the formula: At the thought of this paper you may experience terror and despair; but you will seize the bear by the ears and you will be surprised by happiness, flow. I alerted them to all the masks their fear would take: the sudden domestic obsession that leads to starched tablecloths or investments in semi-gloss

paint, the compulsion to crawl under the bed with a quart of Chocolate Death Ripple. And I used their dry-run papers, written from controlled sources, to immerse them in the new findings on the psychology of happiness. I provided them with excerpts from, and reviews of, *Flow* and articles on the psychology of happiness, drawn from *The New York Times*, *Psychology Today*, and the *Utne Reader*.

As students began their work, they kept process journals, recording not only their discoveries and library strategies, but also their emotional states as they worked their way through their laborious project. And I entertained them with purple passages from my own process journals.

Process journals are useful for drawing students' conscious attention to their emotional states during writing; surveys are useful for drawing attention to their emotional states after writing is over. We think of surveys as serving the survey-giver; but it's likely that they serve the respondents more. What is a survey if not an invitation to examine and reflect on one's experience? Students completed surveys at two points during the research paper class. I gave them an informal survey the day they handed in their first draft and a formal survey the day they handed in their final paper. With their first drafts, I wrote these survey questions on the board: "During the days before you started writing, how did your body/mind feel? During the writing process, did you experience any strong positive feelings like excitement, exhilaration, happiness? Did you ever experience any of these eight characteristics of flow that Csikszentmihalyi identified?"

Eighteen out of twenty-three students reported feeling flow¹. Typical before-and-after responses were

During the days before I started writing, my body felt anxious...
My mind felt overwhelmed, disorganized... During the writing
process I felt. . . overjoyed, . . . I lost track of time;

Before I started writing, my body felt very horrified . . . I felt so
weak . . . Yes, I did experience 'flow—I felt very challenged and I
feel a great sense of accomplishment now that I've met my
challenge;

[Before writing I felt] submerged in an Arctic-like body of
water . . . When the words . . . began to just fly right out of my
head, down to my hand and onto my paper . . .

The day my twenty-five researchers turned in their final papers, I passed out an anonymous survey that I would see only after grades were in. I introduced several survey questions with key passages from *Flow*. The survey opened with the already-familiar passage about the best moments of our lives occurring when our minds or bodies are voluntarily stretched to their limits. "Does this passage relate at all to your experience working on your research paper?" I asked. Three

¹Two prep school students showed some pleasure at the prospect of the research paper, suggesting that their backgrounds had programmed them to anticipate happiness from laborious encounters and supporting my belief that exposure to the psychology of happiness has particular utility for developmental students.

students responded No, and 22 students responded Yes: “Yes, it comes very close to what I was feeling”; “Yes, . . . when I accomplished what I thought was difficult, I was proud of myself”; “Yes, I feel like this is the way I see life, so I am rather enthused by this passage.”

“Overcoming a challenge inevitably leaves a person feeling more capable, more skilled” wrote Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 41). I asked my students if they felt stronger, more skilled having completed their research paper? Twenty-one out of 22 responded Yes. I then asked, “As a result of our study of flow/happiness, do you feel that you are more aware of your feelings before, during, and after writing than you were before you took this class?” One said No; 19 said Yes. One wrote, “I have more courage now.” I asked, “In the future, will you approach difficult writing projects with less dread and more anticipation?” One student responded No and 18 responded Yes.

The purpose of these surveys was not, of course, to gather data demonstrating to me that arduous writing brings happiness. The purpose was to demonstrate it to my students. Reading these results to students—how one writer after another began in misery (the termites, the horrified body) and ended in elation—is perhaps the best way to drive home the point that difficulty and happiness go hand in hand.

Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow can unmask the fraudulent images of happiness foisted on our students. Such an act is liberating for all students: our poor students, humiliated by the media equation happiness = spending power, and our affluent students, surfeited and betrayed by material possessions and consumer entertainments. Csikszentmihalyi can help our students experience the existential difference between consuming and making, between the shopping mall and the blank page. The mall offers unnumbered products, experiences, and emotions to consume—none of which requires a spark of creative spirit or effort. The mall says, “You can relax. I have everything. Everything depends on me.” But the destructive subtext is “You are nothing.” On the other hand, working on a difficult writing project is anxiety-producing. “You better worry,” says the blank white page. “I have nothing. Everything depends on you.” But the constructive subtext is “You are everything.” ☺

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