

## CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FLOW IN MARKETING EDUCATION: A REFINEMENT OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes the psychological concept of *flow* as it applies to experiential learning activities in marketing education. The extensive research by Csikszentmihalyi provides the background literature and framework for a new paradigm that marketing educators can use for experiential learning assignments. Specific recommendations are offered based on eight key components of flow presented in the paper.

### INTRODUCTION

Marketing educators are continually attempting to refine experiential learning activities and discover new, challenging learning opportunities for their students. The variety of new activities seems only limited by a professor's imagination. The educator's enthusiasm for a creative new project often carries over to the students. Marketing education literature has numerous ideas and suggestions related to experiential learning (Daly 2001; Gremler et al. 2000; Gruca 2000; Hamer 2000; Sautter, Pratt, and Shanahan 2000; Young 2002).

As educators continue to design and implement new experiential activities in their classes, they may consider the psychological concept of *flow*. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) generally defines flow as joy, creativity, and total involvement with life. Through years of research and a considerable body of work, Csikszentmihalyi developed a theory of optimal experience which is based on the concept of flow. More specifically, flow is defined as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 4). Flow experiences have been studied in a variety of fields, such as art, medicine, and sports, yet its application to higher education has been limited. A concept related to flow found in the education literature is called "deep learning" (Grauerholz 2001). As marketing

educators attempt to improve the learning environment for students, consideration of the concept of flow may be both appropriate and valuable.

This paper presents a model for marketing educators to use in the development of experiential learning activities using the principles of *flow*. A key component of flow is enjoyment. Assuming we want to improve our students' enjoyment in their education, this model may be useful. Specifically this paper presents:

- (1) A description of the concept of flow based on the literature in psychology.
- (2) A review of the significance of experiential learning in the marketing education literature today.
- (3) Presentation of a model of *flow* based on the work of Csikszentmihalyi.
- (4) Application of the flow paradigm to marketing education.
- (5) Conclusions related to flow.

### A DESCRIPTION OF THE CONCEPT OF FLOW

Although Csikszentmihalyi began work on the concept of flow in his 1965 dissertation from the University of Chicago, the complete theoretical model of the flow experience was presented in his first book, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975). Further work on flow was presented in the book, *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1988). Flow is described as "peaks of involvement that produce intense feelings of enjoyment and creativity" (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 15). In studying the activities of musicians, surgeons, artists, athletes, and many others doing what they love to do, Csikszentmihalyi developed a theory of optimal experience based on the concept of flow. People who experience flow are "so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it"

(Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 4). One of the critical considerations of flow is the ratio between challenges and skills for a person. Flow occurs when the challenges and skills in an experience are in balance. Enjoyment of activities depends on increasing levels of both complexity and variety. Anxiety occurs in situations where there is high challenge and low skills. Boredom occurs with low challenge and high skills. Enjoyment is what appears "at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 52). Marketing educators are well aware of this critical balance between challenge and skills. In order to create flow experiences for both our students and ourselves as educators, we must understand the concept. Flow is important because it makes the present instant more enjoyable and it builds self-confidence which helps develop skills. It is our responsibility as educators to provide appropriate challenges and make sure our students have the necessary skills so that true enjoyment of learning is possible.

A key element of flow is that it is perceived as an end in itself; the activity is *intrinsically rewarding*. Intrinsic motivation is defined as the internal desire to perform a behavior for its own sake (Sdorow and Rickabaugh 2002). In addition, those experiencing flow believe they have a *sense of control* over the activity. Optimal experiences may occur spontaneously but typically flow results from a *structured activity*. As educators we can provide these structured activities, yet the students need to perceive a sense of control. Although as educators we cannot guarantee flow for our students, we can provide a "culture" that encourages flow. If we can create the conditions necessary for flow, students may achieve *deep learning*, "profound, meaningful, and lasting shifts in cognitions, attitudes, emotions and values" (McLeod 1996). Grauerholz (2001) suggests that deep learning can be achieved by teaching holistically. Holistic teachers provide a safe environment for students, encourage emotional response and reflection in learning situations, rely on active learning methods, and validate students' experiences.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN MARKETING EDUCATION

Marketing education continues to move toward an interactive, experiential, student-centered approach to learning and away from the traditional, passive, content-based, teacher dominated paradigm

(Hernandez 2002; Peterson 2001; Tanner and Roberts 1996; Wright, Bitner, and Zeithaml 1994; Young 2002). In a special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Education* dedicated to "Experiential Learning in Marketing Education," (April 2000), the editors suggest "at the heart of all experiential learning theory is the basic belief that effective learning occurs when students are actively involved with an experience and then reflect on that experience" (Frontczak and Kelley 2000). The benefits of experiential learning in marketing education are well-documented in the literature (Frontczak 1998). For example, experiential learning exercises increase student involvement and motivation (Butler and Laumer 1992; Harich 1995), help students to integrate theory and practice in order to connect with the "real world" (Harich 1995; Karns 1993), improve a variety of skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills (Bobbit et al. 2000; Celuch and Slama 2000; Corbin and Glynn 1992; Lamb and Baker 1993; Lamb, Shipp and Moncrief 1995; Williams, Beard, and Rymer 1991), and increase student learning (Hamer 2000; Daly 2001; Gaidis and Andrews 1990; Butler and Laumer 1992). Most current issues of both the *Journal of Marketing Education* and *Marketing Education Review*, including the annual proceedings of the Marketing Educators' Association, lend supporting evidence to this significant trend toward experiential learning in marketing education. Educators continue to search for new ways to improve the experiential learning process. An educator's understanding of flow may lend support to the experiential process.

#### MODEL OF FLOW BASED ON WORK OF CSIKSZENTMIHALYI

The eight components of enjoyment presented by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) represent the basic structural elements for a model of flow. Any enjoyable experience happens as a result of the investment of psychic energy and attention paid to the activity. "Flow activities have as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experiences," (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 72) therefore, a model of flow is based on enjoyment. Not all eight elements are necessary for flow, yet participants in studies of flow often mention all of the following components. Table 1 lists a summary of all components of a flow experience, which are discussed here.

1. Flow occurs when a person is engaged in a challenging activity that requires a balanced level of skill and challenge. In order for this component to be effective, a person needs an appropriate type and level of skills in order to meet the challenge of the activity. Similarly, the challenge needs to be a sufficiently high level to be a real challenge. The right balance between challenges and skills creates enjoyment.
2. A person needs complete concentration or focus on the activity. Flow occurs when a person is so involved in the activity that they are not thinking of themselves or anything else. The purpose of flow is to keep flowing, not necessarily to reach an end. Typically, time is critical for the development of complete concentration. For example, most authors know they need chunks of time in order to achieve the focus they need to write.
3. An activity needs clear goals in order for flow to be possible. Successful athletes understand the importance of setting their own specific goals for a day, game, or a season. Trivial goals do not provide enjoyment. Goals may evolve or change as the activity progresses, yet clear goals remain a component of enjoyment.
4. Immediate and continuous feedback is critical. For flow to keep flowing, a person needs feedback. The principles of operant conditioning and reinforcement are relevant for enjoyment. For example, a surgeon receives continuous feedback throughout the surgery on how they are doing.
5. During flow, the worries and frustrations of everyday life are removed. An attorney arguing an important case in court is not worrying about their own problems when they are fully involved in the moment in court. When a person is completely focused on the activity, irrelevant information does not come into play. This is an important feature of the true enjoyment of the flow experience.
6. A person needs to feel a sense of control over the activity. It is the possibility or perception of control that is more important than the actuality of control. An individual does need a certain skills set to feel this sense of control. A hockey goalie has a sense of control over defending the goal, but they also need the skills to perform.
7. In flow, a person's concern for self disappears. Interestingly, when a person

loses their self-consciousness during a flow experience, a stronger sense of self emerges after the experience.

8. During the flow experience, a person's sense of time is altered. Most everyone knows the feeling of enjoying an experience so intensely that they were unaware of the duration of time.

#### APPLICATION OF FLOW PARADIGM TO MARKETING EDUCATION

The concept of flow can be used as a model for marketing educators in the development and refinement of experiential learning activities. Each of the eight components of flow presented in the previous section can act as a guide for professors. In order to promote optimal learning experiences for students, recommendations are made for each of the eight elements.

1. Challenging activities that require skills:
  - a. Provide appropriate, compelling challenges for students.
  - b. Assignment should stretch student's critical thinking skills, according to levels of the Reflective Judgment Model (King and Kitchener 1994).
  - c. Use experiential assignments for various marketing courses that have been tested and documented in the literature.
  - d. Know the types and levels of skills important for marketing graduates (Gault, Redington, and Schlager 2000).
  - e. Provide students with means/methods to develop those skills.
  - f. Be open to innovative educational experiences that challenge students.
  - g. Expect students to meet the challenges.
  - h. Remember to balance challenges set forth and students skills.
2. Complete concentration on the activity:
  - a. Find activities / assignments that interest the students, not necessarily the instructor, to allow total focus on the activity.
  - b. Give students the time they need so deep, meaningful concentration is possible.

- c. Notice the times and occasions students seem concentrated on an activity in order to replicate those times.
  - d. As the instructor, remember that the purpose of flow is to keep flowing so encourage and reward the focused effort and not just the end result.
3. Clear goals
- a. Allow students to set their own goals for an assignment with guidance and feedback from the instructor.
  - b. Make sure a realistic timetable for the goals is established.
  - c. Allow students to determine how they will achieve these goals.
  - d. Help students to stretch their limits in setting significant goals.
4. Immediate feedback:
- a. Provide specific, frequent, verbal and written feedback to students individually and to teams.
  - b. Be positive, supportive, and non-judgmental in feedback.
  - c. Encourage students to provide feedback to each other.
  - d. If possible, assist in arranging feedback from other constituencies such as project clients.
  - e. Remember it is desirable for students to struggle with an issue, so feedback should be adjusted with this in mind.
5. Activity removes worries:
- a. Educators cannot remove everyday worries and frustrations for students, but can provide direction or information, if necessary, regarding assistance with outside concerns.
  - b. Create an atmosphere of trust.
6. Sense of control:
- a. Give students as much control in their own learning experience as possible.
  - b. Be less of an "authority figure."
  - c. Give students choices so they can make their own decisions.
  - d. Encourage students to formulate their own judgments.
  - e. Let teams make their own decisions and motivate / evaluate their own team members.
- f. Ensure that students have the necessary skills so they have a sense of control.
7. Concern for self disappears:
- a. Encourage teamwork since work with others allows one to focus outside themselves.
  - b. Create an intriguing learning environment that is stimulating for the students.
  - c. Provide opportunities that are so enjoyable for students that they lose their self-consciousness.
  - d. Stretch boundaries of student comfort levels.
  - e. Challenge students to do their best so that a stronger self-concept might emerge following successful achievement.
8. Sense of time is altered:
- a. Notice the characteristics of classes where the end of class arrives and no one has noticed.
  - b. Give students adequate time to work on activities.
  - c. Offer an element of surprise in class so students are not watching the time.

In addition to these components of flow, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) discusses characteristics of a person's background that promote flow. These five characteristics are also appropriate for educators to consider in encouraging an optimal experience for marketing students.

1. *Clarity*: Students should know what is expected of them from their professor.
2. *Centering*: The student's perception that the professor is interested in what they are doing in the present is important.
3. *Choice*: Students should believe they have a variety of possibilities, activities, choices to select from.
4. *Commitment*: Trust should be present to allow the students to feel comfortable enough to get totally involved in the activity.
5. *Challenge*: The professor should be dedicated to providing increasingly complex opportunities for students.

#### CONCLUSIONS RELATED TO FLOW

A question for educators to ask themselves is this:  
How can we make our schools more conducive to

optimal experience? Part of the answer maybe found in the literature related to flow. By providing meaningful, positive, supportive experiential learning activities for our marketing students, we may help to create an atmosphere where flow can occur. We certainly will not be successful in accomplishing this for every student in every class and for every assignment, yet understanding and implementing some of the elements of flow will bring greater enjoyment and ultimately deep learning for our students. Giving our students more control and choice in their activities, offering supportive feedback, structuring challenging assignments and providing the skill development necessary to meet the challenges are the responsibility of us as educators. We first need to understand the concept of flow and then be willing to work on helping students to achieve flow. In addition, marketing professors should reflect on academic, professional activities where flow occurs for them. What are the activities they enjoy for their own sake, not just for promotion, tenure, building a resume, or winning an award? Without an appreciation of the meaning and feeling of optimal experience, professors will find difficulty in providing flow opportunities for their students.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests that "the value of a school does not depend on its prestige or its ability to train students to face up to the necessities of life but rather on the degree of enjoyment on lifelong learning it can transmit." Certainly the assessment of measurable outcomes is critical in business education today but as educators we should also help our students enjoy and appreciate the learning experiences and the educational processes, not just the outcome.

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TABLE 1

Components of Flow Based on the 8 Elements of Enjoyment:

1. Engage in a *challenging* activity that requires *skills*.
2. Complete *concentration* on the activity.
3. The activity has *clear goals*.
4. There is constant and *immediate feedback*.
5. Activity *removes worries* and frustrations of everyday life.
6. Person has a *sense of control* over the activity.
7. *Concern for self disappears*.
8. *Sense of time* is altered.