

INCREASING STUDENTS' FLOW, ENGAGEMENT, AND LEARNING IN MARKETING CLASSES: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND RESEARCH ISSUES

Mary C. Martin, Fort Hays State University
Emi Moriuchi, Fort Hays State University
Ronda Smith, Fort Hays State University

This research investigates factors that influence students' experiences of flow and, in turn, their engagement and active participation in their marketing classes and program activities, which will likely lead to their level of interest and involvement in their career preparation. In fact, students' motivation for actively engaging in courses related to their major is wanting to be successful in future employment (Taylor, Hunter, Melton, & Goodwin, 2011) and engaged students are committed and more likely to continue their university studies (Russell-Bennett, Rundle-Thiele, & Kuhn, 2010).

The concept of *flow* in the context of student learning and engagement guides this research. First, the concept of flow and previous literature on flow will be reviewed. Then, flow in the context of student learning and engagement will be described and research questions for marketing pedagogy will be proposed. We believe that the research questions will help to identify important areas for future research so that marketing educators can determine strategies and experiences that will create flow and, in turn, enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. We conclude by presenting a research methodology for empirically assessing some of the marketing pedagogy research questions.

The Concept of Flow

Flow is defined as the "holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 36). It denotes an optimal experience so engrossing and enjoyable that the activity becomes worth doing for its own sake without the impetus of extrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). How does it feel to be in flow? According to Csikszentmihalyi (2014), experiencing flow feels good, is rewarding, and involves the following:

- Complete involvement in what you are doing – focused, concentrated
- A sense of ecstasy – of being outside everyday reality
- Great inner clarity – knowing what needs to be done, and how well we are doing
- Knowing that the activity is doable – that our skills are adequate to the task
- A sense of serenity – no worries about oneself and a feeling of going beyond the boundaries of the ego
- Timelessness – thoroughly focused on the present, hours seem to pass by in minutes (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014)

Flow involves a tension between anxiety and boredom, and occurs when the level of challenge and level of one's skills are congruent. When the level of challenge is appropriate to one's skills, flow will be experienced. However, one will not stay in flow for very long. His/her skills will improve and boredom will set in, or the challenge will become greater (without an increase in skills), and anxiety will be experienced.

The Measurement of Flow

Flow has been measured in a variety of ways. Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues originally used open-ended qualitative interviews to obtain descriptions of flow (Csikszentmihalyi &

Rathunde, 1993). Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues, wanting to develop an instrument that would allow for a more precise indication of flow in everyday life, developed the Experience Sampling Method (ESM). The ESM involves soliciting responses to a questionnaire when participants are randomly interrupted during various activities, using a pager and self-report forms. Participants complete the booklet each time the pager is activated and answer questions about time, location, activity, content of thought, companionship, moods, motivations, cognitive effort, self-esteem, and other variables (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993). The ESM operationalizes quality of experience by measuring cognitive, emotional, and motivational aspects of consciousness.

Flow has been measured by other researchers as well. Jackson and Ecklund (2004) developed the Flow State Scale-II a 36-item scale that measures dimensions of flow, including challenge-skill balance, clarity of goals, concentration, and perceived control. In a survey of college students, respondents were asked to "Think about 1 specific course you have taken or are currently taking that you found highly enjoyable and memorable" and then rate the frequency with an experience occurs on a five-point scale from *never* (1) to *always* (5). Examples include "I knew clearly what I should do," "I felt in control of what I was doing," and "I really enjoyed working on assignments for this class" (Steele & Fullagar, 2009).

Flow and Student Engagement

Engagement is widely used term in both research and practice and in work and educational settings. According to Steele and Fullagar (2009), flow and engagement conceptually overlap but researchers have tended to focus on differences between the two constructs. Flow is generally described as a short-term, acute absorption in a specific kind of activity, while engagement is more pervasive and persistent across a broad range of activities. But Steele and Fullagar (2009) provide a summary of their similarities:

- Engagement and flow both have cognitive, affective, and physical components
- Both are described as states of extreme concentration characterized by total absorption and immersion in an activity or set of activities
- Both are intrinsically motivating

Steele and Fullagar (2009, p. 7) conclude that "these conceptual similarities justify the use of flow theory as a valid framework for extending our understanding of engagement." Steele and Fullagar (2009) use flow as an operationalization of student engagement, and found positive relationships between flow and autonomy, role clarity and feedback. Steele and Fullagar (2009) propose that flow is a more malleable, adaptable construct that teachers can effectively enhance by training and development that targets:

- The setting of clear and challenging goals that are commensurate with a student's skills
- The provision of unambiguous feedback
- Academic coursework that allows the student autonomy and an optimal level of self-determination

Does Flow Affect Student Engagement and Learning?

Flow has been found to affect student engagement and learning outcomes positively, but with mixed results. Much work has been done to study the effects of flow on student learning outcomes in various educational settings, but little has been done regarding education within business disciplines. In addition, most studies have addressed student interaction with

computers or the Internet and have focused on traditional classroom settings. In general, the findings are mixed with some, but not all, hypothesized benefits of flow demonstrated. For example, Konradt and Sulz (2001) found students in flow had better concentration, satisfaction and motivation, but did not have better learning performance.

Why Should Marketing Educators Be Interested in Flow?

Flow is important to marketing educators because of the potential benefits to student engagement and learning outcomes and the potential to increase students' motivation to be successful in future employment (Taylor et al., 2011) or to continue their university studies (Russell-Bennett, Rundle-Thiele, & Kuhn, 2010). However, studies in marketing pedagogy specifically using flow as a theoretical basis are limited, though several studies address student *engagement* while not explicitly using the concept of flow to guide the research. We believe that repeated experiences of flow may lead to increased learning and engagement in classes and career preparation.

Research Questions – Marketing Pedagogy

Research incorporating the concept of flow will complement existing studies on student engagement and enhance marketing educators' ability to enhance student learning. In terms of marketing pedagogy, important research questions that the authors of this research will address empirically include:

- How can we develop classroom activities that stimulate flow in students, especially in light of different levels of skills and abilities in the classroom?
- How can flow be stimulated in group (versus individual) activities?
- How can flow be stimulated in different modalities (on campus versus online)?
- How can we ensure that flow will enhance learning performance, perceptions of learning and skill development, and student satisfaction?
- To what extent will experiences of flow lead to higher levels of student engagement, across classes and within a major?
- To what extent will experiences of flow lead to higher levels of student interest and involvement in their marketing career preparation?

A Proposed Empirical Study – Flow and Marketing Pedagogy

A mixed method study is being designed to determine factors and experiences that will create flow and, in turn, student learning and engagement. The mixed method study will first entail a series of qualitative interviews which will abide by the phenomenological psychology method. This method will capture marketing student participants' flow experiences in their classroom activities. Second, an experimental design whereby flow is manipulated and student engagement and learning are measured is presented. Hypotheses will address the direct influences on flow (e.g., skill, challenge) and various dependent variables found to be influenced by flow (e.g., actual learning, perceived learning, perceived skill development) and ones not previously addressed by research (e.g., motivation and interest in career preparation). Qualitative data will be analyzed according to the twelve steps discussed in Giorgi's phenomenological psychology method (Giorgi, 1997). Quantitative data will be analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Conclusions

Flow is a widely-researched concept and has implications for a broad range of activities. We believe that it has important applications and consequences for marketing educators, and propose a series of research questions relevant to marketing pedagogy and marketing theory and practice. Future research in these areas and the results of a proposed empirical study could help marketing educators develop new pedagogical strategies and techniques to create flow, engage students, enhance their learning, and increase their level of interest and involvement in their career preparation.

References Available upon Request