



WHAT WORKS IN EDUCATION
THE GEORGE LUCAS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: Motivating People to Learn

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Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ph.D., psychologist and author of the book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, describes what schools and parents can do to promote optimal learning experiences.

1. What's the best way to motivate people to learn?
2. What is "the flow experience" and what does it have to do with motivation?
3. What kinds of school activities are most (or least) likely to promote flow?
4. Can you describe a school that has succeeded in promoting flow?
5. Have you observed any especially innovative practices at The Key Learning Community?
6. What lessons can be learned from the success of the Key Learning Community?
7. What can parents do to help kids engage in "flow" at home?
8. What do you see as the major challenge for public education?

1. What's the best way to motivate people to learn?

Generally, we are motivated by two different reasons. We either do some things for what we call extrinsic reasons. Namely, you work for forty hours a week so you can get a paycheck at the end. And you don't really like the job much but you want the paycheck to do things with that you will enjoy. So that's extrinsic because the reward comes after the activity from the outside.

Now, flow is a type of intrinsic motivation, that is, there you do what you're doing primarily because you like what you're doing. If you learn only for external, extrinsic reasons, you will probably forget it as soon as you are no longer forced to remember what you want to do. Nor will you be motivated to learn for its own sake. Whereas if you are intrinsically motivated, you're going to keep learning as you move up and so you are in this lifelong learning mode, which would be the ideal.

BACK TO TOP**2. What is "the flow experience" and what does it have to do with motivation?**

The flow experience is when a person is completely involved in what he or she is doing, when the concentration is very high, when the person knows moment by moment what the next steps should be, like if you are playing tennis, you know where you want the ball to go, if you are playing a musical instrument you know what notes you want to play, every millisecond, almost. And you get feedback to what you're doing. That is, if you're playing music, you can hear whether what you are trying to do is coming out right or in tennis you see where the ball goes and so on. So there's concentration, clear goals, feedback, there is the feeling that what you can do is more or less in balance with what needs to be done, that is, challenges and skills are pretty much in balance.

When these characteristics are present a person wants to do whatever made him or her feel like this, it becomes almost addictive and you're trying to repeat that feeling and that seems to explain why people are willing to do things for no good reason -- there is no money, no recognition -- just because this experience is so rewarding and that's the flow experience.

BACK TO TOP**3. What kinds of school activities are most (or least) likely to promote flow?**

If you think of where kids have most flow in school, it's mostly in extracurricular activities like band, music, athletics, newspaper. In addition, if you look at academic classes, they would report flow especially when they work on team projects. That's the most enjoyable part of school. Next comes working on your own on a project and you can go down and the lowest one [in promoting flow] is listening to a lecture and audio/visual. Anything that involves them, that has goals where they can try to achieve, solve a problem, or do something it's going to be much more likely to produce flow.

BACK TO TOP**4. Can you describe a school that has succeeded in promoting flow?**

The Key Learning Community (<http://www.edutopia.org/key-to-learning-place-for-meaningful-academic-exploration>) in Indianapolis that you probably are also studying, they have tried very self-consciously also to include flow into their teaching methods and, I think, very successfully. Essentially, they do it in two different ways. One is that they have a space that is called the "Flow Room" where students can spend at least an hour a week to explore new materials and they don't have to do anything except get involved with whatever they are interested in doing. And this is one of the favorite spaces in the school for kids.

But more importantly, every teacher, whether they teach German or music or mathematics, is aware of how important it is for the kid to experience flow while learning because that would make them want to learn more. Teachers are trying to translate their own subject matter into ways the kid can become

really involved immediately and they get clear goals and feedback and they get the challenge matched to their ability. That makes everyday learning hopefully much more motivating to the child so that they will look forward to the lesson rather than be afraid or bored by it.

BACK TO TOP

5. Have you observed any especially innovative practices at The Key Learning Community?

One thing that the Key School did from the beginning was to hire a video technician and a video camera and they interviewed and videotaped every child at the beginning of the school year, asking them why they wanted to go school, what they hoped to achieve at the end of that year. And for the rest of the year, whatever project the kid was involved in got on the same tape. At the end of the year, the child could have a documentary of what he wanted to accomplish and what actually did happen. Now, to me, -- you know, you say, well, so what? -- I think psychologically, it's a very important thing because you are putting the responsibility for learning on the child. They are responsible for what they're going to learn.

BACK TO TOP

6. What lessons can be learned from the success of the Key Learning Community?

The neat thing is that the eight teachers who started the Key schools were not really special in any way. They were typical, good, public school teachers who just were so tired of battling against inefficiency of the regular schools that they banded together to start something new. They were able to pull something out that is very rare, namely, they created an environment where kids love to learn, where you walk into school and you see them laughing and happy in a way that you rarely see them in school and involved in their serious stuff, they're doing very, very interesting projects.

So it's possible, but you need to have that kind of focus, single-minded determination that these eight people have because otherwise, it won't happen by itself. And throwing money at it is not necessarily going to help either, unless you give money to people who have that determination already.

BACK TO TOP

7. What can parents do to help kids engage in "flow" at home?

What the parents can do is: first, support; second, challenge. Almost all kids who are in flow frequently, their parents have very high expectations of them and they trust that they can do that. And they give them the opportunities. For instance, we find that kids who are in flow often at home, have a place where they feel private, where they can be by themselves. And at first we thought, "Oh, well the rich kids have that." No. Rich kids have no more chance to have privacy than poor kids. It's not having a big place, it's just having a place where you feel, "Okay, here I can do what I want to do." It may be a basement, a corner of the basement, whatever.

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Having a TV in a kid's bedroom is one of the worst things because then they end up taking the easy way and when they're bored they turn on the TV, etcetera.

BACK TO TOP

8. What do you see as the major challenge for public education?

[You] see in the past, you learned to become a hunter or a farmer, which is what all our ancestors for millions of years were. They learned by doing in a real setting, where they felt that, "Hey, what I do is important." I mean, you take an Inuit kid of two years old, they get a bow and arrow and they shoot birds -- sitting birds at first. But then they end up shooting seals and polar bears, but it's a kind of graduated involvement with real life and we haven't found how to do that.

It's not surprising in a way because, I mean, how you get the kid to understand what a financial investment advisor does or a rocket engineer. It's really difficult to gradually introduce them. So we find abstract ways of doing it by reading about the principles of physics or finance or whatever. But that's so boring to most kids that they don't feel they are doing real stuff. And so the question of how to get kids involved in their own learning and their own development early enough instead of trying to do it this kind of abstract way. That seems to be the major challenge.

BACK TO TOP

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