

7-2012

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Recommended Citation

Latz, Amanda (2012) "Flow in the Community College Classroom?: An Autoethnographic Exploration," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 6: No. 2, Article 15.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2012.060215>

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Keywords

Flow theory, Community college teaching, Autoethnography

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Abstract

Flow theory has not been previously applied to faculty experiences in higher education. Upon carrying out this autoethnographic self-study, I discovered that my experiences as a community college instructor were riddled with periods of being in flow. During the spring academic semester of 2010, I created weekly journals of my teaching life. Then, I coded and analyzed the journals and three themes were generated: preparation rituals, feedback, and solidarity. This self-study provided me with a wealth of knowledge about my own teaching and could assist others in understanding their own teaching experiences. It also highlighted the importance of affect in the college classroom. This study adds to the existing literature on flow theory, college teaching, and autoethnography.

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Introduction

I can usually fall asleep right away. But, I could not on January 7, 2010. So as I lay in bed, I searched for something on television to lull me to sleep. I landed on an episode of Tavis Smiley on PBS. Tavis was interviewing Paul Mooney about various things including his work with and perceptions of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy. Mooney explained that when these two actor/comedians played a character, they actually became the character they were portraying. He contrasted the styles of Pryor and Murphy with his own, stating that he was always Paul Mooney as the character he was portraying. Mooney expressed admiration for Pryor and Murphy, but stated that he could never give himself up to his characters. As I watched this interview, I began to think about what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) called flow. Were Pryor and Murphy experiencing flow as they gave themselves over to the characters they portrayed? What role did flow play in my own life?

My attempt to dissipate insomnia had made it worse. My thoughts cascaded. I canvassed my life history for incidences of being in flow. Only two came to mind: playing the viola with the orchestra in middle school and playing field hockey during the eight years of my competitive athletic career. So I asked myself: Does flow occur in my life now? I thought about the experiences I have had as an instructor at a community college. I have been an instructor at a community college since the fall of 2006, and I must have experienced flow while teaching. Right? At the time, I did not know. Therefore, on January 7, I sought to find the answer. This paper outlines my exploration and experiences of flow during an academic semester through autoethnography.

The research question that drove this study was: How can flow theory add to my understanding of my teaching practices within a community college? During the spring semester of 2010, I created weekly teaching journals, which I coded using an a priori and

subsequent open coding schema at the close of the semester. Three major themes were generated: preparation rituals, feedback, and solidarity.

Literature Review

This literature review consists of three sections: flow theory, autoethnography, and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). The three sections represent the theoretical framework from which this study was conceived, the methodology employed throughout this study, and the literature base to which this study contributes, respectively. Within the last section, I highlight the ways in which some researchers have used flow theory and autoethnographic methods, albeit independently, to contribute to the SoTL literature base.

Flow Theory

Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory is the preeminent theoretical underpinning and impetus of this work. Flow is described as

a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. (Csikszentmihalyi, p. 71)

As I delved further into Csikszentmihalyi's work, I realized that flow was readily attainable and far less random than I had realized because flow is "something we *make* happen" (Csikszentmihalyi, p. 3, italics in original). Flow states can be attained in all aspects of life. While many individuals actively seek moments of rest, "the best moments in our lives . . . are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times" (Csikszentmihalyi, p. 3). In fact, and counter intuitively, work "is often the most enjoyable part of life" (Csikszentmihalyi, p. 145). Was I experiencing flow at work? This question inspired the conception of this research project and served as a lens through which the data were analyzed. Prior to this project, flow theory had not been applied to the "work" of college teaching.

Flow can be described as an optimal psychological experience. One critical aspect of flow is the harmonious match of skill and challenge. For example, I possessed the skills necessary to teach the courses I taught during the spring 2010 semester. I began my community college teaching career in the fall of 2006. At that time, my skill level was slightly below the level of challenge I faced. In the space of time between the start of the fall 2006 semester and the start of the spring 2010, my teaching skills increased. As such, my propensity for flow experiences in the fall of 2006 must have been less than the spring of 2010 because the level of challenge remained the same, yet my skills had increased. In situations where low skills meet high challenges, anxiety is likely to result. In situations where high skills meet low challenges, boredom is likely to result.

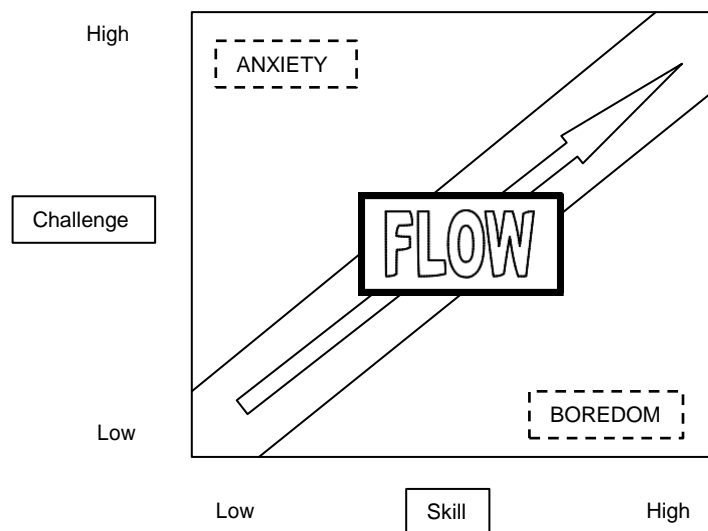


Figure 1. Flow is possible when there is a balanced match of skill and challenge. This figure was adapted from Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 74).

Figure 1 illustrates the affective outcomes of blending certain levels of skill and challenge. Flow is only possible when skill and challenge are relatively equal. It should be noted that when low skill meets low challenge, the flow experience may not be as gratifying as a high skill, high challenge situation. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) noted that “when challenges and skills were both high they felt [participants] happier, more cheerful, stronger, more active; they concentrated more; they felt more creative and satisfied” (p. 159).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) articulated eight elements of enjoyment, which contribute to flow experiences. Strikingly, these eight elements were found in various studies of flow irrespective of task. In other words, the affective elements of flow seem to be unrelated to the specific task. For example, “the way a long-distance swimmer felt when crossing the English Channel was almost identical to the way a chess player felt during a tournament or a climber progressing up a difficult rock face” (p. 48). In addition, “regardless of culture, state of modernization, social class, age, or gender, the respondents described enjoyment in very much the same way. *What* they did to experience enjoyment varied enormously” (p. 48, italics in original). The eight elements are 1) a challenging activity that requires skills, 2) the merging of action and awareness, 3) clear goals, 4) feedback, 5) concentration on the task at hand, 6) the paradox of control, 7) the loss of self-consciousness, and 8) the transformation of time (Csikszentmihalyi).

The eight elements of enjoyment help to address the question: Why is flow gratifying? First, an individual must engage in an activity that requires skill. Within this engagement, and as previously noted, “enjoyment comes at a very specific point: whenever the opportunities for action perceived by the individual are equal to his or her capabilities” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 52). Second, there must be a merger of action and awareness. Flow is not casual. In fact, it can require “highly disciplined mental activity” and the “application of skilled performance” (Csikszentmihalyi, p. 54). Third, the individual must have clear goals. Fourth, the individual must receive and assess feedback during the activity. An activity will not be enjoyable “unless a person learns to set goals and to recognize and gauge feedback” (p.

54). Fifth, concentration on the task at hand is paramount. When extreme levels of concentration are achieved, there is “no room in for irrelevant information” (p. 58). During flow, “one is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life” (p. 58). Sixth, the nature of control becomes paradoxical during flow. More specifically, “what people enjoy is not the sense of *being* in control, but the sense of *exercising* control in difficult situations” (p. 61, italics in original). Seventh, during flow, individuals experience a loss of self-consciousness. This element is directly related to element five because the level of concentration is so high that there remains no room in the individual’s mind to be concerned about the self. Eighth, “time no longer seems to pass the way it ordinarily does” (p. 66) during flow. Often times, hours pass like minutes.

Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) has been used heuristically in a variety of areas. Recently, flow theory has emerged as a means of understanding the ways in which technology, and online sociality specifically, has impacted daily life. It has been applied to the study of on-line gaming (e.g., Cowley, Charles, Black, & Hickey, 2008; Wan & Chiou, 2006), human-technology interactions (e.g., Chen, 2006; Lu, Zhou, & Wang, 2009), and e-learning (e.g., Liu, Liao, & Pratt, 2009; Shin, 2006). While flow theory has been used within the context of higher education (e.g., Steele & Fullagar, 2009), it has not previously been methodologically paired with autoethnography. Flow theory is the broad theoretical perspective that drove the conception of and analysis for the present study, an autoethnographic self-study of flow experiences within a community college classroom.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004) is a systematic process of inquiry (graphy) wherein the researcher engages in a form of self-study (auto) with the goal of better understanding a specific culture (ethno) in which the researcher is a full member. Personal experience is analyzed in an effort to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographic research was born from postmodernist rejections of universal truth claims and objective researcher positionality. Autoethnography exalts researcher subjectivity and rejects positivist notions of researcher objectivity. The term was coined in the late 1970s (Hayano, 1979), and it gained a significant foothold during the middle and late 1990s largely because of the work of Carolyn Ellis, whose name has become synonymous with autoethnography. This research methodology has become a mainstay within the practice and lexicon of the qualitative research paradigm; it has been used within a wide variety of social science disciplines.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Systematic inquiry on the processes of teaching and learning has taken place for some time. However, it was not until the publication of Boyer’s (1990) canonical text that the SoTL has blossomed and become a robust focus of study with a sizable literature base. The SoTL involves the study of teaching and learning processes within the sphere of higher education as well as the dissemination of findings through avenues such as conference presentations, teaching workshops, journal articles, and books (McKinney, 2007). SoTL work within the community college setting is sparse because of the nature of faculty work at such institutions. Community college faculty members do not typically engage in research; their focus is on teaching and college service. Tinberg, Killian Duffy, and Mino (2007) identified two obstacles to SoTL work in the community college: institutionalized attitudes toward research and “pedagogical solitude” (p. 28). Put differently, community colleges are seen largely as teaching institutions, and community college faculty members rarely have the opportunities to share their pedagogical work with others. This study, to some small degree, addresses the lack of SoTL literature within community colleges.

Flow theory and SoTL. Flow theory has been used as a heuristic framework to better understand processes of teaching and learning within higher education (e.g., Liao, 2006). However, Bakker's (2005) research on teachers and students within music schools in the Netherlands provides important context for the present study. Bakker addressed two questions within his work: (a) Could job resources be possible flow antecedents among music teachers? and (b) Does flow transfer from teachers to students? Regarding the first question, he found that

job resources—a combination of autonomy, performance feedback, social support from colleagues and supervisory coaching—had a positive relationship with the balance between challenges and skills, and that this balance, in turn, had predictive value for the frequency of flow among music teachers. (p. 37)

In regards to the second question, Bakker found a positive relationship between teachers' flow experiences and the flow experiences of those teachers' students. The more a teacher experienced flow, the more his or her students experienced flow. More specifically, "teachers' *intrinsic work motivation* was related to flow experienced by students" (Bakker, p. 38, italics in original).

Autoethnography and SoTL. Durante (2007) provided an example of the utility of the autoethnographic methods in SoTL endeavors. The article, according to Durante, "recounted my experience as the participant in a professional development project which was a catalyst for a profound change in the self as a teacher" (p. 9). Within it, she wove together rich narratives with thoughtful analytic writing and references to the literature. About the process, she noted: "my autoethnography made salient the importance of reflective practice in teaching – or the ability to identify and scrutinize the underlying assumptions on the way we teach" (p. 9). She wrote about the process of becoming strange to self (Greene, 1973) through a process of self-reflection (as eluded to in her title), which allowed for a broadening of perspective. At the close of the paper, she stated: "This process has enabled me to better empathise with my students – to understand how they learn – which has empowered me to respond more appropriately in future situations" (pp. 9-10).

Methods

The preceding literature review provided a foundation for this study's research question: How can flow theory add to my understanding of my teaching practices within a community college? I engaged in an autoethnographic (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004) self-study. Spry (2001) described autoethnography as "a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts" (p. 710). Faculty members have engaged in autoethnographic writing about their experiences within higher education (e.g., Frenztz, 2008), but, again, this methodology has not before been paired with flow theory as a theoretical and analytical perspective. I was interested in understanding my own experiences inside two community college classrooms during the spring 2010 semester. I wanted to understand how flow theory could help me better understand the ways in which I went about teaching. During that semester, I taught two classes: Cultural Anthropology and First Year Seminar (community college orientation course). I had been teaching Cultural Anthropology since the fall of 2006 and First Year Seminar since the fall of 2008.

Data were derived from weekly teaching journals I composed during the spring semester of 2010. Educators "can use their journals to examine who they are as teachers and to work to become more engaged in classrooms" (Stevens & Cooper, 2009, p. 135). Moreover,

teaching journals can help educators develop an “academic conscience” (Gee, 2004, p. 26). Sixteen journal entries were created electronically and ranged from approximately 1,100 to 2,000 words. As I created the journals, I engaged in focused freewriting, which Stevens and Cooper (2009) described as “generative and . . . especially useful when exploring a teaching or research topic” (p. 139). Journal content included: pre-class preparations; what took place before, during, and after the classes; how I felt about the classes; and my thoughts about flow in the classroom.

After the final weekly journal was composed in May of 2010, an initial round of coding took place. A priori codes (e.g., Miller & Crabtree, 1992) were established for the first round of coding after an initial reading of the journals took place. They were: flow experiences, non-flow experiences, and analytic memos (Charmaz, 2006). While I did not intend to create analytical writing (which I termed analytic memos within the a priori coding schema) during the journaling process, I realized afterward that I had written in this style at points during the journaling process inadvertently. These analytic writings reflected the development of my understanding of flow theory and its applications to and implications for college teaching. During the initial coding process, a fourth code was also created. This code was termed solidarity. Many instances of one on one interactions between my students and me were noted in the journals and could not be coded appropriately vis-à-vis the three a priori codes. However, I determined that such data chunks were important and should be coded during round one. As such, a fourth (pseudo) a priori code was added and used.

Next, a second round of coding took place. This process included an open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the journals. Sub-codes were created within each a priori code (i.e., previously coded data chunk) from the first round. And, additional codes were created for any data chunks not coded during the first round. In total, 32 new codes were generated during this process. All coding was done by hand. Codes were written in the margins of hard copies of the journals. A separate code key document was created.

After the journals were composed and coded, all data were sorted into three broad categories. These three categories then became the three major findings to result from this study. As I composed the journals, it became evident that I had flow experiences inside the classroom. Therefore, the analytic process was aimed at identifying actions, events, and circumstances that promoted or inhibited flow experiences. The findings are elucidated in the following section.

Findings

As noted above, three major themes were generated from this study: preparation rituals, feedback, and solidarity.

Preparation Rituals

Preparation rituals emerged as a both a promoter and inhibitor of flow. Preparing for my two classes included extensive rituals, which included: thinking about the classes, planning lesson logistics, grading, and preparing physically. Preparation rituals provided me with a sense of control and confidence. After week one, I acknowledged this upfront:

I take great pleasure in being very prepared. The irony is that while I go to extreme lengths to prepare, I never chart out the details or make lecture or teaching notes. When I enter the classroom, the preparation allows for automaticity. I just know what to do and after awhile, so do the students. (journal, January 16, 2010)

Extensive time spent thinking about a particular class session often led to a flow experience. Thinking about the class sessions allowed the lesson planning to happen more pleasurably and efficiently. The time I dedicated to planning for the course session was very important to me. I noted:

My course planning time, especially on Tuesday mornings, is almost sacred. If something comes up, I almost can't stand it. It's like a ritual. I read, I write, and I respond to student emails. I cannot be bothered during this time. Confidence is critical to my teaching 'performance' and without preparation, I cannot be confident. (journal, January 16, 2010)

The weekly rituals I underwent gave me confidence and peace of mind prior to entering into each session.

A large part of the preparation process involved grading. As the semester progressed, the process of grading became a flow experience in and of itself. It is important to note that flow "experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3). Grading was not a task I enjoyed. However, if I was able to turn a grading task into a flow experience, the grading process was more enjoyable and the rest after the grading was more fulfilling. Completing a grading task always made me feel prepared for the upcoming class, connected with the students' thoughts and progress, and as though I had accomplished something. During week 10, I noted: "I was frustrated [with grading], but as I started making progress on the work ahead of me, my negative emotions began to subside" (journal, March 26, 2010).

A final preparation ritual was physical exercise, which placed me in a better mood. In week eight, I wrote:

I did most of my course prep on Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning. I was feeling really overwhelmed over the weekend, like I had too much to do and not enough time to do it – which is the first time I've felt that way all semester. So, I decided to workout early in the morning on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. It was perfect. Today (Thursday) I slept in (if you can call sleeping until 6:50 AM sleeping in). I was able to get everything done fairly comfortably, but I am really tired now. (journal, March 4, 2010)

Completing a workout on Tuesday mornings prior to my anthropology course was always a great way for me to feel physically well prior to teaching. Thus exercise was certainly a positive way for me to prepare for class. It contributed to flow inside the classroom.

Fully completing these preparation rituals often led to flow experiences prior to class sessions, while an absence of them worked against the presence of flow. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) stated that "when the flow episode is over, one feels more 'together' than before" (p. 41). I liken this sense of 'together' with an embodied sense of confidence, which can, in turn, serve as a catalyst for future and more intense flow experiences. Typically, flow through preparation rituals led to flow inside the classroom.

Feedback

When I first began this project, I had assumed that it would be about my own flow experiences as a community college instructor. This notion changed dramatically as the semester unfolded. During week three, I wrote: "Maybe creating flow experiences for [students] is essential to my flow experiences. Is flow contagious?" (journal, January 31,

2010). I realized that I was constantly trying to facilitate flow experiences for my students. During week five, my thinking on this topic evolved:

I'm realizing that my flow experiences are largely influenced by my perceptions of my students' flow experiences. For example, when I observed my [students watching a video clip], I could sense that they were on the cusp of a flow experience. This was affirming to me and allowed me to achieve a greater sense of flow than possible without my perceptions of them being in flow. I assert that flow as feedback is a major flow catalyst for the person receiving the feedback. If my pedagogical goal is to facilitate flow experiences in students, then witnessing them in flow means I've reached my goal – at least in part. Can flow be circular? In other words, what about when students witness and perceive me in flow? While flow may not be a part of their lexicon, they can still perceive me as being really into what I'm doing – my teaching facilitation/performance. Can constant flow feedback – back and forth – provide an educational experience with the force of a tornado? (journal, February 13, 2010)

My perceptions of students being in flow were generated from observing them watching various films and short clips, engaging in discussions (whole class and in groups), and actively participating in class (i.e., giving me eye contact, remaining on task). After week six, I wrote: "I know it's [students leaving class early] not something I should take personally, but I just cannot help myself sometimes. Like, if I made this class more interesting, they'd stay." (journal, February 18, 2010). Concomitantly, the absence of my perceiving students in flow negatively affected my capabilities to create flow experiences for myself.

Constantly gauging and assessing feedback was critical in my ability to adjust my pre-planned class sessions. In week five, I became discouraged with a poor decision I made regarding a video to show the anthropology class. I had chosen a clip that was interesting to me, but boring to the students. I made this choice after not choosing a more interesting and exciting, yet somewhat offensive film. I wrote:

I realize now though, that offensive is much less of a problem than boring. Boring is actually more offensive than offensive is offensive. I had thought about doing the human barometer [discussion-based activity] after the clip, but settled on introducing a few discussion questions. The participation was lukewarm. A few of my more outspoken students were not there and those who were, contributed mildly. Sensing this, I told them that it was time to go. They smiled at me, happy that I picked up on their moods, and left the class at around 1:45 PM (we normally end at 2:20 PM). It was snowing and classes that began after 4 PM were canceled. Their minds were elsewhere and my boring clip expedited their mental departures. (journal, February 13, 2010)

My decision to allow the students to leave a few minutes early allowed me to pull us out from the non flow-producing session, one in which learning was not occurring. Even though the session was not a success by my estimation, this gesture sent a message to the students. My actions assured them that I was receptive to their feedback.

There were 30 students enrolled in each course. The relatively small size of the courses allowed me to actually get to know each student through in and out of class interactions. Despite the already small class sizes, I wrote this during week eight:

We were really sparse [i.e., many students were absent], and I joked with them about how many students would show up. It was the week after the test, the sun was shining for the first time in what felt like decades, and spring break is next week. I think 15 people were there. But, I actually really like it when the class is small. Everyone turned up last week for the test, and not everyone is really interested in the class. So, when only the ones who want to be there are there, it's just better. (journal, March 4, 2010)

This excerpt highlights the notion that my preparation alone may not be enough for me to experience flow inside the classroom. Again, feedback is critical. For flow to occur in the classroom, feedback must come from others (i.e., learners).

In the previous section, I noted that grading was an important part of my preparation rituals. Grading also served as a form of feedback:

Getting ready for anthropology began with grading their [students'] second reading reaction paper, which I was really pleased with on the whole. That they did some good and thoughtful work put my mind in a positive frame about their progress and commitment and made me want to prepare a solid lesson plan for the upcoming class. Grading these papers took place on Saturday. This early grading gave me instant feedback and good feelings of tangible accomplishment. I could release my mind of grading and focus on the lesson. (journal, March 18, 2010)

Not only would students provide me with feedback during class, but they also did so outside of class as I interacted with their work. This feedback contributed to my flow experiences as noted above.

Preparation rituals are related to feedback in at least one additional way. During week nine, I wrote:

When I know the content well enough to tell an intriguing and funny story about it, there's flow. When I don't, I become mechanistic, and there's no flow. Students respond to the stories with eye contact, laughter (I can be funny), and facial expressions. I perceive them in flow. That feedback feeds and propels my flow experience. (journal, March 18, 2010)

My preparation efforts, or "knowing the content well," allowed me to use humor with the class. The use of humor created positive feedback from students, or "eye contact and laughter." Here again, the back and forth of feedback exponentially increased the intensity of flow experiences within the classroom.

At this point, it is important to return to Bakker's (2005) work. The present study's "feedback" finding is emblematic of Bakker's, which I stated previously: the more a teacher experienced flow, the more his or her students experienced flow. However, further inquiry in this area is required because the notion that flow is contagious might actually be more accurately described as emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1994). Emotional contagion refers to the automatic mimicking of another's emotive embodiments: posture, facial expression, tone of voice, and so forth (Hatfield et al.).

Solidarity

Solidarity emerged as a powerful theme within the data. One important element of flow is matching skill and challenge. If educators are to create opportunities for students to experience flow, they must have an understanding of who they are, what capacities they

possess, what motivates them, and where their interests lie. Learning about students requires trust, safety, and communication. I found that the more I was able to relationship build with students, the more I was able to create the conditions necessary for them to experience flow. Building these relationships meant coming into solidarity with students by telling stories, sharing food, and experiencing community.

I would often take time before or after class to spend time talking with students about items related to the course. At time, I spoke with some students about other aspects of their lives. Here is an example:

I was in a good mood before class on Tuesday and had the chance to talk to [student]. I met him last semester through my supervisor. He's a dumpster diver. It's fascinating. Anyways, we were talking about his project and he ended up showing me a bunch of photos from his escapades. And, he invited me to dive with them once the weather warms up. (journal, January 30, 2010)

This student was enrolled in my anthropology course and completed his capstone assignment on dumpster diving culture. I lament the fact that I was never able to "dive" with him, but our exchanges allowed me to see glimpses into his life that would have otherwise gone unseen.

In addition to speaking with students about their educational lives, at times I also spoke with them about their personal lives. This was the case during week six:

Before class, I received an email from [student]. I was not expecting her to be in class, but she came about 30 minutes late. In her note, she explained some personal issues she had been having with regards to getting through school. We talked for a solid 30 to 45 minutes. There were tears and honesty, and it was really helpful, at least I think so. Being able to talk with students like that is very fulfilling. Because I do not have an office at [community college], I don't have a lot of opportunities to talk with students one to one. It's not that this is a bad thing – I would not have enough time to get things done if students popped into my office all day long. [Student] is a really brilliant student and I think she just needs a little structure and guidance. Maybe she needs someone to help her be accountable. I hope she finishes. I think she will. (journal, February 18, 2010)

Unfortunately, this student did not finish the course. However, interactions such as this one allowed me to better understand where students were coming from and to empathize with them. The connections I made with certain students throughout the semester were motivating. They inspired better preparation, heightened communication, and ultimately, more flow experiences.

The most endearing moment of solidarity with students I experienced during that semester took place during week 13. I wrote:

As I was loading the PPT on to the computer, [student 1] came up to me from the hallway and asked if I wanted to "break bread" with a group of them in the student lounge next door. I never turn down food, so I said yes. I finished getting my PPT slides loaded and the clicker connected, and then I headed to the lounge. It was super cute! [Students 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5] had planned a mini-carry in. [Student 1] brought enchiladas and [student 5] had made a cherry pie. It was awesome! All six of us were there sitting around a little table and just putting it away. It was super

cute. They were all talking about their wives and husbands, and I find it to be so heartwarming that [student 2] talks about his late wife all the time. He was telling stories about her on Wednesday too. She died of cancer 12 years ago. [Student 1] mentioned something about everyone needing a living will. And, [student 2] commented on how his wife had things laid out in preparation for her own death. She wanted to die in bed, in his arms. Shit. That was so touching. He misses her so much and I am sure he loved her so well, still does! After 12 years, I find that to be so amazing. It was a great way to start a class and the polar opposite of the day before. (journal, April 15, 2010)

The solidarity I was able to experience with those students and their completely unexpected kindness provided the psychological fodder necessary for me (and perhaps them as well) to enter into our classroom space primed for a flow experience.

Implications and Conclusion

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) stated that “perhaps the most powerful effect flow theory could have in the public sector is in providing a blueprint for how institutions may be reformed so as to make them more conducive to optimal experience” (p. 191). It is difficult to discern the difference (if one exists) between teacher and student enjoyment within a classroom setting generated through a learning task and a flow experience within a classroom setting generated through a learning task. However, if those involved in teaching and learning processes at the college level have more flow experiences, positive learning outcomes are likely. This is well rehearsed within the literature. But within the accountability driven academic culture within which most educators at all levels work, it is my belief that too little emphasis is placed on both flow experiences and enjoyment. Based on my experiences completing this research, it is my assertion that flow theory can make explicit some of the dismissed, tacit, and nuanced conditions and dispositions that lead to powerful learning for those labeled as educators and as learned alike.

While qualitative research is not meant to be generalized, it is transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to similar settings. This self-study provided me with a wealth of knowledge about my own teaching and could assist others in understanding their own teaching experiences. Employing the autoethnographic method allowed me to create reflective and analytical space to fully process my teaching experiences. The disciplined schedule to which I stuck during the journaling process enabled me to generate a large amount of rich data from which I could make meaning of my work. This study, like Durante’s (2007), honed my teaching. It also highlighted the importance of affect in the college classroom. The lens of flow theory allowed me to understand the importance of preparation rituals, student feedback, and coming in to solidarity with students, all of which I had assigned no meaning prior to this study. The use of the broad theoretical frame of flow theory coupled with the autoethnographic methodology generated a richly descriptive account of a semester’s worth of community college teaching. Engaging in this project was potent and significant to me as a pedagogue and as a researcher. This study adds to the existing literature on flow theory, college teaching, and autoethnography. It also serves as a call to other practitioner-researchers to do further work in these areas, especially those within the community college sector.

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