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Happiness consultancy report

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

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Assignment

The consultancy is a continuation of your reflective journal.

- You continue with the activity you used for your journal, or a different one, and/or an additional one.
- You recruit two or more individuals — called clients — to undertake an activity known to increase happiness, either the same activity as your own or a different one.
- You introduce your clients to the activity, for example through a presentation, talk, workshop and/or handout.
- You monitor their engagement with the activity on a regular basis (at least weekly) through observations, interviews, survey and/or other means.
- You evaluate the effect of the activity on yourself and your clients using questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and/or other techniques.

For more details see http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_13outline.pdf

Desiree Tahiri's consultancy report starts on the next page.

This document is located at <http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/happiness-consultancy-tops/>.

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Consultancy Report: Creative Flow Activities

It is often through the routine, conscious training of thought that one may flourish and experience the meaningful, contented life. This ability to focus the mind and live wholeheartedly in the present, savouring moments and making deeper meaning of experiences have been proven to be significant dimensions of wellbeing. One method of practicing this spirited engagement with life may be through increasing suspended ‘flow’ experiences. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as a state of intensely absorbed consciousness where great attention is paid to the details of an activity being performed and there occurs a transcendence of self and time (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, pg. 4). In the past couple of months, I have been practicing developing and maintaining flow and its benefits through a personally meaningful, creative activity – learning jazz on mandolin. Having derived much enjoyment and an increasing sense of the emotional, creative and practical flourishing of self, I decided to conduct research to gain a broader understanding of the relationship between creative flow activities and happiness. I designed a program that would ask participants to chose a flow activity and record their progress over one month. This activity was specified to be of a creative nature, as my own activity had been, due to the specific benefits I felt this provided where skills could be developed and something may be produced – a claim supported by research as in a 2008 study which revealed a “significant positive relationship between happiness and creative ideation”, (Pannells and Claxton, 2008, pg. 67).

After approaching a few friends and acquaintances about the project, I managed to recruit 3 clients – a young, fellow university student – Ben, a middle-aged female friend – Lisa, and my mother – Elke, also middle-aged. The disadvantages of recruiting my mother may have included her favourable bias towards the outcomes I hoped to facilitate – such as increased happiness levels, along with the possible influences I may have had over her experience of flow – seeing as we live together. I was conscious of and attempted to diminish these disadvantages – such as by requesting unbiased feedback, cautiously wording my questions, and allowing her space to self-interpret flow and how to conduct her sessions. Upon

reflection I think that the advantages outweighed setbacks – the convenient, frequent access to her reflections, which were of high quality and depth due to her comfort in revealing personal thoughts and emotions to me, along with being able to observe her flow sessions, for example, facilitated detailed insight of flow processes.

Describing evidence collected from participants who invested significant time undertaking challenging activities, Csikszentmihalyi outlined the patterns of flow and proved its powerfully positive effect on wellbeing (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, pg. 48). A fundamental element for the creation of flow and a consequent fulfilling sense of joy during an activity, as academic and popular literature on the topic suggests, is that the activity be intrinsically meaningful to the individual – in order that the effort devoted to developing skills be considered worthwhile. All three clients had described choosing an activity that was inherently meaningful and valuable to them – Elke endeavoured to learn mandolin, Lisa took up crocheting and Ben carried out creative writing activities.

To introduce my clients to the philosophy of happiness and flow and my research program, I created a handout that summarised key ideas, asked clients to choose a creative activity (with a list of examples) and provided a loose guide on how to go about effectively conducting this activity to encourage flow. To monitor their progress I had designed weekly progress forms for clients to record after each session their happiness levels ‘before and after’, set a weekly goal (and later reflect on their progress), answer questions about their flow experience and they considered successful and difficult about their session, and any other pertaining reflections. At the close of the month-long project, I collected these forms and conducted a casual interview with each client for an insight into their overall experience of flow within their activities. As well as this, I received regular feedback about their progress and thoughts through direct observation and casual conversations. Upon the return of all this qualitative and quantitative information, I set about sorting and analysing clients’ responses through their common and differing descriptions of the conditions and causes of flow and its relation to their happiness, as well as comparing my own experience and the vast amount of literature on the subject.

As all three participants described in their own terms, the meditative state of flow often facilitated what Ben-Shahar terms “peak experience and peak performance”, where great pleasure is derived while one performs at their best and with proficiency (Ben-Shahar, 2007,

pg. 104). Privette defines peak experience as “an intense and highly valued moment”; peak performance as “an episode of superior functioning” and flow as “intrinsically enjoyable experience” (Privette, 1983, pg. 1361). While Csikszentmihalyi and Ben-Shahar speak of flow as a powerful amalgamation these aspects, Privette explains that flow, in any of its forms, does not as such imply both these experiences, “but may include either or both” (Privette, 1983, pg. 1361). Reflecting on my clients’ accounts of flow as well as my own, it could be argued that the creative nature of the activity undertaken perhaps lent itself to this fuller experience incorporating all these aspects. All clients reported experiencing optimal performance and joy during flow – especially further into their program when their skills had developed along with a semi-regular routine and their progress towards their goals became felt. We may facilitate this through flow when “nothing distracts us or competes for our attention”; through this intensity “we learn, grow, improve, and advance toward our future purpose” (Ben-Shahar, 2007, pg. 104). This contention was strongly reinforced by my clients who reported states of complete, attentive absorption during flow, describing these states as their most productive, expressive and ecstatic. When the mind was cleared of ruminations and attention was sharply focused, Ben described that creative ideas flowed easier and he found himself writing “intuitively rather than forcing words” during flow, which he explained as deeply satisfying.

A common experience among all three clients, as well as myself, however, was the occasional (although less and less) difficulty staying focused on the activity as the mind ‘drifted’ onto external or internal distractions – which both academic and popular literature both conclusively argue must be overcome to achieve flow. Becoming distracted by both mental ruminations and environmental factors – such as Lisa’s experience with her cat, who to her amusement regularly joined her sessions to tangle her ball of yarn – was often reported by the clients as enabling only fragmented (if any) moments of flow. To overcome distraction, Elke described how she pre-prepared the content of her sessions in order to stay focused and found time to dedicate to the session when she knew there would be no major external distractions and her mind was cleared of daily stresses – often towards the end of the day. Similarly, Ben practiced his activity first thing in the morning in order to approach his session with clarity, and adopted an attitude of ‘just do it’ to overcome his writer’s block. Persistence and control of consciousness – not an easy task, as clients confirmed, were described as key to forcing concentration and – as this became habitual, facilitating uninterrupted creative flow. Reflecting upon my own experience, I found that single-

mindfulness during flow, in which there is a hyperawareness of the detail of the present moment – the actions of the activity at hand, is also facilitated by a mediation of challenge and boredom, and directed by clear goals. When one's mind is trained to exclude distractions, patterns of negative thinking and ruminations that stir depression and anxiety are disrupted and flow may become more habitual (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, pg. 10).

Flow encourages “higher levels of happiness by transforming the formula of “no pain, no gain” to “present gain, future gain””, where all of one's skills are engaged but not constantly overexerted (Ben-Shahar, 2007, pg. 105). To achieve this there is a need to work at a balance between anxiety and boredom, allowing for concentrative, engaging states of flow without becoming frustrated or bored (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, pg. 10). This idea resonated with the clients' accounts of the conditions they described helped focus their attention. All three reported that they had overall managed to maintain a corresponding amount of challenge to their skills as they developed through setting new goals and adding variety – either by learning a new tune, a new crochet stitch, or switching between writing a new story and editing an older one – a practice which all said sustained their interest and produced new creative passion and drive within flow. In a popular blog article Maymin outlines that flow may occur both within a “comfortable zone” – where activities do not require much skill and pose only a small challenge, and during situations that demand high level skills to address a high level challenge (Maymin, 2011). Balance between passivity and stress through the congruence of skills and challenge to facilitate flow, where all skills are engaged and “there is no ‘space’ to think about anything else”, as Ben elucidated, is a theme common to much of the literature concerning the meditative state, and is a key element within the high skill – high challenge creative activities conducted by the clients. All of the clients, when asked about their balance of anxiety and boredom, said responded with similar sentiments outlining the renewed required all of their attention as they upped their challenges, and how effectively this facilitated flow.

An effective strategy employed the clients to overcome their frustration when they felt the challenge was too high, was the slowing the pace and breaking-down of tasks into more manageable segments, allowing for more congruence between skills and challenge, as academic literature reaffirms. These strategies developed over time and clients described their increasingly frequent, sustained experiences of flow and the ability to move with greater ease in and out of this intense state. Observing Elke practicing mandolin, particularly after

the first week, I noticed her increasingly disciplined approach involving repetitiously playing segments of a tune to learn the order of notes and timing and thus lessen mistakes, memorising it in manageable increments each session. This was much like my own approach, where routine became important in maintaining and developing skills, enabling more frequent absorbed states of flow. I have observed my mother in these highly absorbed states, deeply concentrating on the task at hand, and later commenting on how quickly the time had passed. Working at developing their own effective routine and strategies to maintain equilibrium between anxiety and boredom was described by two of the clients as a thoroughly rewarding experience, affirming a claim within Pannells and Claxton's study that those "who feel capable of finding solutions report feeling happy", especially as they began to sense the positive feedback of their efforts (2008, pg. 71).

Regularly setting goals also prevented the clients from boredom and distraction; they commonly described that working towards something and noticing their progress elicited a sense of excitement and pride; I myself felt driven to achieve by my personal goals due to their intrinsic value to me. Always having clear goals, whether these involve solving a problem or reaching a particular point in one's activity, provides a sense of purpose that drives one to make time to work with effort towards something. Intensive sessions conducting a creative activity creates sustained periods of flow, and enjoyment may be derived through the immediate and long-term positive feedback one receives when making noticeable progress towards goals and performing with quality during this state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, pgs. 9 – 10). Upon analysing their progress forms, I noticed that it wasn't until the second week – when they began making noticeable progress that all clients began to look forwards to their next session. Within my own and my clients' experiences, a feeling of elation or a "natural high", as Lyubomirsky describes, is derived from the fun of the activity and the awareness of improving technique (Lyubomirsky, 2010, pg. 187). Moments of flow, often described by clients as blissful, passionate attentiveness, were said to facilitate performance of much higher quality; such deeply concentrative states acutely beneficial in developing skill and almost acting as "turning points" where one finally reached their goal, as Elke explained in the interview. Lisa described these moments as "empowering". Reinforcing this claim, Csikszentmihalyi argues that the process of honing skills through flow develops "a sense of mastery", and by extension "a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life", driving one with purpose and producing meaning (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, pgs. 4 & 3). This may firstly elicit confidence and self-efficacy, but

also in the long term, as I have noticed within myself, establishes a feeling of control over the flourishing of the self and emotional wellbeing as flow becomes more systematic.

Flow is arguably facilitated through structured routine of practiced action, guided by a trajectory of goals. During the interview Elke explained that the more she learnt and practicing became a habit, the more enjoyable the activity became and the smoother she played – facilitating flow more frequently as the weeks went on. Elke also reported enjoying her activity as she was free from pressure and could practice at her own routine pace. On the contrary, Ben described feeling motivated because he felt a sense of accountability at first to me as the research, but later to himself, as he felt the benefits of his developing routine and increasingly sustained periods of flow. Each of the clients reportedly increased the frequency of their sessions after the first week from my recommended twice-a-week model to four times a week as they had enjoyed feeling in flow and felt driven by their personal goals – a momentum and passion I myself experienced conducting my own creative flow activity.

The ability to set clear goals, maintain the right amount of challenge and devote time and effort to progress and induce enriching periods of flow gives the individual a sense of control over their wellbeing and the quality and meaning in the life. During flow, in which the mind is so saturated with the present, one experiences a warped sense of time along with a transcendence of self. “Paradoxically”, as Csikszentmihalyi thus articulates, “the self expands with acts of self-forgetfulness” (1997, pg. 11). All clients reinforced these claims and reported experiencing varying extents of increased happiness after a session of flow and identified a more significant growth of overall wellbeing at the end of the month’s program. As in Csikszentmihalyi’s research, a very common theme among the clients was the description of a transcendence of self during flow, where they lived wholly in the present and were conscious of nothing but the details of the activity before them. One client discussed the therapeutic value this state had on them, as a means of relief from stress and negative rumination. All clients also strongly highlighted the warped sense of time they experienced – passing in an instant during flow. In a newspaper article discussing contentment, ‘the meaningful life’ and how they may be attained through flow, Carey describes Seligman’s ‘blueprint’ for happiness that involves the developing two crucial skills – “how to mind our thoughts, moment to moment” and “how to forget ourselves altogether” (Carey, 2003). These notions resonate with my own experiences and those of my clients’ concerning creative flow; one must control the mind to focus attention on the details of the present, which – provided

the conditions are in place, may induce flow, and one momentarily transcends the self as a result.

During their interviews all clients reported a lasting sense of accomplishment, self-efficacy, pride, competence and confidence stemming from their ability to mindfully focus their attention and facilitate a state of flow increasingly at will, create and follow a routine, achieve goals and improve skills; two reporting that this was further elucidated through reflection on their self-written progress notes in the weekly form. Reflecting on his progress form, Ben explains that he was “able to identify when I felt positive or was working well. Being aware of these increased my mood; knowing I felt positive kept me feeling positive for longer”. Creativity, as Flora argues, reaffirming my own and my client’s assertions, has strong connections to happiness as it “provides opportunities for self-actualization” (Flora, 2009, pg. 73). Allowing one to feel “more vividly in the moment, and, at the same time, more connected to the world”, creative engagement even at the everyday level, as a study amongst college students reveals, encourages “a greater sense of well-being and personal growth” (Richards and Ivcevic in Flora, 2009, pg. 73). An article by Australian mental health initiative MindMatters similarly argues that one may encourage flow in their everyday lives through becoming conscious of and aligning thought processes, feelings and actions, developing through this flow an enriching sense of “inner harmony” (MindMatters, 2012). Two clients described feeling inspired and motivated, and all felt they spent their day undertaking at least one meaningful, valuable activity – rather than “sitting on Facebook all day” as Ben admitted. The feeling that one has spent the day being productive, as I myself strongly felt after an involving, especially creative session of flow, creates a powerful sense that one is expressively, intellectually and emotionally flourishing – and as a result of one’s own hard work. One client even discussed how she began to feel these positive effects feed into other daily activities.

It is much easier to derive short-term pleasure from passive flow activities such as watching television or eating, or circumstantial elements as earning more money or being conventionally more attractive, as Lyubomirsky discusses (Lyubomirsky, 2010, pgs. 13 – 68). However, activities of a creative nature – requiring a disciplined routine of at times hard work in order to actively produce something; sustained effort inducing deeply fulfilling states of flow - are for some infused with deeper meaning, capable of enriching the quality of one’s life with cultural expression and innovative philosophy, and creating a more profound, long-term psychological and physical flourishing. All three of my clients, as well as myself, had

similar overall experiences of creative flow, albeit within very different activities, and the academic and popular literature on the subject largely reaffirmed the themes and emotions that arose within our separate experiences. The benefits of these creative flow activities on wellbeing and personal flourishing were vast and long lasting, and my clients had mentioned no disadvantages. One issue of concern that may arise within these activities is not conducting these activities in a manner that encourages flow, where the challenge may be too high for one's skill, for example, which might result in frustration and cause one to 'give up'. Recommendations for those continuing with creative flow activities are thus to maintain correct balance between anxiety and skill, set personal goals and a workable routine, learn to clear the mind and most importantly – ensure that the activity is one which is personally considered meaningful, in order to derive a fulfilling sense of self-achievement and joy. All three clients had energetically expressed their intent to continue their activities, as each claimed to derive many lasting positive emotions from being in creative flow within their intrinsically important activities and wanted to maintain their ability to control their thought processes to facilitate flow much easier than when they first began. I myself still practice mandolin on a lesser but still weekly frequency, and derive many positive emotional, creative and skill-orientated benefits from flow. It has been a pleasure working with my clients and knowing that I've helped facilitate a routine for creative activity and flow from which all three derived so much joy.

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