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Finding Meaning in Flow: A Conversation with Susan K. Perry on Writing Creatively

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> Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act.
> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
>
> Amateurs sit and wait for inspiration, the rest of us just get up and go to work.
> Stephen King
>
> Flow is feeling part of something beyond oneself, almost a kind of mini-transcendence…a way of describing what it's like when you feel you are a part of something larger.
> Susan K. Perry

Introduction

Recent pieces in this series on creativity and twenty-first century education have focused on exploring the work of a range of notable creativity scholars and researchers. Through ongoing interviews with such scholars, we aim to explore creativity in all its richness—across disciplinary lines, diverse perspectives, and a range of philosophical and methodological approaches. We have considered psychological views, neuro-scientific approaches, social and collective theories, social justice philosophies, imaginative play, and organizational creativity (Cain et al. 2017; Good et al. 2016; Henriksen et al. 2017; Keenan et al. 2016; Mehta et al. 2016; Richardson et al. 2016). In this exploration of researcher perspectives, we have just begun to scratch the surface of the possibilities in this field, as evidenced by the range, eclecticism, and variety among creativity scholars. In this article, we share ideas from an interview with Dr. Susan K. Perry, who has focused on the construct of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1996) to explore how this state of mind and way of working contributes to creativity, particularly in the domain of writing.

Susan K. Perry, Ph.D., is a social psychologist and the author of six nonfiction books, including the bestselling *Writing in Flow: Keys to Enhanced Creativity*; the award-winning *Playing Smart: The Family Guide to Enriching Offbeat Learning Activities for Ages 4–14*; and *Loving in Flow: How the Happiest Couples Get and Stay That Way.* Her first novel was the critically noted *Kylie's Heel*, and her second novel is in progress. She has published numerous articles, essays, Q&A columns, and poems; and has contributed chapters to *The Psychology of Creative Writing* (Cambridge University Press) and *Creativity Across Domains: Faces of the Muse* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates). Dr. Perry also blogs (*Creating in Flow*) for PsychologyToday.com. Through a range of teaching experiences, consultations, and radio/TV appearances, she has become a noted psychological expert on creativity, flow, and writing.

In this interview Dr. Perry identified some key themes that connect flow, creativity, writing, and thinking. We examine

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these themes in more detail below, including the work of writing, writing in flow, and flow for meaningful creativity in research and education.

The Work of Writing

Dr. Perry first began writing about her own children, later branching out to general non-fiction and then realizing that psychology, in particular, fascinated her. She described how she instinctively began with an area she knew and had experienced, and from there entered less familiar areas about which she was innately curious. Despite her experience as a writer, writing for her was still a chore, rather than something that flowed with easy concentration. She observed her husband (a poet published in *The New Yorker*), and noted that he wrote with an intensity and focus that she felt she lacked. This curiosity led her to the works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996), and his work on flow. As Dr. Perry noted about her initial observations of her husband:

> I would watch him work, and he would be so focused and so intent. I wasn't getting that way myself. I've always been easily interruptible, but my husband is not, and I was curious about that because he could really get into his work, and I wanted to get to that place. When I read about flow, when I read Csikszentmihalyi 's work, I could understand how I'm not getting in flow with the work I'm doing. But I *can* get into flow, and everyone can in something or other…it's the question of, when does time stop for you?

According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow is a mental state in which a person working on a task or activity is completely immersed with a feeling of focus, involvement, and pleasure in the process or work. As he notes, flow can be attained through "meeting a challenge, solving a problem, discovering something new" (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, p. 66), and he suggests that it is during this period of flow that people feel their best.

Dr. Perry decided to conduct her doctoral dissertation on the creative writing flow of writers and poets, leading her to a qualitative study of flow, as experienced by over 76 famous novelists and poets. She contacted these writers through letters and emails, interviewed them over the phone, or visited with them in person at book signings, workshops, conferences, and in their homes. Through three years of additional research and writing, Dr. Perry realized her ultimate goal of turning her dissertation research into an award-winning book.

Although these years of research, revision, and writing held frustrations, she saw the value of that struggle and was able to channel it into something creative. While it can be uncomfortable, Dr. Perry views uncertainty and frustration as an opportunity towards creativity, as she described it:

> You are on that knife edge of challenge, and that is different for every person…that knife edge of too-hard or too-easy. We can teach kids when they're frustrated, whether it's a frustration to the point of impossible or whether it's a momentary frustration. If they can find the spot where they get stuck, and keep going and keep going…That's when the rewards come in, that persistence.

Dr. Perry's discussion of the importance of a "knife edge" of a challenge, also relates in certain ways to a foundational idea in educational psychology—that of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1960, 1978). According to this construct, students must be engaged in work that keeps them sufficiently excited or challenged to persevere and maintain interest, while not feeling the challenge is out of reach or so impossible as to necessitate giving up. If students lack interest in the topic or run into constant writing blocks, they will give in to their frustration. If the writing task is too simple, they will run through it perfunctorily, and the result will lack voice and creativity. Instead the topic must allow for challenges that will engage students' curiosity enough to push them through any roadblocks they may encounter. As she describes it:

> Flow is highly conducive for creativity to flourish. It happens when you're sufficiently challenged to stay engaged in a task, but not so frustrated by your inability to accomplish the task that you become anxious and quit. You forget yourself, time changes or stops for you, and you feel part of something larger than yourself.

In this way, the foundation of creative challenges parallels what is known about highly-motivating challenges and tasks (Csikszentmihalyi 1996; Ryan and Deci 2000; Vygotsky 1978). This suggests the importance of helping students to become aware of their passions through difficult but interesting and appropriate learning challenges.

Through her research, and her own experiences as a writer, Dr. Perry realized that writing has two basic modes. The first involves a fundamental work ethic, which many writers described as *ritualistic*. Some of the writers she interviewed mentioned a need for a specific environment or space, special items turned on or off, special drinks or snacks at hand, or even a particular writing instrument. One author kept a spread sheet to track how many words he wrote each day. Dr. Perry found that for her own writing she needed to take care of trivial matters, such as doctors' appointments or email, before she could ground herself in her writing. Once in that space, the

work of writing often began with rereading her previous day's efforts, spotting places she could expand, or conducting research on topics she noted through a series of asterisks, to enter it more readily. Much of the time, writing is no different than any other task—tedious, challenging, and at times frustrating.

Dr. Perry suggests that there is a second mode which she calls writing in flow. Flow is the moment when a writer is so intently open to the creative aspect of their craft that the writing seems to flow right through them and onto the page:

> When I write my list of chores, my full brain is working on that, but it's not that different from the articles I write sometimes. You know, ten ways to blah blah, which are kind of boring for me after all these years. However, part of flow is feeling part of something beyond oneself, almost a kind of mini-transcendence… The transcendence feeling is a way of describing what it's like when you feel you are a part of something larger. If it's right, you may feel like the words are being given to you.

This flow allows you to let go of the trivial things happening around you to focus solely on the task at hand. Dr. Perry feels that she is not able to be in flow as often as she would like, but now that she knows what it is and how it feels when she is in it, she knows she can seek it out. In this, there may be a kind of meta-cognitive awareness of mental states that can help us enter them, or be more aware of how and when we can get into them, which facilitates such states as flow. Along these lines, Dr. Perry also believes that flow can and should be taught.

Writing in Flow

Many fields have different or colloquial names for that moment when the outside world falls away and the person can fully focus on only his/her craft. We speak of how dancers "float," singers "fire up," athletes are "in the zone," or writers "flow." Some writers seem to intuitively find their flow, while others may have to work towards it. Yet, because flow provides a meaningful conduit to creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1996; Kotler 2014), Dr. Perry suggests it is a construct that should be explicitly taught to students. While people enact flow in a variety of ways, Dr. Perry believes that everyone experiences it in some way in some area. She commented:

> Flow is such an individual experience! Some can get into it easily, some not. Some often, some almost never. Some crave it and find it gives their lives—not just their creative output—meaning. In the context of education, it seems to me it would be extremely helpful for people of all ages to understand their own experiences, and that includes those times when they're so engaged in a task that they just don't want to stop. Whenever possible, young people should be encouraged to pursue their own interests.

Dr. Perry recommends the infusion of mini-flow lessons with students to provide them some experience and context with flow. In describing how this might unfold, she suggested that an instructor might begin by having students think of an experience in which they completely lost track of time. A teacher might ask them to examine and unpack that experience to identify what led up to it to apply the experience to writing. For example, if talking with friends at a party led to staying out much later than originally intended, perhaps writing about a party, or aiming to capture or translate aspects or social dynamics of the experience could lead to a similar enjoyment and focus.

Dr. Perry notes several markers that demonstrate a person is experiencing flow. For instance, a person may be so focused and engaged in writing that they *lose track of time*. The writing allows the student to walk the *knife edge of challenge*—enough to promote curiosity even in the face of frustration, but not enough frustration to push to the point of quitting. The student or writer feels as if, through the writing, they are *part of something larger*. Dr. Perry does not speak to this in a religious sense (though a religious person may interpret it in that fashion), but in the sense that the brain is communicating with you on a different level. She suggests that this may be the reason that inventors wake up with a completely formulated solution, or that writers keep a notepad near their bed:

> Something is coming through you—it's you—it's your brain, but different parts are firing. It's not left brain or right brain, it's the whole brain, and the upper and the subconscious and sometimes the unconscious. It's like you wake up from a dream with an idea that you are able to turn into something.

Dr. Perry describes this firing of the whole brain as "transcending the everyday." When she is in flow, she considers herself to be experiencing a smarter version of herself.

Dr. Perry's research also indicated that the duration of flow can vary among writers. Some authors can be in flow so deeply that when they resurface they are done for the day. Conversely, science-fiction author, David Gerrold, described his flow process as short intense bursts, of which he would continuously step in and out of throughout a writing session (Perry 1999). He used these breaks to allow his subconscious to help him solve certain writing puzzles he faced, particularly regarding dialogue. He would also check his word count at each stopping point to stay aware of his overall progress before moving forward.

Dr. Perry notes that besides helping students to be explicitly aware of times when they are in flow, teachers should also help students see the benefits of purposefully promoting flow, and she spoke to several metacognitive benefits of flow. Her research demonstrates that flow assumes an intense and persistent focus, which also suggests a problem-solving orientation *conducive to creativity* and innovation. Dr. Perry further claims that writers in flow experience high levels of engagement, which *promotes persistence*, even in the face of frustration. She rationalizes that students who demonstrate persistence will stick with the writing longer, which *develops expertise*. Students will begin to shift from being extrinsically to intrinsically motivated. Dr. Perry believes an explicit understanding of these motivations will help students move beyond writing merely to get a grade, to engage in intrinsically motivating or meaningful communication and expression. She sees flow as a way to transcend from mundane writing assignments to meaningful creativity.

Flow for Meaningful Creativity in Research and Education

Dr. Perry sees creativity as a way to alleviate boredom—as a break from what is already known, involving the development of new ways of doing or seeing. However, as is the case for all creativity scholars, studying creativity presents a unique challenge which each researcher meets in their own way. For Dr. Perry, qualitative approaches have provided tools to methodically identify core themes of creativity and flow among successful creators, in empirical ways that allow for the personal, open-ended, and idiosyncratic nature of the domain:

> Studying and researching a somewhat nebulous concept like creativity, like studying love or happiness, is always going to be a special challenge. I believe qualitative research works best, at this time, to offer an understanding of what goes on for a person engaged in creative work. You are looking at consciousness after all, and although those being studied are often not very clear on what's happening for them, peering into their brains is even more limiting at this point in brain science. So, it's useful to focus on creative persons who are also versed in psychology, and who aren't fearful that a scientific understanding of what they're doing is going somehow to harm their creativity.

Dr. Perry believes that creativity presents itself through natural curiosity and a need for questioning. This drive for understanding can be nurtured, or stifled. Despite the nebulous nature of creativity, she strongly believes that understanding and being able to find a path into creativity is crucial for students—in their thinking, in their writing, and in their lives.

In terms of technology and education, much has been said about the innovative power of technology, and schools have certainly been pushed toward heightened technology infrastructure and integration. However, Dr. Perry suggests a balanced approach that neither sees technology as a panacea or an impediment to learning and creativity—but rather something that depends on use and context. She cautions that technology does not automatically equal creativity. Technology can certainly engage and motivate students; yet, it can also deceptively mimic flow in drawing on behaviorist foundations, rather than constructive ones. For example, students can easily lose track of time and become heavily focused in something like gaming. However, gaming does not necessarily help students become part of something larger as most flow experiences do. Therefore, Dr. Perry considers a loss of time on such applications to potentially become a mindless addiction. As she noted:

> Whenever I discuss flow and creativity, I tend to talk about it in terms of how fantastic it is to get that fully engaged in anything. However, with computers (in schools, especially) and the ubiquity of Smartphones in the hands of youngsters, I would have to distinguish between mindless addiction to intermittent rewards, and flow in the service of something larger…a mini-transcendence. While I check my email and social media too often, if I find that time has escaped my notice and that I've spent time doing nothing, I feel something like the opposite of transcendence.

This issue of social media and technology as a potential distraction from productivity or creativity (versus being used as a tool for those things), has increasingly become part of a larger conversation around technology and culture in our world (Shirky 2011). Along these lines, Dr. Perry notes that social media and video game designers have learned well the behaviorist lessons of slot machines and other forms of gambling. She cautions that there is a real danger that when learning goals and creative achievement come up against addictive forms of technology, kids will take the easy road. She reflected the concern that then, "they miss out on a lifelong habit of the profound pleasures of deeply engaging with something just challenging enough for them to grow from the effort."

She would suggest that teachers think carefully to consider the learning goals behind any technology they intend to use. Dr. Perry would encourage teachers to build a classroom environment conducive to writing creatively. Toward this end, she recommends the following strategies:

- *Discuss the concept of flow.* Explicitly talk about being engaged and curious.

- *Talk about your own flow experiences.* Share your own challenges and frustrations so students can see hard work can be worthwhile.
- *Provide enough time and space.* Do not schedule every moment. Leave room for students to pursue their own interests.
- *Teach attentional self-monitoring.* Help students be aware of when their focus is lagging, or the times that they become hyper focused.
- *Offer challenging learning opportunities.* Some assignments are so well-defined that there is little challenge. Consider leaving aspects of the assignment open to interpretation to scaffold their understanding and application.
- *Emphasize learning for its own sake.* Stay away from rewards as these can lessen intrinsic motivation. Instead allow students to have some say in the topics they choose or they way they present the material.
- *Experiment and find novelty.* Choose activities and assignments that do not necessarily have a right or wrong answer. Allow students to experiment with how they demonstrate their understanding, as long as they provide their rationale. Correct misconceptions, but make it clear that mistakes can be a powerful way to learn.

Dr. Perry does note that this can be difficult in the current U.S. educational environment, which places such heavy demands on teachers and learners in terms of testing. She argues that the field of education puts too much emphasis on test scores and not enough on creative flow and learning activities.

With the advent of standardized testing, pay for performance, and legislated standards, it has become increasingly difficult for teachers to focus on broader skills such as creativity (Henriksen, 2011). However, organizations such as Common Core, Next Generation Science Standards, and twenty-first Century Skills argue that inquiry-based learning, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity are integral for twenty-first century student success. Dr. Perry believes that much of the traditional writing done in schools is torturous and that textbooks are extremely "unflowing." While many teachers may not be able to openly integrate mini-workshops on writing in flow, she believes they can ensure that creativity is not stifled or punished.

Dr. Perry suggests that while creativity and flow are not necessarily things that can be "taught" directly, they can be developed or hindered, or nurtured or stifled, based on how teaching and learning opportunities and tasks are designed. She notes several things that "stifle" creativity in learners such as:

> …dividing class periods into short amounts of time. Not giving kids choices when making assignments. Not recognizing passion when they see it. Not letting kids move around when they need to. Not recognizing creative approaches to an assignment and downgrading such. Fretting over petty nothings that have nothing to do with keeping order or inciting the desire to learn.

She acknowledges that students should be accountable for fundamentals, but feels that what those students do with that knowledge is as important as the knowledge itself, stating, "Kids need to learn the background and context of whatever interests them, so that at some point they can break away from what is new to them, to what is potentially new to everyone. But that background should never be taught in a way that inhibits their own efforts."

In considering the current position and direction of much educational policy and bureaucracy, Dr. Perry lamented that there is a lack of choice and freedom for creativity for both students and teachers. This is ironic, in that creativity makes the top of most lists of twenty-first century skills—making it a concept that the field of education gives much lip service to but little support. It is clearly a mindset and construct that the field speaks about, but that does not receive the resources, policy, and practice to develop and support.

As Dr. Perry commented, "When you focus on test scores and completing checklists, naturally it leaves little room for creative pursuits that don't produce quantifiable results." These tensions between policy and practice, between subjective experiences and quantifiable tests, and between what we claim to value versus what we reward in schools, are nothing new. Yet we must continue to navigate and push on such tensions toward valuing creative work and thought. It is through persistence, passion, and creativity that students can use fundamental knowledge to come up with new ideas and artifacts, to develop solutions, and to make things that move us forward, in creative flow.

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