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Project Proposal Form - 1575 words

Project Title

Can Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) Facilitate Creative Flow among Professional Vocalists?

The Context

I am a private voice teacher of popular music styles working in California, US. Most of my training and research has focused on voice physiology and evidence-based pedagogy, but teaching experience has shown me that cognitive and psychological skills are also essential to successful performance (Gill et al., 2022; Philippe et al., 2022). These skills can promote optimal functioning and feelings of intrinsic reward, a state commonly referred to as “flow” (Cohen and Bodner, 2021; Philippe et al., 2022).

Like many music teachers, my students often approach me about the psychological aspects of vocal practice, but I lack a formal structure to address these concerns (Shaw et al., 2020).

Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT), a non-clinical adaptation of the psychotherapeutic model Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Mahony et al., 2022), offers a simple and malleable structure that can be easily learned and adopted by music teachers (Shaw et al., 2020) and performance coaches.

This study will explore the impact of Acceptance and Commitment Training on experiences of flow among professional vocalists, toward the potential inclusion of this coaching model in my studio teaching work. This research aims to investigate potential connections between psychological flexibility and flow, to evaluate ACT as a framework to improve vocalists’ practice and performance experiences, and to expand the research on ACT as a model for music performance coaching. The objectives of this study are to consolidate and explore existing literature on ACT and flow, and to develop and deliver a one-to-one ACT coaching intervention.

The Justification

Research on ACT as a model for music performance coaching is in its infancy, with most studies focusing on the alleviation of problematic music performance anxiety (MPA) (Mahony et al., 2022; Clarke et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2020; Juncos and de Paiva e Pona, 2018; Juncos et al., 2017). Remediating MPA is only one facet of facilitating optimal performance, however, as “optimal functioning cannot be attained solely by the absence of pathology... methods for facilitating positive functioning need to be actively cultivated” (Cohen and Bodner, 2021, p. 521).

A state of optimal functioning is often referred to as “flow”, or “being in the zone”, and is characterized by “effortless attention, action and awareness merged,” a lack of self-consciousness, the potential for spontaneity, and a skewed sense of time (Doyle, 2017, p. 2). Flow is a desirable state, as musicians in flow report feeling more connection to their performances and a greater sense of internal reward (Jackson and Marsh, 1996). It is proposed that certain antecedents must be present in order for a flow state opportunity to arise, such as knowledge of a clear goal and the availability of immediate and specific feedback. There must also be a balance between the level of challenge presented and the level of skill possessed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). All of these antecedents may be present in the context of a well planned voice lesson or thoughtful home practice. Even so, psychological factors such as resistance, distraction, mindlessness, fear of failure, or a need to control outcomes may prevent a flow state from occurring. In the language of the ACT model, these factors are symptomatic of psychological inflexibility.

The primary purpose of ACT is to promote psychological flexibility. Psychologically flexible processes include observing and accepting unpleasant thoughts and feelings rather than identifying with them, and taking committed action toward one’s values (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz and Baran, 2023). Inflexible processes involve attempts to suppress and control internal experiences, causing individuals to become anxious, distracted, or depressed (Katajavuori et al., 2023). The similarities between psychologically flexible processes and the prerequisites of flow present a compelling case for the use of ACT to encourage optimal functioning. This study seeks to identify points of connection between these two internal states through the analysis of quantitative and narrative data.

The Intended Impact

Through this study I will gain initial proficiency in delivering ACT-based coaching, assess the potential benefit of this model, and explore how to incorporate ACT strategies into my teaching work. Over the course of this project period I will also acquire coaching-specific training, after which I may begin to offer coaching independently of my teaching work.

This study contributes to growing bodies of literature on both ACT-based coaching and flow state experiences among musicians, drawing the first connection between these areas of study and spurring future research. By illuminating how coaching skills can bolster traditional teaching approaches (Mahony et al., 2022), this study may also inspire other teachers to adopt coaching models such as ACT to enrich their professional practice.

Methodology

I will conduct this study as outlined in the following Gantt chart.

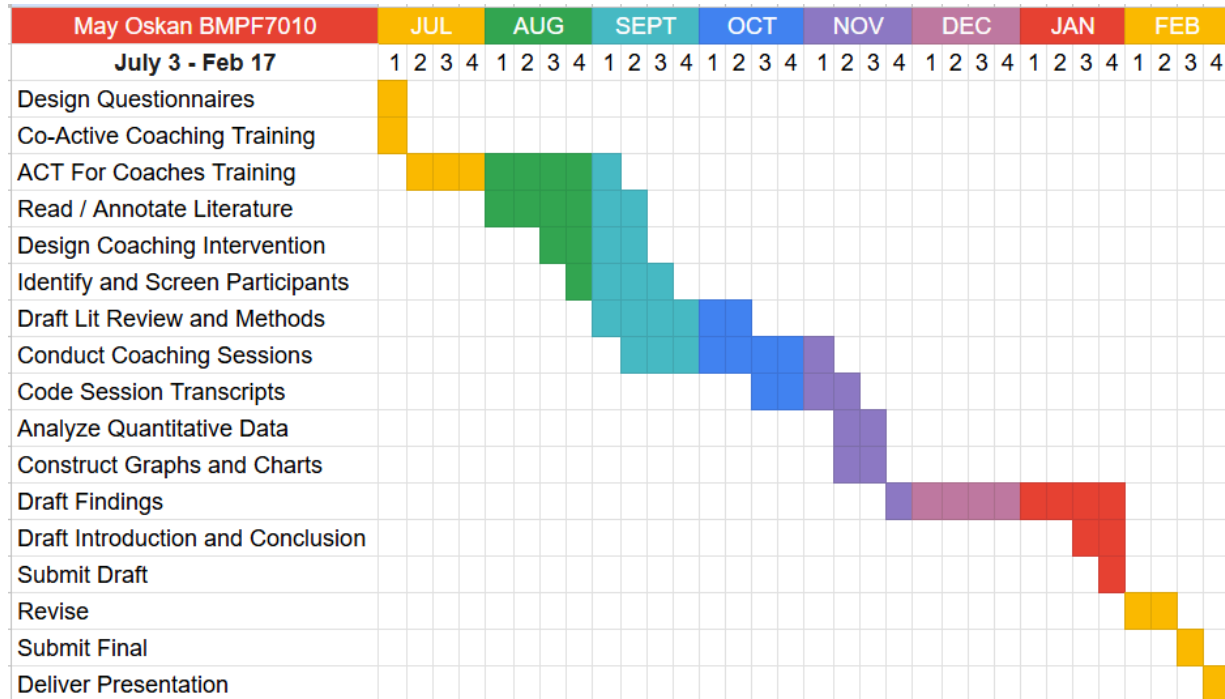


Figure 1: Project Gantt Chart

The literature review will build on my previous independent study and focus on the connections between psychological flexibility as promoted by the ACT model (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz and Baran, 2023) and the qualities and antecedents of the flow state, such as a merging of awareness and action, concentration, and a sense of personal control (Norsworthy et al., 2021). By considering this intersection, I will design an ACT-based coaching framework for use in my participant study.

I will take a pragmatic approach to research, as I am using a mixed methods study design and am most interested in developing practical applications based on my findings. Pragmatism is commonly associated with mixed methods research, and focuses on the consequences of the research (Feilzer, 2010) and its practical utility.

Methods

Participant Selection

Due to the time constraints of this study and the involved nature of offering multiple coaching sessions to each participant, I will draw a small convenience sample by word of mouth referral, asking fellow teachers and performers to recommend professional vocalists who may be interested in receiving complimentary performance coaching for their participation. Since the study period is protracted over several weeks, there is a strong likelihood for attrition. I will aim to secure six participants, which would allow for some attrition while still resulting in a manageable amount of data if no one drops out. I will conduct a short screening interview with each participant to make sure they understand the nature of the study and the goals and limitations of coaching. If they agree to participate, they will sign a digital informed consent form and we will schedule their coaching sessions.

Baseline Data Collection

Before the initial coaching call, participants will complete the eleven-item Creative Self Questionnaire, based on Karwowski's Short Scale of Creative Self (Zielinska et al., 2022), to provide a baseline measure of creative personal identity, creative self-concept, and creative self-efficacy, factors which may influence an individual's likelihood of experiencing flow.

Ongoing Quantitative Data Collection

Participants will also complete the fifteen-item Weekly Check-In Questionnaire: a combination of the Psy-Flex, a scale designed to measure psychological flexibility as a set of changeable

factors over time (Gloster et al., 2021), and the Psychological Flow Scale (PFS) which measures the extent of flow experienced during a single task or event the preceding week (Norsworthy et al., 2023). Participants will complete the Weekly Check-In Questionnaire before each coaching call, describing their experiences with psychological flexibility and flow during the intervening week.

Delivery of Coaching and Qualitative Observational Data Collection

All participant interactions will take place via Zoom video call, and each coaching session will be recorded and transcribed. Following the final session, participants will complete a brief semi-structured exit interview to provide feedback about the coaching process. Exit interviews will also be recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Session transcriptions will be analyzed on an ongoing basis, allowing the design of the coaching intervention to be continually refined, reflecting on emerging themes and hypotheses (Pope et al., 2000). I will take an inductive approach, allowing the framework for analysis to arise from the data itself (Burnard et al., 2008). Findings will be presented as a multiple case study, considering “multiple cases within specific contexts to explore... theoretical hypotheses” and “allowing for a level of generalizability to similar cases beyond the scope of the study” (Sneed et al., 2020, p. 6). Quantitative data collected in weekly questionnaires will be presented graphically, providing a visual representation to enrich the qualitative findings.

Ethics and Insider Research

In order to protect participant interests in the immediate and long-term (Denscombe, 2003), I will adhere to the ethical application already approved by UWTSD.

I acknowledge the potential difficulty of managing expectations as a practitioner researcher (Rowley, 2003). To minimize the impact of these dual roles, I will exclude friends, family, and past and current students from my participant sample. I will also invite each participant to collaboratively design how we will work together, allowing for modifications to this design as sessions proceed.

Participant information will be kept strictly confidential, and questionnaire responses and session transcripts will be deidentified. In the coaching process I will reduce bias by asking neutral, open questions and by engaging with topics that are most important to the participant.

Personal Learning Outcomes

- Build my general and ACT-specific coaching skills through research and intensive training.
- Through coaching skills, establish constructive working relationships and a culture of open communication with my students.
- Use transcripts from session recordings to distill and present compelling narratives of professional vocalists' experiences.
- Delineate best practices for incorporating coaching into voice teaching.
- Understand the nature of flow state experience, its antecedents and barriers.
- Identify future areas of research into ACT coaching and flow.
- Connect with other ACT practitioners and coaches through sharing and discussing my findings.

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Can Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) Facilitate Creative Flow among Professional Vocalists?

Project Report - 13883 words

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the potential of Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) as a coaching approach to facilitate states of optimal performance, or “flow”, among professional vocalists. Flow is a heightened state outside of ordinary experience in which time seems to pass differently, attention seems effortless, action is merged with awareness, and skill and challenge are equally balanced (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). A lack of distractibility and self-consciousness allows for complete immersion in a task and the spontaneous generation of new ideas (Doyle, 2017). Acceptance and Commitment Training is based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (also abbreviated ACT), a psychotherapeutic model based on six key processes intended to improve psychological flexibility through the promotion of mindful acceptance and commitment to valued action (Juncos et al., 2017). When used outside of psychotherapy, ACT shows promise as a music performance coaching method (Shaw et al., 2020; Mahony et al., 2022), and may have a positive impact on flow (Roman and Juncos et al., 2021). The components of psychological flexibility, as described in the ACT model, are similar to the proposed antecedents and experiential characteristics of flow, but a direct connection between psychological flexibility and flow has not yet been established.

Access to flow state opportunities is desirable, as musicians experiencing flow in performance are less cognitively involved in the process of making music, more absorbed in the task, and more likely to experience feelings of satisfaction and enjoyment (Norsworthy et al., 2023). A framework to encourage flow would benefit voice students as well, but the role of flow in music education or music practice settings is less well understood.

Recent research suggests that access to flow is not a static trait, but can be taught and learned (Norsworthy et al., 2023), and new scales have been validated to measure both psychological flexibility and flow as changeable attributes over time (Gloster et al., 2021; Norsworthy et al., 2023). This literature presents the opportunity to explore possible connections between flow states and psychological flexibility, as well as the potential to create performance coaching approaches to improve students’ access to flow.

This project includes the design and delivery of a six-session ACT coaching intervention,

thematic analysis of session transcripts, and the use of quantitative data from two recently validated questionnaires to answer the research question: can Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) facilitate creative flow among professional vocalists?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to illuminate the components of psychological flexibility, as promoted by ACT, and the preconditions and experiential qualities of flow experience. The following sections explore the relationship between ACT and flow as inferred by existing literature, the impact of flow on music performance and other creative pursuits, and the potential benefits of encouraging flow states in the voice studio. The throughlines between these concepts provides a foundation for the original research findings to follow.

ACT and Flow

Existing literature widely supports the efficacy of ACT as a psychotherapeutic model, but research into its use in nonclinical applications such as music performance coaching is still emerging (Juncos et al., 2017). Recent studies suggest indirect associations between psychological flexibility and flow (Roman and Juncos et al., 2021), but a direct link between these internal states and their impact on creative activity has yet to be established.

In a recent study of university musicians, psychological inflexibility “showed an indirect effect on performance flow”, as psychologically inflexible music students experienced higher levels of problematic music performance anxiety (MPA), “which might decrease flow experiences during music performance and also contribute to avoidance of weekly practice”. This study also showed a “significant relationship between psychological inflexibility and maladaptive perfectionism” (Roman and Juncos et al., 2021) which may also hinder flow, as flow state experiences are categorized by feelings of unselfconsciousness. While this research shows the negative impact that psychological inflexibility may have on flow, as of this writing no studies explore the potential direct, positive impact of psychological flexibility on increasing flow. This study is intended as an initial contribution toward filling this gap in the literature.

Flow has been studied as a cognitive event, a physiological and affective state, and an experiential phenomenon (Philippe et al., 2022), and has been conceptualized and measured in a broad variety of research applications. The results of one scoping review include over one hundred constructs and eighty-four possible prerequisite conditions for flow. Among these, a few

antecedents of flow were most commonly cited, including “optimal challenge and high motivation”, while “absorption, effortless control, and intrinsic reward” (Norsworthy et al., 2021, p. 806) were the most frequently mentioned characteristics of the flow experience itself.

Unsurprisingly, flow is related to improvements in professional and academic performance. One study on mental toughness, flow, and academic attainment found that “challenge, commitment, control of life, confidence in abilities, and overall mental toughness were each significantly related with flow” (St Clair-Thompson and Devine, 2023, p. 332). This study suggests that access to flow is determined by certain personal attributes and mental faculties, but results of another intervention-based study “provide preliminary evidence that it may be possible to ‘train’ flow”, thereby increasing participants’ “performance, competence, well-being, intrinsic motivation, interest, choice,” and the ability to cope with stress and anxiety (Norsworthy et al., 2023, p. 531). Such interventions would benefit music students, especially in the personally sensitive discipline of voice (Lewis and Hendricks, 2022), but few studies examine specific coaching methods to this purpose (Suzuki and Pitts, 2023). Through the analysis of mixed methods data and direct feedback from participants, the six-session coaching intervention used in this study will be assessed for its efficacy in increasing flow. This research may serve as an important starting point for future discussions on how to encourage flow among music students.

Flow in Music Performance

In music research, flow is viewed as a “positive experiential state [that] occurs when the performer is totally connected to the performance, in a situation where personal skills equal required challenges” (Jackson and Marsh, 1996, p. 17). This balance of challenge and skill is supported by recent research using electroencephalogram (EEG) data of jazz musicians during improvisation. These findings suggest that musicians experiencing flow are less cognitively engaged in their performance, and that flow is therefore a state of “optimized domain-specific processing” achieved through extensive practice (Rosen et al., 2024, p.1).

Most literature on improving music performance focuses on the alleviation of MPA. Interventions to reduce MPA may also increase flow, as flow shows a positive correlation with “perceptions of competence, self-rated performance, [and] autotelic personality”, while negatively correlating with levels of stress and anxiety (Norsworthy et al., 2023, p. 309). Simply put, individuals who experience less performance anxiety experience more flow, and ACT may have an indirect

positive effect on flow through reducing MPA (Mahony et al., 2022; Roman and Juncos et al., 2021).

There may be more to flow, however, than a reduction in MPA symptoms. In keeping with Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) rejection of reductive, pathology-centered approaches to psychotherapy, many newer papers on flow align with Seligman's (2011) suggestion that "optimal functioning cannot be attained solely by the absence of pathology" and "methods for facilitating positive functioning need to be actively cultivated" (Cohen and Bodner, 2019) as well. Through increasing psychological flexibility, ACT may cultivate optimal functioning beyond the reduction of negative symptoms (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz and Baran, 2023). In addition, the proposed oppositional relationship between MPA and flow (Cohen and Bodner, 2021) has also been shown to work in the reverse direction. In a study of over three hundred orchestral musicians, those who experienced more flow seemed to cope better with performance anxiety symptoms (Spahn et al., 2021) when they arose. Therefore, it may also be possible to reduce MPA by increasing flow.

Though ACT has been studied extensively as a psychotherapeutic model and rarely as a framework for creative or performance coaching, its focus on developing a workable relationship with experience (Berkout, 2022) speaks to the contextual nature of creativity itself. As Csikszentmihalyi (1988) asserts, "we cannot study creativity by isolating individuals and their works from the social and historical milieu... because what we call creative is never the result of individual action alone" (pp. 325-326). As all creative actions occur in the context of the social, cultural, and physical environment (Sawyer, 2022), efforts to encourage greater creativity would likewise benefit from taking a sociocultural perspective, acknowledging the whole person as "co-developing" with their context over time (Glaveanu, 2020, p. 350).

Flow experience, too, is contextual. One study found significant differences in levels of flow and MPA depending on performance variables such as role, instrument, and type of performance, as well as background variables like age, gender, and culture (Cohen and Bodner, 2021), and suggested that interventions to encourage flow and remediate MPA should also take these contextual considerations into account. Of equal importance is the context in which the intervention itself is carried out, as social support, recognition, and a positive atmosphere are all correlated with increased flow (Philippe et al., 2022). In this study, I made every effort to create a positive and supportive coaching environment and developed the coaching intervention to

flexibly suit a variety of learning and communication styles. I sought to respect contextual and personal differences by including participants of diverse backgrounds working in a variety of genres and professional capacities, and by welcoming participant questions and feedback at any stage of the coaching process.

Flow in Creative Contexts

Flow is increasingly viewed as a flexible state that varies depending on both internal and external conditions. In a study about the impact of flow on creative performance in work settings, Stollberger and Debus (2020) introduce the concept of “flow variability” (p. 343), suggesting that some individuals experience peaks and valleys in their levels of available flow from day to day, while others can access flow on a more stable basis. The authors argue that low flow variability is “beneficial for all persons alike, irrespective of their actual flow level, because consistency enables steady work progress and serves to avoid work interruptions that would otherwise hamper creativity” (p. 346). While this may be true in a work setting where employees are expected to make creative contributions on a consistent basis day after day, flow variability may not have the same negative result for creative professionals in the arts. For musicians whose creative practice does not follow a strict daily schedule, the ability to experience high levels of flow on a more variable basis may be most beneficial.

During flow, individuals feel a connection to the context in which they are working, take an “exploratory attitude” toward their potential actions, and apply a consecutive series of skills that lead them to achieve their goals (Sanchez Vara et al., 2023, p. 2). According to general definitions, “perceived skill/challenge balance, clear goals, [and] clear, immediate feedback” are defined as pre-conditions of flow (Cohen and Bodner, 2021, p. 27). However, depending on the context, flow may have unique properties in certain creative pursuits, such as “unclear goals, uncertain feedback, the possibility of surprise, and rapid meaning-making” (Doyle, 2017). Due to these differences, it may prove difficult for artists to identify flow states based on general definitions, or to know whether the uncertainty or lack of clarity experienced during a creative task is indicative or counter-indicative of flow.

In one study, flow was shown to link aspects of curiosity to greater creativity. In this case curiosity, or “the desire to know”, was defined in three dimensions: “joyous exploration... knowledge-deprivation sensitivity, and stress tolerance” (Schutte and Malouff, 2020, p. 1). Simply put, curious individuals experienced more flow, and those who experienced more flow

made more creative contributions to the task. ACT may promote creativity by heightening these dimensions of curiosity, encouraging acceptance of novel outcomes and situations and a willingness to explore new knowledge and ideas. Tools to promote curiosity and exploration are valuable in the voice teaching context, as vocalists engage with creative thought and novel experiences in every part of their artistic process from song selection to performance interpretation. Following this study I intend to continually revise the coaching intervention toward this purpose.

Potential Applications in the Voice Studio

Along with fostering increased creativity, flow state experiences may also motivate commitment to creative practice. Perceived connection to an activity and “trust in one’s skills” are strong motives for continued participation (Jackson et al., 2023), even in extremely challenging fields. In turn, as mastery increases through practice, musicians engage less cognitive control, and experience greater creative flow (Rosen et al., 2024), which is more likely to arise when a musician is both totally committed to and fully enjoying the act of playing music (Philippe et al., 2022). In this way, creating opportunities for flow experiences in music education may begin a virtuous cycle that increases both mastery and enjoyment.

Developing an awareness of flow, and tools to increase flow opportunities, may benefit music teachers as well as their students. Although research into flow states in music mainly focuses on performance, one study emphasized the flow experiences of music teachers as an indicator of effective pedagogy and work satisfaction. Goal clarity and clear, immediate feedback were strongly associated with flow in music teaching, underscoring the importance of balancing thoughtful lesson planning with spontaneous student engagement (Kang, 2023).

Regardless of an individual’s level of professionalism or specific creative pursuit, flow is related to a feeling of connection to the body and the present moment, the ability to manage stress and maintain concentrated attention without distraction, and a sense of higher meaning (Philippe et al., 2022). According to the ACT model, the processes related to psychological flexibility mirror these characteristics, including mindful awareness, contact with the present moment, and commitment to valued action. Though research has yet to show a positive correlation between psychological flexibility and flow, “treatments designed to increase psychological flexibility... have the potential to significantly improve musicians’ performance success, by increasing their experiences of performance flow and commitment towards weekly practice” (Roman and Juncos

et al., 2021). Clarifying personal values and setting concrete action steps will be central elements in the coaching intervention, encouraging participants to commit to measurable practice and performance goals while remaining in alignment with their values and in mindful contact with the present.

The “ability to actualize peak experiences”, self-acceptance, mental flexibility in decision making, and a “high degree of personal reflection” are important components to living a full, satisfying life (Alexander, 2022). By increasing psychological flexibility and encouraging creative flow in music practice, ACT-based coaching interventions may positively impact other aspects of artists’ lives. The opportunity for lasting positive change inspired the following research methods, designed to explore potential links between psychological flexibility and flow experiences while evaluating a concrete tool to potentially increase both states.

METHODS

A Mixed Methods Multiple Case Study Design

Case study research necessitates a balance between maintaining a constant focus on the research question being investigated and addressing new questions and theories elicited through the ongoing data collection and analysis process (Hancock et al., 2021). In this study I delivered thirty hours of one-to-one coaching to five participants, resulting in a large amount of narrative data from session transcripts and ample opportunity for new questions and theories to arise. I thematically coded session transcripts on an ongoing basis, looking for connections between self-reported experiences of psychological flexibility and flow. Through the use of the Weekly Check-In Questionnaire, I incorporated quantitative methods to anchor the rich narrative data and help maintain focus on the research question: can Acceptance and Commitment Coaching increase experiences of creative flow among adult professional vocalists?

I designed this study to reflect the “bottom-up, inductive” nature of the ACT model (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 187), as well as the reflexive processes of music practice and performance. Taking a constructivist approach to the multiple case study model (Sneed et al., 2020), I centered the research question by using validated quantitative instruments (Norsworthy et al., 2023; Gloster et al., 2021) and used qualitative data derived from session transcripts to highlight the nuances of each unique coaching relationship (Liu et al., 2015). I analyzed narrative data with respect for the individual contexts in which thoughts and behaviors occurred (Hayes et al., 2013) to develop an in-depth understanding of the rich experiences that had taken place (Tsang, 2013). Findings

were presented through the lens of the pragmatist paradigm, focusing on the consequences of the research (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019) to inform practical applications in my work as a voice teacher and creative coach. The workflow for the entire project is visualized in the chart below for easy reference.

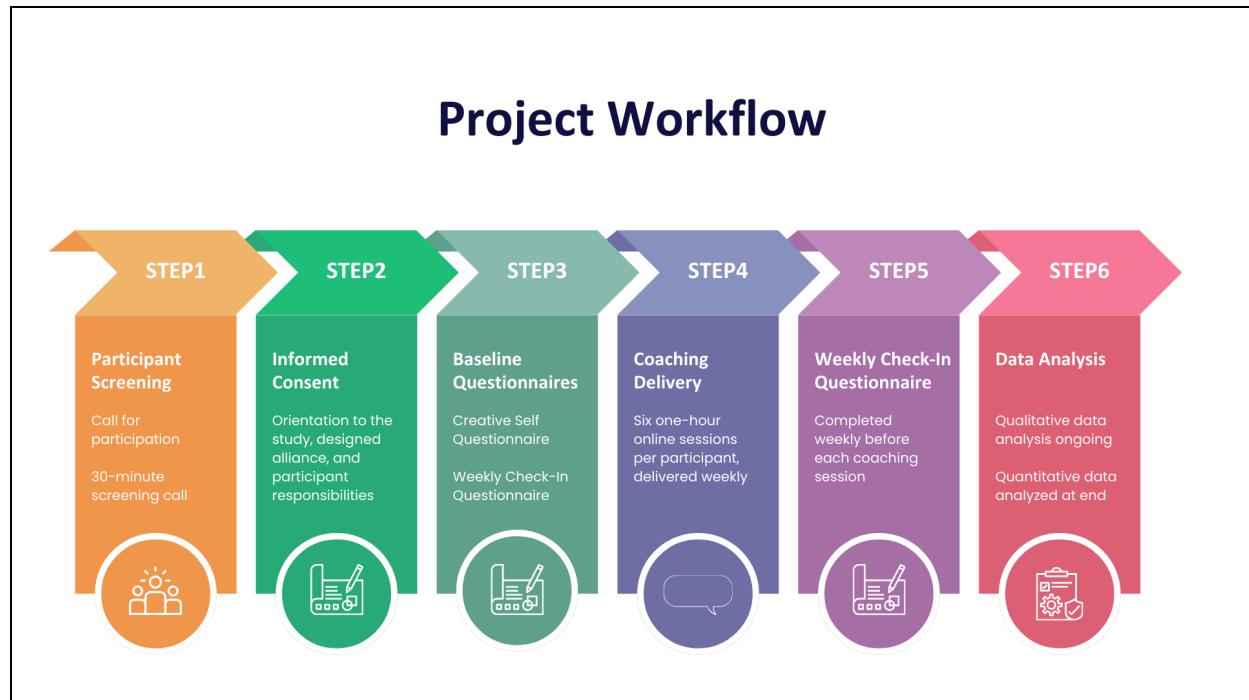


Figure 2: Project Workflow

Questionnaires

Quantitative data was collected using baseline and weekly check-in questionnaires, which were adapted from existing scales to measure changes in psychological flexibility and flow state experiences over time. Based on Karwowski's Short Scale of Creative Self (Zielinska et al., 2022), the Creative Self Questionnaire consists of eleven items designed to provide a baseline measure of creative personal identity, creative self-concept, and creative self-efficacy. Though this study focused on determining changes in psychological flexibility and flow experience over a progression of six weekly coaching sessions, I included this baseline measure of creative self as a link to my previous literature review on the potential of ACT coaching to improve creative self-efficacy (Osman, 2024). By including this measurement I intended to uncover additional points of discussion in the resulting data sets, including possible correlation between artists' beliefs in their creative faculties and their ability to make positive behavioral changes in their practice and performance lives.

Self-administered before each coaching session, the Weekly Check-In Questionnaire consisted of fifteen Likert scale items to measure participants' changing experiences of psychological flexibility and creative flow. The first six questions were adapted from the Psy-Flex, a scale measuring psychological flexibility over time (Gloster et al., 2021). This is a short, context-sensitive tool specifically designed for capturing change over repeated administrations (Gloster et al., 2021), rather than measuring psychological flexibility as a static trait.

The other nine questions were derived from the Psychological Flow Scale (PFS), which asks participants to reflect on flow-related experiences during a single task or event the preceding week (Norsworthy et al., 2023). The experiences characteristic of flow include mental states of absorption, focus, and attention, senses of control, fluidity, and effortlessness, and feelings of intrinsic reward and satisfaction (Doyle, 2017).

I presented these data sets in a series of line graphs, showing changes in psychological flexibility and flow state experiences both within each individual case and across cases (Sneed et al., 2020). Session transcripts were coded based on key markers of psychological flexibility and flow, to provide a narrative of participant experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) and enrich my understanding of the quantitative results (Robinson et al., 2011).

The Coaching Intervention

Coaching is a collaborative partnership created to meet the client's stated goals (Liu et al., 2015), and these goals may change or expand over the course of the coaching relationship. Given the dynamic nature of the coaching partnership and process, determining an effective framework of concepts and tools to be offered in the same order to all participants presented a challenge. I drew on a variety of textbooks and workbooks, as well as live and asynchronous educational experiences, to inform the structure and design of the coaching intervention. As coaching is not a licensed or regulated profession in the United States, I took care to select education from reputable, accredited sources.

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) is the largest member organization and accreditation body in the industry, and maintains a list of approved coaching courses and education providers (International Coaching Federation, 2024). Through this tool I found an eight-week synchronous course called "ACT for Coaches", which I registered for and completed.

I also completed a twenty-hour synchronous course on the fundamentals of Co-Active Coaching, to develop a stronger foundation in coaching core competencies as outlined by the ICF. Co-Active Coaching is an established model with a growing body of empirical research to support its efficacy, especially as a protocol for health behavior change (Pearson, 2011). In practice I used the Co-Active approach to develop relationships and establish constructive communication, which served as a foundation for the experiential tools of ACT.

I also learned from resources specific to ACT coaching. Based in the United Kingdom, Contextual Consulting is a continuing education provider specializing in live and prerecorded ACT courses. Though most of these courses are targeted at psychotherapists and mental health professionals, some of them are coaching-specific. In preparation for this study I completed a short online training by Dr. Joe Oliver entitled “Creative Hopelessness in ACT”, which focused on helping particularly resistant clients get unstuck from cyclical patterns of thinking and behavior. I found this course especially relevant to my work with artists, as I have observed a tendency for singers, including myself, to create elaborate excuses to talk themselves out of engaging with their practice.

Finally, I consulted with Dr. David Juncos, a psychologist and well-published ACT researcher with extensive experience using ACT in music performance coaching. We met via Zoom to review my draft coaching plan, and the exercises and activities I had chosen to offer.

Ethics

Transparency is paramount for coaches to maintain trusting client relationships and ensure ethical practice, as coaching is not licensed or regulated in the United States. I referred to the International Coaching Federation’s Code of Ethics (International Coaching Federation, 2024) to guide my conduct throughout this study, including the development of the informed consent form (Appendix A, p. 2), which included client responsibilities and agreements in addition to standard disclosures about the study. During screening calls I also communicated select background information and acknowledged my multiple roles as a singing teacher, coach, and researcher. It was important for potential participants to understand that, during the course of this study, I was operating outside of my usual context as a voice teacher who interfolds ACT coaching into singing lessons. I also provided information about my training as a coach, and invited questions about my qualifications and education.

Participant Selection

Participants were identified through email outreach to two community message boards, one with a national reach and one more locally focused. I also asked professional singers in my immediate circle for referrals, and reached out to participants from my previous research study who might qualify. Present and past students and performers whom I personally know were disqualified from participating, to minimize the ethical and practical challenges of taking on dual roles (Rowley, 2003). While conducting research within my work environment might lead to new insights and innovations, researching my small group of about twenty-five private students could disturb the dynamic of the teaching environment or make clear data collection difficult (Breen, 2007), especially since I already use some ACT tools in the voice studio.

Fourteen potential participants expressed interest in the study, all of whom proceeded to schedule and complete an initial thirty-minute screening call. The screening call was part semi-structured interview about each vocalist's current professional roles, and part orientation to the study and to coaching in general. All calls were completed in the span of one week. The script for this call is included in Appendix B, (p. 4). I aimed to confirm six participants for the duration of the six-week study period. Of the initial fourteen, five participants were disqualified because they were not currently working as vocalists in a professional capacity. Three others were placed on a waitlist because they were either working as semi-professional vocalists or in the process of changing performance jobs. The remaining six vocalists confirmed their commitment to the study by signing an online informed consent agreement (Appendix A, p. 2), and scheduling six weekly one-hour coaching sessions. During the study period, I sent email reminders twenty-four hours in advance of each session and reminded participants to fill out the Weekly Check-In Questionnaire if they hadn't already done so. One participant had to drop out after two sessions because of schedule conflicts that arose as she began a Broadway tour. Five participants completed the entire study and were included in the final sample.

Inductive Analysis of Qualitative Data

Analysis of qualitative data from coaching session transcripts was conducted via thematic content analysis (Burnard et al., 2008). Themes were derived from existing literature on the experiential characteristics and preconditions of flow and the six ACT processes used to promote psychological flexibility. These themes are outlined in the following chart.

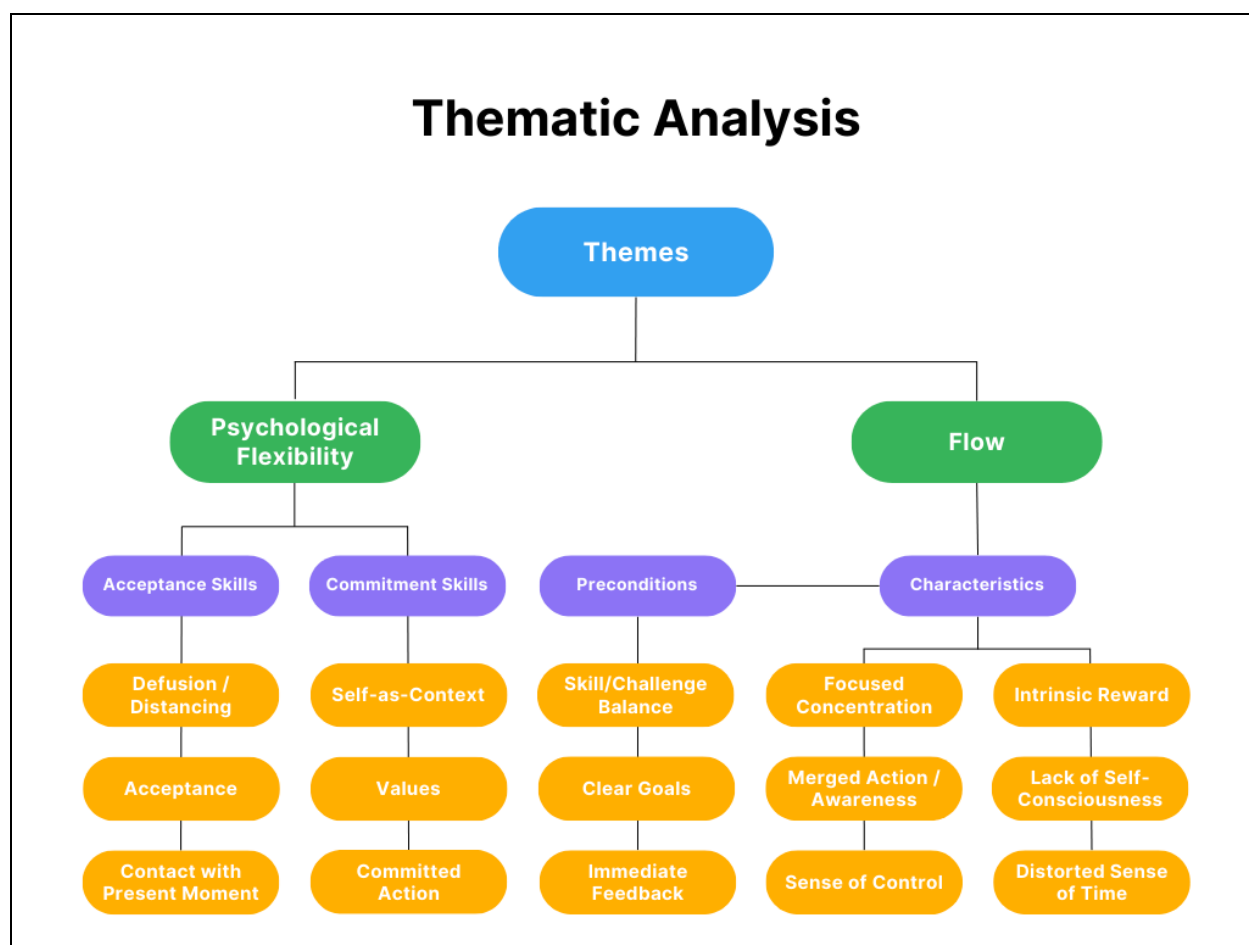


Figure 3: Thematic Analysis Chart

Quantitative data was downloaded into a single spreadsheet with a separate page for each participant. This system allowed me to quickly see changes in within-case data over time, and to easily search for across-case patterns (Sneed et al., 2020). Composed of the Psy-Flex and Psychological Flow Scale questionnaires, the Weekly Check-In Questionnaire included specific questions relevant to each ACT skill and element of flow experience, allowing quantitative data to be sorted and visualized both by participant and by theme. The consistency of terms across methods also enabled synthesis between quantitative and qualitative data.

Constructivism and Contextualism

Whether in a single or multiple format, case study research must be grounded in and focused through the lens of the researcher's epistemological beliefs, of which constructivism is the most common (Sneed et al., 2020). Rather than seeking to obtain quantifiable, objective knowledge, a constructivist orientation explores "the meaning people have constructed through their lived

experiences”, and does not attempt to remove observed phenomena from the contexts in which they occur (Sneed et al., 2020, p. 2).

Contextualization plays a role in case study analysis, as well. Tsang (2013) offers a typology to classify analytical methods based on whether the emphasis is on contextualization or on the advancement of new or existing theories. I approached analysis through the lens of “interpretive-sensemaking”, which is “more interested in seeking an in-depth understanding of human experience embedded in a rich, real-world context than contributing to the development of any abstract theory or concept” (Tsang, 2013, p. 198). This approach meshes with a constructivist epistemology.

In a constructivist approach, data collection and analysis can co-occur, allowing the study to develop flexibly and responsively (Sneed et al., 2020). Due to the short timeline and multi-week delivery structure of this study, the ability to transcribe, reflect upon, and complete initial coding throughout the data collection process was essential to proceeding in a timely fashion, as well as capturing the nuance of each coaching session while it was fresh in my memory.

Case study research can uncover remarkable complexity within a single case (Ebneyamini and Moghadam, 2018), and within-case thematic analysis is a powerful tool for the generation of “universal categories” that may apply to all cases (Sneed et al., 2020, p. 7). Throughout the analysis and coding process I maintained the transcripts in their entirety, rather than editing them down to key points and quotes. This was essential for the sake of clarity, as “behavior always happens in context” (Gloster et al., 2021, p. 14), and a comment taken out of context might as easily be construed as demonstrating psychological flexibility as psychological inflexibility (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz and Baran, 2023), for instance. This holistic view aligns with the psychological approach of “functional contextualism” in which ACT is grounded (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 181), where thought and action are always associated with the historic and situational context in which they occur.

Data Management and Security

Coaching sessions were automatically transcribed by the Zoom video call platform. After each session, I reviewed the transcript for accuracy and redacted all identifying information before saving the edited transcript to Google Drive. I also removed identifying information from participant worksheets. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and the code key linking

pseudonyms to real names was stored in a password protected physical hard drive rather than on cloud storage of any kind. Pseudonymized data is still considered personal data by the UK GDPR, and still falls within the scope of that regulation (General Data Protection Regulation, 2024). By ensuring the confidentiality of the sessions and resulting data, I hoped that participants would feel at ease to speak freely during coaching sessions.

FINDINGS

Introducing the Cases

Some background information is helpful in placing the participants themselves in context. The following table provides a brief summary of each participant's role as a professional vocalist, along with some of the main concerns and challenges they reported at the beginning of the coaching process.

INTRODUCING THE CASES		
participant	background	concerns and challenges
Shanna	Opera singer, sings in an opera chorus and as a hired soloist. Has recently completed an MA in counseling psychology. Building therapy practice while remaining involved in opera.	Describes herself as a ruminator and overthinker. Balancing creative practice with other forms of work. Managing disturbing thoughts brought on by chronic pain.
Giulia	Multidisciplinary artist, experimental vocalist and composer. Training in experimental theater and a variety of vocal styles. Often hires other musicians for creative collaborations.	Returning to performance following a period of grief. Preparing for two high-visibility shows in New York. Looking to clarify her values and improve communication skills.
Alice	Professional musical theater performer from Europe. Has trained and performed extensively from a young age. Newly launching her American career in New York.	Clarifying intrinsic motivations behind creative practice. Uninspired by rote, repetitive practice strategies. Describes her self-talk as generally negative.
Matthew	Music educator, singer/songwriter, and composer. Most often works as a hired vocalist or pianist. Engaged in a variety of professional and volunteer activities.	Balancing paid performance work and personal projects. Returning to songwriting, composition, and solo performance. Struggles with focus, procrastination, and overthinking.
Dana	Professional musical theater performer. Passionate about experimental, radical, and queer theater. Deeply invested in building community.	Clarifying values and taking aligned committed action. Engaging with creative practice between show contracts. Pushing the boundaries of their artistry.

Figure 4: Introducing the Cases

Though these performers have different backgrounds and challenges and perform in a variety of genres and professional capacities, the findings of this study expose many commonalities between their experiences. The section below describes the baseline data collected for each participant, with a discussion of the findings to follow.

Establishing Baseline

Self-efficacy is positively correlated with flow (Cohen and Bodner, 2019), and musicians with higher self-efficacy experience stronger flow states during performance (Spahn et al., 2021). As part of participant onboarding, a baseline measure of three markers of creative self was established using Karwowski's Short Scale of Creative Self, the entirety of which is included for reference below.

Short Scale of Creative Self

Maciej Karwowski (2011)

Below you will find several sentences used by people to describe themselves. Please decide to what extent each of these statements describes you. There are no good or wrong answers.

(1) I think I am a creative person

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(2) My creativity is important for who I am

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(3) I know I can efficiently solve even complicated problems;

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(4) I trust my creative abilities;

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(5) My imagination and ingenuity distinguishes me from my friends;

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(6) Many times I have proved that I can cope with difficult situations;

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(7) Being a creative person is important to me

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(8) I am sure I can deal with problems requiring creative thinking;

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(9) I am good at proposing original solutions to problems.

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(10) Creativity is an important part of myself

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

(11) Ingenuity is a characteristic that is important to me

Definitely not – somewhat not – neither yes or no – somewhat yes – definitely yes

Scoring:

Creative Self-efficacy: average items: 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9

Creative Personal Identity: average items: 1, 2, 7, 10, 11

Alternatively a Creative Self-concept scale may be scores averaging all 11 items

Figure 5: Short Scale of Creative Self

This scale is designed to measure three distinct but interrelated factors in an individual's sense of their relationship to creativity. The scale is scored according to these guidelines: an average of items 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9 for **Creative Self-Efficacy (CS-E)**, an average of items 1, 2, 7, 10, and 11 for **Creative Personal Identity (CPI)**, and an average of all eleven items for **Creative Self Concept (CSC)**. The overall reliability and internal consistency of this scale according to its Cronbach's alpha measurement is .80, with the subscale for Creative Personal Identity showing

a slightly higher score of .90 (Karwowski et al., 2019). Participant scores are represented in the graph below.

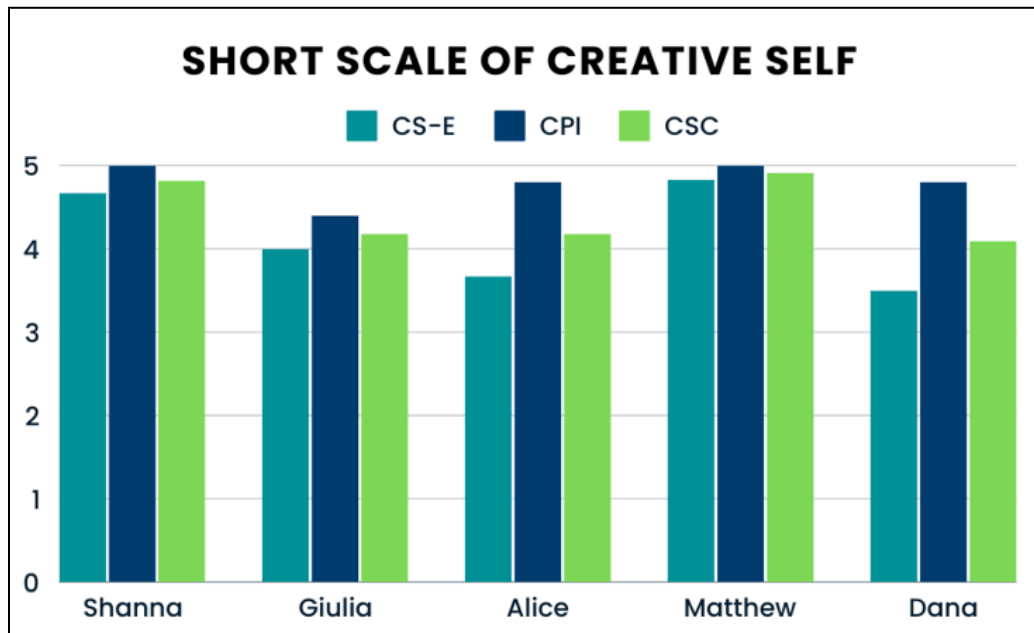


Figure 6: Short Scale of Creative Self Results

The green columns at the far right represent the average of all eleven questionnaire items. It is worth noting that each individuals' creative self concept did not correlate with the amount of time spent or percentage of income earned in creative pursuits. Dana scored lowest on this metric, although they are a professional musical theater performer. Giulia and Alice scored only slightly higher, with the former no longer making a significant amount of her income from music, and the latter earning the majority of her livelihood from performance. Shanna scored second-highest, and at the time of our coaching was not currently on contract and was only practicing and performing occasional gigs. Matthew scored highest, and during the course of the study was spending most of his time as a school music educator.

Of course, the point of including this scale as a baseline measurement was not to make assumptions about how professional musicians view themselves in the context of their careers. However, this discrepancy underlines the fact that performers' assessments of their creativity are not dependent on objective external conditions. This disparity between external conditions and internal responses will come up many times in the course of the study findings, and

highlights an important aspect of ACT coaching. Put simply, it is an individual's response to what happens, not the occurrence itself, that makes the most difference to their reality.

Creative Self-Efficacy, represented by the light blue bar on the far left, showed the most variability between participants. It may be assumed that individuals with higher self-efficacy may more readily make positive changes in their creative lives. Performers with lower scores, like Alice and Dana, may be more susceptible to creative self-doubt, and may experience more resistance to creative practice as a result. Those with higher scores, like Shanna and Matthew, may more readily adopt new skills and strategies to the benefit of their psychological flexibility and creative flow.

Considering responses to individual questionnaire items provides a more nuanced picture. Statements with the highest average score related to identifying as a creative person, the importance of creative identity, and the ability to cope with difficult situations. Taken together, these factors may speak to values of personal identity and resilience. Lower scores were associated with participants' trust in their creative abilities and their confidence in efficiently solving complex problems. Participants were also less attached to ingenuity as an important personal characteristic. This is not surprising, as while workforce creativity often takes the form of ingenuity and proposing original solutions to everyday challenges, creative contributions in the arts are rarely created in answer to a specific problem.

The lowest average score was associated with a statement about ingenuity as a defining characteristic that set participants apart from their friends. This result speaks not only to the downplaying of ingenuity in general, but perhaps also to the importance of creative community and collaboration often mentioned by participants during coaching sessions.

The following sections present a review of the components of psychological flexibility and flow, using quotes from session transcripts as a framework for discussion and comparison between cases. Participants provide further reflections on their creative sense of self, including internal processes that may hamper their sense of self-efficacy.

Ongoing Quantitative Data Collection: the Weekly Check-In Questionnaire

Every week, immediately before each coaching session, participants were reminded to fill out the Weekly Check-In Questionnaire. This questionnaire is a combination of the Psy-Flex, a

scale designed to measure psychological flexibility as a set of changeable factors over time (Gloster et al., 2021) and the Psychological Flow Scale (PFS) which measures the extent of flow experienced during a single performance task or event the preceding week (Norsworthy et al., 2023). In the Psy-Flex section participants were instructed to consider their mental state over the course of the week, and in the PFS section participants were instructed to think of a single practice or performance experience and answer the questions with regards to that single event. Both questionnaires are reproduced below in their entirety, for easy reference.

Appendix Psy-Flex

The questions refer to your experiences in the **last seven days**.

1. Being present.
Even if I am somewhere else with my thoughts, I can focus on what's going on in important moments.

very often
(5)

often
(4)

from time to time
(3)

seldom
(2)

very seldom
(1)

2. Being open for experiences.
If need be, I can let unpleasant thoughts and experiences happen without having to get rid of them immediately.

very often
(5)

often
(4)

from time to time
(3)

seldom
(2)

very seldom
(1)

3. Leaving thoughts be.
I can look at hindering thoughts from a distance without letting them control me.

very often
(5)

often
(4)

from time to time
(3)

seldom
(2)

very seldom
(1)

4. Steady self.
Even if thoughts and experiences are confusing me I can notice something like a steady core inside of me.

very often
(5)

often
(4)

from time to time
(3)

seldom
(2)

very seldom
(1)

5. Awareness of one's own values.
I determine what's important for me and decide what I want to use my energy for.

very often
(5)

often
(4)

from time to time
(3)

seldom
(2)

very seldom
(1)

6. Being engaged.
I engage thoroughly in things that are important, useful, or meaningful to me.

very often
(5)

often
(4)

from time to time
(3)

seldom
(2)

very seldom
(1)

Figure 7: Psy-Flex Scale

		Strongly disagree	Neutral					Strongly agree
1	I was absorbed in the act/task	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	I was highly focused on the task/activity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	All my attention was on the task/activity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	I felt like I could easily control what I was doing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	My actions flowed effortlessly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	There was a sense of fluidity to my actions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	I found the experience rewarding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	The experience felt satisfying	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	I would like the feeling of that experience again	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Researcher notes:
 Items 1-9 assess the flow experience. Average the nine scores to obtain a global flow score. Items 1-3 assess the dimension 'absorption'. Items 4-6 assess the dimension 'effort-less control'. Items 7-9 assess the dimension 'intrinsic reward'. Where possible it is advised to examine dimensional scores in addition to the global flow score. Avg means scores (for both global and the three dimensions) to be used for reporting.

Figure 8: Psychological Flow Scale (PFS)

The Coaching Intervention

A challenge of conducting research on the efficacy of a coaching approach is striking a balance between delivering the model consistently and remaining flexible and responsive to participants' individual needs. The following table gives an overview of the coaching intervention design. An expanded outline and summary of each session is included in Appendix E (p. 19).

session	objectives	tools
1	Assessment, formulation, and values-based goal setting.	General check-in about recent practice and performances. Values clarification, using the values list for inspiration. Introducing the adapted bullseye , filling it out together.
2	Developing the vision, continuing to clarify values and goals.	Working through and refining the adapted bullseye together. Introducing the choice point , concept of towards / away moves. Identifying experiential avoidance strategies from list.
3	Practicing mindful awareness, defusion, and acceptance.	Review the choice point , identifying towards and away moves. Revisit and clarify experiential avoidance strategies that occurred. Defusion / acceptance exercises, including "I notice..."
4	Refining goals and committing to valued action.	Review defusion questions and metaphors , how they were used. Targeted review of all concepts and exercises so far. Introducing committed action worksheet , filling it out together.
5	Developing resilience on the path to committed action.	Check-in about committed actions taken and tools used this week. Discussion of successful tools and skills, adjusting for coming week. Resetting committed action worksheet and prep for final session.
6	Connecting newly developed skills with successful action.	Check-in about committed actions taken and tools used this week. Making clear, explicit links between new skills and committed action. Targeted review of all skills and strategies, building the vision.

Figure 9: Coaching Intervention Overview

Presentation of Qualitative Observational Findings by Theme

The following section explores participant experiences by presenting qualitative observational data by theme. Acceptance skills will first be explored in general, then the three individual acceptance skills of Defusion, Acceptance, and Contacting the Present Moment. The report then continues with commitment skills in general, then the three individual commitment skills of Self-as-Context, Values, and Committed Action. Thematically grouping qualitative data allows these findings to remain anchored in the language of the ACT approach.

Acceptance Skills

In ACT, the purpose of developing acceptance skills is to reduce experiential avoidance, or unnecessary struggle against unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and sensations (Hill and Oliver, 2019). Experiential avoidance is an umbrella term for all of the thoughts and actions a person may engage with in an effort to suppress, drown out, or ignore uncomfortable sensations. Along

with potentially contributing to anxiety and depression (Katajavuori et al., 2023), these efforts distract a person from engaging with thoughts and actions that are aligned with their values and supportive of their goals. ACT encourages the development of a flexible, curious relationship with internal experience through practicing three skills: defusion (or distancing oneself from troubling thoughts), acceptance, and contacting the present moment.

Study participants engaged in a wide variety of experiential avoidance strategies, including unhelpful thinking habits like ruminating, excessive worry, and fixating on the negative aspects of a situation (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz and Baran, 2023). In her first session, Shanna remarked: “I’m definitely a ruminator. My brain tends to grab onto things that aren’t working, or things that are bothering me”. Similarly, Giulia related a thought process that “feels like innate negativity bias, to scan for what’s wrong in the situation and fixate on it” (Giulia, 5). Dana also struggled with distracting thought patterns, describing entire arguments between a harshly critical inner voice and a second voice that tries to moderate it. “I wish it wasn’t this dialogue,” they said, “of the bitchy voice thinking something, and the other one being like, okay, calm down” (Dana, 3). These thought processes often precluded taking valued action, or any action at all. As Alice reflected in her second session, “I’m definitely an over-thinker. I’m six steps ahead before even doing anything”.

Many observed a tendency for these thoughts to “spiral” (Matthew, 3) or “spin and spin” (Shanna, 1), whereby the thoughts trigger painful internal experiences that then trigger more unpleasant thoughts. When asked to demonstrate these spirals in session, fairly innocuous thoughts like “I’m too tired to practice” (Shanna, Matthew, Alice) could quickly devolve into self-criticism, judgment, blame, shame, guilt, and feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. In ACT, this spiraling mental state is called cognitive fusion (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz and Baran, 2023). As “attempts to control or suppress thoughts and feelings can paradoxically increase the experience of those thoughts and feelings” (Clarke et al., 2020, p. 2), ACT instead focuses on accepting unpleasant internal experiences and establishing distance from them through a process called Defusion.

Engaging in experiential avoidance can limit access to the characteristics of flow. “Negative coping strategies such as... avoidance and denial” correlate with increased levels of problematic music performance anxiety (MPA) among professional and other advanced musicians (Spahn et al., 2021, p. 2-3), a state considered antithetical to flow (Cohen and

Bodner, 2019). It can be assumed that feelings of self-doubt and criticism would inhibit the focused concentration, lack of self-consciousness, and sense of intrinsic reward indicative of a flow state (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz and Baran, 2023).

As Alice pointed out in her second session, feeling out of touch with her intrinsic motivations can make her achievements, however significant, feel meaningless and hollow. She struggled to find joy in her practice, instead relying on a disciplined, pragmatic approach. Despite her obvious successes, she said “it feels like that approach makes it very easy to run out of gas”. Dana mentioned focusing on external validation, saying “there is an insecurity in my abilities that I'm trying to fill with affirmation from audiences, critics, whoever. That is the thing that is ultimately the big barrier, I think, between me being in these values” (Dana, 2). In ACT, “values have been conceptualized as guiding principles for living which provide direction for actions” (Barrett et al., 2019, p. 458), making values clarification an important early stage of this intervention.

It is worth noting that feelings of insecurity persisted for every participant, regardless of their level of musical skill or critical acclaim as professional vocalists, and that the singers' awareness of the irrational nature of these feelings did not diffuse them. “Rational me would never see myself as somebody that feels inferior, that feels inadequate”, said Matthew in his fourth session. Even for these trained, experienced professional musicians, the proliferation of uncomfortable internal experiences seemed to lead to a lack of focus, overwhelm, and eventually a feeling of shutting down. In her fifth session, Shanna described this process as “putting so much pressure on yourself, and then completely checking out and just going to a place of like, I can't deal. So my brain's gonna protect me and keep me from having to do this hard thing”. Giulia described cycles of worry and self-doubt that prevented her from making decisions, as she found herself hooked by thoughts like “what if I make the wrong decision and I regret it?” (Giulia, 5). For Matthew, thoughts around perfectionism interfered with his songwriting practice. “I get stuck on this isn't good enough,” he said. “This needs to be perfect. I'm going to hold this away until I can get it right. There are so many unfinished songs because of that kind of thinking” (2).

Worse, it seemed that remaining hooked by such thought patterns sometimes lead participants to negative conclusions or feelings of dread. Shanna reflected that following these thoughts “could get morbid. I think that's the problem with my ruminating. It just gets so grandiose and out of hand” (5). Alice described keeping busy in her creative career as a way to avoid larger

questions, saying “when we're not only getting the dopamine kicks, what does it actually mean? And isn't that what art should be exploring, instead of just like, when can I book the next gig?” (Alice, 5). Instead of avoiding the discomfort these larger questions may present, increasing acceptance and taking valued action may allow singers to create deeper meaning in their work. As one participant mused, instead of practicing for critical acclaim, perfection, or to book the next gig, perhaps true artistry and satisfaction lies in “practicing for surrender, for presence, for pleasure. And for awe, maybe, as well” (Dana, 3).

Often as a first step, ACT coaching uses a variety of exercises and metaphors to help individuals defuse, or distance themselves, from unpleasant thoughts and feelings (Juncos et al., 2017). One defusion activity is described in detail below, to give a sense of the experiential nature of ACT exercises. The remaining skills are then outlined through participant observations, exploring potential links to flow state experience.

Defusion

In ACT, the process of “unhooking” from thoughts is called “defusion”, as the goal is to identify thoughts and inner experiences as what they are, and no longer feel “fused” with them. I prefer to call this process “distancing”, as this term can be easier for some participants to understand. Indeed, during the defusion exercise described below, almost every participant used some form of the word “distance” in their reflections.

In the first step of this exercise, participants were asked to repeat an intrusive thought in their mind for one minute, in silence. The exact wording of the intrusive thought was determined by a preliminary client-led discussion, where the coach facilitated the refinement of a pervasive internal experience into a single, short sentence.

The process of noticing and labeling internal experiences is an ACT defusion exercise in and of itself. For some clients, simply labeling the thought had an impact on their relationship with it. Matthew commented that “I thought I would feel worse and worse and worse. The longer I kept repeating it, the more false it started to sound. Like an unnecessary worry” (3). For Shanna, however, repeating the thought caused a negative spiral that hindered her motivation. “It was a shutdown-inducing statement, like this kind of collapsing in. It didn't leave any room for creativity or movement. I could see how this would lead to not doing anything” (Shanna, 4).

In the second step, participants were asked to repeat the same thought, adding the words “I notice” to the beginning of the sentence. This small change allowed participants to experience how the language of their thoughts might hinder their ability to take action. As Alice noticed, the sentence in the second step “feels more neutral. The first one feels like such a statement, like the train has already left. Just putting that “I notice”, I kind of get this feeling, this option, like what can I do about it? What are my options today?” (Alice, 4).

In the third and final step, participants repeated the same thought prefaced with “I notice I’m having the thought that”. Alice reflected that this preface felt like “distancing myself from the statement even more. And I feel like now I can even start questioning, is this true?” (Alice, 4). Giulia experienced how thinking can exacerbate the feeling that spurred the thought to begin with, saying the third sentence “adds even more distance. It also implies that the thinking is a pattern. The thinking about being overwhelmed. It’s not just the overwhelm. The feeling about the feeling or the judgment about the feeling can just perpetuate it” (Giulia, 4). Shanna and Matthew experienced the fickle nature of thoughts, with Shanna describing “another layer of impermanence”, “removing yourself from it,” and being reminded that “it’s a thought. It’s fleeting” (Shanna, 4). Matthew similarly reflected that the third sentence felt “no longer like reality” and like only “one of a bunch of other thoughts” (Matthew, 3).

In addition to assuming a more objective view of uncomfortable thoughts, many participants experienced feelings of compassion, care, and concern toward themselves. “Almost immediately I felt this sense of care for myself”, Matthew said. “It coincided with me starting to sit up straighter and take deeper breaths. The longer I stayed with it, I felt more a sense of strength and empowerment, like I’m going to take care of myself” (Matthew, 3). Shanna felt this care as if she had “the ability to step outside of myself, almost like there were two of me, and one of me is like, it’s okay. So there’s a sense of compassion that came from being able to step outside” (Shanna, 4). In ACT, this stepping outside of one’s thoughts and feelings is called “self-as-context” or “the observing self”, which provides a “perspective on experience that is not synonymous with the content of that experience” (Howell and Passmore, 2019, p. 1996). This perspective is considered a key element in a person’s ability to take committed action.

For Dana, repeating the intrusive thought that they were faking it in performance induced a strong somatic response. “I got body chills a couple of times,” they said after the first step. In the second step, “the first thing that came through was compassion, and that compassion leading to

a concern like, I'm worried about you, what can I do?" They also experienced a new curiosity about the contents of the thought, wondering "why do you feel like you have to fake something? Can I help you feel safe enough to let down the armor?" (Dana, 3). This curious, compassionate inquiry signals a dramatic shift away from the fear and avoidance that can stifle the creative process.

Alice gave a poignant summary of the exercise as a whole, saying "The first one is like, this day is ruined because I don't have the energy. The second one is like, okay, today is gonna be hard. What can we do about it? And the third one is like right now it feels like this, but this might not determine the whole day" (Alice, 4). Her comments perfectly capture the transitory nature of internal experience that ACT defusion or distancing exercises seek to demonstrate. It is worth mentioning that this entire exercise, including the preliminary discussion and reflections between each step, takes no more than ten minutes.

In exit interviews, participants frequently cited the power of this simple exercise. In future iterations of this coaching approach I plan to offer this exercise in an earlier session, as it may serve as a helpful reference point to underscore how the language of thoughts can either encourage or deflate one's ability to take meaningful action.

Acceptance

In ACT, defusion and acceptance go hand in hand, as it can be easier to accept internal experiences when one is no longer hooked by or actively struggling against them. Still, certain internal experiences are especially difficult to separate oneself from.

In the twelve-week "ACT for Coaches" course, grief and chronic pain were underlined as critically important topics around which to develop acceptance, as the presence of either of these experiences tends to color the rest of a person's experience. For this reason it is difficult to develop acceptance around other internal experiences until the relationship to grief or chronic pain is addressed.

This was true for the two participants who found acceptance skills most difficult to practice. Shanna was living with chronic pain as the result of scoliosis, and Giulia was navigating her return to creative practice following the death of a family member. Given the gravity of these topics, it is important to acknowledge the practical differences between coaching and

psychotherapy, in that coaching is “results-oriented and aims to maximize capacity, not process feelings” (Aboujaoude, 2020, p. 974). In order to proceed ethically, it is essential that coaches outline the purpose and limitations of the coaching intervention at the outset. In this particular case, both Shanna and Giulia had extensive training in psychotherapy themselves, allowing frank conversations about the limitations of our coaching relationship. Still, I was prepared with resources and referrals to other practitioners should a situation outside of my scope of practice arise.

Shanna shared a recurring thought, “that’s just the way it is”, that impacts her motivation, saying “the idea is so powerful it’s making me emotional to think about it” (Shanna, 6). The language of this thought and its impact on Shanna underscore the difference between the passive, hopeless acceptance that can make a person feel stuck, and the skill of active, constructive acceptance that can feel liberating. In the final session, Shanna found that the visualization of a waterfall matched the intensity of the overwhelm she often feels in the face of her chronic condition. By “stepping away from it, I could feel it getting less and less. It was almost like tricking my brain, distancing myself from my own intensity” (Shanna, 6). Metaphor and visualization are widely used to make ACT exercises more experiential.

For Giulia, fostering a state of willingness helped her reframe her grief from a hindrance to be avoided to an experience that may help her take valued action. We used the simple idea that turning away from the discomfort of grief could mean turning away from the emotional capacity needed for creativity. “That coupling of I’m willing to let myself feel this to act in alignment,” she said, “It feels empowering, it creates a sense of agency. It’s often like, if I let myself fully feel this, it’s going to be too much. Or it’s just devastating to feel it. So this idea that you can be willing to feel it, and that you can actually use that to act in alignment, to me is like finding better ways to cope with it” (Giulia, 4).

Acceptance was also a key skill for participants not experiencing grief or chronic pain. By developing a willingness to have uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, participants reduced their experiential avoidance and took meaningful actions in alignment with their values. As Alice shared, “it helps somehow to see mistakes or challenges or difficulties as something interesting, like something to lean into, rather than pull away” (Alice, 2). Shanna saw acceptance as a pathway out of guilt and shame, saying “even discomfort is a message. Reframing that sensation, so that my mind doesn’t immediately go to “it’s my fault”, it’s more of an

acknowledgement of like, hello! You need something. Shifting away from the blamey guilt feelings around discomfort, I think, is a big one” (Shanna, 5). In this way, acceptance also seemed to evoke feelings of self-compassion.

Activities for building acceptance varied between participants. Dana responded positively to the simple metaphor of a radio playing in the other room, saying “I can’t necessarily turn the radio off. But can I get some distance from it, or allow it to be background noise and not something I’m super tuned into” (Dana, 6). The radio metaphor comes from a list of acceptance activities provided during the twelve-week ACT for Coaches course. For Alice, writing down an intrusive thought on a piece of paper and then trying to crush it into a tiny ball helped illustrate the distracted preoccupation that experiential avoidance can cause. When invited to simply hold the crumpled paper in her hand, she said “that’s definitely easier. I feel like it almost became a bit anxiety inducing, to actively be like, go away, go away, go away!” (Alice, 5). This crumpling paper exercise came from Joe Oliver’s short course on Creative Hopelessness in ACT available through Contextual Consulting. Later in the session Alice reflected that “you can’t escape the bad days. You are gonna have bad days. That discomfort is just part of life” (Alice, 5).

Along with dispelling feelings of helplessness and victimization, practicing acceptance helped participants struggle less to control their experience, increasing their psychological flexibility (Clarke et al., 2020). Giulia shared, “I keep coming back to this idea of surrender and softening and trust, and recognition that this isn’t about me controlling and strong arming. I have to maybe loosen the reins a little bit” (Giulia, 5). Letting go of control and gaining distance from intrusive thoughts may facilitate the relaxed alertness required for a creative flow state to emerge.

Contacting the Present Moment

When asked about their state of mind when they are performing at their creative best, participants had many reflections related to presence. “Responsive feels like a good word to me. That’s definitely when I’m on”, said Matthew in his first session, and later mentioned “really being awake and aware in the moment. That sense of aliveness goes hand in hand with being a dynamic performer” (Matthew, 2). Alice shared this sentiment, saying “I want to be more, what is it, submerged? Or present. That feeling of I can be fully there” (Alice, 1).

Participants reported various barriers to feeling fully present in practice and performance. For Giulia, “older material can lose its freshness. There are moments where I’ll notice myself

checking out, and the energy and the fun and the presence and the communication really get lost” (Giulia, 4). Alice also felt that repetitive practice sometimes dulled her ability to be present, especially when working with prerecorded exercises. “It feels like that kind of kills the curiosity,” she said. “It’s not authentically a matter of what’s going on today. It maybe numbs the practice in a way” (Alice, 2). For Dana, a lack of presence in performance caused more distraction and anxious thoughts to arise. They described “moments where I’m just like, you’re in your head. And now I’m anxious that I’m in my head, and now I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know what this even looks like from the outside, and I’m just going through the motions” (Dana, 3).

Participants related their own practices for contacting the present moment. Dana spoke of taking “deep, nourishing, grounding breaths. Always helps me feel more centered. And more connected to what’s real” (Dana, 6). For Shanna, “spending lots of time outside helps me feel grounded, alive, healthy, connected. Out of my head” (Shanna, 3). In addition to physical self-care, Matthew found it important to “check in with how I’m feeling emotionally. Has this stopped being fun? Have I crossed the line into just, you know, drudgery?” (Matthew, 5). Although participants unanimously agreed on the importance of presence, the experience of being fully present was not universally positive.

For some participants, being in touch with the present brought feelings of vulnerability. Dana reflected that vulnerability seemed “connected to a larger thing around ugliness, like, how am I looking? What is my face or my body doing? Sometimes I see a musician playing an instrument. And they’re just so in it, that’s so cool when I see it. I’m like, Wow! I wish I could be that present with something, but it’s also vulnerable” (Dana, 2). For Alice, feelings of vulnerability emerged even when she practiced alone and unobserved. “There’s this impulse of pulling back and getting quiet, like it feels scary to vocalize in those moments,” she said. “My voice can start to feel intimidatingly intimate. It does feel a bit scary, like, am I really in the mood to go this deep? It’s very intimate. And it feels very authentic. It’s so weird that there’s resistance to that. This clinging to keeping that distance” (Alice, 6).

Still, participants related that contact with the present moment can be a profound or even transcendent experience. Dana spoke of “wanting to feel like I’m using my talents to the best possible service, not necessarily just to entertain people. I want to show up with my voice just super present, surrendering to be a channel for something greater than I am” (Dana, 2). Matthew similarly reflected on “creative expression as devotion, as giving up my creative best to

something bigger, even just the universe. That's something that means a lot to me. Sometimes it just happens, sometimes I'm in one of those sort of flow moments. And I do really feel like I'm part of something bigger. (Matthew, 1). As Matthew mentions, a line may easily be drawn between contact with the present moment and the lack of self-consciousness characteristic of a flow state.

In ACT, the development of skills to manage one's relationship with internal experience affords the capacity to adjust behavior toward more favorable outcomes (Howell and Passmore, 2019). Although all six ACT skills are intertwined with one another, it is sometimes helpful to see the three acceptance skills (defusion, acceptance, and contact with the present moment) as leading to the three commitment skills. For instance, distancing oneself from intrusive thoughts and feelings (defusion) and allowing internal experiences to occur without needing to control them (acceptance) both contribute to the skill of self-as-context, or "being able to experience private events without being defined by them" (Berkout, 2022, p. 105).

In order to understand how the above skills may translate into actions in participants' creative lives, a brief summary of the three ACT Commitment skills is necessary.

Commitment Skills

Commitment skills may impact flow state opportunities by allowing individuals to set clear goals, a precondition of flow (Cohen and Bodner, 2019). A focus on goals aligned with one's values may also contribute to the characteristics of a flow experience, such as "complete absorption", "automatic execution", "satisfaction and positive self-confidence" (Spahn et al., 2021, p.). In addition, taking an observer perspective may allow for more objective self-assessment of practice and performance experiences (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz and Baran, 2023) among professional singers and music students alike.

Self-As-Context

Reviewing the baseline readings in the Short Scale of Creative Self (page 28 of this report), participants scored higher in Creative Personal Identity (the dark blue bar in the center) than any other measurement. As their instrument is part of their body, singers may feel more vulnerability as a result of identifying with their creative capacities (Lewis and Hendricks, 2022). Alice spoke of "basing my self-worth on what I do and how I perform in life" (Alice, 5), and also pointed out that, while she "very much identifies" as a singer, her practice was often "low on the

priority list when it comes to the day to day” (Alice, 2). The mismatch between Creative Personal Identity and Creative Self-Efficacy, or a person’s belief in their ability to take creative action (Capron Puzo and Audrin, 2021), is also clear on the baseline graph.

For some participants, questions of identity sometimes interfered with the ability to make decisions or take action in their creative lives. Dana spoke of procrastinating on important contract decisions for as long as possible, saying “I can’t get that clarity because I’m so busy stressing about what that decision means about who I am as a person” (Dana, 2). Matthew also remarked that fixating on problems “ends up taking me away from the creative stuff” (Matthew, 4).

As they worked to develop the skill of Self-as-Context through naming and defusing from internal experiences, participants found that “it does give a degree of separation. It gives you power. It allows you to step back and examine the thing” (Shanna, 5). Giulia shared a sense that “there’s so much more awareness and agency, rather than just feeling like a victim” (Giulia, 3). A sense of agency and empowerment is an important component in clarifying personal values and taking committed action, as discussed below.

Values

For some participants, it was hard to spontaneously name values, and easier to reverse engineer them, considering satisfying past experiences and identifying values that may have been present. Giulia summarized a possible shape for this inquiry, saying “when does it feel good? When does it not feel good? What is healthy and realistic?” (Giulia, 1). For Alice, it was important to first clarify the difference between personal values and cultural morals, saying “I don’t know if it’s a cultural thing. I can’t speak for the rest of Europe, but I don’t feel like we talk very much about values. It’s like, be a decent person, and you know, behave” (Alice, 2).

Through a variety of exercises, participants gradually became more comfortable delineating their own values from those possibly passed down from mentors, teachers, and peers. As Giulia put it, working with values helped her “get clarity on what [creative practice] adds to my life” (Giulia, 6). Shanna had a rich experience with ongoing inquiry into her internal state, saying “I really like the practice of reminding myself, what’s the desired feeling? What’s the state of existence that I’m going for?” (Shanna, 5). Tracking her internal state helped Shanna find language for her values.

Values clarification can have significant impacts on the creative product, as well. Alice realized that considering her own creative desires would influence her choice of content in her original musical, saying “it’s easy for me to want to jump to, I need to find something that resonates with other people. But it’s true, I can’t bypass me” (Alice, 6). Matthew, who was also writing a musical during the study, noticed feelings of vulnerability emerging as a result of contacting his deeply held values. As he poignantly remarked, “I just heard myself say, would anybody care? Would it matter to anybody? And it’s like, am I anybody?” He was visibly moved by his own remarks, and commented, “yeah, now there’s some actual feeling coming up” (Matthew, 2).

Committed Action

For most participants, committed action was something of a missing link, a way of moving through creative life in a completely different way than they had been expected to in the past. When asked about the drivers of their creative practice, discipline, hustle, and avoiding humiliation were common themes. Alice said that “hard work is like a safe haven, how I’ve always done it”, but also “maybe that’s the feeling of banging my head against the wall. This has worked in the past, why is it not working anymore?” (Alice, 1). Matthew recognized that “there’s a short sightedness that comes from that older way of being, just hustling. Just keep going. I think there’s a conceptual framework or set of beliefs that might be keeping me stuck in an old paradigm” (Matthew, 2). Shanna, too, realized that “it’s never good to move from that place of fear. That’s gonna keep you from making a fool of yourself, but then there’s anxiety fueling your practice” (Shanna, 2). Giulia didn’t always feel she had a choice in her creative actions. “There’s a mismatch happening,” she said. “It takes a lot of energy to stay in things that aren’t aligned, but are part of my survival right now” (Giulia, 3). It is easy to imagine how complex internal struggles like these would subtract from each person’s available creative capacity.

The main purpose of increasing psychological flexibility is to reduce unnecessary struggle and access the ability to move toward values instead of away from discomfort (Chelkowska-Zacharewicz and Baran, 2023). Identifying patterns of experiential avoidance is an important first step in developing the willingness and ability to make positive change (Howell and Passmore, 2019). Over the course of this study, participants experienced changes in all of the six ACT skills, as outlined in the quantitative results below.

Quantitative Findings

The following graphs visualize data from the Weekly Check-In Questionnaire, which is a combination of the Psy-Flex and Psychological Flow Scale (PFS). Results from the Psy-Flex portion of the questionnaire are themed by the six ACT skills, and results from the PFS portion are themed based on three general characteristics of flow experience. Then, results from each component of the questionnaire are sorted by participant. Visualizing this data in a variety of ways allows the exposure of patterns both within and between cases.

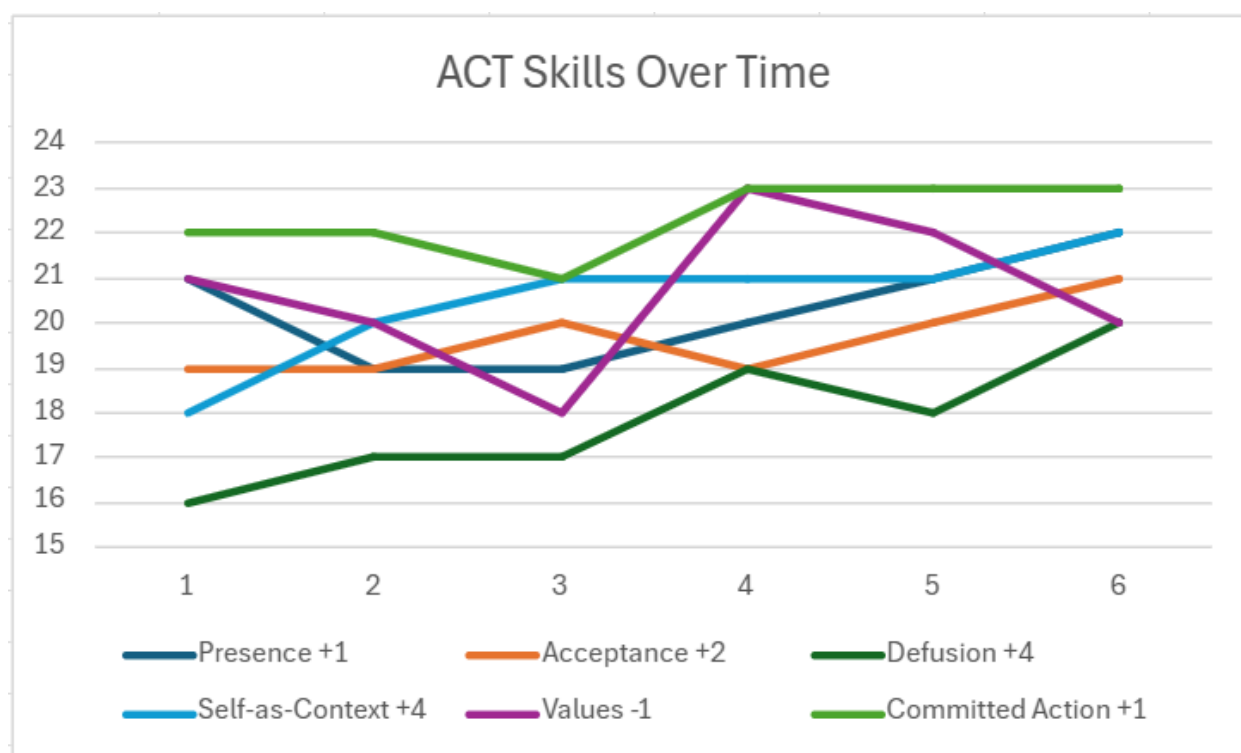


Figure 10: Act Skills Over Time

The Psy-Flex includes one question for each of the six ACT skills, to determine the extent to which each skill was present for the participant the preceding week. The above graph was created by totaling the score for each question each week, allowing data to be sorted by individual ACT skill.

Between the first and sixth administration of the questionnaire, Presence and Committed Action both went up one point, Acceptance went up two points, and Defusion and Self-as-Context went up four points. Values was the only skill that decreased overall, going down one point in total. Defusion was the lowest scoring skill overall, and Committed Action remained at the top of the

chart throughout the study period. Further research is needed to explore the possible educational, cultural, or personal reasons for this low Defusion score among professional vocalists.

The dramatic weekly shifts and lower overall score of Values is an interesting result. Participants may have initially assumed that they had a strong sense of their values, but perhaps their early confidence did not hold up to the intensive scrutiny of later weeks. This is especially interesting given the relative steadiness of the Committed Action score. In other words, participants were confident that they were taking values-based action even when they seemed unsure of their individual values. Several participants related a cultural, educational, and industry focus on external markers of success, and it is very possible that participants were taking action in alignment with the values of family, peers, teachers, industry professionals, and larger cultural influences, instead of their own.

Although Defusion remained at the bottom of the graph overall, it is interesting that this skill, along with Self-as-Context, made the greatest gains in total score. These skills are deeply interconnected, as an individual's ability to distance themselves from their thoughts and feelings is a prerequisite step in developing an objective point of view of their internal experience. These results indicate an opportunity for ACT coaching to elicit positive change in psychological flexibility overall, with especially significant change possible with regards to Defusion and Self-as-Context.

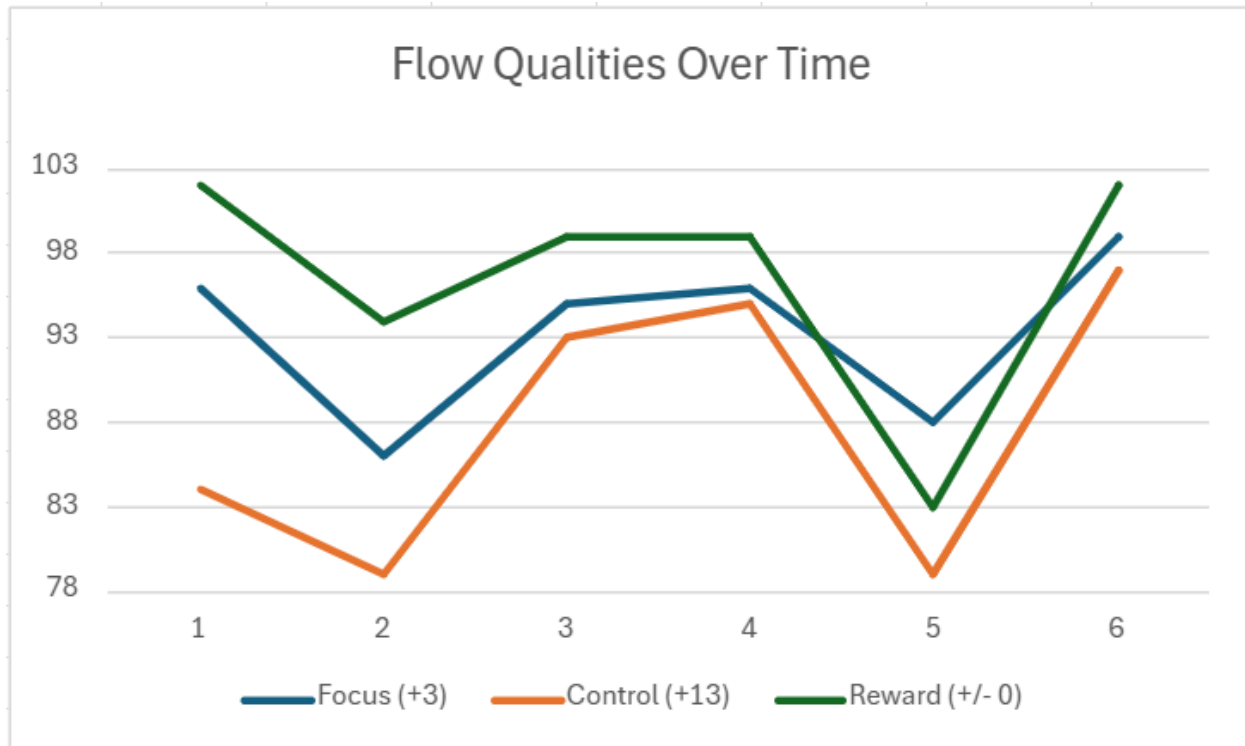


Figure 11: Flow Qualities Over Time

The nine-item Psychological Flow Scale includes three questions for each of three general qualities of flow experience: steady, attentive **focus**, a sense of **control**, and feelings of intrinsic **reward** and satisfaction. The above graph was created by totaling scores for all participants across the three categories of questions.

The quality of Control saw the greatest overall score increase, going up thirteen points between the first and sixth administration of the questionnaire, though this quality remained at the bottom of the chart throughout the study period. Like Defusion in the previous chart, this result suggests that the elements of experience in which participants were least confident held the most potential for improvement.

Similar to Committed Action in the previous graph, Reward made no total gains or losses, but mostly maintained the highest overall score. This result may indicate that participants placed a higher value on deriving satisfaction from creative activities and so were more likely to report a high level of intrinsic reward. This data may also signify that these particular vocalists, all of whom were practicing independently at the time of the study, tended to engage in creative activities that felt rewarding. It would be interesting to gather additional data from performers

working in more prescriptive or institutional creative settings, to see whether the level of reward would differ with the amount of free choice associated with creative tasks.

Finally, Focus saw a modest overall increase of three points, and remained somewhat more steady over the duration of the study period. It may be argued that focus is more of a fixed trait, or at least that it has more personal, constitutional components than the other two qualities. By contrast, Control and Reward may be seen as more situationally dependent. Still, the slight improvement in Focus over time may indicate the positive impacts of ACT. Taken with the steady increase in Defusion scores, ACT may have helped participants to reduce distraction, resistance, and worry, by helping them “unhook” from unpleasant internal experience.

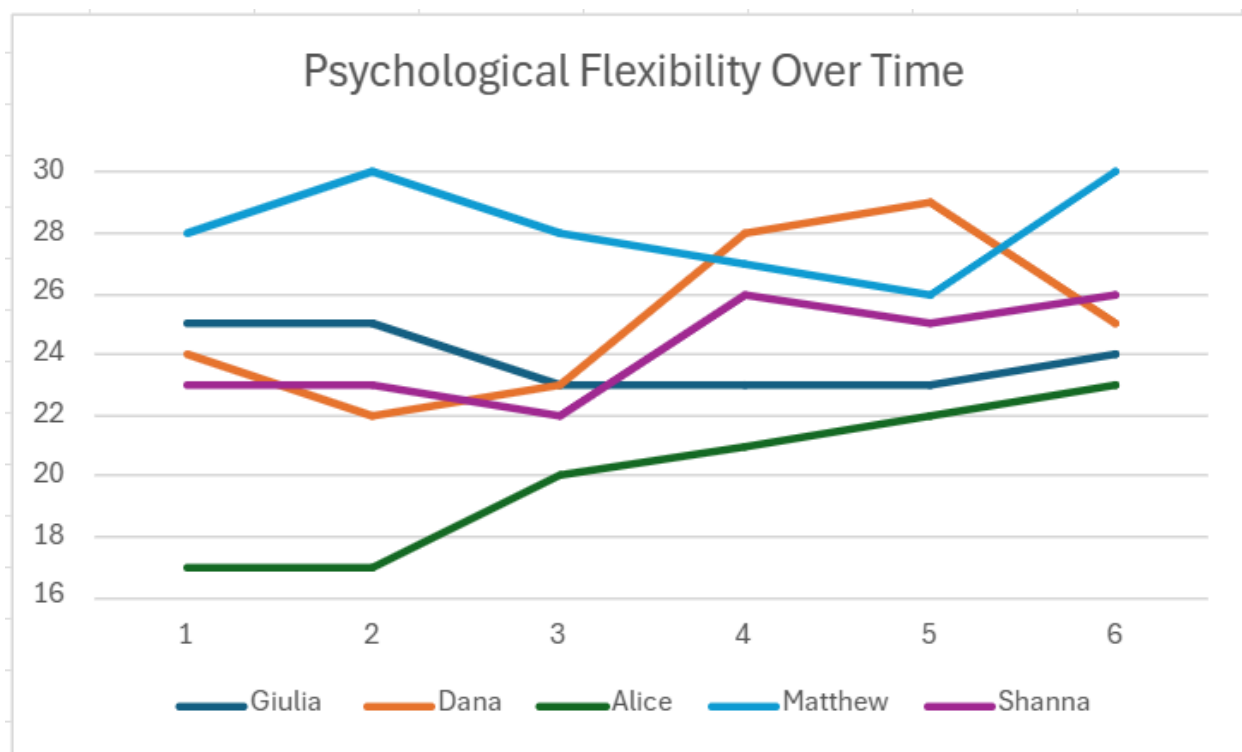


Figure 12: Psychological Flexibility Over Time

The above chart shows the results of the Psy-Flex portion of the weekly check-in questionnaire, sorted by participant. Of the five participants, Alice reported consistently lower levels of psychological flexibility, but also made significant, steady progress, increasing her score by six points with no pitfalls between the first and final session. In keeping with the previous overall results, it may be argued that people who are more aware of their capacity to improve are more

likely to do so.

Dana (+1), Matthew (+2), and Shanna (+3) all made upward gains, although not as steadily as Alice. all experienced peaks and valleys over time, although not in the same order. In fact, Dana and Matthew experienced fairly opposite contours in their experiences over time. Giulia (-1) was the only participant to report a slightly lower score in the final session.

As the duration of this study was only six weeks, it is important to remember how exaggerated these fluctuations may appear, in contrast to how subtle the same results would likely seem as part of a longer-term study.

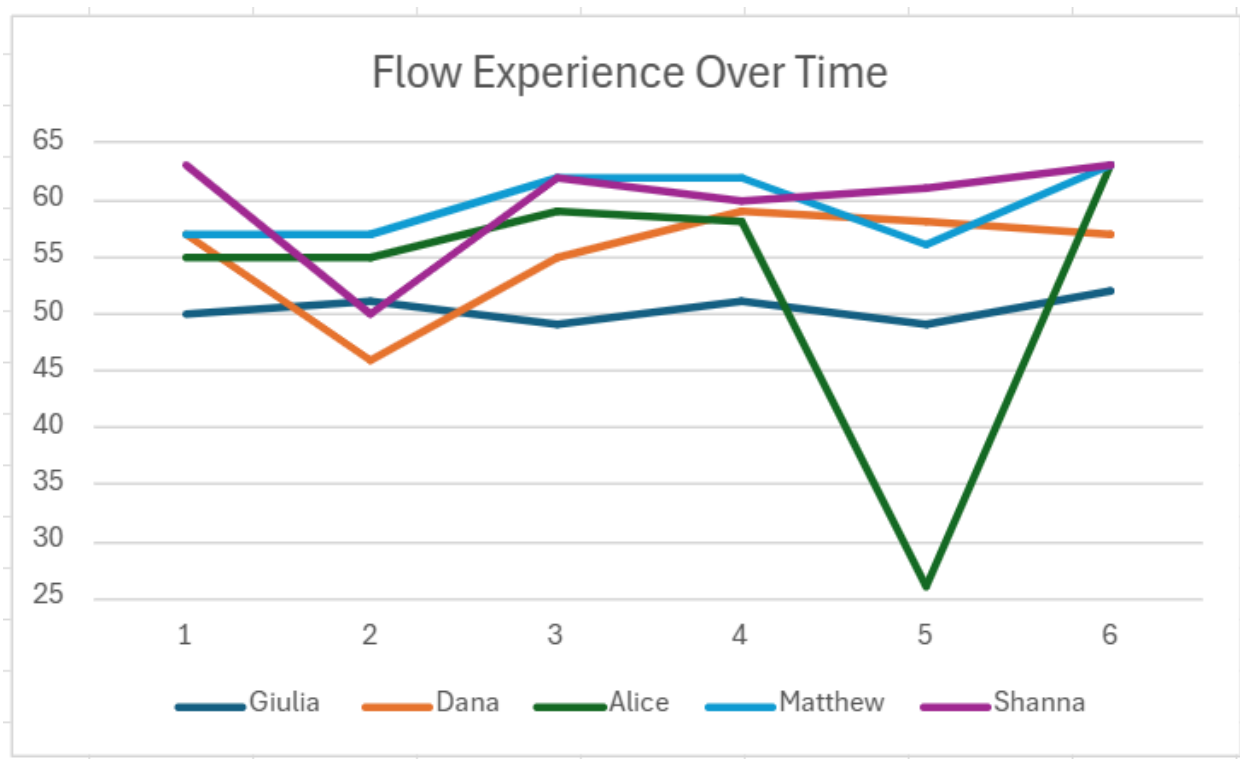


Figure 13: Flow Experience Over Time

The graph above illustrates the Psychological Flow Scale portion of the weekly check-in questionnaire, with results sorted by participant. An initial glance at these results brings the concept of flow variability (Stollberger and Debus, 2020) immediately to mind. The stark contrast between Giulia's lower but more steady flow state experience from week to week, and Dana and Shanna's higher but more tumultuous scores, may support the assertion that some individuals have more consistent access to flow than others.

Were it not for a dramatic decrease in flow between weeks four and five, Alice might also have exhibited a steady flow experience similar to Giulia's. Given the short duration of this study, discrete life events like illnesses, personal emergencies, and sudden responsibilities outside of one's creative work have the potential to create a drastic shift such as Alice's.

Between the first and final questionnaire responses, both Shanna and Dana ended the study with the same score as their baseline. Giulia's flow score increased by two points, and Matthew's increased by six. Despite her difficult week, Alice's flow score increased the most overall, going up eight points by the final session.

Perhaps more interestingly, Dana and Shanna experienced a dramatic decline in flow following their initial coaching sessions, while the other three participants reported about the same amount of flow between the first and second week. One possible explanation is that for some people, confronting and talking about challenges in their creative life may hinder their access to creative flow. If this is so, the negative impact seems to be temporary, with both Dana and Shanna reporting a strong increase in flow the following week.

Although more research is needed to determine clinical or statistical significance of these findings, all participants responded favorably to the ACT coaching experience. Select feedback collected during coaching sessions and exit interviews appears in the section below, as well as a summary of each participants' self-reported accomplishments over the duration of the study period.

Individual Findings

As ACT coaching places a high value on finding workable solutions for the individual person and context, I find it appropriate to close this report by celebrating the progress and accomplishments of the individual participants. The following short summaries also contain key feedback collected during exit interviews, suggestions which will be considered in future iterations of this coaching design.

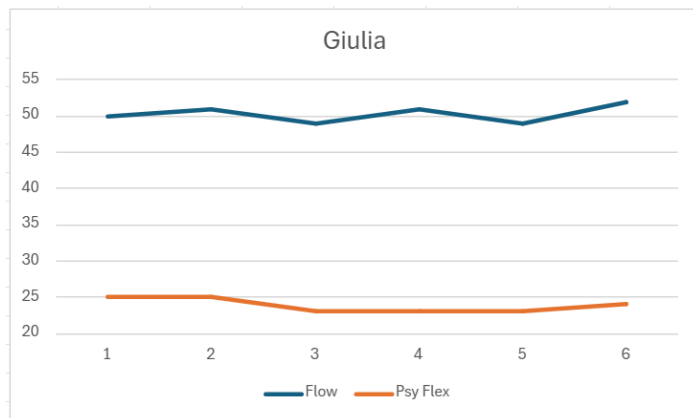


Figure 14: Giulia Results

Giulia

As previously mentioned, Giulia was navigating a return to performance following a death in her family. Over the six week study period she prepared for and performed two fairly high-visibility shows in New York. Rather than falling into a “vortex of stress and worry” (5) during this busy time, Giulia wanted to use these performances to explore her values of authenticity, vulnerability, and connection with the audience. In her fifth session, she related an experience in one of her final rehearsals where “I was able to become much more present and fluid in my body, and it really informed the music. Out of that came the goal of fluidity and presence, being aware of my body”. As an improviser and experimental vocalist, Giulia was able to locate additional values through her experiences with flow, which informed further explorations in later coaching sessions.

Though she is an accomplished and critically acclaimed performer with an advanced degree in performance, Giulia said that this coaching experience was “maybe one of the first opportunities I've had to talk about and explore, or even to gain more of a sense of agency or empowerment around things that I felt stuck with”. Overall, she found it helpful to have a fellow artist in the role of coach, saying “the container and the material that you shared allowed me to share very honest places of stuckness for me, and I didn't feel judged”. When asked how the coaching process could be improved, she said that for her, as a “highly sensitive person... often less is more. Going deeper, with fewer concepts” would have helped her integrate the material more fully.

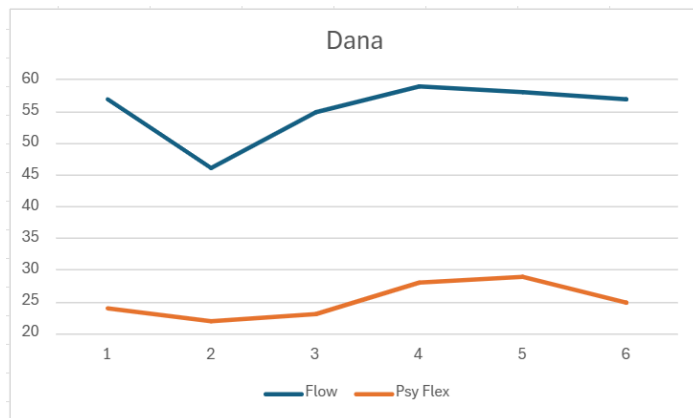


Figure 15: Dana Results

Dana

When asked in the exit interview to share a standout moment of the coaching process, Dana mentioned the simple “I notice” defusion exercise outlined earlier. They said “those sorts of active exercises for me are always really useful. Because it’s somewhat of a somatic exercise, giving me time to sit with those things in my body, and to really feel”. They engaged with this practice the following week at a theater festival, and remarked that “I was having that experience of, I’m noticing this, or I’m noticing that. I feel like I was able to be more present. When I was watching something that was really resonant, the joy I felt in my body felt very full. That felt like a new opening for me. I’m not getting so caught up in my head about critique. I could notice things and let them go, so that I could continue to be present, and then things that were very exciting, I felt at times just overwhelmed with pleasure, joy, emotion, just sharing this experience with the actors and the story, and that was really beautiful and delightful”.

This movement toward mindful presence aligned with Dana’s goals of releasing self-criticism and procrastination through engaging with values and creative desires. At the end of the study period, Dana expressed excitement in preparing for their next leading role, saying “what a role to practice and integrate the embodiment, the spiritual presence, the focus on self and scene partner and sharing with the audience. To be able to practice removing the internal critic and judgment. And I feel like, wow, what a great opportunity. A perfect role to be integrating a lot of this work that we’ve done, and to be moving more in the direction of the values I’m trying to embody while in performance”.

When asked how the coaching process could be improved, Dana expressed wanting to spend more time experientially unpacking avoidance strategies, so that they might more easily identify them as they come up in practice.

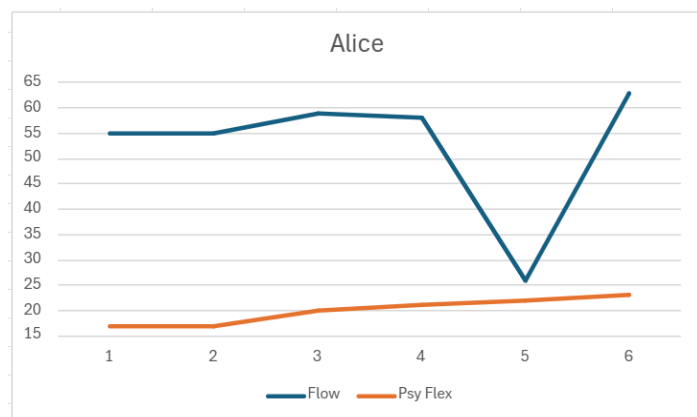


Figure 16: Alice Results

Alice

Despite extensive training from a young age, landing leading roles soon after her undergraduate training, and numerous accolades in her home country, Alice often related a lack of connection to her core values surrounding performance. Through coaching, she defined values that ignited new excitement and curiosity in her creative practice.

Alice began her exit interview saying she felt “focused and hopeful”, and that her first experience with coaching was “super valuable and inspiring”. Having grown up in a discipline where goals and markers of success are largely determined by external means, she remarked that she would have benefited from clarifying her personal values “way, way earlier” in her training. “This approach should be implemented in undergrad programs”, she said. “I think a lot of people probably never get this, and then they get mad and frustrated and tired and run down by the business”.

She also described how easy it is as a creative person to “strongly identify with your professional self, and I feel like the lines can sometimes get blurry. If that's out of balance or not grounded into something that is actually sustainable, it's gonna affect a larger part of your life”. Although we worked solely on concerns related to her creative practice, Alice noticed a

tendency for her new skills to “spill over into personal life” by helping her “anchor to values” and maintain a more sustainable, objective perspective.

Alice remarked that the coaching process could be improved by simply extending it, saying “six sessions feel like they’re over so quickly”.

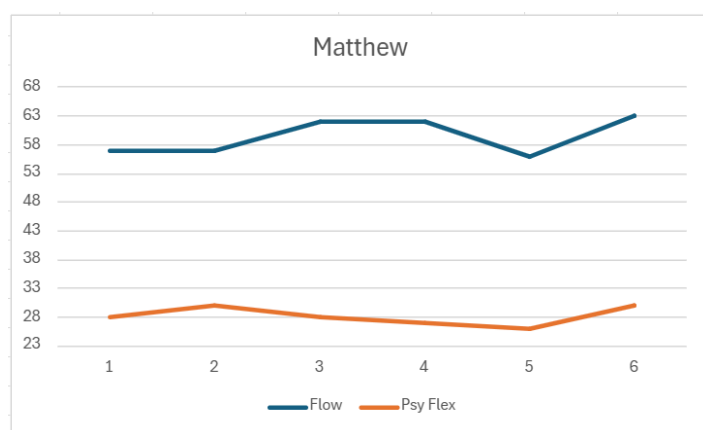


Figure 17: Matthew Results

Matthew

While he found all of the coaching activities useful, Matthew said that “the most revealing exercise was the bullseye. Identifying the values in those four quadrants, and then measuring where I am, in alignment or further out, that was really useful to me”. The presentation of concepts and exercises made sense to Matthew, “continuing along a progression of like, let’s identify one of those [values]. What’s a goal we could set for it? How can we break that down? How can we anticipate the barriers?” Identifying avoidance strategies, especially those related to procrastination and distraction, was an especially vital element in Matthew’s progress.

Unlike some of the other participants, Matthew began the coaching process with a clear sense of his values. In his second session he said “I have a mission as a human being. A big core of that is just to let people know that who you are is okay and that you belong”. He however often found his full schedule at odds with his songwriting and performance pursuits, and felt a disturbing amount of tension between his professional and volunteer obligations and his personal creative impulses. By identifying the thoughts and feelings behind procrastination, distraction, and overcommitment, Matthew gradually found workable solutions to “honor that need to spend more time with myself as the artist” (3). When he implemented new strategies to

manage distraction and feelings of burnout, Matthew said “it made me aware of how much energy and time there is available at night. When I’m not engaged in some sort of work, or scrolling, there is that space there. And I do have energy. I just sometimes forget, because I get habituated to keeping the hamster wheel going” (Matthew, 5).

As a full-time high school educator, Matthew was also interested in researching ACT-based resources for the social-emotional learning program at his school.

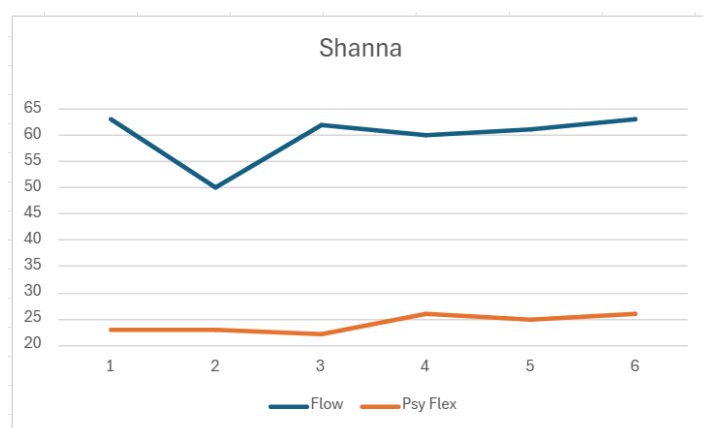


Figure 18: Shanna Results

Shanna

Like Matthew, Shanna found the sequencing of the coaching process helpful, saying “it’s kind of an unraveling. You have to do one thing before the other to get a full understanding”. This understanding allowed Shanna to develop her skills of Defusion and Self-as-Context, as she reflected that “the more you understand something, or can notice it, or label it, the more power it gives you to be an observer in the moment and not let it control you. I find that really powerful, especially for rumination”.

The most powerful moment for Shanna was in her final session, when she chose the image of the waterfall to represent intense, overwhelming feelings associated with her experience of chronic pain. “That image needed to match the intensity I was feeling for it to be useful”, she said. The simple image of “standing under the waterfall, standing outside of the waterfall” helped Shanna relate to her overwhelm with an increased sense of agency and control. As previously mentioned, Acceptance is a particularly critical skill for individuals facing grief or chronic pain, as these experiences inform how an individual views and conducts themselves in all parts of life.

Shanna gave helpful feedback in terms of improving the language used in the coaching process. She supported using the term Distancing instead of Defusion, and also offered that instead of using “unhooked” and “hooked” as directions on the choice point exercise, to use clearer, more literal language like “aligned with values” and “avoiding discomfort”. She also mentioned the importance of holding space for strong emotions, and that she appreciated feeling genuinely cared for throughout the study period.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these initial qualitative and quantitative findings, ACT shows preliminary promise as a coaching modality for increasing creative flow among professional vocalists, and invites further durational research with a larger sample size. Overall, these results were in agreement with Roman and Juncos et al. (2021), in that participants generally reported more creative flow when they experienced less performance anxiety and engaged in their music practice in a less perfectionistic way. Findings also aligned with Norsworthy et al. (2023) and the assertion that access to flow state experience is trainable, as opposed to being a fixed constitutional trait. In addition, participants reported that the coaching process fostered an environment of mutual understanding and respect, which can also contribute to increased flow state opportunity (Philippe et al., 2022). As this was a short study with a small sample size, further research is needed to determine clinical or statistical significance.

Given the large amount of data and the deeply interpersonal context of this process, it is helpful to reflect on the personal learning objectives defined in the project proposal.

Studying ACT through existing literature and books, live and asynchronous courses, and individual mentoring allowed me to build a strong foundation in ACT coaching approaches, and to become conversant in related psychological topics and terminology. Continuous exposure to ACT materials and an ongoing coaching practice also had a noticeable impact on my communication with voice students, and on my ability to strategically assist them with challenges related to practice and performance.

Engaging with session transcript coding on an ongoing basis allowed me to continuously reflect on the efficacy of my coaching tools and manner of engagement with clients, and the practice of distilling these transcripts into narratives gave me access to valuable perspectives I would not

otherwise have considered. Maintaining a culture of open communication with participants and inviting candor in the exit interview process helped me refine the language, delivery, and content of my future coaching approaches, leading to the development of a working six-week ACT coaching model I plan to continue offering.

My knowledge of and sensitivity surrounding flow state experience, along with its antecedents and barriers, benefitted both my teaching practice and personal creative pursuits. This process also afforded a unique opportunity to understand the properties of flow specific to creative arts settings suggested by Doyle (2017), through the experiences of five professional vocalists in different genres, contexts, and career stages. Although most of my students are not professional singers, the struggles professionals face as a result of psychological inflexibility seem consistent with those faced by semi-professional and avocational singing students, and I look forward to continuing a reflective exploration of ACT tools and their impacts in my daily teaching and coaching practice.

On a personal note, and perhaps most importantly, throughout this study period I acted mindfully in alignment with my own values of creating meaningful processes for my learning and offering the benefits of my education to fellow artists free of charge.

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