

Module Four
BMPF7013
Independent Study

To enable learners to independently study a complex subject that
has particular relevance to their workplace practice and their
personal development.

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Date: 31/05/2024
Module Word Count: 9077

Portfolio Word Count: 4231
Literature Review Word Count: 4846

An exploration of Flow Theory and its potential influence on the ways we approach actor training

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Portfolio

An exploration of Flow Theory and its potential influence on the ways we approach actor training

Introduction

American actor and teacher Sanford Meisner described acting as “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (Meisner & Longwell, 1987, p.15). But how does an actor develop their craft in order to first discover and then authentically recreate that truthfulness? There are many differing approaches to acting methodology and a plethora of methods and techniques that have developed throughout history, each practitioner leaving their mark on acting practice (Carnicke et al., 2016). As an actor and practitioner, I have experienced and continue to adopt many of these within my practice from Konstantin Stanislavsky and Uta Hagen, to Sanford Meisner. Many of these complement each other well, creating a toolkit consisting of techniques that have been tried, tested and valued for many decades. But as practitioners, how do we create a training environment and promote strategies to support the development of these differing options? How can we make the most out of the time we spend with students to instil these methods and techniques with the aim to support the development of their craft?

Inspired by my own personal mindfulness practice and my training as a mindfulness practitioner, my previous areas of study have considered the lessons we may learn from mindfulness to inform and accompany acting pedagogy. This includes discovering potential ideas that can be applied to working with performers in training, as well as techniques that may be beneficial if adopted and tailored to suit performer training. My overarching aim is to strive towards developing a holistic approach to my practice. This

leads me towards uncovering existing concepts that potentially align with a sense of mindfulness and support the promotion of a holistic approach towards actor training.

Personal Context

I currently work mostly within the field of acting; teaching and coaching students aged between eleven and eighteen years old. I would describe my work as alternating between both teaching and coaching, matching the needs and aims of each individual I am working with. This features a combination of working with students who are learning their craft and developing their skills, to those who are refining those skills and putting their craft into practice when preparing for exams, assessments and auditions for higher educational settings. For the purposes of this portfolio, I will refer to myself as a practitioner, in the hopes this covers both aspects of teaching and coaching acting, aiming to encompass both elements of my work.

The sessions I lead vary in format, ranging from weekly private one-to-one sessions to small groups. They are grounded in text-based work, where the material explored acts as an anchor to establish and refine interpretive and technical skill development, whilst also working towards examinations and assessments in line with the educational setting's requirements. There is a need to make efficient use of session time and the expectation, due to the nature of the work, that students will have to continue their practice at home; from memorising lines, to rehearsing material. My aim as a practitioner is to not only help students develop their interpretative and technical skills, but to also ensure they develop strategies to help them work independently as well as under my guidance and direction in sessions. I hope to encourage students to understand and optimise their independent working, cultivating skills to take them beyond our sessions and time together into future work. In order to achieve this, I wish to widen my understanding and implementation of a range of strategies in relation to actor training that can be adapted to suit the needs of a specific individual, setting and the requirements of a lesson as I work towards developing my pedagogical practice.

Inspiration

There is a growing inclusion of mindfulness-based practice within the field of singing pedagogy (Becker et al., 2022; Czajkowski & Greasley, 2015; Dion, 2016) and supporting literature to encourage this. However, the research into mindfulness-based practice within acting pedagogy remains limited (Jones, 2019). This, in part, may be down to the fact research into mindfulness itself is still evolving (Baer, 2003).

Mindfulness is a complex construct, with differing, but often still related references within literature, from a state of being, quality, practice and as a therapeutic intervention (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). It has numerous suggested definitions ranging from a state of consciousness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), a mode of awareness (Bishop et al, 2004) and the regulation of attention (Astin, 1997). All of which may contribute towards the difficulties faced in rigorously studying mindfulness. However, one of the most widely accepted and used definition comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn. He describes mindfulness as “awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4). The idea of present moment remains a key element in discussions surrounding mindfulness.

When choosing to consider mindfulness through the lens of acting pedagogy, perhaps narrowing down and addressing some specific qualities within mindfulness may not only be more manageable to study, but once discovered, potentially offer the prospect of more practical application.

If we perceive mindfulness as the ability to bring awareness towards your current experiences, moment to moment (Bishop et al., 2004), this invites us to better consider this as a concept known as present moment awareness. Put simply, present moment awareness is the awareness of now (Afari & Herbert, 2022). It is the flexible focus towards present moment experiences (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2012). This is in contrast to mindlessness, sometimes referred to as mind wandering. This occurs when attention shifts (Seli et al., 2014) and thoughts arise that are unrelated to the present moment (Bennike et al., 2017). Following an experience sampling study (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) by Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010), it is suggested that mind wandering takes up almost half of our waking lives. So how do we promote present moment awareness, encouraging and supporting our students to sustain this attention and awareness in lessons and as part of developing their craft?

An integral inspiration within my practice sits the work of renowned voice coach Patsy Rodenburg on presence. She is an ardent advocate of the appreciation, development and ongoing commitment towards craft and the refinement of skills. In previous areas of study, I have explored her work on presence and how it aligns with present moment awareness. Rodenburg describes presence as “the energy that comes from you and connects you to the outside world” (Rodenburg, 2009, p.11). She refers to it as an individual’s connection to the present moment, and from moment to moment (Rodenburg, 2009). Rodenburg values presence as a way for actors to truthfully and authentically bring characters and stories to life, as a way to hone their craft. As a practitioner I am able to appreciate those moments when students are present, engaged in the moment and focussed on the task at hand. An ongoing aim in my overall research is to build upon my understanding and experience of ideas and techniques such as Rodenburg’s presence work and discover other concepts that may support this. Ultimately as I develop and hone my pedagogical practice, I wish to build a strong collection of valuable strategies that can be applied to supporting a holistic approach to actor training.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi developed a theory surrounding what he describes as optimal experience. His Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) centres around the concept of “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.4). This concept would appear to align with present moment awareness and Rodenburg’s presence work, an appealing concept for practitioners to explore in order to then encourage for their students. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as “the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.6). With this in mind, does Flow Theory provide a strategy for attaining present moment awareness? Are there ways in which Flow Theory can become a useful and beneficial strategy within acting pedagogy? Therefore, perhaps we should aim to better understand Flow Theory and its characteristics in order to evaluate its potential influence on acting pedagogy.

Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of my research as a practitioner is to discover effective ways to engage students in their training, identifying potential strategies that will be beneficial towards fostering effective and efficient working practice. My focus is to develop a pedagogical framework in which to create a holistic approach to training. This particular project centres around Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory with the aim to explore its potential influence on the ways we approach actor training.

My objectives throughout this project include:

- To advance my understanding of Flow Theory, exploring the various perspectives on it.
- To ascertain and evaluate characteristics of Flow Theory that may be applicable to acting pedagogy.
- To identify gaps in research for further consideration and future study.

By the end of this project, I hope to have a better understanding of Flow Theory and whether it has the potential to influence my pedagogical practice in relation to actor training.

Study Plan

My studies need to be planned alongside working relatively full time, including a busy schedule for the Spring and Summer academic terms. In the school setting, where I am Head of Department, I have two full days of teaching, alongside another part-day dedicated to administrative work, followed by one day working in a performing arts college. Notable dates this term include a showcase on 11th March and three full days of examinations across the 18th, 19th and 20th March. I also have a handful of days scheduled for examining work within my role on the LAMDA examining panel.

Some weeks I am able to dedicate more hours and days to my studies than others. The below plan features the tasks I intend to complete alongside the preferred timescale for completion ahead of the draft submission deadline of the 31st May.

Task	Timescale
• Complete study plan for this project with tasks to complete including preferred timescale.	31 st January
• Read Csikszentmihalyi's book 'Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience' highlighting points of interest. Make use of the references and links to Csikszentmihalyi's research studies included.	31 st January
• Search for potentially relevant white literature, with inclusion criteria of peer-reviewed articles and journals. Key terms in searches to include 'Flow Theory', 'Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi', 'Flow Theory and pedagogy', 'Flow Theory and teaching', 'Flow Theory and coaching', 'Flow Theory and performance', 'Flow Theory and performance coaching', 'Flow Theory and acting'. Read introduction and abstract sections to determine possible relevance and usefulness. Save and label literature accordingly.	31 st January
• Complete portfolio component for this project including my research question, aims, objectives, rationale and context.	7 th February
• In depth reading and annotations of saved white literature, highlighting points of interest.	14 th February
• Follow up on any citations referenced and citation chaining in literature used so far. Read, save, label and highlight any material of interest and use.	28 th February

• Review notes made from a thematic literature review perspective. Note any patterns in discoveries, points of comparison and contrast.	13 th March
• Consider and evaluate discoveries made in line with my research question, aims and objectives.	27 th March
• Select key patterns/themes for further in-depth analysis based upon my research question and information collected.	10 th April
• Discuss and reflect on chosen topic, research question, points of interest and next steps in a tutorial meeting with tutor, Dr Michael Bonshor.	Wk/C 15 th April
• Plan thematic review, including headings, sub-headings etc. to ensure a detailed step by step process.	17 th April
• Begin writing thematic literature review based on notes and plan made.	20 th April
• Reflect on writing so far, linking back to initial question, aims, objectives and plan to ensure the writing stays on topic.	1 st May
• Complete draft of thematic literature review.	8 th May
• Complete reflective element of portfolio based upon thematic review and research completed.	10 th May
• Proofread portfolio and literature review.	12 th May
• Submit draft project for reading.	15 th May
• Adjust project based upon feedback.	27 th May
• Submit completed project assignment.	31 st May

Methodology

My research comes from a place of exploration. I wish to better understand Flow Theory in order to determine its potential to influence the way we approach actor training. Therefore, adopting a methodology that not only benefits practitioner research, but also allows for an open-minded approach will best suit my needs.

Ontologically, a subjectivist stance allows me the opportunity to consider that there may be multiple viewpoints towards Flow Theory and its application as a strategy within pedagogy. Subjectivism suggests that reality is perspectival and there may be multiple possible realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Cohen et al., 2007) and these may represent differing individuals' experiences. Whilst a subjectivist epistemology allows for the belief that reality can be both individual and perspectival (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Cohen et al., 2007), I would say that I lean towards a constructionist stance. Constructivism provides the belief that truth, and therefore the discoveries we make, can arise through interaction and engagement with realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Cohen et al., 2007). As this research is the exploration of Flow Theory, I want to be open to the prospect that as individuals, people have the potential to experience things in different ways. Reality may be different for each individual which is a key consideration in my strive towards developing a holistic, person-centred approach to my practice. Therefore, allowing for knowledge to emerge and be constructed from multiple viewpoints should allow for an authentic, truthful and wide-ranging understanding of Flow Theory as a whole.

As a paradigm, pragmatism offers a practicality in research design (Morgan, 2014) with the research question key to the process (Creswell, 2003). With this research I am keen to better understand Flow Theory and the various perspectives on it. Therefore, pragmatism's acknowledgment that knowledge is contextual and that truth may be subject to change (Denscombe, 2010) as it is not committed to the belief in one philosophy or reality (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006) is beneficial to my research question. I plan to evaluate the characteristics of Flow Theory and how they may be applicable to acting, so approaching current literature through the pragmatic lens of knowing knowledge is relative, so should not be deemed absolute (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009)

will be useful when addressing data not necessarily linked with the field of acting, but considering whether this holds the potential to remain true across fields of application.

In terms of research design, phenomenology is centred around the study of lived experiences (Lavery, 2003). However, hermeneutics also aims to understand human consciousness alongside lived experiences (Lavery, 2003). The hermeneutic circle refers to a sense of moving back and forth during the research process, the knowledge uncovered continues to inform the research undertaken. Meaning emerges from this two-way conversation between the material and the researcher (Koch, 1999). This also allows for a sense of reflection during the process (Kakkori, 2009) and an element of adaptability towards the discoveries made and how they continue to influence the research's development. The material considered then has the potential to contribute towards creating layers of understanding information in terms of one information source and its relevance to another (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). This should allow me to analyse sources, comparing and contrasting discoveries and its relevance in order to build a bigger overall picture of Flow Theory. One consideration however in adopting hermeneutics is the challenge of the hermeneutic circle. The importance of the research question will be key in balancing the depth of research and the potential for it to drift away from the initial aims and objectives during the discovery of further information that may detract from the research objectives.

My research begins with Csikszentmihalyi's book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) as this is the initial inspiration of this research area. Detailing Csikszentmihalyi's concept and including references to his own research and studies, this acts as an ideal starting point. The research will then comprise of searches utilising the online University of Wales Trinity Saint Davis library, as well as Google Scholar for white literature. Inclusion criteria will help limit results to peer-reviewed articles and journals, or dissertations and theses to ensure material and therefore the information and studies taken into consideration as part of this research is of a high standard, rigorously reviewed before publication. As Flow Theory and Csikszentmihalyi's work began around the 1970s, searches will be limited to include anything published from 1970 up to the present to ensure relevance. Key terms of my searches will include 'Flow Theory', 'Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi', 'Flow Theory and pedagogy', 'Flow Theory and teaching', 'Flow Theory and coaching', 'Flow

Theory and performance', 'Flow Theory and performance coaching', and 'Flow Theory and acting'. I will make use of citation chaining as a means to explore academic literature (Cribbin, 2011) to deepen the range of material and research undertaken. It will allow me to utilise the connections created between research articles and discover other potentially relevant papers and studies for consideration (Haddaway, Grainger & Gray, 2022). Backward chaining will allow me to view articles cited in the current article I am viewing, whereas forward chaining will allow me to view articles that cite the current article I am viewing (Cribbin, 2011). Together this creates a sense of tracking backwards and forwards through a network of citations (Haddaway, Grainger & Gray, 2022). This should help to find the initial source material and the continued development of concepts and ideas in further or more recent research.

My findings will then be compiled with a thematic literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke & Hayfield, 2022). One of my research objectives is to ascertain and evaluate characteristics of Flow Theory, so a thematic literature review will assist in the process of identifying and exploring patterns surrounding Flow Theory that may relate to key characteristics and perspectives on the concept. By adopting a pragmatic approach, I will be able to discover meaning that emerges from the understanding of people's experiences with Flow Theory, as well as be accepting of differing perspectives. The aim is to explore Flow Theory in order to analyse the data, looking for connections to provide inspiration and begin to determine whether Flow Theory has the potential to influence actor training. With this in mind I will also aim to highlight gaps in the current literature and any limitations in either the current literature surrounding Flow Theory, or its application to acting pedagogy.

Reflection

The aim of this project was to gain a better understanding of Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory in order to explore its potential influence on the ways we approach actor training. With this in mind, for the reflective aspect of the project, I appreciate the simplistic nature of Rolfe et al.'s (2001) reflective model. Its three-step process of 'what?', 'so what?' and 'now what?' (Rolfe et al., 2001) may help me to clearly and

distinctly evaluate my research project, the discoveries made, then indicate possible future next steps.

Utilising Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006) with a pragmatic paradigm (Morgan, 2014; Creswell, 2003) allowed me to approach my research with an open mind, meeting the research aim of exploring Flow Theory. I was able to notice reoccurring patterns and themes within the material discovered to paint a picture of the key characteristics of Flow Theory. This enabled me to meet my objectives of advancing my understanding of Flow Theory, as well as ascertaining characteristics that may be applicable to acting pedagogy.

Throughout this project I was able to enjoy reading a wide range of current literature on Flow Theory, making notes of the discoveries and key points of interest along the way. I explored forward and backward chain chasing (Cribbin, 2011; Haddaway, Grainger & Gray, 2022) to deeper understand data that emerged, appreciating the ongoing development and refinement of Flow Theory and its growing application. As Flow Theory is beginning to be applied across a range of different fields such as sport and music (Jackson, 1995; Philippe et al., 2022) it was beneficial to see its application, bridging the gap between knowledge and practice. However, in line with my research question, it was important to continually evaluate each article's relevance to my research aims and objectives when exploring literature and considering its impact and usefulness towards my research project. Considering Schon's reflection in action (1991) and taking inspiration from this was beneficial to my process. Throughout my reading and note taking, I gave myself the time to reflect upon each article, considering what I had learnt from it, how that relates to my research objectives, then taking into account its overall place within the rest of my research. From this I was able to evaluate an article's influence and impact on my research, as well as retain focus on my research aim.

So, what did this uncover? An emerging theme discovered in the current body of literature was the consideration towards the characteristics of individuals experiencing flow state (Csikszentmihaly, 1975, 1990) and the key conditions (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) necessary to facilitate the potential for individuals to

experience flow state. As practitioners, we have the potential to promote the conditions of flow state within lessons, by providing a mindful awareness of the challenge-skill balance and ensuring we offer support in creating clear goals and immediate feedback during lessons (Schaffer & Fang, 2022). As the data, although still limited in its range, depth and often sample size, suggests, these conditions can assist in initiating an individual's potential to experience flow state. It's important to remember there is no guarantee that students will engage with flow state (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) and that any experiences are still subjective to each individual's own perceptions (Rosas, Padilla-Zea & Burgos, 2023). Despite these limitations, the data reviewed does infer that perceived experiences of flow state can increase an individual's engagement and involvement in the present moment (Shernoff et al., 2003; Tardy & Snyder, 2004; Smith, 2009; Steele & Fullagar, 2009).

Notably absent from the current literature is a comprehensive exploration of how Flow Theory can be utilised and applied by acting practitioners. This has already been identified by researchers including Polanco and Bonfiglio (2016), with the likes of Winner (2006) noting overall that far less studies are carried out in relation to acting compared to other performance art forms. Therefore, this provided much of the challenge faced in this research project. Finding literature specific to actor training was scarce, without side stepping into other realms such as music performance anxiety and sports psychology was a challenge. For the purposes of this review, I made the conscious decision to retain my focus on acknowledging the characteristics and conditions of Flow Theory in relation to student engagement. I believe this allowed me to evaluate the potential of Flow Theory within acting pedagogy through the viewpoint of promoting an enjoyable and engaging training environment within the present moment. Therefore, after analysis of existing research and the gaps uncovered, this highlights the need for further investigation into application of Flow Theory in relation to acting pedagogy. But overall, in response to my research question of exploring Flow Theory's potential influence on the ways we approach actor training, I am encouraged to believe there is merit in considering future, specific research in this area.

As some data has shown, actors have said that they can relate to and recognise flow state like experiences in their acting (Robb & Davies, 2015), further supporting its possibility. I have already adopted the use of mindfulness-based techniques in my

practice after previous study, training and consideration. Renowned mindfulness practitioner Kabat-Zinn believes that mindfulness acts as bridge connecting our minds and the present moment, allowing a person to remain aware of what is happening in each moment (2009). It has been said that mindfulness shares attributes that may support the facilitation of Flow Theory (Gold & Ciorciari, 2020). Therefore, this adds to the growing interest in the opportunity to investigate pedagogical strategies that promote a mindful awareness of the present moment and adoption of Flow Theory into aspects of pedagogical practice.

Reflecting upon my research I am encouraged by the discoveries made and growing interest and study of the impact of Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory. Moving forwards, I am keen to delve into the concept further and apply it towards acting pedagogy. There are, of course, limitations to my current research in the scale, and thus validity, of the current body of literature surrounding Flow Theory and actor training. Therefore, all considerations and evaluations made must be done so with an acknowledgment of their representations and validity. These issues highlighted may provide strong foundations on which to build and enhance future investigation. With this in mind, I refer back to my research question and aim to explore Flow Theory and its potential, rather than seeing the literature as definitive. I am keen to pursue this area of study further, appreciating the possibilities pragmatism and hermeneutic research design viewpoints offer in this field.

This research project has enabled me to explore Flow Theory and I am excited to continue understanding and appreciating the influence it may have on my practice. I have been able to evaluate what Flow Theory can offer practitioners and students, as well as consider how I may be able to contribute to its ongoing development and study in the field of acting pedagogy in the future.

Literature Review

An exploration of Flow Theory and its potential influence on the ways we approach actor training

Introduction

First emerging in the 1970's, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began developing a theory surrounding what he describes as optimal experience known as Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). This encompasses a state of flow which he ascribes to "the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.6). Recent years have seen an expansion in research surrounding Flow Theory, leading to a wealth of empirical articles on the concept emerging (Wolters & Brady, 2021). However, Flow Theory has still not been thoroughly explored within the field of acting (Polanco & Bonfiglio, 2016). But with its focus on encouraging individuals to be fully immersed within the present moment, should we be exploring the potential that Flow Theory may provide practitioners to help engage students in their training? Therefore, perhaps we should aim to better understand Flow Theory in relation to actor training, evaluating the potential influence it may have on acting pedagogy.

The aims of this paper are to explore Flow Theory, before evaluating various perspectives on characteristics that may be applicable to acting pedagogy. Key themes uncovered across the literature relate to the characteristics of Flow Theory and conditions of achieving flow state, alongside the emergence of studies aiming to understand these by identifying the presence of flow state within educational settings and subsequent possible impacts. After considering the current literature on Flow Theory and those with any links to actor training, I will also aim to identify gaps in research for further consideration and study should this review suggest potential.

Understanding Flow Theory

Flow Theory stems from Csikszentmihalyi's exploration of understanding the concept of optimal experience, centring around "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.4). Within flow state is the control of psychic energy, referring to concentration and focus on the task at hand, where there is no opportunity for thoughts to arise and detract from the present moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Polanco & Bonfiglio, 2016). However, it is worth acknowledging that flow state is subjective. Ultimately, it depends upon how an individual perceives their participation within a given moment in time and present activity (Rosas, Padilla-Zea & Burgos, 2023).

Csikszentmihalyi proposed nine characteristics of Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990). These include challenge-skill balance, clear goals, immediate feedback, merging of action and awareness, concentration on task, heightened sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, distortion of temporal perception and autotelic experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990; Wolters & Brady, 2021). Challenge-skill balance is the most extensively studied characteristic of Flow Theory (Tse, Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2020) and therefore substantially evolved. It is the balance between the challenge of an activity and the capability of the individual (Polanco & Bonfiglio, 2016). Clear goals, that are realistically achievable, inform individuals of what they need to do (Nakamura, Tse & Shankland, 2019) and immediate feedback provides individuals with the flexibility to adjust in relation to the task at hand (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). The merging of action and awareness refers to an individual's absorption in a task, in both their action and attention towards it (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Similar to this is concentration on task, where focus remains relevant to the present moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), which also links to a heightened sense of control due to involvement with the immediate environment and attention within each moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Loss of self-consciousness is also a characteristic of Flow Theory, as an individual's concentration on the present moment can lead to less self-awareness and thought on the self (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Being completely absorbed in an activity may contribute to individuals losing track of time, causing the distortion of temporal perception (Nakamura, Tse & Shankland, 2019). The autotelic experience refers to the experience being rewarding within itself, without the need for extrinsic rewards (Nakamura &

Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Over time the Flow Theory model has seen several refinements (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) and continuous development, much by Csikszentmihalyi himself alongside many colleagues.

This continued research and development has seen some characteristics further defined as conditions of flow state. The proposed conditions for entering a state of flow are the challenge-skill balance, clear goals and immediate feedback (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). They are considered interconnected conditions (Nakamura et al., 2019) but despite ongoing research, due to their overlapping nature and difficulty in separating the aspects for study, how they interact to facilitate flow is still considered an open question (Keller & Bless, 2008) to many researchers. Understanding how these conditions can impact an individual's ability to achieve flow state will be beneficial in a practitioner's ability to begin implementing these as strategies to potentially improve students' engagement and sense of presence.

Conditions for Flow State

As previously mentioned, an individual's perception of achieving flow state is subjective (Rosas, Padilla-Zea & Burgos, 2023). But as practitioners if we can understand what conditions lead to flow, then we may be able to help create a setting in which students could potentially experience flow conditions, therefore reach flow state (Schaffer & Fang, 2022). Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) suggested that "it is not possible to make flow happen at will ... attempting to do so will only make the state more elusive. However, removing obstacles and providing facilitating conditions will increase its occurrence" (p.138) which could be a beneficial pedagogical strategy for practitioners. A better understanding of the conditions that can influence an individual's possibility of achieving flow state may help practitioners be able to promote these conditions as beneficial strategies.

Much research into Flow Theory, and in particular challenge-skill balance, relies on utilising the Experience Fluctuation Model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This has been

further supported more recently by Bassi and Delle Fave (2016) and is often used in conjunction with the Experience Sampling Method (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) to highlight the potential growth in understanding the concept of Flow Theory in relation to the present moment. Commonly used scales are The Flow State Scale (Jackson & Marsh, 1996) and adapted from this, The Activity Flow State Scale (Payne et al., 2011). These involve asking participants questions on a likert scale detailing their perceptions of Flow Theory characteristics. As previously mentioned, experiences of flow state are subjective and data collected this way can only evaluate an individual's own perceptions of their experiences in relation to how they respond, identify with and relate to the statements reflecting flow state characteristics. Therefore, careful consideration towards this and the limitations it poses should always be acknowledged when evaluating data gathered. This is relevant to much of the qualitative data and use of scales therein to suggest perceived experiences of flow state uncovered in this review.

The challenge-skill balance has been described as a key condition within Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1999). Some have suggested it is the most important prerequisite to experiencing flow (Schiefele & Raabe, 2011), whilst others propose that flow could be better defined as the balance between skill and challenge (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008). Put simply, it refers to the balance between the challenge of an activity and the capability of the individual (Polanco & Bonfiglio, 2016). Several studies within the field of education support the requirement of the challenge-skill balance in an individual's perceived experiences of flow state. For example, in a longitudinal sample of five hundred and twenty-six US high school students completing a likert scale, Shernoff et al., (2003) found students identified with increased levels of engagement during activities where they felt the challenge of the task and their own skill levels were both high and in balance. This highlighted increased perceived levels of attention in the present moment, leading to an overall higher quality of experience, circling back to Csikszentmihalyi's reference of flow as the psychology of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Similarly, a study of English teachers working in a university in Turkey by Tardy and Snyder (2004) suggested that teachers were able to correlate moments where they felt students were intellectually challenged as peak moments within lessons. Alongside understanding the characteristics and conditions of Flow Theory, the teachers identified those moments as possible flow state experiences. Inkinen et al. (2014) completed a study of fifty-five university students to measure their relationship between challenges and skills within their education alongside the quality

of the experience. From this, four possible outcomes were identified to describe the challenge-skill balance. This includes an active and pleasant state from a high challenge and high skill balance, an active and unpleasant state from a high challenge and low skill balance, a passive and unpleasant state from a low challenge and low skill balance, then a passive and unpleasant state from a low challenge and high skill balance. This supports previous beliefs that the ideal balance has a positive effect on individuals' perceptions of concentration and involvement in tasks (Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) as well as a more positive experience when participating in balanced challenge-skill levels in activities (Keller & Bless 2008). Whilst these studies provide a helpful contribution towards understanding students' experiences of challenge-skill balance and perceived levels of engagement, they firstly rely upon individuals' perceived interpretations of flow state characteristics, then how the authenticity of that data is interpreted by researchers. An acknowledgement of this credibility must be made when reviewing the data.

Another key condition is the inclusion of well-defined, or clear goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Task orientation, an individual's direction of focus and effort on a task, may be positively related to enjoyment and achieving flow state (Jackson & Roberts, 1992; Keller & Bless, 2008; Van de Pol & Kavussanu, 2011). Duda et al. (1995) discovered that task-involved athletes experienced greater interest in tasks and were therefore more likely to be performing the task for its own sake, both of which can be recognised as characteristics of flow state. Clear goals help to inform individuals of what they need to do in the moment to achieve the task at hand (Nakamura, Tse & Shankland, 2019). In a longitudinal sample of five hundred and twenty-six high school students in the US, Shernoff et al. (2003) found students were able to identify the presence of flow state characteristics in activities where they felt they had received specific, task relevant instructions. Similarly, in an online survey of one hundred and thirty-seven college students Steele and Fullagar (2009) found that when instructions and expectations were clear and autonomous, students felt more engaged and involved in their activity. Smith (2009) would also appear to support this proposition in finding that providing specific, differentiated instructions that account for students' individual ability in an activity leads to students being more likely to experience flow state. These studies imply that practitioners providing clear goals may help to promote a student's ability to achieve flow state. Aside from Flow Theory, student goal orientation itself has been considered and recognised as significant to academic engagement (Martin & Jackson,

2008). Therefore, we can infer that clear goals are an integral condition within Flow Theory if we value engagement and involvement as a defining characteristic.

In order for individuals to achieve goals, they utilise feedback as a way to evaluate their performance (Kluger & Denisi, 1996). The third condition of flow state is the inclusion of clear and immediate feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 2019). Task relevant feedback allows individuals to understand how well they are doing in their activity and in relation to the progress or achievement they are making towards goals (Schaffer & Fang, 2022).

When a person in flow state receives clear, immediate feedback, they are able to respond to this appropriately (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Considering the potential for flow state within coaching, Wesson and Boniwell (2007) explored the application of flow theory to coaching psychology. The literature they reviewed was able to indicate Flow Theory as a useful coaching framework through its ability to help coaches and clients find focus and fulfilment during sessions. The combination of goal actioning and feedback within activities encouraged clients to remain on task and in the moment. The feedback loop considered by Schaffer and Fang (2022) aims to describe a process of continual adjustment in the moment. Adjustments may be made by an individual based on the immediate feedback they receive. This supports other views within teaching pedagogy inferring that when teachers and students co-create a pattern of interactions together, this positively impacts motivation and involvement for both (Turner, Christensen & Meyer, 2009). It has also been proposed that the nature and quality of interactions are fundamental in understanding student engagement (Pianta, Hamre & Allen, 2012), which hypothetically we could say may be achieved when a flow state is created between practitioners and students if they are both engaged in meaningful interactions within the feedback loop. This could be an interesting aspect for further study, to specifically focus on the quality of interactions and perceived reflection on progress and achievement, within a loop of goal setting and feedback interaction between practitioners and students. Steele and Fullagar (2009) assessed the correlation between perceived experiences of flow state and characteristics of this within academic work in a study of one-hundred and thirty-seven college students. From the students' responses, they inferred that ample feedback opportunities throughout activities, as well as what the students viewed as good quality feedback, helped facilitate students' overall engagement and experiences. This further supports Csikszentmihalyi's beliefs that feedback is necessary to allow individuals the ability to

adjust their performance within a task as needed in that moment (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005).

Current Considerations within Pedagogy

Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory continues to be consistently explored and encountered across a widening array of activities and settings (Jackson, 2016), with Quinn (2005) claiming it as a useful construct for people who love their work and play to explain their behaviour. I examined current literature in relation to teaching and coaching practices to better understand the potential of Flow Theory in student's engagement. Student engagement has been described by Shernoff (2010) as a simultaneous occurrence of concentration, interest and enjoyment in a study to determine the experiences of students in high school classrooms. This is compatible with beliefs by renowned educator Maria Montessori that concentration and absorption in activities are related to meaningful learning (Montessori, 1967). In an Experience Sampling Method study of teachers in Canada, Zhu (2001) found a significant correlation between how teachers observed potential flow states within their students and their evaluation of students' cognitive engagement at the time. This study took place involving thirteen teachers across five days, resulting in five-thousand and forty-seven observations to infer the relationship between flow state characteristics and student engagement. This is further supported by Tardy and Snyder (2004) and their observations surrounding potential flow states within their students, perceived levels of student engagement and their evaluation that those were the peak moments where learning took place. Whilst both studies show a positive correlation between flow state characteristics and student engagement, due to limited sample sizes of participants we have to consider this may not be fully representational of a wider population. However, based upon inferences made, future areas of research could include ways to examine and evaluate the suggested levels of knowledge retention in relation to learning that takes place during these key moments of potential flow state. Alongside wider scale sample sizes, this would help to further clarify the value of Flow Theory, therefore possibly identify and strengthen support for the promotion of flow state conditions in pedagogy.

Much of the literature surrounding Flow Theory in relation to performance is applied through the lens of another topic, largely sport and music, with Philippe et al. (2022) conducting research into elite college athletes and musicians and their flow state experiences during performance. Within sports psychology Flow Theory has been utilised to determine its possible impact on athletes' psychological skills in order to optimise their performance (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Norsworthy et al., 2017; Jackman et al., 2019). In the field of music, it has been considered alongside creativity as a way of improving and enhancing composition activities (Byrne et al., 2003; MacDonald et al., 2006). It has also been utilised in studies on music performance anxiety (Kirchner et al., 2008; Sinnamon et al., 2012; Fullagar et al., 2013; Wrigley & Emmerson, 2013; Cohen & Bodner, 2019; Moral-Bofill et al., 2022). However, in terms of this review, to expand into the field of music performance anxiety and other aspects of performance psychology would necessitate deeper exploration and understanding of those areas. Therefore, for the purposes of this review, I have made the conscious decision to retain focus on acknowledging the characteristics and conditions of Flow Theory in relation to student engagement. This will allow me to evaluate the potential of Flow Theory within acting pedagogy as a way to promote an enjoyable and engaging training environment within the present moment.

This decision has also allowed me to reflect on previous areas of study including present moment awareness and Patsy Rodenburg's work on presence (2009), considering how these relate to Flow Theory. A simplistic definition of present moment awareness is to describe it as the awareness of now (Afari & Herbert, 2022). It is a flexible focus towards present moment experiences (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2012). Similarly, Rodenburg's concept of presence is grounded in an individual's ability to be in the moment (Rodenburg, 2009). Rodenburg's extensive work as a voice and acting coach evolves around presence, which she describes as "the energy that comes from you and connects you to the outside world" (Rodenburg, 2009, p.11). She is an ardent advocate of the appreciation, development and ongoing commitment towards craft and the refinement of skills. Rodenburg values presence as a way for actors to truthfully and authentically bring characters and stories to life. She relates presence with energy, the connection an individual has with the present moment. To be present is to be in the moment (Rodenburg, 2009). This concept of presence seems to draw parallels with the work of Csikszentmihalyi and his belief that flow state is "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total engagement" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p.36).

Although there is limited research material on the impact of Rodenburg's work and a significant knowledge gap, it may provide valuable insights into implementing characteristics of Flow Theory if the two concepts were to be studied and their impacts evaluated.

Flow Theory and Acting Pedagogy

Interestingly, psychologists have performed fewer empirical studies on acting compared to other art forms (Winner, 2006). Unsurprisingly therefore, theoretical and empirical studies examining Flow Theory in relation to acting are scarce (Polanco & Bonfiglio, 2016). However, activities described as enriching, such as sport and arts, have been associated with heightened levels of challenge, enjoyment, motivation and initiative (Mahoney, Larson & Eccles, 2005). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) found that when asked to rank different activities in terms of identifying with flow, highly skilled individuals from activities such as rock climbing to music reported that activities involving designing or discovering something new were the most similar to their own previous experiences of flow. So, the lack of focus in this area specifically is interesting.

Amongst the limited studies between acting and Flow Theory sits a handful of literature drawing links between Csikszentmihalyi's theory and Stanislavsky's system.

Throughout his acting and directing career, Stanislavsky (1863-1938) developed what has since been described as a foundational system of thought used by much Western modern theatre practice (Silberschatz, 2013). Much of his theory towards performance practice is based upon his own experience (Benedetti, 2007). It is an inherently fluid system (Silberschatz, 2013), continually developed and refined not only by Stanislavsky himself during his lifetime, but also by those who are inspired by his system. This is not too dissimilar from Csikszentmihalyi's ongoing development of Flow Theory and his work with multiple colleagues to expand study in this area.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described an aspect of flow state where the mind and body are stretched to its limits to accomplish something difficult, but worthwhile. This draws

parallels with Stanislavsky's focus on the importance of the mind and body being trained together, known as psycho-physicality (Merlin, 2014). Practitioners utilising this belief aim to promote the relationship between mind and body (Jones, 2019), approaching training in a holistic way. An advantage of this is a sense of inner-outer coordination (Merlin, 2014).

Another similarity is the awareness of the present moment. Csikszentmihalyi refers to this as psychic energy. He believes that when an individual is in flow state, they are in control of their psychic energy, how he describes concentration, then everything they do adds to that consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Stanislavsky strived for a natural process, wanting performances to be believable, positively evoking a response from an audience (Benedetti, 2007). One way he thought this was achievable was for his performers to have an awareness of inner circumstances they experienced internally, as well as an awareness of the present moment including external circumstances and wider surroundings (Stanislavsky, 2013). He stressed the importance of living in the moment when creating well-rounded, believable performances which he called psychological realism (Merlin, 2014). With this in mind, it has been suggested that Stanislavsky may have been striving towards what we may recognise as a state of flow in relation to Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory before it even existed (Polanco & Bonfiglio, 2016), Stanislavsky's system predating Flow Theory by decades (Silberschatz, 2013).

Facilitating Flow State in Acting Pedagogy

Jackson (1995) found that those partaking in training for performance activities, including athletes and musicians, felt they could control flow state experiences. Twenty-eight athletes across seven different sports were interviewed about the characteristics of flow state and their influence on experiences. Although small in sample size, responses indicated that participants believed they had some control over achieving what they perceived as flow state when considering the characteristics of it. Schellman (2009) carried out a similar study in which actors in the US were asked to consider their performances and utilising a likert scale featuring flow state characteristics, reflect upon

their present moment experiences relating to flow. Also considered was participants' reflection on whether those were believed to be positive performance experiences. Responses implied that participants had experienced flow state like moments across their performances, identifying these as more positive performances. But it was recognised that moments of flow state experiences were not consistently present. This study provides valuable insights into actor's perceptions of flow state experiences and the quality of those moments. The sample size, as also discussed by Schellman, is limited and may not be representative of a wider population. However, it is indicative of a potential correlation between flow state experiences and its possibility to influence acting, suggesting further exploration may be worthwhile.

One way to begin facilitating flow state conditions as a practitioner would be to consider the challenge-skill balance when working with students. Csikszentmihalyi's theory suggests that in order for an individual to experience flow state they need to feel that their skills are necessary to meet challenges presented, but are still being challenged (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This is supported in a small study of twenty actors in Australia by Robb and Davies (2015). The study focussed on individuals' experiences of working as an actor and their wellbeing, however Flow Theory was included in relation to possible experiences of flow. Responses inferred that a sense of flow was perceived in performance moments where individuals felt their abilities were matched with an opportunity for action, further highlighting challenge-skill balance as a key condition to experiencing flow state. In relation to optimal experience, Csikszentmihalyi said that in order to continue enjoying something it's complexity would need to increase with the discovery of new challenges and opportunities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In terms of acting pedagogy, practitioners need to be mindful of working to continually challenge students and retain the challenge-skill balance. Perceived challenges are an opportunity for action, to stretch, but not overextend existing skills (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) and a training environment, such as acting lessons offer a suitable environment for this. When working with acting students in training and rehearsal, there should be a focus on ongoing flexibility, where challenges are adapted accordingly (Strandberg-Long, 2021). This challenge-skill balance could complement the other flow state conditions of clear goals and immediate feedback, working together to form a continuous loop of skill acquisition, development and refinement. Further investigation into the challenge-skill balance from a neuroscience perspective could provide a deeper understanding of it and how it enhances flow state for individuals.

Csikszentmihalyi stated that some activities require longer timeframes to accomplish, but utilising components of specific goals can be important in this process (1990). This can be adopted within acting pedagogy, creating specific goals to ultimately achieve a larger goal; by breaking down a text into smaller units to focus on, or choosing to consider and refine one particular technique or aspect at a time. Having clear, understandable goals allows an individual experiencing flow state to know and work towards what needs to happen next (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Ensuring goals are realistically reachable (Nakamura, Tse & Shankland, 2019) also aligns with acknowledging the challenge-skill balance condition. Attention should be directed towards a goal (Polanco & Bonfiglio, 2016) with clear direction, that is neither too easy nor difficult to achieve.

Supporting those goals with immediate feedback within the moment further adds to the challenge-skill balance. Individuals are able to utilise feedback given to evaluate their current performance. This, when considered in relation to the goal, allows an individual to continue to adapt and work towards the goal (Kluger & Densi, 1996). The use of practitioner feedback is essential to teaching and coaching, but also further supports a student's ability to consider how specific actions help to achieve desired outcomes (Nakamura, Tse & Shankland, 2019). Practitioners have the potential to promote the conditions of flow state within lessons, utilising the loop of clear goals and feedback aligned with the challenge-skill balance. Whilst there is no guarantee that students will engage with and achieve flow state, research, whilst limited, does infer that perceived experiences of flow state may increase engagement in the present moment and activity.

Conclusion

Guiding this review was the aim of gaining a better understanding of Flow Theory and whether it has the potential to influence pedagogical practice in relation to actor training. Key objectives were to understand Flow Theory, then ascertain and evaluate characteristics that may be applicable to acting pedagogy. There is a generous amount of information surrounding Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory, including a growing wealth

of studies. The proposed nine characteristics of Flow Theory; challenge-skill balance, clear goals, immediate feedback, merging of action and awareness, concentration on task, heightened sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, distortion of temporal perception and autotelic experience are well supported and often utilised within research studies in both qualitative and quantitative data collection. An emerging theme is also the support towards the three conditions of challenge-skill balance, clear goals and immediate feedback as influential factors towards experiencing flow state.

The current literature indicates that Flow Theory may be of value to education and performance-based activities in terms of engagement and enjoyment. However, as of yet research from an acting perspective is limited. Therefore, the current body of literature highlights the need for further investigation into how Flow Theory may specifically be of significance and value to actor training. A key finding in current studies is the ability to identify the presence of key characteristics and conditions, utilising Experience Sampling Methods (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) and the use of scales such as Jackson and Marsh's Flow State Scale (1996) and The Activity Flow State Scale by Payne et al. (2011). But notably missing is the deeper understanding of why Flow Theory could be of benefit in performer training, not just if it is present. Further investigation needs to be undertaken in order to firmly propose why Flow Theory should be considered as a pedagogical strategy within acting, with evidence gathered from the perspectives of practitioners and students.

When considering the implications of material evaluated, it becomes clear that although gaps in literature have been revealed, Flow Theory has much promising potential for further study in the field of acting pedagogy. Current literature can help provide a framework and foundation on which to develop and build specific research into Flow Theory and its potential influence on the ways we approach actor training. Utilising the in-depth and continually developing work of Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues, as well as methods that have already been favoured by researchers, may provide inspiration, motivation and the foundation to apply similar techniques and hypotheses to acting pedagogy.

In conclusion, since its first appearance in the 1970's, Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory continues to be a concept of interest and relevance across many fields of research. Csikszentmihalyi's ongoing development of his theory and its continued study and application by a wide range of researchers highlights the significant potential Flow Theory offers. Therefore, following analysis of the current body of literature and the suggested possibility it offers the field of acting pedagogy, Flow Theory appears an exciting concept for further study and evaluation.

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