

Participatory Flow

The theory of flow was established by Csikszentmihalyi in 1975, stating that being in the state of flow is to be fully engaged with an activity in the present, in an enjoyable and creative way (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997, 2014, 2015). It is a neoteric “optimal experience”, leading to wisdom, which is a “manifestations of complexity at the intrapersonal level” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004, p.342) enabling a harmonious dynamic relationship with the environment. It is an intensive creative state of mind but without feeling tense or drained, due to the active balance between challenge and skills, described by the model of ‘flow channel’ (p.28). This focused attention may proliferate mental and physical energy, particularly when people are engaged with an activity in their domain (Gardner, 2006). Having similarities with children’s play, the flow state may offer a feeling of happiness and connectedness to the world whilst losing the sense of time. Flow has become a central topic of interest in positive psychology (Seligman, 1992; Sheldon, 2011; Carr, 2011; Harmat, 2016) in the last 20 years.

This research is concerned with participatory flow that is in close association with terminologies such as social flow, group flow and team flow (Sawyer, 2007; Walker, 2010; Salanova, 2014; Magyarodi & Olah, 2015; Boffi et al., 2016; van den Hout, 2016; Tse, 2018). It is an emerging field of knowledge within positive psychology and the distinctions between these different terminologies are under review (Lucas, 2018).

The terminology ‘participatory flow’ is used throughout this research because it is considered as being a socially receptive state of mind that is created and maintained by the a/r/tographer as part of a flow-scape for the students to participate in and interact with. It is an expansion of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) theory of (personal) creative flow. Sawyer (2007) discusses creative group flow as a collective state of mind. Using conversation analysis, he examines the similarities between the process of innovation and group improvisation and argues that most revolutionary innovations can be traced back to collaborations. Sawyer (2007) identifies seven factors that are essential for successful ‘group flow’: time, deep listening, constructive collaboration, uncertainty, surprise, unexpected problems and acceptance of mistakes.

While (personal) flow is useful for explaining the focused engagement and enjoyment the participants experience during a participatory art & craft project, it does not explain the heightened energy level of such a process and the reason for remembering it later as an extraordinary experience that often have no parallel in a person’s life. It is often an experience of extending capability far beyond the expectations of the participants themselves, whilst the result is far greater than any of the participants could have achieved on their own.