

Positive Psychology Final Paper: Part 1 & 2

**Positive Psychology Final Paper: Personal Reflection (Part 1) &
Thinking About Encouraging ‘Flow’: Through The Power of
Group Singing and Team- Bonding (Part 2)**

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PART 1

Personal Reflection

This morning, I woke up way later than I had intended to, because I couldn't close my eyes last night until 5 AM. Yesterday, I was reminded again and again how unpredictable and dangerous life can be. A beloved employee from my undergraduate alma mater has passed away suddenly. Then, on my way downtown, my train was delayed- which was fine, but it was due to a two year old boy being struck by the train ahead of us, which was not fine. After shedding tears hearing both of these news, I got a broadcast message from the Columbia community which said that Tessa Majors was stabbed to death in Morningside Park, which really isn't too far from where I live. But, this is not about me. It's just that, so many things have happened that were out of my/our control, so many tragic things too and I don't know what to do with it. I don't even know if I should do something with it, since it is so indirect, yet powerful. I didn't know Tessa, but interestingly enough I have been looking everywhere for a female bass player and I found out this morning that she was a great one. My heart was broken. It's kind of irrelevant, but I still found a way to make meaning out of it to make sense out of it. Or maybe even, to take inspiration out of it.

Anyway- I don't know where I am going with this exactly. But here I am, finishing up my paper, so I am proud of myself. It's interesting because I am becoming more resilient as I grow up and this course has helped me recognize it more often. However, during one of my reflections I was also questioning: can resilience make us a bit more insensitive? I'm struggling

with those emotions, still. Although, I live much “stronger” by acknowledging the power and adaptive personality I have, being grateful for my resilience.

That being said, I thirty minutes ago I came to a bagel shop, and ordered a “lox, egg and onion” one. When it arrived, I was disappointed for a second. There was no cream cheese, and the waitress had taken my “table number” before my drink arrived. Then I stopped for a moment, and said to myself, “you know what, I am technically lactose intolerant anyway, and my drink is probably just at the counter instead”. I was able to rephrase my narrative and way of thinking very quickly. And to be honest, I have always kind of been able to do that, but now even more often, because I am more constantly detecting my strengths, and giving myself some appreciation for that. That makes the whole difference.

The benevolent self exercise was one of my favorite exercises. I really liked being a friend to myself. I don’t know how sustainable that’d be if it was done too often, but I want to use it here and there as well as the chair exercises. I have double majored in psychology and music in undergrad- however, positive psychology was the only course that didn’t exhaust me. I always liked the field, but one new adjustment I made within myself was to be more open to therapy. I’ve never been in therapy beyond the first session, I didn’t like it. Now, I am more open to things such as drama therapy, positive psychotherapy and even meditative practices now that I know there’s not just one way of doing it. I never judged therapy, but I also never wanted to do it. Now, I am not only open to it and know it’s there if I need it, but even want to do it when I think I don’t really “need it”.

In our lessons, we talked about how our reactions are mirrors of our own emotions. I've been trying to pay more attention to that too. The other day, I was in a small argument with a friend. It was a very small miscommunication. I felt like I had been telling him how stressed I am because of finals, but then he invited me to the movies. I felt unheard for a moment, and got upset with him and said : "well, I just told you I don't even have time to shower...". He got upset with me and said that he was just trying to make plans with me. Then I realized, maybe my frustration wasn't with him, but with myself that I have a hard time simply saying "no, I can't". Yes, I wish he understood my time crunch better, but also, it should be fine if he doesn't. I should just be okay with not prioritizing everything every time. It was enlightening.

I am grateful for the community we built and to have more strategies in how I can cope with things, as well as having practiced appreciating my strengths more often. In my papers, I mostly wrote about how some sub theories of positive psychology relates to music education, because I want them to be more accessible to me when I teach. Thus, also in this paper, I tried connecting a bunch of ideas with flow, music and meaningful relationships. To be honest (and yes that is my top strength), I struggled quite a lot trying to put my thoughts into words and paragraphs in an order that made sense, but I've worked quite hard on this, so if there are any questions, please let me know! Thank you! (Find Part 2 below)

PART 2

Thinking About Encouraging ‘Flow’: Through The Power of Group Singing and Team-Bonding

Let's start with a *random* example. Imagine a river running, not too wild, and not too calm. There they are, a group of tourists that are rafting. Rafting is a pretty intense activity that requires basic survival skills. You need to manage your way through the waves, not fall off and hit rocks, and stay balanced. Just in case you fall, you shall know how to swim. If not, you probably wouldn't have gotten on that boat or enjoyed it. It is a bit dangerous, but often very entertaining. Often done with a group, you've got to work with others, and not letting your team down. Time flies by as you struggle together in laughter. No one is checking their watch to see what time it is as they try to make it through. I am guessing that most people aren't thinking about anything else but that moment that is being lived, and shared with others. Most likely, they are experiencing ‘flow’.

In the last few decades, the idea of flow has been extremely popular. So, what is ‘flow’? There are many ways one can describe and define what flow is and how it is experienced. Simply put, “it is a state of consciousness where one becomes totally absorbed in what one is doing, to the exclusion of all other thoughts and emotions” (Jackson, Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p.5).

Flow can be experienced in many other settings such as sports and music as well. It requires one to be challenged just enough, but not too much that it is detrimental or causing anxiety for that person. “There are few activities- such as performing music, or drama, or playing chess... to make flow happen” (Jackson, Csikzentmihalyi, 1999, p.6).

Interestingly, ‘Early research on flow characterized it as an individual, not a group phenomenon.’ (Walker, 2010). However, Walker (2010) argues that group flow/social flow tends to be even more intense than individual flow. In music, specifically singing, can be a great way of enforcing that. Thus, as it is also my field of expertise, with this paper, my main focus and intention is to briefly gather some literature specifically on the power of group singing and team-work/bonding, and discussing experiencing and encouraging flow with it through the lens of a voice teacher/choir conductor.

But- first of all, why is it important to experience flow? Why would we aim to experience it or make it more attainable for students? Flow can be beneficial as it tends to enhance intrinsic motivation, engagement as well as creativity. “The association between flow and highly creative work has been well documented (Pearce, Conger, 2008; Csikzentmihalyi, 1996; Feldman, 1994). It is also known to positively affect and help reaching an optimal performance state of mind. McPherson and Parncutt (2002) talk about how flow state can even help with performance anxiety, which is a common issue singers go through. Pre and during performances, anxiety can get in the way of calm breathing, it may make it harder to control registers steadily(voice can get shaky). “Flow is the state in which performers perform to their optimum”(McPherson, Parncutt, 2002, p.182) and therefore flow could either reduce the impact of anxiousness or at least make one feel like that stress is a good, none-hurtful one. Either way, it is beneficial to our state of mind and body when we are learning, singing, and performing.

To conclude this idea, motivation, creativity, engagement are important pillars in learning, especially applicable in music education and singing.

Furthermore, in some more recent studies they found that experiencing flow is related to subjective well-being (Fritz, Avsec, 2007). Following a similar idea, flow can lead to a “heightened, subjective space” (Walters, 2016). In our Positive Psychology lectures this semester, we had discussed how spiritual experiences could enhance well-being just as much. engagement or “flow experience has been considered by scholars to constitute an important element of psychological well-being, and several recent studies have investigated how engagement or flow experience may contribute in this way” (Croom, 2015). More specifically, “Singers in flow-conducive rehearsals often seem to be transformed upon entering the room and never hesitate to sing energetically, to engage in physical movement...” (Freer, Raines, 2005). Who wouldn’t want students or members of our acapella/choir groups to feel like that?

Nowadays, students can easily feel angry, bored or disinterested because they were forced to sing in the school choir without any immediate will to do so. We see many teenagers or even adults dropping out from many different musical activities. Often, teachers leave it up to the students to feel engaged and motivated, and get creative. However, I believe we can do more to get them to enjoy music making with a few simple strategies and make flow more attainable, more accessible. As Keeler, Roth, Neuser, Spitsbergen, Waters and Vianney (2015) discusses: flow can make an activity very enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding, meanwhile having positive consequences including increased motivation, creativity, efficacy and subjective well being. We must share the responsibility.

So what could we do? We can recognize the importance of creating and promoting activities that may incorporate flow through re-considering group music and singing settings so that students can feel motivated and engaged as much as possible. We can treat our choirs and

other various singing groups as a community, and a team. We can aim for not only musical flow, but also social flow: perhaps, “communal moments of heightened emotional experience” (Jaros, 2008).

First, let us understand how powerful group singing settings can be already without any conscious effort (choirs, ensembles, acapella groups, and more). When singing, your body becomes your instrument. You are connected with your breath, and any sound that comes out of you. It can be a very emotional activity to embrace. We often tell stories through songs, some we can relate to, and our voices are heard. If we go back even deeper and darker in history, singing with others occurred and was used as a means to prepare for going to war. There were many chants and prayers that took place in religious and survival settings across the world. Singing is a powerful tool on its own, but when done with others it can even be transcending. Remember the feeling when your favorite singer lets go of the mic, letting all the audience sing their hearts out during a concert with thousands of people, shaking the arena. That's social flow right there! There's no other feeling like it.

Even if we disregard the power of singing on its own, there's simply something very special about being part of a group, a team or a family. It allows us to feel like we belong. It makes us work for something bigger than us. In our Positive Psychology lectures, we also talked a lot about how finding meaningful relationships can enhance well-being in many senses. If students “have to” be at choir rehearsals, if they are not necessarily into singing or music, at least they can hold on to it through social flow, and still have fun with it. “When experienced in group settings, flow holds the potential to facilitate social connection...” (Keeler, Roth, Neuser,

Spitsbergen, Waters and Vianney, 2015). Which then, may even lead to a raised interest in the topic.

For instance, although it varies from one to the other, college students who are part of sororities/frat houses tend to build pretty strong relationships among each other. Same goes for sports teams. Yes, it could be unfortunately exclusive sometimes. However, they put extra effort into building their relationship, staying loyal and honest with each other. It somehow allows a sense of security. Sometimes they have chants and traditions that are passed down, secrets they keep, gifts they exchange and team-bonding activities that occur pretty consistently. It's not hard to guess all of these can allow for one to feel secure, and stable. As they constantly are putting effort into getting together, sharing experiences, and feeling grateful for each other, it could be a pretty special feeling. Teams often celebrate each other's successes too. Why not apply all of this to our singing teams? Vocalists are athletes too. There's even books written about it (eg: the Vocal Athlete by LeBorgne & Rosenberg, 2021).

We could come up with handshakes, an original song, secret-santa exchanges, pre-performance traditions that keep sealed and more, but it is often neglected. The power of sharing common experiences during group activities or among teams is also very powerful. "Both pleasant and unpleasant experiences were more intense when shared." (Boothby, Clark, Bargh, 2014), even if it's just another person it can truly amplify the meaning of the moment. It could be something as simple as walking from your house to the grocery store with your new roommate. Thus, when you sing with others- a very embodied activity, you can truly double the effect. More resources also support this idea: "Gaston (1968), a noted music therapist, stated that the potency of music is strongest in groups. 'Singers making music together lose a sense of self

consciousness and experience feelings of unification and team spirit'." (Jaros, 2008). David Jaros also claims that "choral singers experience communal moments of heightened emotional experience" (Jaros, 2008).

If we merge group singing, with a little more team bonding, and consciously creating a space possible for flow (both on individual and group levels), we can only imagine how precious and powerful rehearsals and lessons could be. Music already brings creativity, meaning and engagement to our lives. So does a healthy team-work and good social navigations, and so does flow! It is up to us to connect the dots, and triple the effect.

To sum it all up, experiencing flow can be a great indicator of our students feel engaged, motivated and creative in singing and music lessons, especially with a group. Therefore, I believe we should be consciously thinking about:

"What, if anything, can the (choral) conductor do to account for flow in rehearsals or performances? Is it possible to intervene in such a manner as to essentially create flow among our singers? And if so, how might we do it?" (Walters, 2016), but also upcoming research should investigate *how* team-bonding activities also effect/dig pathways to flow, and how intensely it is felt as well as looking into more practical solutions (which of these activities are most effective, etc.)

Through mix-and matching of the literature I read so far, here are my final reflections:

- Build a team.
 - Make people feel that they are part of something bigger. Create a sense of belonging and security.

- Encourage **interdependence** (high inter-dependent task was rated as more challenging and the flow experience was reported to be more intense- Keeler Roth and more)
- Try to sit in a circle.
- Build trust between members.
 - Create a safe space (Bloom, Henley,2005) for individuality
- Come up with traditions, together as a group. Add interpersonal meaning as well, not just musical.
- **Multidimensional** rehearsals instead of unidimensional ones. (Freer, Raines, 2005)
 - Give the students **a choice in repertoire**, but make sure it is a great balance between their interest, capabilities, skills and challenges.
 - Have clear goals and directions. Remember, to “sustain flow, skills must improve to meet (new) challenges” (Custodero, 2005)
 - Treat your students as leaders. Make sure the leadership is shared.
 - Allow them to experiment with different kinds of activities and build self-confidence. Create multiple pathways of learning something.
 - Sound circles/improvisatory activities as well as learning to work with the score
 - Work with movement and gestures, embrace music with more than one sense. See it, hear it, move it. “Deliberate gesture was the most frequent observable indicator in the voice lesson context” (Matthews, 2013; Custodero, 2005)

- **Positive Environment**

- Mistakes are welcome and negative emotions are okay, are a part of the experience (adapted from Bloom, Henley, 2005)
- Constructive feedback: be positive, but also honest. Encourage them often.
- Allow space for and encourage reflection through gratitude journals or discussions, so it's easier to access the feeling next time.

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