

## **“In The Zone”: Lived Experiences of MVC Music Instrumentalists**

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the lived experiences of five music instrumentalists from Mountain View College. The primary data collection method was in-depth interviews. The data were coded and analyzed according to the research questions. Five themes emerged regarding participants' experiences that include: (1) challenging experiences to one's skill, (2) concentration on a task, (3) high levels of personal and performance satisfaction, (4) deep learning and experiencing the "flow," and (5) uncovering inner emotions. Themes were analyzed from the music instrumentalists' experiences through the theoretical lenses of the Flow theory. The participant's experiences served as a jumpstart to the discussions about the actual and perceived values of the musicians' life. It is concluded that Flow or "in the zone" moment, the optimal psychological state, musical activities that challenge their skill level, immersion and concentrated focus on the task, in deep learning, and high levels of personal music performance and satisfaction were all experienced by the participant. It is then recommended that the research participants and musically inclined students be continually provided with all opportunities, music facilities, and a supportive environment to help them experience in-depth learning that would make their talents grow.

## KEYWORDS

Music Education, Flow moment, lived experiences, music, instrumentalists, qualitative design, Mountain View College, Bukidnon, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

A life lived extraordinarily stems from the belief that people whose passion is music spent their time and energy devoted to the pursuit of developing their craft with excellence in mind. Musicians at times find it hard and struggle to master their craft and others persisted 'til perfection is attained. Musicians who persevered stay in a state of mental well-being and mental functioning devoid or with limited social interactions, pleasures, and recreations.

Musical training as studied can have a profound effect on enhancing cognitive development and brain processing. An example of this model is when a musician in training uses the Suzuki method of learning a violin, "by ear." Children receiving the Suzuki music training have shown greater growth in manual dexterity and music perception skills (Schlaug, Norton, Overy, & Winner, 2005).

Music making is shown to contribute to perceived good health, quality of life, and mental well-being (Hallam & Creech, 2016). According to various researches, playing musical instruments can lower blood pressure, decrease heart rate, reduce stress, and lessen anxiety and depression. There is also increasing evidence that making music

enhances the immunological response, which enables us to fight viruses (Sarkamo et al., 2014).

When an individual is engaged in different musical activities, the cerebral cortex self-organizes and makes a huge impact in the individual's psychological health, for the skills developed may then influence the individual's other activities (Johnson, 2004).

Musicians by far experienced Flow which is an optimal psychological state experienced when engaged in an activity that was appropriately challenging to one's skill level. It is said that these experiences often result in immersion and concentrated focus on a task. In turn, individuals are in deep learning, accompanied by high levels of personal and work satisfaction (Csikszentmihályi, 1990).

Csikszentmihályi identified eight mental states that happened during the learning process in his Flow theory. These mental states included flow, anxiety, apathy, arousal, boredom, control, relaxation, and worry that result when a learner experienced a combination of skill and challenge levels of a task in non-optimal combinations.

Among the eight mental states, Flow is the superior states in learning. It is the highest skill level and challenge level that created a learning experience that is so intense and focus, and where learners feel they can lose track of time or they are "in a zone" because they are so engrossed in the undertaking at hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Flow Theory is humanistic in nature which answers the search for a better quality of life. It seeks to discover what it means to experience the satisfaction of any tasked one is doing and the pleasure of "enjoying optimal experience" of one's fruit of labor where Csikszentmihalyi, in 1990, eventually introduced as "the flow."

The interest of the topic stems from the musical point of view of the researchers. The two student researchers are Music, Arts, Physical Education and Health (MAPEH) majors who are music instrumentalists trained in playing guitar, piano, flute, recorder, and vocal pedagogy as members of choir or singing group. The three researchers themselves have undergone music training from childhood and are actively involved in performances both in church and public settings.

A two-pronged perspective is used in this study for other music students, musically inclined students, musically trained students, music educators, and parents of musicians knowledge, understanding, and experiences that would enhance, support, advocate music training and education. Advanced music instrumentalists are a class on their own. Their musical trainings took on activities such as attendance to music advance classes, music camps, seminar workshops, and music trainings with highly trained music faculty, attendance to music performances and parental support that is unconditional.

As Anderson & Bower (2014) stated creativity as an element of the experience is a fundamental premise to fruitful learning. Human beings exercise creativity in problem-solving, writing, relating to the world around them and articulating themselves to one another. On the other hand, music educators are advocating studies that impact advanced youth music ensemble participation that will identify the meanings and values placed on early childhood and youth music learning (Smith, 2008).

Second, the researchers believed that when other music students under training in both vocal and instrumental performance realized the rigors the respondents put into their musical training, they will be encouraged to follow practice techniques and music learning of the participants of the study. As attested by (Alerby & Ferm, 2005) the concept of experiential learning, is directly linked to the development of one's experiences, way of seeing and being in this world, and prominently related when assessing the myriad conditions of educational music spaces.

## FRAMEWORK

### **Challenging Experiences to Ones' Capacity**

The flow experience hinges upon subconscious control and is a personal experience that exists in the crux between two sets of balances: a balance of control, of which a person is not consciously aware; and a balance of challenge and skill (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

### **Concentration on Task**

Interviewing people who referenced this experience, which included chess players, rock climbers, dancers, etc., he noticed they frequently termed the experience flow, thus producing his appellation for the experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). He then defined certain characteristics of flow: on recurring throughout the themes of engagement, interest, and social literacy contracts is flow theory. Flow is total immersion, or engagement, in an activity to the point where time is altered (slowed or sped up) for the participant and awareness of place diminishes along with self-awareness a loss of a sense of time, self, and place; intrinsic motivation; interest at the task at hand; and intense concentration (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Spitzer (2015) makes corresponding claims about the metaphors involved in rhythm and harmony. In melody, then, sounds are heard as moving through space. In rhythm, they are heard as moving in a sense that is distinct from succeeding one another—they are heard as animated (as “dancing”).

### **High Levels of Personal and Performance Satisfaction**

Skadberg & Kimmel (2004) have further explored time distortion as an indicator of flow. Intrinsically rewarding, flow brings enjoyment and satisfaction; thus, it is cyclical in intrinsic motivation, causing the participant to desire to repeat the experience and thus, described as autotelic (Rathunde, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

### **Deep Learning and experiencing the “Flow”**

Recurring throughout the themes of engagement, interest, and social literacy contracts are flow theory. Flow is total immersion, or engagement, in an activity to the

point where time is altered (slowed or sped up) for the participant and awareness of place diminishes along with self-awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

### **Uncovering Inner Emotions**

Also, according to Fong, Zaleski, & Leach (2015) study, levels of flow can be assessed: mild flow is indicated by the categories of enjoyment and clear goals only; moderate flow, by the addition of challenge, concentration, control, and feedback; and deep flow, by the addition of transformation of time and place and loss of self-awareness. Furthermore, it is the organization for “unconscious fantasies and conflicts throughout life” (Diamond, 2008, p. 811), which could indicate a vicarious resolution of personal issues for the viewer/reader, perhaps even satisfaction or relief.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to find aspects of lived experiences of the research participants through in-depth interviews that helped better understand the experiences of musicians and their development. Lastly, themes found in the interviews were compared to Csikszentmihalyi flow theory to determine if the eight mental states are present and consistent among the participants of the study or if new states emerged.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The research used the qualitative phenomenological design that employed a purposeful sample of six college music instrumentalists. It was conducted in Mountain View College, an Adventist Educational Institution located in Bukidnon, Philippines. Data were collected via interviews and themes found were compared to the Flow Theory of Csikszentmihalyi.

### **Research Participants**

The study participants are musicians who have undergone advanced training in music. The selection was based on the music training from elementary to the present. They are active musically in campus music activities. All of the participants that fitted the selection criteria received a letter of invitation for them to join the study. Video camera and voice recorder was used in recording the actual interviews.

### **Procedures of Data Collection**

Selected six college music instrumentalists who were enrolled in Mountain View College, with music training backgrounds from elementary up to the present were involved in this study. A series of individual semi-structured interviews and one open-

ended group interviews were done. The researchers interviewed each participant twice in sessions that lasted approximately one hour and took place over a one-semester time period that included observations on the daily activities of participants. The researchers tape-recorded and transcribed the interview sessions. The same series of open-ended questions were used for all of the interviews. In addition, the interview protocol allowed for flexibility to delve deeply to other areas of discussion not covered in previous interviews.

### **Method of Analysis**

In the process of analysis, the researchers created code lists to support scientific analyses (Stiegelbauer, Malcolm, & Adams, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Transcripts were read multiple times and codes were listed for various topics that the researchers discussed. After listing the codes, the researchers reviewed the list and clustered all related codes into larger codes and categories. The researchers took notes of all tentative thoughts about themes that emerged from the data in the margins of the transcripts. The clustered themes were then placed into categories.

The stages of data analysis followed this order: open coding, axial coding, selective coding, memo writing, and validity checks with an interpretive community and with the study's participants. During the open coding stage, the researchers read the transcripts multiple times and identified concepts that explored their dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and mental state as described in the Flow Theory of Csikszentmihalyi.

Axial coding took place when the researchers found relationships between categories and subcategories in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researchers then integrated and refine the theory in the process of selective coding. General explanations were developed for what appeared to be happening in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researchers constructed a "record of analysis, thoughts, interpretations, questions, and directions for further data collection" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 110). Some of these records were brief, and others were lengthy that accommodated explanation of the documents. Validity checks were done by the researchers to accommodate opportunities of interpretations from significant others.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Six music instrumentalists participated in a series of individual semi-structured interviews and one open-ended group interview. Each of the interviews took place in the familiar confines of Mountain View College. These interviews brought to light stories about each of the participant's musical backgrounds, practices, rehearsals performing experiences, challenges and their aspirations in life to reach a certain proficiency in music.

Through open coding, axial coding and selective coding, five essential themes were eventually revealed. These were: (1) challenging experiences to one's skill, (2) concentration on a task, (3) high levels of personal and performance satisfaction, (4) deep learning, and (5) uncovering inner emotions. These themes are elaborately discussed in detail with the illuminative voices of the participants.

Brief descriptions of the musical background of the participants in the study were provided. This was followed by the themes extracted from the responses that identified the lived experiences of participants.

### **Musical Background**

All of the participants in this study are musical instrumentalists from early on up to their time in Mountain View College. Both male and female students are actively involved in musical performances on and off campus. Most of them started their musical training being forced by their parents to take piano, violin, voice, brass, and strings lessons at a young age which ranges from 5-10 years old. Despite these circumstances, these experiences gave each one significant foundation in the advancement of other musical instruments.

Among the six participants P1 opted to play the piano. Meantime, P2 and P6 are saxophone players, while, P3 plays guitar, and P4 and P5 play the violin. Most of the participants stated that they spent at least 30 minutes to 1 hour for musical practices every day.

Through analysis of the data the themes found are challenging experiences to one's capacity, concentration on a task, high levels of personal and performance satisfaction, deep learning and experiencing "the flow," and uncovering inner emotions.

### **Challenging Experiences to Ones' Capacity**

The first essential theme that emerged in all of the stories by the participants was the challenging experiences they encountered from the start of their music training. Each of the participants enumerated that performing in front of elite persons, in a huge crowd, in special occasions as a guest or grand finale performer, points out as challenging experiences.

P1 stated, "What I considered as the best and challenging experienced was my last recital, when I was assigned to perform for the grand finale." "I was in my fourth year and almost all the students in the lower years expected a lot from me." P2 stated, "My first recital and when our singing group sang during the divine service." P3 followed, "We had a concert and the piece we played was the musical theme from "Titanic." We practiced so hard for months." "The piece was supposed to be played within seven minutes; it was an intense moment for everyone especially when we reached the part where we interpretatively played the moment of the ship-wreck." "I felt like everyone was playing too fast, faster than the usual tempo during practices." "The audience was very silent as if they were also with us in the final moment of the tragedy." On the other

hand, P5 said it was the “first concert of CIMA String at MT Oliverio hall, when we played the piece Pirates of the Caribbean, I was scared but challenged to do my part.” P6 shared, “It was my last piano recital, (“Wala man gud nako na memorized ang ako pyesa”) I did not really memorized my piece that time but fortunately I perfected my piece.”

In a study conducted by Hallam (2010) found out that music is so multi-faceted and absorbing that its challenges seem limitless such as public performance, recitals etc.

### **Concentration on Task**

Concentration on task focused on the participants’ experiences that included emerging of action and awareness, strong concentration and loss of awareness of time while practicing, rehearsing and performing.

P1 said, “When I started walking towards the piano “padulong sa piano” I felt nervous (goose bumps). But when I was already seated on the piano I was very focus on the piece though all eyes were watching me”. I never minded them.” This happened during a recital.” “It was like my fingers were just moving on their own.” “Though I did not master the piece I really felt that I was one with my music.” P6 said, “Many people were watching me, performed, and then at the middle of the recital I was very focus with my performance and I forgot the audience.”

Meanwhile P3 commented, “I only saw my hands and I could close my eyes, appreciate my time alone with my music.” “I can only hear and feel “sa pagbagsak sa notes” (the rhythm of the notes).” P4 shared, “We were playing the theme from “Titanic”, it was like I was sitting on the ship and I clearly heard the parts of the horn, cello, double bass and the percussions.” “I felt like the stage was shaking because of the loud sounds we produced, and it was fast yah, maybe, that was what I felt and then after that there was silence, decreasing from the climax of the music theme to the mellow part of the music.” “My heart will go on, it was like (a huge sigh).” “It was different from what we had practice.” “And everyone was asking like what was that.” “We never played better, that fast, and with that feeling”. P5 additionally shared, “Murag walay tao while performing I can only see the piece, hear the music and connected with my co-performers”.

A systematic review, reported by a group of music psychologist in the study, “When music “flows” State and trait in musical performance, composition and listening” in 2015 testifies everything flows easily even though the piece of music is clearly difficult to perform and they were very concentrated on performing the music (Chirico, Serino, Cipresso, Gaggioli & Riva, 2015).

### **High Levels of Personal and Performance Satisfaction**

The satisfaction came from practices, rehearsals and very good final performances of participants. P1 commented, “During and after the performances my sweat would flow

into my arms, the long practices paid off and I felt justified after I heard the applause of the audience.” P3 continued, “It gave me so much happiness and “mas dali maka feel nga” I am in the zone during practice time when I am all alone.” “I enjoyed the moment even though the piece is really hard”.

When asked what was the best part when all of you experienced the flow or when you are “in the zone”, P3 enthusiastically beamed, “It feels like heaven.” P5 interjected, “I felt the feeling of relief that finally it was done.” “But when I realized that I committed mistakes “maka-ana gyud ko nga hala! Sayop man gyud to murag ulaw lng gyud siya nga feeling.” “But then, I told myself to do better next time.” “It motivated me also to make it perfect next time.”

Further, P6 shared, “Many times during performances, I would feel nervous but in the end of the performances I felt satisfied without even conscious about what really happened musically.”

According to the study of Skadberg & Kimmel (2004) an indicator of “flow” is time distortion causing the participant to desire to repeat the experience.

### **Deep Learning and experiencing the “flow”**

Another theme that is considered is deep experiential learning that means, the musical trainings they received from scratch to years and years of trainings up to the present. All of them shared that the point of deep musical learning that satisfied them were, where when they were able to share, experience the “flow” during performances, experience deeper connection to music, and finally taught others to become like them which in turn change the music participants life in the process.

P1 testified, “What I learned is that my body naturally moves and expresses my music when I performed.” “As if my physical being has a mind of its own and that state of being is to me, the “flow.” On the other hand, P2 further added, “It was a stepping stone experiences, it was success when my music bloomed.” “The more I played and practice, the more I performed.”

Meanwhile, P3 stated, “In every performance, I truly believe that there is a zone “makaabot lang ka ana nga time when you let it go what is within you.” “And you did not force yourself to do it.” “It felt that a pack bag of music is released.” P4 shared, “Flow- is when we performers forget everything and concentrated on what we have practice.” “During practice we were so conscious of the technical things that included the bowing and how we like the sound of articulation or simple technical little things that mattered.” “And during that flow moment, sometimes or even most of the times, the technical things were forgotten and all you do is just enjoy your music.” “Technical playing is kind of robotic.”

Additionally, P5 shared, “It helps improve not only my talent but my self-confidence.” P6 added, “Every performance is a milestone and to be better in what I am doing is what I aim”.

Smialek & Boburka (2006) states that “flow” causes people “to become a little bit more real”, helping to improve quality of life, happiness, health and sense of community. We are never without music, even if we are not concentrated on it in a specific moment. Finally, it has a great impact on our lives, mainly in promoting our well-being.

### **Uncovering Inner Emotions**

It is very clear that instrumentalists’ feelings, moods, and emotions played vital roles that ultimately affect their practices, rehearsals and performances. It also stimulated the understanding that playing musical instrument creates psychological effect that generates positive emotions and behaviors of the participants.

P1 started with the revelation, “Summer time is my favorite time, I can play the whole day specially when I am alone at home.” “I can play whatever piece I want to play to overcome boredom.” P2 contributed, “I will just play and play and expressed the music I have heard.” P3 happily added, “Usually kung ako lang isa sa balay nice kayo sa feeling magpractice and play your instrument kay wala man gud mo criticize sa imuha.” “Dili ka ma conscious then even the neighbourhood will just appreciate you as well.” With pride P4 shared, “It was holiday in MVC that was why I came home”. “I was alone in the house that day and I did not know I just opened my violin and play whatever I wanted to play.” “Just stayed in the house and played the whole day.” “During practice you need to be technically detailed, it is necessary even though flow might happen.” “You play without thinking all technical things”. “Unconsciously I did the right thing already.” “And I thought whatever happens, everything will be fine.” Additionally P5 stated, “While performing I feel the excitement to play and make it the best performance.”

The Result of flow journal in musical contexts of Croom (2015, 2012) states that, the complexity of both phenomena (i.e., flow and music), has led scholars to focus on several different aspects of them, such as emotions(Lamont, 2012), motivation (Digelidis, Karageorghis, Papapavlou, & Papaioannou, 2014), anxiety management (Fullagar, Knight, & Sovern, 2013), social relationships (Hart & Di Blasi, 2015), creativity and psychophysiological correlates of flow experience (Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald, 2012).

## **CONCLUSION**

Flow or “in the zone” moment which is an optimal psychological state were all experienced by MVC music instrumentalists when they engaged in musical activities that challenge their skill level. These experiences resulted in immersion and concentrated focus on the task and turn; participants were in deep learning, accompanied by high levels of personal music performance satisfaction.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is then recommended that the research participants and musically inclined students be continually provided with all opportunities, music facilities, and a supportive environment to help them experience in-depth learning that would make their talents grow.

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