

FLOWER: Self-Coaching Tool for Teens and Tool for Personal Skills Development Course for Teachers

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Abstract

This paper establishes an argument for flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) as a foundation for mentoring and coaching relationships in academic (mainly secondary school) settings. Flow is the mental state during which a person feels enjoyment, energized focus, and full involvement while being fully immersed in a performed activity. During flow states, people perform their best, they feel challenged but in control, they receive immediate feedback from the activity itself, they lose their time-consciousness and self-consciousness and experience other benefits.

The session will describe FLOWER, a mentoring and self-coaching application for teenagers that fosters flow by helping adolescents realize their own strengths and goals. Users learn how to accept and give feedback while getting to know themselves, their own moods, and the moods of others in order to build harmonious relationships with possible adult supporters. According to Professor Csikszentmihalyi, a person might experience 8 different moods (mental states) even within a few hours. These moods can be represented on a “map of everyday experience” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 72.). The FLOWER application was developed based on Prof. Csikszentmihalyi’s Experience Sampling Method (ESM) and his wide range of research about adolescence and flow.

The paper will also give a short view of the FLOWER mentor training program that teaches secondary school teachers how to become effective coach-type of teachers and how to incorporate FLOWER into their class activities.

Introduction

Back in 2015 ALEAS Sims. was approached by the Ministry of Human Capital of Hungary to develop an online micro-learning and mentoring program for the 15-18 years old age group as part of the National Talent program. The company got this request based on the success of its leadership-development tool, FLIGBY and based on the fact that ALEAS Sims. is in direct contact with the world famous psychologist, Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (who is business owner in the company). There were some given criteria that had to be followed in the development process: 1. it had to be an online program; 2. it had to connect teens, their teachers and their parents; 3. it had to help teens in discovering their talent; 4. the user (teen) had to initiate the processes, and 5. it had to include Prof. Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory and research.

The first version of this developmental tool was mainly based on the skills measured in FLIGBY, and its aim was to identify the teens’ talent fields. This version had to be dropped as the names and definitions of the talent fields were controversial (it had to get into deep explanations to get the message through), the skills were mainly focused on leadership practice and developing the right questionnaire would have required years of research.

The content of the second version of this “simulation” was written by a certified coach who also had experience in mentoring and teaching children with learning disabilities. This learning and mentoring tool has started with a 19-questions scaling system that intended to measure and give a feedback about the teens knowledge of being in flow. An online coaching conversation supposed to follow this scaling exercise. Real life “mentors” – invited by the teen who wanted to participate in this program – were asked to lead these conversations and support the teen. These real-life mentors could have been the teens’ teacher, parent, any other adult relative or adult friend. These mentors got online written support and instructions about how they were supposed to lead these conversations and also about how to create a flow promoting environment at home and at school. However, the weaknesses of this second version were: 1. the questions that have been tested in real life conversations, didn’t work in the virtual environment; 2. the initiation of the program had to come from the teen, and it was hard to motivate them to get into it (teenagers had to decide who they wanted to invite as their own “mentors” and they often got rejected by those who they have invited) 3. Mentors, especially the teen’s parents preferred taking the process out from the virtual world into the real world, and place the mentoring process in the real world. Thus, the current data is being re-evaluated due to this limitation.

The experience with the second version has led us to several conclusions and to the redevelopment of the whole mentoring program. In the meantime the company has been also asked to produce a training program for teachers about what it meant to be a mentor-type of teacher and how FLOWER can be incorporated into their courses. This request and the experience gained with the second version have led to a shift in the whole approach of this application. We have realized that the initiation of using FLOWER has to come from the teacher and FLOWER has to be part of a course built around self-knowledge and self-development. In order to make it more user friendly and appealing to the youngsters and their teachers, the coaching questions had to be simplified. At the same time, the whole program became more complex by incorporating more exercises about self-knowledge. And this was the birth of the third version of the FLOWER program that became: 1. an assessment tool for identifying flow-promoting activities; 2. self-coaching questionnaire for teens; 3. helpful tool for teachers in leading personal-skills development courses and 4. a tool for connecting teens with their friends, family, teachers in order to start a deep and meaningful conversation.

Where is the name FLOWER coming from?

The name FLOWER beside the obvious association to Professor Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory, also refers to the aim of this program: helping youth to blossom by finding their own strengths and talents. FLOWER aims to help young people to succeed by raising awareness of positive attitude, self-knowledge and experiences regardless of their personal circumstances and background.

What is the structure of the FLOWER program?

FLOWER, this online self-coaching tool for teens is part of a 12 weeks long course as a personal skills development tool used by teachers.

The course starts with a so-called briefing session, when the teachers explain the importance of FLOWER, set up their group and send the registration links to their students. During the testing of the second version we had to realize that the program only works, if there is a person facilitating it. The facilitator (teacher) besides getting a training on what it meant to be a coach-type teacher also gets lesson plans for every weekly session. The first week kicks off with a slightly modified, simplified and digitalized version of the Experience Sampling Method used by Csikszentmihalyi (see details below). It is followed by blocks of self-coaching questions automatically sent to the students on a weekly basis between the 2nd and 11th week and closed with a so-called debriefing session on the 12th week. Even though the students are required to answer the coaching questions on their own, they get help on how each and every block could be interpreted from their teachers on the weekly class sessions.

The below chart shows the headings of each session that is part of the program:

No. of session	Date (set by the teacher)	In class activities – lesson plan	Self coaching questions	Feedback exercise	Group exercise	Exercise to be fulfilled with a mentor outside of class
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The areas highlighted with red are part of the future development plan of FLOWER. The in class activities serve as a background, interpretation session for the self-coaching questions that have to be answered by the teens individually, inserting their answers into the system.

The system is programmed to send out the “feedback” exercises on a weekly basis as well. One of these feedback exercises is the “Flow-map” exercise (twice throughout the whole program), another one is the Johari-window exercise (also twice throughout the whole program, as we have created two versions of it). The feedback exercises are additional questions and tools that help the teen to get to know themselves, their strengths, their current state of self-appreciation, goal-oriented mind setting better and also to start a non-conventional self-knowledge conversation with their friends and family.

The teachers, besides getting help in facilitating the whole process, also get a chance to participate in some of the feedback exercises and are also welcomed to fill in the self-coaching questionnaire offline.

There are two elements of the program that are not part of the above table. One of them is the “media library”

where we provide reading materials both to teachers and students about the content of the program, including on flow and Csikszentmihalyi himself. The other element is a daily empowering quote from Csikszentmihalyi's works.

How is Prof. Csikszentmihalyi involved in this project?

The continuous changes and the slowness in the development of this project originate in those critiques, suggestions and advices that we continuously get from Prof. Csikszentmihalyi himself. The Professor helped interpreting the Experience Sampling Method and also to transpose it into the digital world. He also overviewed the process of linking the simplified and modified ESM questionnaire to the "map of everyday experience" that we demonstrate as a flower with eight petals.

The testing of the third version is coming up this autumn at Hungarian and US High Schools simultaneously. Prof. Csikszentmihalyi is currently organizing a group – mainly from PhD students – who will participate in a research built on the data entered into the system. A study based on the findings of the research is awaited during the upcoming years as well.

How is the "Experience Sampling Method (ESM)" appears and how is it connected to the "map of everyday experience" in FLOWER? How the concept of flow appears in the program?

The "Experience Sampling Method (ESM)" that is used in FLOWER is a slightly modified and simplified version of the ESM explained in the book: *Becoming adult*. As it is written in the book: "It allows the respondent to report his or her specific activities as they occur at various times throughout the day and to describe the cognitive and affective states associated with the reported activities. ESM data make it possible to investigate how differences in location, time, and physical and social environments affect the quality of experience." (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000).

Our aim was not to recreate the same research that Prof. Csikszentmihalyi already did together with his colleagues, but to give a tool to adolescents to identify those activities that they enjoy the most for themselves. Originally adolescents were beeped 8 times per day randomly to fill in the questionnaire during a normal week. Our application notifies the students 4-5 times a day randomly, but they are asked to fill in the questionnaire for over the course of two weeks. The first week starts right after a student registered into the application, while the second week is in the middle of the whole program.

Once a student has answered to the questions of this simplified ESM questionnaire, the application indicates his or her mood in regards of the activity he/she entered at the beginning of the questionnaire by placing him/her on any of the eight areas of the "map of everyday experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, page 72.). As the indication of the mood is not based on years of research, this activity is more like an educational game than scientific fact. That's why we phrased the feedback this way: It seems, based on the answers you have given for the questions, that you might be in the mood of (*name of one of the 8 moods here*) while you are performing (*name of the activity given by the adolescent at the beginning of the questionnaire*). The system stores all the answers that the students give for the questionnaire and it also puts an excel sheet together, containing the following information: Date and time; name of the activity performed, place, who he/she was with, whether the activity was more like work or play, what was the main purpose of doing the activity itself and the mood indicated on the map. By downloading the excel sheet with various data, the student will be able to identify for himself/herself: who he/she spends the most time with; where he/she spends most of the time; what activity he/she does most of the time and what might be his/her most common mood.

The "map of everyday experience" also helps the students to understand, recognize and phrase their own and those people's feelings who surround them. The teens, besides getting help in understanding the tasks given by each and every block, also gets helpful reading materials in the "media library".

One of the items in the media library is a short explanation about what it means to be in flow and how this mental state can be achieved. One of the main preconditions for a person to experience flow is: having a clear goal that he/she can work towards to. The first block of self-coaching questions is focused on the theme of goal setting, and urges the teens to think beyond tomorrow. They are actually define what they want to achieve within 10 years, where they see themselves, and what profession they want to practice.

The second main precondition for experiencing flow is the balance of the challenges the given activity offers and the skills needed to rise to successfully deal with the challenge. First of all a person needs to know his/her skills, strengths, and abilities to be able to set a goal, and should know what kind of skills required in

order to achieve a given goal. The Johari-window exercises meant to help the adolescents get to know themselves better by identifying not just those virtues that are known to themselves and others, but by seeing their attributions through the eyes of others. (The students get two times forty two adjectives to choose from. They have to choose 7-10 adjectives that they feel describe themselves the best. The first set of adjectives are work-related, while the second set of words are related to communication and personality. Once they choose minimum 7 words out of 42, they can save their results and send a link to friends, family, asking them to do the same – choose adjectives, words that describe the given student the best. The student will only see anonymous results on his/her monitor. The teenager will be able to see which attributes belong to the arena, which ones are blind spots, facades or unknown.)

The third main precondition of flow is getting immediate feedback. The users besides understanding the importance of feedback arriving from the activity itself, learn how to receive and give constructive feedback to others. The flow-map exercise gives immediate feedback to the student about his/her possible current mood, while the Johari-window exercise requires teens to reach out to other people and learn to accept their feedback about their capabilities.

Figure 1 below is a representation of the “map of everyday experience” (Flow-map) in a way it appears in the simulation itself (moods and captions are in Hungarian as the original version of the FLOWER program is written in Hungarian). The square “map of everyday experience” has been transformed to a flower with eight petals in order to match the title of the program. The bee on the map serves as the indicator of the teen’s actual mood.

The Flow-map exercise is available for the teachers as well, so they can have a first-hand experience with it.

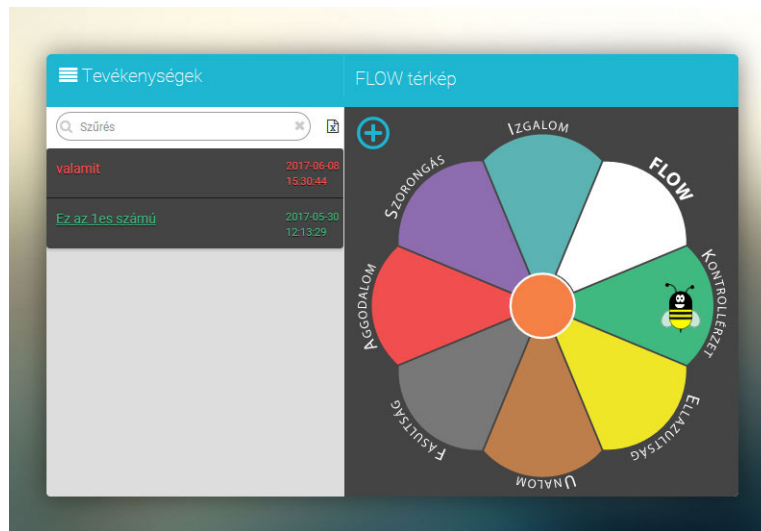


Figure 1. “Flow-map”

Helping adolescents understand what being in flow means, and how they can generate this state of mind for themselves is a great way to help them discover what they are really interested in, what their talents are, and what profession they would be happy to pursue.

Why did we choose coaching-type instead of mentoring-type approach as the leading method for the program?

To understand the way of acting and behaving that is required from the teachers in applying FLOWER as a teaching tool, it is imperative to understand what it means to be a conventional teacher and why the coaching mentality is preferred to mentoring.

The teachers’ role is often formal and carried out at schools or other places of conventional education. Most teachers are informational type of speakers – their aim and focus is to impart knowledge and information through frontal type of instructing and explaining. The goal of this type of teaching for the student is to pass a test/exam.

Mentors – based on our experiences and studies - give guidance as well, not just information. Their role is to build capability, encourage and to raise awareness of the pitfalls and discouragements that they have already encountered along the way to achieve their own career or any other type of goals. They share their knowledge

with someone who is less experienced (in our case: the student) in a given field, help them to develop their self-reliance and help them to work toward the goal the teenagers have already achieved. Mentoring is a kind of partnership between two people and it emphasizes a mutuality of learning.

Coaches are intended to help the coachee (student) to learn rather than to teach them. Their approach is to ask powerful, open ended questions to which only the individual can know the answer. They are not meant to give advice, but to help the student to find their own strengths, to set their own achievable goals and to find their own best way to achieve it. A coaching-type of teaching allows the students to have their own choices and to make their own decisions in the learning process. It might seem, that teachers are required to work more, but it actually puts more responsibility on the student. It allows the students to set their own pace and excel in those tasks (steps) that they set for themselves. A coaching-type of teaching supports individual strengths. It does not require from the students to be at the same level in everything. It also encourages students to achieve their personal best based on the assessment of their current situation.

What is the FLOWER mentor training program?

During this 1- or 2-days training program (depending on the facilitator) secondary school teachers learn how the FLOWER program is built and how they can navigate within the application itself. They get a detailed explanation about each and every block of questions, a chance to use the feedback exercises themselves and a teaching material for in class activities.

Teachers – besides getting a powerful teaching tool in detail – also get the chance for self-development by going through the self-coaching questions themselves and participating in the exercises.

How might teenagers benefit from FLOWER?

Teenagers can learn how to set goals for themselves and improve their learning and intrinsic motivation. They get to understand how to take ownership of their own decisions and behavior, and how to take responsibility for their own lives. They are encouraged to stay committed to the goals they set for themselves and they get regular feedback on how they advance on attaining their goals. Staying persistent on achieving their goals might increase their creativity and risk-taking due to greater investment of time and energy into activities related to the goal. By learning how to set reasonable and achievable goals broken down into details, they also understand that self-regulation is a key to success. The program helps them set clearer goals, gain confidence and be more effective in different areas of their lives.

In order to be able to set reasonable goals teenagers have to know themselves. Students get concrete exercises that enhance the development of healthy self-knowledge and self-confidence. There are several blocks of questions built around knowing their strengths, capabilities and values. They are asked to evoke stories from their past, when they already achieved a goal set by themselves so they can then build on those experiences. Students can also identify the people who can help them along the way by using this program.

This program can also help them focus on the positive in themselves and in others. They receive instructions on how to give constructive feedback and how they can revert from being reactive and become proactive in their responses.

Students learn about the mental states they might go through throughout a day by connecting different type of activities to different moods. Understanding the connections between skills and challenges might urge them to recreate their own daily life by filling their days up with activities that are in direct link with their goals.

The self-coaching element of the FLOWER program empowers the students and give them the feeling of being capable of decide for themselves. They learn that there are no ready-made answers (unless it is a test question) for situations thrown at you by life. They learn that they are the ones who are responsible for their own lives. Teachers, on the other hand, can help the students to grow their autonomy, control and competence.

References

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