

Optimal Experience in the Choral Setting: Examining flow experience events between choral ensemble members and choral conductor

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The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate in what ways ensemble directors promote the conscious state of *flow* among students in rehearsals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The flow experience as a rehearsal objective positively enhances music learning by making the curriculum more accessible and meaningful to all students. Understanding how directors' encourage optimal experiences may impact future teaching practices within a curriculum that includes flow as an objective. This mixed method study uses Creswell's Sequential Explanatory model including quantitative data collected from a self-reporting instrument and qualitative data in the form of interviews, field notes, reflections and images. The study has three parts: Self-reporting instrument for both students and director; interviews with questions informed by the quantitative analysis occurred with the director and two students (one who reported a high occurrence of flow and one low); additional data including field notes, emails, images and reflections gathered by the investigator.

Research questions:

- I. Do moments of flow occur for both students and the conductor?
- II. In what ways can the conductor of a choral ensemble facilitate flow experiences from the ensemble members?
- III. Do flow events occur with more frequency for particular songs than others?
- IV. Is there a relationship between the flow experiences of the conductor and those of the ensemble members?

Quantitative analysis results revealed both students and director experience flow moments during rehearsals. A mean comparison of flow moments among participants showed evidence of flow frequency based on repertoire. The relationship between the flow experiences of the conductor and those of the ensemble members was not statistically significant. Qualitative inquiry was informed by these quantitative results. Qualitative analysis can be organized into three constructs: Attention, relationships and purposeful music making.

Positive psychologist Csikszentmihalyi describes the theory of flow as an optimal experience resulting from a harmonious balance in the state of consciousness between skill and challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When balance is not accomplished, the result is anxiety or boredom depending. He characterizes the experience as a state of being so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The activity is the reward in itself and includes feelings of exhilaration, deep enjoyment and acute awareness. Incorporating flow as an objective in choral music education pedagogy would engage students intrinsically while reducing anxiety and boredom.

How do these research results apply to teaching practices in the choral rehearsal?

- The relationship between song and flow events reveals certain songs have a more frequent occurrence of flow than others.
- Flow among students is most prevalent when the director is experiencing flow.
- Director's flow experience may be influenced by rehearsal challenges as opposed to music selection or flow among students.
- Song memory appears to be an important aspect of the flow experience.
- Movement including clapping, "choral-ography" and attention to articulation may encourage flow experiences.

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