

# Flow

**Flow** is a state of mind in which people feel completely engaged and immersed as they lose awareness of themselves and the activity they are performing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The process is also known as being “in the zone,” or “in the groove” as well as “in flow.” Flow is a complex, multidimensional construct. It is not simply the merging of awareness and action, but flow is also characterized by a loss of both conscious effort and time, a loss of self-consciousness, intrinsic enjoyment, and a seeming perfect balance of skill and challenge, which makes action feel effortless and part of a natural rhythm.

Karen Beard vividly captures the notion of flow in a passage from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, which describes how the wealthy Russian aristocrat Levin learns how to move like the servant Titus while mowing hay with a scythe:

*“I will swing less with my arm and more with my body,” he thought, comparing Titus’s row [of hay] which looked as if it had been cut with a line, with his own unevenly and irregularly scattered grass. . . . He thought of nothing, desired nothing, except not to lag behind and to do the best job he could. He heard the clang of scythes and ahead of him saw Titus’s erect figure moving on. . . Levin lost all awareness of time and had no idea whether it was late or early. A change now began to take place in his work, which gave him enormous pleasure. In the midst of his work moments came to him when he forgot what he was doing and began to feel light, and in those moments his swath came out as even and good as Titus’s. But as soon as he remembered what he was doing and started trying to do better, he at once felt how hard the work was and the swath came out badly. In this hottest time the mowing did not seem so hard to him. . . . More and more often those moments of unconsciousness came, when it was possible for him not to think of what he was doing. The scythe cut by itself. These were happy moments. The longer Levin mowed, the more often he felt those moments of oblivion during which it was no longer his arms that swung the scythe, but the scythe itself that lent motion to his whole body, full of life and conscious of itself, and, as if by magic, without a thought of it, the work got rightly and neatly done on its own. These were the most blissful moments. (Tolstoy, 1878/2002, pp. 249-256).”*

The passage provides an artistic and arresting rendition of Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow. Beard has done one of the few studies of flow in education. She linked flow to academic optimism (Beard and Hoy, 2010), which is a significant predictor of student achievement regardless of SES; (Hoy, Tarter, Woolfolk Hoy, 2006).