

35. Practice Activity: High Flow Spaces

The places we choose to work in often have a big impact on how effective our work is. Our environments can influence the quality of our concentration and focus in both positive and negative ways. An interesting study by two researchers at Reading University, Derek Clements-Croome and Li Baizhan (2000), found that UK office workers felt significantly less productive as their work environment became more crowded or cramped, as temperatures varied or the quality of light diminished. A large majority of the subjects interviewed estimated they might get a 10% rise in productivity if their environment was better.

We've seen similar effects with thousands of pupils over twenty years of teaching. And, surprisingly, we've seen pupils who deliberately sit down to work in noisy, distracting locations so they can be disturbed. When we meet to talk about their lack of progress, they'll often tell us, 'Well, I tried to work, but I couldn't concentrate,' or 'I like working with lots of people around me.' Inevitably, when we check the quality of their work, they've expended lots of time but in fact got very little done.

What are your work environments like, and what link might they have to your levels of focus, concentration and flow? By figuring out where you work best, you can increase your levels of concentration – and get more quality work done in less time.

School Spaces

Try walking your school or college environment and mapping where your high concentration, high flow spaces might be. Visit study rooms, workspaces, your library and so on. Look out for:

- » The levels of foreground and background noise in these rooms.
- » The number of other people there.
- » The behaviour of the other people there.
- » The quality of the seating spaces (the tables, chairs and desks).
- » The levels of light.

More than anything, try to capture a feeling – is this place calm and focused? If it is, you will be too.

Then make a list of places to go when you really need to get a job done – your high flow spaces – and places to avoid, even when the worst part of yourself might be persuading you to go there!

High flow spaces: ..... ..... ..... .....	Positive qualities: ..... ..... ..... .....
Low flow spaces: ..... ..... ..... .....	Negative qualities: ..... ..... ..... .....

## Home Spaces

Now have a look at the space you have at home. It might be a shared space or a space you have to yourself. Try to examine it with fresh eyes. What is your desk like? What about the space around you? Is there a corner of your room which is a calm, quiet, high flow space?

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If not, you need to make one. If you can't, you need to find a surrogate study space that is neither school nor home – an in-between space.

## In-between Spaces

Think about your wider environment – the public spaces between school and home. Many pupils we've worked with over the years have found the perfect coffee shop or local library to revise or do independent work or prepare for tests. Others have worked on long bus or train journeys.

Draw up a list of places to investigate. Make sure they're easy to get to so that you can incorporate them into a new routine.

Possible in-between spaces:

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....
6. ....

## Changing Spaces

Benedict Carey, in his book *How We Learn*, discusses some fascinating research about environment and memory. Research shows that changing the space in which you study increases your chances of remembering the material you've studied. Something about the freshness and variation in space makes the material more easily accessible in your memory. Swap high flow study spaces often and you may well remember more of what you've studied.

So, the more high flow study spaces you have at your disposal, the better you'll do!

## Final Thoughts

A new, unfamiliar space often reminds us we're trying to work differently. Even a small change to your room at home works like a quick visual reminder that you're planning on practising harder!

Think about moving the position of your desk, pinning up some quotes, a timetable or some notes and reminders, moving your bed or your chest of drawers. All these small things will help reinforce the change you're making in the way you work.