

April Activities

We've spoken to plenty of pupils who have told us they've fallen asleep whilst revising. And yet the same pupils wouldn't fall asleep in an exam. Why not? Because the exam is (i) hard and (ii) important. Often when we revise we make our work (i) easy and (ii) unimportant. Combine that with the choice to sit on a bed to do it, and you've got the perfect circumstances for falling asleep. This month's activities are designed to get you to think about how hard and important the work you set yourself is. If revision is intellectual combat, it should feel risky, challenging, slightly scary and weirdly exciting. If your revision is so dull it sends you to sleep, maybe you need to rethink what is is you do with your time – and where you work. Changing both could super-charge your exam preparation.

34. Practice Activity: Finding Flow

Many social scientists and academic researchers have become interested in the idea of 'flow'.

Flow is a high concentration, high performance state that we can all experience when we have the right task in front of us, the right space around us and the right balance of challenge and skill. You might well have reached what researchers call a 'flow state' before:

- » If you've ever become so absorbed in a task that time seems to fly – perhaps writing, painting or playing sport.
- » If you've ever sat down to work on something (it might not be school work, maybe a personal project) and hours seem to have gone by in the blink of an eye.
- » If you've been so focused that a two-hour exam might feel like it's gone by in half an hour.
- » If you've ever suddenly felt like you're totally 'in the zone'. A sort of fully engaged, complete concentration on something fascinating and difficult.

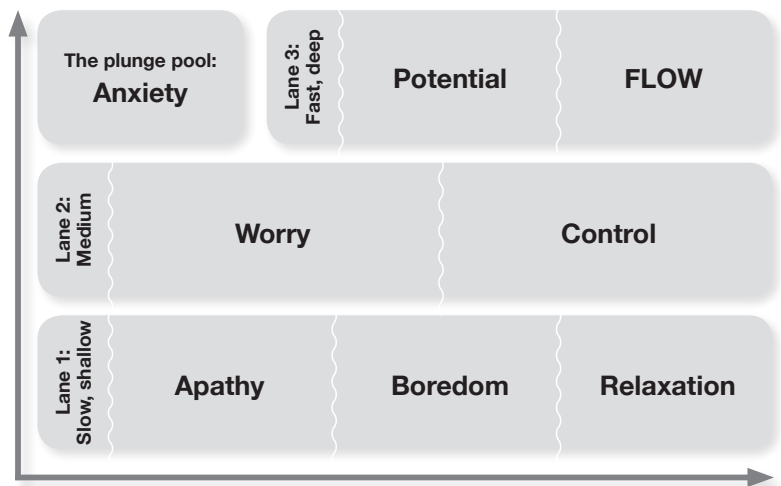
People seem capable of amazing work when they're in flow. They make swifter progress, they learn quickly, stretch and challenge themselves, and operate at a higher level. They seem to expend more mental effort and often feel pretty exhausted afterwards.

Lots of social scientists have studied and written about how to reach flow states. Two observations have emerged:

1. There seems to be a connection between *flow* and *challenge*. You can't reach flow doing something so easy it doesn't require your full concentration.
2. There's a connection between *flow* and *your level of skill*. You can't reach flow trying to attempt something that's way beyond your current capabilities.

But get the right balance of challenge and skill, and you begin to approach flow. One social scientist has produced a kind of emotional map to show us where flow is. We've reproduced a version of it here. Think of a swimming pool with three lanes like this:

April Activities



In lane 1 the water is warm. In other words, it's a nice, safe and comfortable place to be. The tasks here are low challenge and the work is easy. Even as your skill level increases, if you're in lane 1 you always feel relaxed.

In lane 2 the water is deeper and colder. It feels uncomfortable getting in if you're used to the warm water of lane 1. Swimmers move faster here – in other words, the work is harder. It often feels worrying, but stay long enough and you begin to feel in control.

In lane 3 the water is deep and cold. It's hard work here until you get used to it. Tasks are challenging and swimmers cut through the water quickly. Flow occurs in lane 3. There's no other way to get to it than by moving from lane 1, through lane 2 to lane 3.

The plunge pool – argh! Sometimes you try to move lanes too quickly, and end up losing your way and finding yourself in the plunge pool of anxiety. It's freezing in there! If you ever feel panic, if you feel overwhelmed or fearful, step back a little. Find a warmer, safer lane. Build your confidence there and then try to swap lanes again.

What Lane Are You In?

It could be that you're in different lanes for different subjects. So let's review your revision in just one subject.

Subject:

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How do you feel when you revise for this subject? Return to a memory from the last revision session you did. Now check that memory against the three lanes of the flow swimming pool. Your word might not be one of the words in the pool, but is it similar to one of them? Which lane do you think you're in at the moment? Record your thoughts here:

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Changing Lanes

Changing lanes is about increasing challenge. If you're interested in changing lanes, remember:

- » You need to choose harder revision tasks to up your level of challenge and change lanes.
- » This will start by feeling uncomfortable. Worry, stress or anxiety might be the emotions you begin to feel at first.
- » But these feelings will disappear the longer you stay. Control or potential might be the states that replace it.

Let's finish by making a list of revision activities you could be doing. If they're easy and comfortable put them in lane 1. If they make you feel uncomfortable or slightly worried put them in lane 2. If the thought of them makes you feel dread or fear put them in lane 3.

Lane	Indicative emotions	Activity
1	Comfort, ease, confidence, boredom
2	Worry, discomfort, uncertainty
3	Dread, fear, stress

Next time you're feeling like progress is slow and you're comfortable and bored, you know it's time to change lanes. Choose an activity from a deeper, colder lane of the pool!

Final Thoughts

When you're in class, your teachers are often the ones pushing up the level of challenge. They might organise the lesson so that you're being forced to work in a less comfortable place. It's their job to do so!

It's natural sometimes to give ourselves a break when we're working alone. To ease the foot of the gas and do something simple.

So a good question to ask yourself is – *if we were revising/practising this in class, what kind of things would the teacher make us do?* Then do that, rather than return to those temptingly simple, shallow lane tasks.