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Introduction and Invitation (Chapter One of Generating Tact and Flow for Effective Teaching and Learning)

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INTRODUCTION AND INVITATION

This book is for teachers, written by teachers, about the magic days. The days when things go so well you imagine that although teaching is a severely underpaid gig, you loved your work so much you might consider teaching for free. Maybe your most challenging students joined you on the learning journey in a new way, or a slightly under-planned lesson went much better than you anticipated, generating clear direction for the following week. Maybe things took a completely unexpected turn, and a teachable moment turned into a power hour fueled by excited and engaged students. These are the moments when teaching seems to flow effortlessly, when we know what to do and move seamlessly from task to task. Sometimes, early in a teaching career, these moments happen only occasionally. A year or two in, teachers might start having more of those moments, stringing the moments together into hours or even days. And with time, reflection, and experience, teachers move easily into the flow of teaching, subsequently gaining more joy in their professional lives. It is these flow experiences and the ways teachers create them through tactful action that we focus on in this book.

We write with the conviction that these sorts of teaching experiences can inspire and sustain teachers. Because we believe that story is a key way that humans make sense of their lives and work, we have built this book on teachers' stories. These educators work all over the world, teach in a variety of educational settings, and have shared narratives of teaching experiences that amazed and inspired them. Our teacher-contributors responded to these situations in amazing ways, reflexively sharing with us—and with you—their excitement about the serendipitous and successful moments that highlight the daily work of teaching. We took these stories and analyzed them through the theoretical lenses

of tact and flow so that we could find ways to see theory in action. We did this because we wanted to offer ways forward for educators working to deepen and enrich their practice.

We understand that we teach at a time when educators are discouraged, and for good reason. Most teachers enter the profession out of humanistic motives to help make the world a better place. Teachers complete a course of study, learning pedagogical theory embedded in hands-on practice; they graduate and begin teaching in a school, a humanistic organization with moral goals. But not far into their new career, reality hits. They become weighed down with an ever-increasing list of duties and come to see how encumbered the profession is with societal expectations. It is common to hear the language of business as school boards and districts seek new ways to allocate limited funds. Sometimes teachers even hear coercive language: *if your school does not perform well, we will take it over or even close it*.

With this increase in monetary and coercive language, the moral rewards for which most educators teach seem to fall increasingly out of reach. We take this distinction between the moral rewards of teaching and the increasingly monetary and bullying tones of educational contexts from the work of Etzioni (1961, 1964). We do so because we believe his distinction is perhaps more applicable now than when he first suggested it decades ago. A more contemporary writer, Doris Santoro (2011), has named the state in which some educators now find themselves as *moral depression*. Thus, while we write in the book about magical classroom moments, we do so well-aware of the challenges facing today's teachers.

In this book we do not go into detail about the roots, symptoms, or results of teacher demoralization, although we believe deeply that educators need such research, and we are grateful for the many researchers and teachers who have engaged in that work. Rather, we focus on one possible antidote to teacher discouragement and demoralization: *understanding what happens in flow moments for teachers who are tactfully and thoughtfully engaged*. Because we believe that all teachers have these moments, hours, and days, we want to help teachers remember them. We want to understand what factors are at work—or at play—when those experiences happen. We want to understand the antecedent causes of such experiences. Under what conditions do they happen? Can teachers intentionally make such experiences happen? And what might a deep study of these moments offer us? In short, we want to offer teachers stories to lift their spirits and celebrate the good work happening every day in classrooms all over the world. We believe there are other antidotes to moral depression and ways to lift teachers' spirits, but in this book, we focus only on the magical moments. By doing so, we want to offer words that will bring teachers hope and courage.

The stories come mainly from teachers but also from students, and we believe that by poking around inside those stories and the classrooms where they

originated, we might gain new insights into how we can create the conditions where students become intensely engaged in the great work of learning. We also hope that the stories we explore here will help you remember your own learning experiences where the magic happened. Such remembering has the power to restore hope and courage. If this book enlarges your vision for your classroom or helps you regain your vision for going back to your classroom, then we will know we have succeeded.

In the rest of this chapter, we briefly introduce the framework within which we analyze and attempt to understand our contributors' stories. That framework is simple. We explore these stories in a kind of space between two concepts: *flow* and *tact*. As we write this, in 2020, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced *chick-sent-mah-hi*) has worked on the concept of flow for almost four decades. We use his work to understand those moments when students (and sometimes teachers) get completely lost in their work. The concept of *tact* comes from Max Van Manen, who has also worked for decades to understand how teachers respond to all that teaching requires. He has asked to what degree teachers reflect on what they do and if, sometimes, they simply act—tactfully—without taking time to reflect. We introduce Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow and Van Manen's concept of tact briefly in this chapter before offering a more extensive review of their work in chapter 2. We find Csikszentmihalyi's and Van Manen's concepts powerful tools for understanding classrooms and teaching.

What is flow?

We start with Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, which may be easier to understand with reference to the idea of being *in the zone* in sports. Athletes who describe this feeling mean that they were performing at the peak of their abilities. Athletes and coaches were the first to speak about the zone in the sense that we now connect to flow. Over several decades, the concept moved from its original home in athletics to a wider usage. Just as *being in the groove*, another semantic cousin, emigrated from its original musical context some decades earlier, being in the zone found its place in the wider lexicon. We do not need to give more space here to the history or the meanings of these terms; we simply want to point to the similarities in meaning to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow. To Csikszentmihalyi's credit, the word flow—like the word zone—has achieved acceptance in a much wider circle than psychology, its circle of origin; it has entered general usage.

Csikszentmihalyi has named several pre-conditions for flow states and qualities of flow experiences. We follow his lead in distinguishing conditions from qualities, in part because a driving question in this project has been whether teachers can actually create the necessary pre-conditions for students to

experience flow in their learning. We have come to an affirmative answer to that question and focus on it specifically in chapters 8 and 9, where we suggest steps teachers can take and identify meta-themes across the stories pointing to teacher knowledge and expertise. We believe strongly that flow states are not a matter of blind luck. Our careful and repeated reading of these stories has convinced us that we can learn from these stories how to create classroom conditions that help our students get into learning flow. Among other conclusions, we believe that most of the stories our contributors shared with us reveal their high levels of pedagogical tact, and so we draw a strong link between Csikszentmihalyi's and Van Manen's work.

The first pre-condition of flow is *goal clarity*. The sarcastic English sentence, "Remind me again why I'm doing this," captures the need to meet this condition. Teachers expect clear rationales for new policies and practices handed down from school jurisdictions. In this regard, students are quite like us—they want to know why we insist they complete their school work—and, as most teachers know, the older the student, the more important it is to make the purposes of curriculum and instruction clear. Csikszentmihalyi sometimes lists goal clarity and *goal buy-in* as one pre-condition and sometimes he separates the two. We treat both in more detail in chapter 2 but will note here the immediately obvious connection of goal buy-in for educators: given that most K-12 students come to our classrooms because they are required to do so, how do we get them to buy in?

The next pre-condition Csikszentmihalyi lists is *feedback clarity*; to get into a flow state, people need to know how they are doing. In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky (1994) presents an anonymous and agonizingly self-conscious protagonist who never gets into a flow state (or even seems to enjoy life) because he constantly worries about what other characters in the book and even his readers think of him and of what he is saying. On the other hand, the student who never has her work graded or returned by a disorganized teacher will also be denied entering flow because she literally does not know how well she is doing in class. These extremes—obsession with feedback and absence of feedback—help us understand Csikszentmihalyi's point: we need enough feedback to focus on the task at hand, but even so, we cannot focus only on the feedback.

The fourth pre-condition Csikszentmihalyi specifies is *concentration* or *absorption in the task*. He uses this term in its ordinary sense. The Dostoevsky character we named above concentrated, but because of his debilitating insecurity, he concentrated on feedback rather than on living. The student who never again sees the assignments she submitted cannot concentrate effectively on upcoming tasks because she has no feedback. The stories throughout this book demonstrate how students can become absorbed in classroom activities and assignments, usually because they were fun and almost always, by definition,

because they were engaging. We return to concentration and absorption in chapter 2.

Csikszentmihalyi's final pre-condition—*the balance between challenge and skill*—implies that the task at hand cannot be too simple or it will not engage us. We experience doing dishes as too easy; clean dishes are necessary but we are both capable of much more. But the task cannot be too difficult or the individual will become anxious. We are most likely to enter flow when engaged in tasks where we are capable of success but that also demand most or all our skill, tasks like facilitating a cooperative learning task for teachers or analyzing data or revising a book chapter.

Those are the main pre-conditions; Csikszentmihalyi also lists the qualities of flow. First, a person in a flow state typically has a *sense of control*. Self-talk language such as "I've got this," catches this sense. We are less certain about the T-shirt that reads "No Fear." One of us (KB) always has a sense of high control (of self-efficacy, from Bandura, 1997) in the woodshop but never has it when looking under the hood of the car. We all have such areas where we feel in control, and areas where we do not.

Second, the activity yielding a flow state is inherently rewarding or worthwhile. Csikszentmihalyi uses the word *autotelic* to name this condition. We explore this idea at greater length in chapter 2, and we note there that the athlete may want to win and the teacher may need the salary, but that autotelic activities, by definition, are their own reward. Joggers, climbers, backpackers, New Year's Day polar bear dip swimmers, and others often find themselves answering the question, "Tell me how this is fun!?" Whether they have heard of Csikszentmihalyi's work or not, answers like, "It just is" probably echo this quality.

The third and fourth qualities of flow are related: *loss of self-consciousness* and *loss of awareness of the passage of time*. Several stories in this book recount classes where students experienced these qualities that Csikszentmihalyi described. A few stories even tell of teachers who, while remaining professional in every way, were able to enter into that flow moment with their students, sometimes because of on-the-spot decisions about the direction to take the class (or let the class go). We examine several such stories of good decisions in chapter 5, but for now we will leave off with Csikszentmihalyi and turn to Van Manen's conceptualization of tact.

What is tact?

It is important to note that Van Manen's conception of teacher tact varies somewhat from the ordinary English sense of the word tact, where we might consider the most tactful way to tell someone about the hole in their pants or the spinach lurking in their teeth. We use tact when we explain to our family that, despite their expectations, "No, we are not actually coming over for Christmas this

year." These paradigmatic examples of tact connote politeness and finding the best way to approach sensitive topics. By way of contrast, Van Manen conceptualizes tact as comprising skill and ease or effortlessness, meanings obviously related to but still different from our normal use of the term. Tact is a keen and observable sense that experts act without even thinking about what they are doing. They just move.

We have all watched cooks, athletes, carpenters, gardeners, or teachers who made excellent work look effortless. Of course, hundreds of researchers and writers have tried to describe or explain this kind of expertise (including Csikszentmihalyi). *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell's (2008) assessment of how people become experts, by practicing for 10,000 hours, even became a bestseller. By *tact,* Max Van Manen means that teachers possess something like expertise, but more like quiet competence. It is the sense one gets in the presence of teachers who know what is happening in their classrooms and can handle with graceful ease any situations that arise. We think of tact in relation to teachers who both deeply know and are known by their students; they are connected. And they are confident, flexible, and capable.

Teachers have been likened to performers for their improvisational abilities; it is a performer's uncanny sense of his audience's mood and his ability, without apparent confusion or effort, to make moment-by-moment adjustments to his material or tone. The highly tactful teacher seems to know not only what is happening in the room at any given moment but also how to shape what is going to happen next. This means tact is a kind of embodied knowing and acting in the moment that is rooted in a deep understanding of pedagogy and students. It is authentic action, rather than artificial or borrowed. Tactful teachers are sensitive, thoughtful, and responsive to the needs of students because they understand how students act, and they bring that understanding to bear with sensitivity and purpose as they keep in mind the bigger picture of where the class is going. From this perspective, tactful teachers work from a complex knowledge base and a fully stocked pedagogical toolbox to bring their understanding of students, their attentiveness, their views of the world, and their interpretive sensibilities to every moment. Tact is comprised of both feeling and knowing what to do that is unique to the personality and character of whatever adult might be in charge, be it teacher, mother, counselor, or principal.

The past few years of conceptualizing and composing this book have convinced me (ST) that we can, in fact, see and sense tact in teachers, even in the first few moments of stepping into their classrooms. It is a quality of calm, the sense that nothing bad is going to happen in this place, as long as this teacher is at the helm. It is a sense of leadership that the adult knows what to do next or at least can be honest about needing a moment to figure it out or readjust if things are not working. Experienced teachers have this tolerant forbearance and stay in the action of teaching with patient energy. We see clear

connections between this quality and Csikszentmihalyi's inclusion of engaged awareness as a quality of flow. In this book, we ask how teachers' stories reveal the ways that tact and flow work together to highlight better the ways teachers do their work.

In his observations of teachers, Van Manen (1991) observed that many did not appear to need to think about their practice while engaged in the work of teaching; they simply knew what to do. This conclusion runs somewhat contrary to the conclusions of Donald Schön, who coined the phrase *reflective practice*. Schön's research entailed observing a variety of professionals at work (1983) which led him to conclude that effective practitioners were reflective practitioners, professionals who reflected before, during, and after their professional activities. Van Manen saw it differently, concluding that many successful teachers might reflect before and after teaching, but in their moment-to-moment classroom work, they seemed to carry on almost intuitively, without the need to reflect. He named this quality teacher tact.

We see tact running through all the stories we included in this volume. They evidence the ways tact is connected to our dispositions and desires. In some cases, tact is related to intuition. In other stories, it appears to be a skill or ability. In most cases, it involves sensitivity, seeing, listening, and being aware. It also expresses itself as a kind of pedagogical expertise. Because we believe it connects with all these elements, we cannot offer a formula (nor would we want to). But in chapters 8 and 9 of the book, we review many of our contributors' stories to identify the common themes or threads that indicate mindsets and practices tactful teachers seem to cultivate.

The connections between tact and flow serve as the analytic lens for the stories in this book. From flow, we can derive the qualities of what it feels like to lose track of time doing something you love; from tact, we can appreciate what it is to know intuitively what is the best thing for the next moment in front of you. We collected teachers' stories of their classes because we believed that we might discover in them some of the qualities Van Manen and Csikszentmihalyi described in their work. We also believed that by analyzing these stories through this lens, we would gain deeper understanding of how to cultivate tact and facilitate flow for educators who are so inclined. Not all teachers possess tact, and not all students experience flow. But we are convinced that teachers can learn tact. And we believe they can create the conditions for flow. We gathered these stories and wrote this book out of those convictions.

The sources of the stories

We asked over 100 in-service and pre-service teachers to describe their flow experiences in teaching. In our invitations, we described our goals for the

project and very briefly explained our wish to work between Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow (where teacher and students lose awareness of time, lose self-consciousness, and get completely engrossed in the tasks in front of them) and Van Manen's concept of tact (where teachers' pedagogical experience and keen awareness allow them to "know feelingly" how to behave in the best interest of students). Some of the stories teachers contributed pushed us to clarify our thinking about how the concepts of flow and tact connect, but mostly our contributors knew what we meant when we asked them to write about those classroom experiences when everything went well and time flew by. We asked them to describe what they did—or think they did—that contributed to their students having a quality and highly engaged learning experience and why they thought those classes were successful for their students. We expected to receive (and did receive) stories about engrossing assignments, surprises, times when a plan went exactly as teachers imagined it or when it went completely differently—to the benefit of all. We heard about times when students were co-teachers and students and teachers together were co-learners, and we heard about times when something made teachers laugh. We asked teachers to reflect on times when they felt deeply satisfied with their teaching or when students could not believe the time was up at the end of a lesson. These are the stories we requested.

We received hand-written and emailed descriptions, some as short as a paragraph, others several pages long. We also conducted and transcribed several interviews. The stories we work with here came from all grade levels in K-12 classrooms and from higher education; they came from various subject areas; they came from several countries.

How did we organize the stories we tell and retell here? We organized chapters 3 to 7 to reflect loosely the criteria and qualities that Van Manen and Csikszentmihalyi list; their conceptualizations offered lenses through which we read the stories. But we were also compelled to attend to the categories that seemed to arise from the stories themselves. We wanted to honor the teachers who helped us by telling their stories, and we wanted to honor the two theorists who offered us the framework within which we work here. Giving honor in these two directions did not cause us even the smallest of headaches, and we believe that you, our readers, will find our organization to be reader-friendly and fair to the two theorists and dozens of teachers whose work stands behind these chapters.

To show you what sort of thing you can expect in the pages ahead, this story from Jason's high school Biology classroom and the analysis that follows will help you see how we used tact and flow to make sense of the magic moments embedded in classroom interactions where tactful teachers live out thoughtful pedagogy.

AN EXAMPLE: PREDATOR AND PREY

Jason Niedermeyer

High School Teacher, Oregon

In my first year of teaching sophomore biology, I discovered that student engagement spiked anytime I incorporated the observation of animals into the curriculum. I was also teaching freshmen English, and found that students were most likely to participate productively in large and small groups if they had opportunity for creativity and argumentation.

By my third year of teaching, the district was in need of more science classes, so I developed an animal behavior course. Its principal goal (in the eyes of the building and district) was to use ethology as a conduit for teaching the processes of science; for me, the goal was to help students use the behavior of animals to understand their own lives better. However, I instinctively knew that neither goal could be achieved without engaging students' natural sense of wonder. Through my teaching of biology and English, I had developed some pedagogical content knowledge that I knew I could draw upon, but I also knew I was going to have to create new experiences to elicit the wonder necessary to inspire understanding. That is why I invented the game Nature's Duel.

The premise of the game is that predator and prey are competitors that adapt in response to each other. Though I have rules written up for the game, I typically introduce it by having two students volunteer, one to serve as the predator, the other as the prey. The predator gets to choose what type of animal he or she is, followed by the prey doing the same. Typically, the more boisterous volunteer insists on being the predator, and they select their alter-ego animal with the kind of pride that just begs for a fall. I always hope that the second volunteer is more introverted and thoughtful in their decision making.

My dream scenario transpired recently, with a cocky athlete boldly declaring that he was a great white shark while his opponent thought for a moment, listened to the suggestions of her classmates and then asked whether her prey animal had to live in the same place as the great white. I informed her that they did not, so without hesitation, she chose to be a terrestrial slug. The athlete/predator cried foul, but I informed him that he had the opportunity to make the first adaptation, and that he had better respond to the fact that he was living in a different environment than his prey item. The predator chose to develop legs—a bold stroke that would of course take millions of years, but was well within the parameters of the game (as long as the adaptation exists somewhere in nature, it is fair game). The class "ooed" and "ahhed," suggesting they were picturing a 20-foot-long, 2000-pound denizen of the deep that

had crawled out of the water to become the scariest thing since "Sharknado." His opponent, however, was nonplussed, and calmly chose to develop wings. At this point in the game, it was time for the class and me to take on the third role: that of judge. Charged with identifying which individual won that round—the predator or the prey—all but one student raised their hands in favor of the slug. The lone dissenter was a teammate of the predator, but being unable to produce an argument as to why the great white would win (besides it being "freaking awesome"), he quickly created a consensus in the class.

I modeled another round, with the newly quadrupedal shark having the first opportunity to respond to the aerial slug before the latter adapted and the judge made the call. After that round (another shellacking by the slug), I told the students that games last five rounds, with the first four requiring adaptations that exist in the natural world, before the fifth round where they could draw upon whatever fictional muse they wanted—Star Wars, Harry Potter, Tolkien, or Sylvester Stallone. Once that explanation was complete and students clarified any lingering questions, I gave students 90 seconds to form groups of three or four (in which case there would be one predator, one prey, and two students serving as the judge). Unlike other times that students were invited to form groups, they were so amped to play the game that 90 seconds was almost too much time to create groups, and many started playing before I gave my final instructions (they were to attempt to play at least 2 five-round games with people in different roles each game).

As soon as the game got underway, I could have easily removed myself to my desk to take attendance, answer e-mails, and even grade papers. But the energy of the classroom was too infectious; I had to cruise around, observe, and comment. While orcas developed the spade feet necessary to dig after worms, wolves were busy using echolocation to find cave dwelling snakes, but the prey species consistently had the upper hand, with poison being shot out of every body part imaginable. As the games escalated into the fifth rounds, I had teleportation battling mind control, and I floated from group to group consulting with judges to help determine winners.

Once the time limit had been reached, and virtually every group had played at least two complete games, I got the class's attention and gave them one minute to identify how they might get data from their game sheets. After [giving] time to consult with their opponents, I took volunteers to see what they had come up with. As I expected, virtually everyone in the class had identified that we could add up the winner (predator or prey) for each round. I then proceeded to do just that, and students diligently reported who won on each score sheet, with nary a student saying "pass" or "I don't know."

By the time I'd written all the scores on the board, it was obvious that the prey had won significantly more often than predator had won. I gave the students 30 seconds to come up with explanations as to why. Most students concluded that it was because the prey got to go second. I told them I completely agreed. I even went as far as to ask them, if they were ever the prey and they lost a round, "What were you thinking?!" After asking this semi-rhetorical question, I told them that though it seemed like they had enjoyed playing the game, it really was stupid; if I tried to market it with Milton-Bradley, I was certain I'd be asked by executives who would want to play a game where you know who should win every time? So then I threw the natural follow-up question at the students: why would I create a game where I know who should win every time? Fewer students were able to come up with an explanation for this question in a short period of time, so I took volunteers. The first student to raise her hand informed me "because that's how nature works." I asked her what she meant. She proceeded to explain that if predators won all the time, or even an equal number of times, then the predators would drive the prey extinct. It was a lovely answer, and her classmates concurred, but I asked if there was more to it than that. Another student piped up, "well, if the prey loses, it loses its life." I then asked him about the predator. He told me, "he just misses a meal."

After this exchange, I turned to the class. "So, who has more at stake in this game, the predator, or the prey?" They chorally responded prey, so I told them that what they had just discovered was a key principle of both behavioral and evolutionary biology. As such, it had a highly technical term that they were going to want to write down so they could get the spelling correct. It is called the life-dinner principle. (If I'm being honest, not as many students thought this was as funny as I had hoped, but enough did to warrant my using the joke again in the future.) I followed this proclamation with another question: What would have to happen to turn the life-dinner principle into a situation where the predator had just as much at stake? After giving them one minute to brainstorm with a partner, I again sought out volunteers to provide me with ideas. Almost everyone recognized that the prey item had to be capable of killing the predator, and several were certain that the easiest way for prey to ensure that was the case was to be poisonous.

At this point I asked students if they knew what evolutionary biologists call this scenario. One student said "life-life principle." I told him that was a good guess, but in reality, it was called an evolutionary arms race. I was able to help them draw on what they'd learned (hopefully) in history about arms races, and have them liken it to what happens between poisonous prey and their increasingly immune predators (more poison leads to more immunity,

leading to more poison and more immunity…). I informed them that these kinds of relationships are rare between predators and prey, but that one of the most famous (albeit it borderline) examples happens in their own backyards between critters they've inevitably seen: the rough-skinned newt and the common garter snake.

I was then able to launch into a short PowerPoint augmented by a likely apocryphal story about a biologist licking the highly toxic newt to show off for students and nearly drowning, and have them excited to analyze a figure that illustrated the concurrent development of toxicity and immunity in sympatric populations. What was most astounding to me was that here we were, at the end of a 90-minute class period, and students were on the edge of their seats to analyze a figure to determine if what was happening in their back yard was a case of the life-dinner principle or a true evolutionary arms race. Even more astounding is how I have been able to scale this lesson to work with students ranging from high school seniors applying to ivy league schools to second-grade students for whom English is a second language and every grade and ability in between. I have even used the lesson to inspire Elementary Education majors to consider how to utilize creativity in science during an evening class while they were doing part-time student teaching; several students said they have never laughed so hard in their lives. I think in every case, a significant number of students achieved a state of flow, becoming so engrossed in the game that they wanted to understand every aspect of it, even those connected to the "hard" science components.

This is one of our favorite stories from a teacher; he offered us wonderful narrative detail and dialogue to help us understand both the depth of his pedagogy and the high levels of student engagement. If we conceptualize tactful teaching as a contributor to student flow, we can see those obvious connections here. Jason's tact was evident in his planful action; he built a course and game based on content that would capture students' interest while building their content knowledge.

As any elementary teacher can testify, students' interest in animals is a real thing. I (ST) am glad to see it does not evaporate when students get to high school. But building a whole course around this interest is a gutsy move, in this case demonstrating Jason's trust in his own ability to justify it to administrators and make it work for students. We appreciate the tact indicated in his dual goals for the course, to *use ethology as a conduit for teaching the processes of* science while also enabling students to *use the behavior of animals to better understand their own lives*. We especially value the essential role he assigns to students' wonder in his planning; he wants to inspire them to something beyond mere curiosity. His decision to use creativity and argumentation is both intuitive and telling;

high school students love a good challenge, and the predator/prey relationship seems obvious on its face, tempting boastful students into opting for the stronger element and forcing them to contend with the unexpected results of that choice. Teaching students about their own lives, as Jason aimed to do here, is the kind of move Parker Palmer advocates in *The Courage to Teach* (1998), a book we recommend to our readers and one to which we refer repeatedly in this book. What Palmer recommends, and what Jason demonstrates so successfully here, is that when we can teach from a deep knowledge of who we are, we are more equipped to recognize that our students learn as they are. It is with patience and kindness and creativity in curricular games that we can approach and help our students approach sensitive issues from a different angle and perhaps see students change their mind about themselves. Changing our minds about ourselves is one of the most difficult things to do; Jason creates a way to help his students do that, and it unfolds into richer and richer moments of surprise.

We also want to note how Jason used a discovery process to uncover curriculum. We use the word *uncover* here to honor both Jason as well as Neil Postman. Postman regularly pointed out how educators say they covered this or that bit of the curriculum; he called on teachers to uncover the curriculum alongside their students and invited us as educators to be moved into wonder ourselves (Postman, 1979; Postman & Weingartner, 1969).

Jason's tact as a teacher extends to his focus on students, even in a moment when it would have been easy for him to draw away and grade or take attendance. He knew that his presence would channel students' enthusiasm in positive directions and that it would help him discern helpful directions for what should come next. He creatively used humor (the "life-dinner principle") to highlight principles studied and employed by evolutionary biologists. We sense that this learning experience was far more effective for helping students learn these ideas than a lecture would have been; at the very least, it was more memorable.

We leave Jason's story now, but throughout this book we use stories such as this one to ask how Csikszentmihalyi's conception of flow and Van Manen's conception of tact connect in students' and teachers' experiences in classrooms.

The chapters that follow

Earlier in this chapter, we briefly introduced the framework within which we try to understand the stories our contributors provided us. In chapter 2, we develop that framework in more depth; it summarizes the scholarly conversations related to tact and flow. Figure 1.1 offers a view of the ways we see these concepts working together to support an analysis of meaningful teaching and learning.

More of our readers will know of the work of Csikszentmihalyi and flow than will know of Van Manen and tact. University libraries and public libraries have Csikszentmihalyi's books on their shelves. Van Manen's works appear in teacher

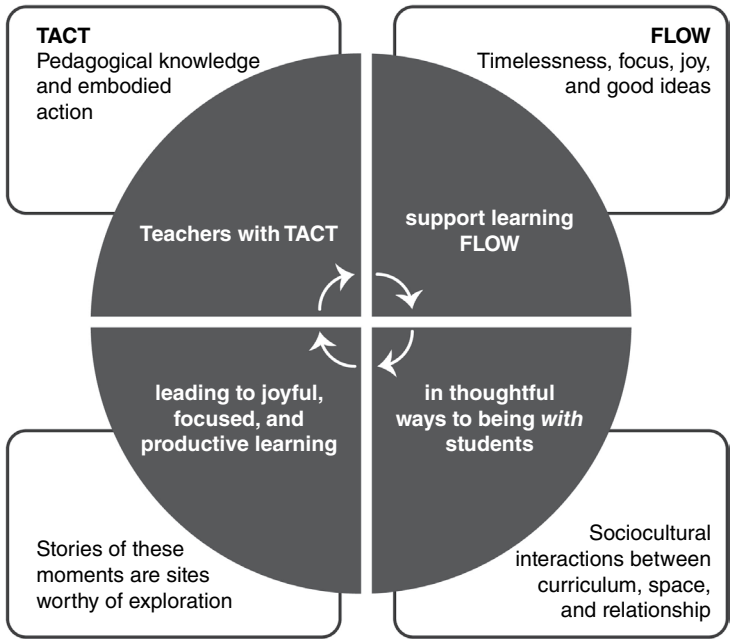

FIGURE 1.1 The interrelatedness of tact and flow for creating engaging and joyful learning experiences

education courses but not in the popular imagination. What we offer in chapter 2 will be new for some and simply review for others, but we do want to make our theoretical framework clear so our analysis of the stories that follow will make more sense to our readers.

In chapter 3, we listen to some accounts of pure enjoyment, by students, teachers, or both. One of the prompts we used in our correspondence and conversation with our participants was this: "Tell us about the days you would have taught for free." This chapter draws a big picture from the stories of those days. We give those stories priority because we think they will help set the positive tone we desired for this book. By helping you in chapter 3 to recollect your own joyful teaching and learning experiences, we invite you to consider tact and flow through the window of sheer enjoyment.

Chapter 4 focuses on stories where teachers forgot about themselves (Csikszentmihalyi) and yet knew that being intentional and mindful (both Csikszentmihalyi and Van Manen) were critical to the success of the learning and teaching happening in their classrooms. Being simultaneously forgetful and mindful can initially strike one as paradoxical, and we recognize the tension between them. In fact, these two ideas bring us to one of the major points where we try to create conversation between the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Van Manen.

All readers who have worked in classrooms will find themselves somewhere in chapter 5 because there we work with stories about the decisions that teachers make. Among the many themes that emerged in the stories teachers told us, this one jumped out: teachers make surprisingly good decisions *in the moment*. As it happens, this theme is another meeting point between Van Manen's concept of teacher tact—knowing intuitively what to do in the moment—and Csikszentmihalyi's criterion of loss of self-consciousness.

One of the key qualities of flow is lost awareness of time. In chapter 6, we tell stories about classes where the time flew and both teachers and students lost track of time. In such classes, everything goes as it should or even better than the teacher expected. When time flies for a classroom full of students, it means everyone is in flow; everyone is surprised when they look at the clock. In his various works, Csikszentmihalyi describes this loss of awareness of time in many dimensions of life, including hobbies, sports, and work. We focus on this quality of apparent timelessness in classrooms in chapter 6. To understand what losing track of time looks like, sounds like, and feels like in these flow moments, we share stories about this flow quality and point out some commonalities between students' and teachers' narratives about the passage of classroom time.

Csikszentmihalyi repeatedly lists clear and continuous feedback as essential to enter or stay in a flow state; in his view, one must know how one is doing. Chapter 7 "Stories of Student Feedback" recognizes that teachers might experience flow and tact themselves, but they also receive confirmation about flow and tact from the feedback students give them. This chapter focuses on the stories where students told or showed their teachers that they were engaging fully with the classroom program, learning effectively, and enjoying their work. Some of those stories involve feedback in the moment, and others tell of feedback given at the end of the term or even long afterward. But they share one element in common: students gave their teachers effective feedback about the quality of their teaching.

In chapter 8, "Steps Teachers Can Take," we grow a little bolder, pointing to stories that seem to offer specific suggestions about how tactful teachers create flow conditions. We examine what all of us as teachers can do to build the kind of learning and teaching ethos where students are more likely to experience flow in their learning.

We end this book (chapter 9) by sharing meta-themes that exist across the stories and that invite further consideration of the habits, mindsets, and actions teachers might take to develop tact. Budget pressures and widespread standardized testing have reduced some of the artistry that should characterize teaching. We will not complain in this volume about tight budgets or the growth of testing culture in our time; other writers have done so already. But in the face of those pressures, we believe that those teachers who want to restore artistry to their teaching can find several open routes. Aiming at the cultivation of pedagogical

tact is one way, and we focus in chapter 9 on that aim. Building the pre-conditions for flow into our design and planning of curriculum and instruction is another. Without doubt, teachers currently have reasons to feel beleaguered. We know that many teachers can hear the accountability and assessment hoofbeats just outside their classroom doors. Yet, in those circumstances or even because of those circumstances, we take a hopeful tone throughout this book, trusting that readers will find optimism in the stories provided by their colleagues.

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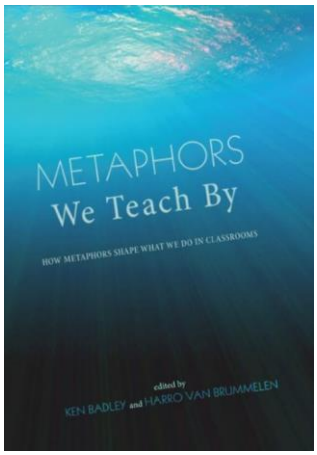

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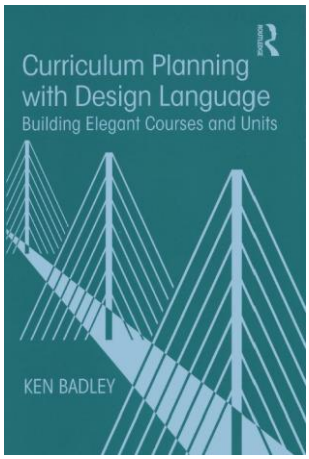

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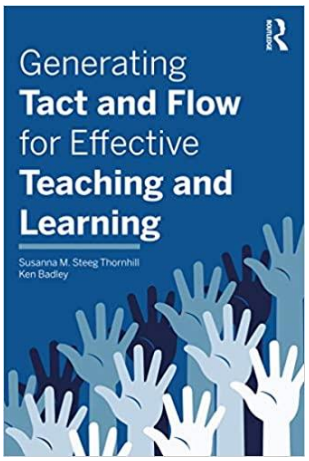

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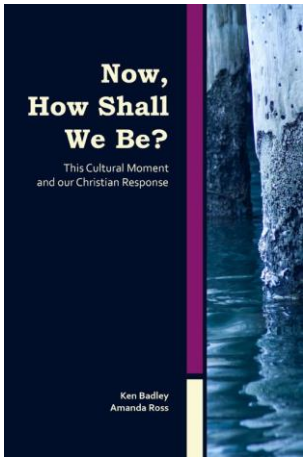

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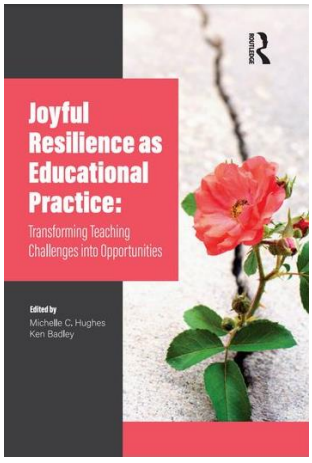

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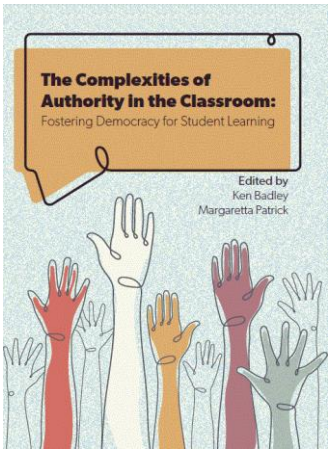

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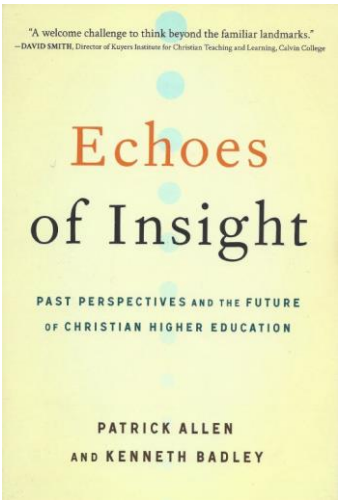

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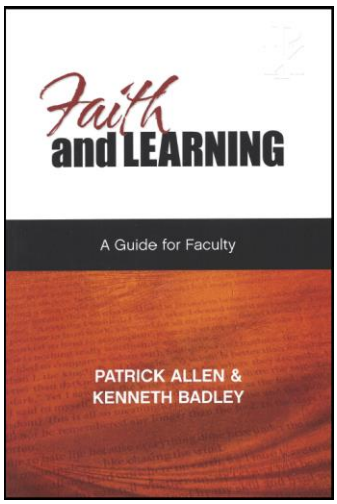

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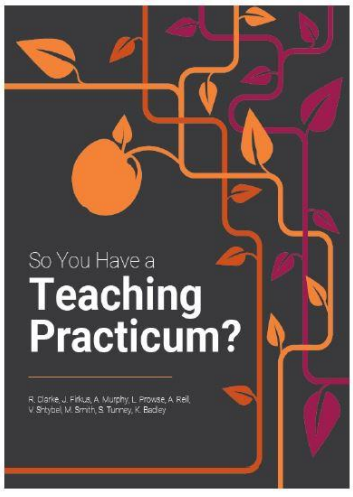

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