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Book Review: Thornhill, S., & Badley, K. (2021). Generating tact and flow for effective teaching and learning: Routledge. ISBN 9780367628949, hardcover, 150 pages.

Christina Belcher
Emeritus Professor Redeemer University, cbelcher@redeemer.ca

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Abstract

Thornhill & Badley explore the methodology of Csikszentmihalyi and Van Manen regarding the topics of tact and flow. They analyze teacher narratives to demonstrate how pedagogy can generate tact and flow in their classroom teaching for pre-service and existing teachers.

Keywords

tact, flow, teaching, learning, narratives, encouragement

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Christina Belcher

In reading the title of this work, I selected 3 questions that would guide my reading:

1. Why do tact and flow matter?
2. Why are narratives the chosen vehicle of information on tact and flow?
3. How do theory and teacher practice combine to demonstrate tact and flow where the rubber meets the road in a public or Christian educational environment?

These questions provided a helpful framework for me as I delved into my exploration of the concepts, theory, and methodology of this succinct book.

Introduction and Organization

These opening words ground the reader well for the purpose of this text.

“This book draws from and analyzes teachers’ and students’ stories of great classes in order to promote teachers’ development of pedagogical tact and to encourage flow states for students. Taken together, these theoretical lenses—pedagogical tact and flow—provide a valuable framework for understanding and motivating classroom engagement. As the authors suggest, tactful teachers are more likely to see their students in flow than teachers who struggle with basic classroom routines and practices. Grounded in narrative research, and written for pre-service teachers, the book offers strategies for replicating these first-hand accounts of peak classroom

teaching and learning.” (Thornhill & Badley, Front matter, p. 3)

Throughout the text, examples of the best lesson ever, or worst experience possible, are wondrously transformed into teachable moments, as students and educators engage in the dance of teaching, learning, being, and doing in the craft of educating in a classroom.

Based in the theory of Csikszentmihalyi’s work on the pre-conditions and qualities of flow and Van Manen’s work on tact, the stories of teachers unfold not to tell, but to *demonstrate* that mystical aspect of teaching. Throughout the text, examples of the best lesson ever, or worst experience possible, are wondrously transformed into teachable moments, as students and educators engage in the dance of teaching, learning, being, and doing in the craft of educating in a classroom.

This text is divided into nine chapters and is very well organized. The first two chapters, the *Introduction and Invitation*, and *Theoretical Framework and Methodology*, creatively provide a runway for using the text itself to demonstrate tact and flow in both content and analysis of personal stories of teachers within the text.

Christina Belcher, Emeritus Professor, Redeemer University

The remainder of the chapters focus on narrative stories of teachers featured in the text. Divided into the following themes, these narratives masterfully demonstrate examples of tact and flow within the act of teaching and learning: *Stories of Pure Enjoyment; Stories of Forgetful Attention; Stories of Teachers' Decision Making; Stories of Time Flying, Stories of Student Feedback, Stories About Steps That Teachers Take, and Big Ideas From Short Stories.*

Why Tact and Flow Matter

The text proceeds to fulfill its purpose to understand what happens in “flow moments for teachers who are tactfully and thoughtfully engaged” (p. 3). At first, I was not sure what this would mean, but the narratives as teaching tools served as a vehicle for celebrating teaching on the good and bad days, creating a landscape where I could not help but desire to be better in the tact and flow of effective teaching.

The authors provide succinct and clear definitions for the central concepts, tact and flow. Van Manen described the word *tact*, from a Latin word meaning touch, to mean being fully in touch with a situation. Tact unfolds in the experienced moment. Van Manen considered tact to be found in the ways teachers make countless, effective decisions daily (pp. 26, 27).

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Csikszentmihalyi defined *flow* as a “sense” that one has the skills to adequately cope with challenges, where someone can perform as a teacher without self-consciousness (p. 19). Preconditions to flow include concentration or absorption in a task, balance between challenge and skill, goal clarity, goal buy-in, and feedback clarity (p. 20). When the researchers analysed the narratives, they noticed some of these traits in what they called the “qualities of flow”. These qualities included a sense of control, autotelic flow

state, loss of self-consciousness, loss of awareness of the passage of time, and complete absorption to the task at hand.

Thornhill and Badley explored and merged the combination of tact and flow as being essential for good pedagogy.

The Power of Narratives Within the Craft of Teaching

Thornhill and Badley unfold future impact in teaching and learning, beyond impact being only a moment in time. When the book is read as a whole, it reveals a teleological aspect of their research. These examples of personal narrative accounts are some from 100 stories chosen carefully and for a purpose. This past, present, and future scope shows why the research is significant not only in a moment, but over time.

“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.” (p. 3)

The authors took an ontological stance that *being* comes before *doing*; that who we are cannot be separated from what we do in the classroom. For this reason, the narratives from teachers are central to their research.

This quote from the text, regarding the significance of personal narratives, demonstrated their ontological stance well: “Stories offer a bridge between knowledge and practice, functioning as “arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life or community as lived” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 17). This resonated with the ethnographic work of Dorothy Smith (2005, 2006), who believed that omitting the voices of meaningful dialogue from within an institutional community, bars deeper understanding into what it means to be part of a community. In employing

lived narratives, the authors allow readers to be able to learn from such voices. “Narratives are a unifying force for humanity, because we make sense of our lives and experience through story” (p. 17).

One of the things that I appreciated from this text is the element of embodied teachable moments that are so easily identified, mirroring the theory and practice from which the book is tethered. I also appreciated the fact that these embodied stories from teachers are not treated as dry individual case studies, but are woven into teachable moments for the teachers who read them. The included narratives engage the reader with masterful demonstrations of tact and flow in the classroom that educators can build upon within their own practice.

In times of Covid, I found this text to be a surprisingly encouraging and helpful journey into the *soul* of teaching that could resonate with any teacher. The authors remind educators of why the noble profession of teaching is important. They do so not through theory alone, but via narratives of the stories of teachers and their ordinary and extraordinary moments in a classroom.

In scrutinizing this text, I re-read and searched to be able to say what I did not like, overlooked, or missed for critique, I was unable to find anything. I think this text will be a valuable resource for pre-service teachers, and for more seasoned teachers to further hone their craft.

“Narratives are a unifying force for humanity, because we make sense of our lives and experience through story.”

References

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