

Using Waiting Time Well: Toward a Theory of Microflow

Abstract

Though waiting is an eminently common occurrence, there is little research on how to have a positive waiting experience. Building on research on optimal experience (*flow*), boredom, multitasking, and waiting, this study explored some of the factors that are known to lead to positive experiences and can be applied to waiting.

People in Penn Station New York were asked to fill out surveys that inquired about the activities that the commuters were performing while waiting for the commuter rail. Surveys focused either on the perceptions pertaining to the activity, such as whether the activity was perceived as useful, or on whether the characteristics of the flow experience were present, such as performing the activity for its own sake (*autotelicity*).

One of the study's key conclusions is that a positive waiting experience is under the control of the individual. There are few, if any, advantages inherent in being of a particular age, gender, or minority, and even environmental factors, like comfort, can be enhanced or mitigated by the individual. Results also showed that more active [emotionally-neutral/emotionally-positive] tasks that either require higher alertness, or that tend to make one more alert, are likely to lead to positive perceptions of the activity and an overall positive experience.

Though *deep flow* often cannot be experienced while waiting, results showed that it was possible to experience a sub-construct of flow, termed *microflow*. Building on recent flow research, microflow was redefined as a compromised form of flow, and the new definition was consistent with the data. Microflow is marked by high levels of arousal and affect, as well as satisfaction with the activity and the sense of having had a positive experience. But, some individuals had *pseudopeak experiences* instead, which were reflected in strong feelings of satisfaction with the activity in the sense that the activity was a good use of time and an enjoyable experience.

Ultimately, the way to a positive outcome involves knowing what energizes a person and improves the mood, right along with planning ahead so as to be able to mitigate any environmental challenges inherent in the waiting situation.