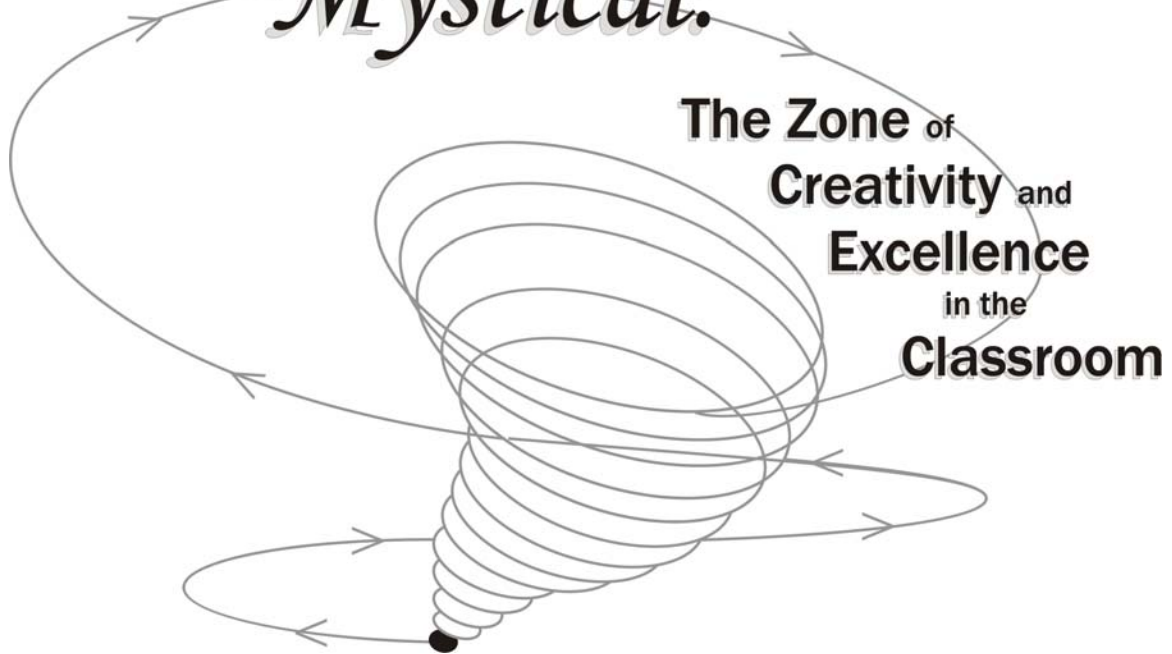


Revealing the Mystical:



WORKSHOP MATERIALS

INTRODUCTION

“The Zone” is a term used by athletes to describe a sometimes elusive mental state that is characterized by mental focus and a sense of calmness and confidence. Actions and decisions are effortless and easy in the Zone. There is no self-consciousness and the athlete is totally in the moment, in the here and now. John and Adele Algeo describe the Zone in this way:

[the Zone is] a state of altered consciousness in a sport when the athlete has a sense of wholeness with the activity and, consequently, of confidence and success. (American Speech, 1997).

We see this concept expressed in a variety of other paradigms. For example, in Buddhism, the term *satori* is used to refer to a deep or lasting state of enlightenment. It is also used to describe the path that leads to those "Eureka!" moments of discovery, like those that come from the clarification of a mystery or the realization of a hidden truth. In the performing arts, it is the act of purest expression of the space that lies between the worlds of imagination and reality. Wherever we see it expressed, though, this idea of a place from which we can draw energy, awareness and excellence is a compelling one which has significant implications for teachers in the classroom.

Imagine a classroom full of students who are happy, engaged and thoroughly focused on learning. Imagine you, the teacher, as part of that, doing your part to gently guide and direct your students to discover on their own the little pearls you have laid out for them. This is possible. What you will explore in this workshop will help you to discover exactly what this looks like for you.

In order to properly understand the Zone, it will be necessary to draw on your own experience with it, and one of the first activities you will see is designed to recognize what working in a relaxed state of creativity and high performance feels like. Knowing this will help you to create and manipulate such moments in your classrooms.

Getting your classes into the Zone also requires some important skills, and we will explore some of the essentials here. For instance, teachers must be able to cultivate habits and routines that improve their students’ ability to embrace a long-term learning process so they can foster the skills that make states of high performance like the Zone possible. Teachers should also understand how to construct their lessons to help students develop an approach to learning that equates success to effort and practice, and to work with, not against, their students’ passions and learning styles.

The step-by-step process described in this workshop will do more than help you with lesson planning. It is a model for how to manipulate the energies of your classroom so that they flow smoothly and responsively through the ebb and flow of the school year. It is a model for pacing, so teachers don’t burn out. It is a model for growth. Most importantly, however, it is a model for making connections.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ZONE

The Zone that we are attempting to learn about is unique to the individual. We each enter it through different activities, and the balancing act we must employ to remain in the Zone is different for each of us. Understanding this, there are certain commonalities to the experiences we have that put us and keep us in the Zone.

1. **You are relaxed.** Sports research is showing conclusively that athletes perform their best when they are just slightly above their normal state of arousal, not at the extreme end of the spectrum. When you are balanced between being energized, yet relaxed, you are able to move with ease and coordination.
2. **You are confident.** When you in the Zone, you feel confident that no matter what the challenge, you will succeed. You do not let a drop in performance change your belief in your overall abilities; you will adapt and try again.
3. **You are in control.** When you are in the Zone, you feel like you have ultimate command over your actions and your emotions. You recognize that you have the power to dictate the tone and flow of the task at hand, and you feel like you can manage your own destiny with authority.
4. **Things seem to happen with little or no effort.** Your body and mind are working as one in perfect unison. There is a feeling of grace and elegance to what you are doing, even if the task is very grueling and demanding.
5. **Your actions are automatic.** There is no interference from your thoughts or emotions. You are on auto pilot, able to react to whatever comes your way without any conscious thought. You trust your instincts and your intuition.
6. **You are having fun.** The enjoyment you get from what you're doing is incomparable to anything else—even other activities that put you in the Zone. This element of fun is a key factor because it means you will do the activity for its own sake, not because of any external reward you might receive.
7. **Your sense of time is altered.** Time seems to fly by but, paradoxically, everything seems to happen at a slowed-down pace. Time seems to adapt itself to the situation, instead of the reverse.
8. **You are completely focused.** You are not thinking about the past or the future; you are there, in the moment. The only thing you are concentrating on is the task at hand. The ability to stay in the moment is a skill that peak performers of all kinds share. "Any time you get into that state where you're thinking about the result instead of what you're doing," says Shane Murphy, a sports psychologist and consultant, "you're pretty much screwed, to use a scientific term,"

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ON THE ZONE

There are several theories about optimal performance that are relevant to teachers and their students. You will see some remarkable similarities in them, despite their divergent centers of attention. We will focus on two in this workshop.

Lev Vygotsky developed his theory of individual zones of optimal functioning to establish the levels of mental and physical anxiety most advantageous for peak performance to take place. His model suggests that development of a behavior occurs between two areas. On one level is an individual's *independent performance*—that is, what he or she can do already without assistance. On another, higher level exist those tasks which an individual can only reach with help. This is called *assisted performance*. Between maximally assisted performance and independent performance lies an area of partially assisted performances, which he termed the **Zone of Proximal Development**, where learning is most effective (see Figure 1, below).

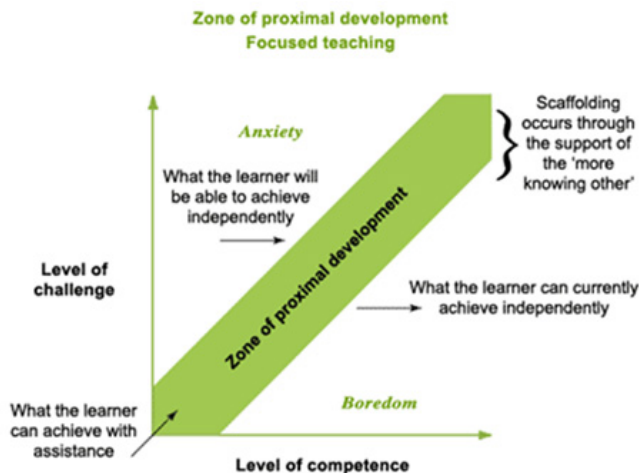
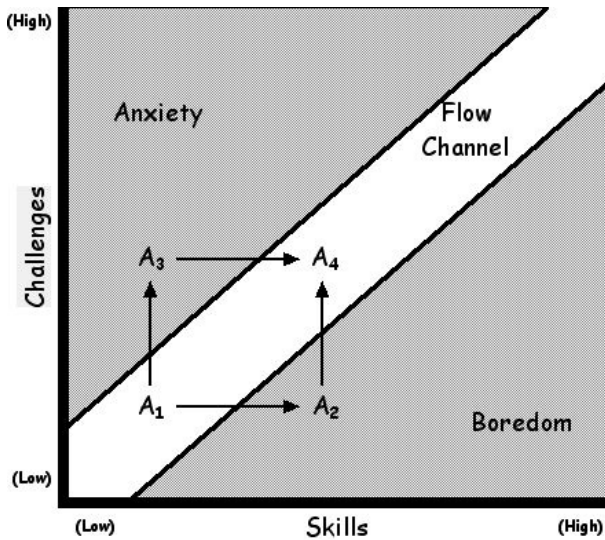


Figure 1: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (2007, State Government of Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development)

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (pronounced *chick-sent-me-HIGH-ee*) developed the concept of “flow” to define in scientific terms key psychological components of the state of optimal performance. His work suggests that, to achieve a flow state, there must be a balance between the task and the skill of the performer. That is, if the task is too easy or too difficult, flow cannot occur. His concept of this balance is illustrated in his work *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990, see Figure 2).



From *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*
by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (page 74)

FIGURE 2: Csikszentmihályi’s Concept of Flow (1990)

Vygotsky’s and Csikszentmihályi’s models each imply that skills which were beyond us at the start become independent as we become more skilled and that, if we are to continue to work in the Zone, we must continually adapt what we’re doing to stay there. Other research done on the pursuit of excellence suggests that the flow channel increases as we become more skilled, so that we are able to work in a state of focused attention for longer, in more demanding situations. Given this, a more accurate adaptation of this zone might look like Figure 3, below.

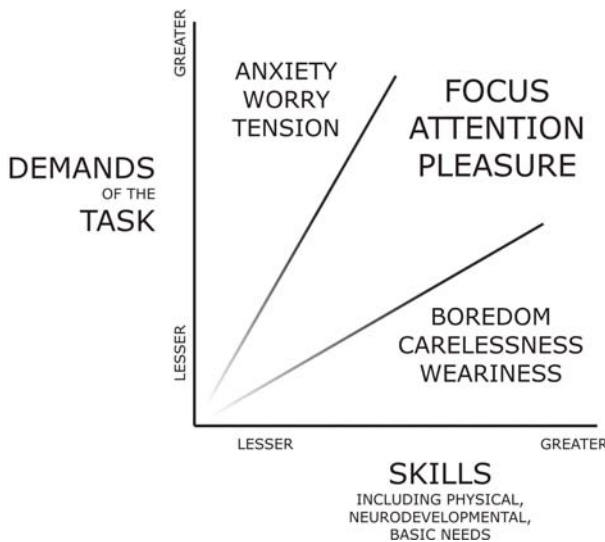


FIGURE 3: The Zone of Excellence

SELF-THEORIES AND LEARNING

The ability to enter into the Zone is directly tied to an individual's beliefs of how they learn. Carol Dweck (1999) has identified two distinct ways in which learners view their own intelligence. Those learners who have an "entity" theory view of learning see intelligence as being an unchangeable, fixed internal characteristic. Those who have an "incremental" theory believe that their intelligence is malleable and can be increased through effort.

Dweck's model states that *entity theorists* often view circumstances as outside their control. When faced with a situation that is beyond their skills, they often believe that there is simply nothing they can do to make things better. Entity theorists tend to avoid activities they perceive as challenging or, at the other extreme, they may intentionally engage in tasks above their skill level so they have an excuse for failing. Because of these tendencies, they are susceptible to a *pattern of learned helplessness* that inhibits their ability to enter into a Zone of Excellence.

Incremental theorists, by contrast, believe that effort, practice and attention will actually increase their intelligence. They will react resiliently when faced with a challenge. They will immediately begin to consider different ways to approach a task, and they will often increase their efforts. They have an intrinsic desire to master challenges, and develop what Dweck terms a *mastery-oriented pattern*. The differences between a helplessness pattern and a mastery-oriented pattern are outlined in Figure 4, below.

Entity Theorists	Incremental Theorists
Make goals related to measuring ability/product	Make goals related to measuring growth
Focus on ends/products	Focus on means/processes
Give/Get feedback related to how good at the task or intelligent one is. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I'm good/bad at ..." - "You're smart!" - "What's wrong with you?" 	Give/Get feedback related to effort, improvement. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I'll get ..."/"I can do ..." - "You're becoming a great ...!" - "Keep it up!"
Focus on ability/intelligence	Focus on effort and application
Promote stereotypical beliefs about various groups typical ability/intelligence	Challenge stereotypical beliefs about various groups typical ability/intelligence
Exhibit the following qualities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - External locus of control - Value individuality and competition - See worth as related to ability level 	Exhibit the following qualities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal locus of control - Value belonging and acceptance - Use personal standards to judge worth
Develop a pattern of helplessness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Will often quit when challenged - Equate failure to insult 	Develop a mastery-oriented pattern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Will often rise to the level of a challenge - Equate failure to the need for further effort

FIGURE 4: *Self-theories of Intelligence and Learning*

An important discovery of Dweck’s research, which is good news for teachers seeking to create the Zone in their classrooms, is that self-theories are malleable, however deeply entrenched they may be. With the application of certain habits and routines in their instruction, teachers have the ability to bring their students to a more incremental way of learning. Through the strategies that are part of The Learning Spiral, we may begin to explore practical ways to foster positive habits to improve student motivation, behavior and performance.

THE SPIRAL OF STRESS AND RECOVERY

One of the basic principles of endurance sports training is the concept of stress and recovery. This means that we start off by training just a little faster or further than we are used to at first, then allow our body to get used to that higher level. This stretches the muscles beyond their previous capacity and makes the muscles grow and become stronger. In the process of stretching the muscles, however, we also put strain on them. This is why it is necessary to allow a period of recovery for the muscles to rehabilitate.

This same concept is applicable to learning. We need to be stressed mentally and emotionally in order to learn well, but we also must be given recovery time to get stronger. Admittedly, the hard part with using a stress and recovery method of teaching is to know when, how intense and how long to make the challenges and when and how long to allow students to recover.

If we incorporate the concept of stress and recovery into the model for the Zone of Excellence, we create something like Figure 5, below. We can see similarities between this model and the Vygotsky model of development and Csíkszentmihályi model of flow experience. We will explore a different form of this model, called the The Learning Spiral, a bit later.

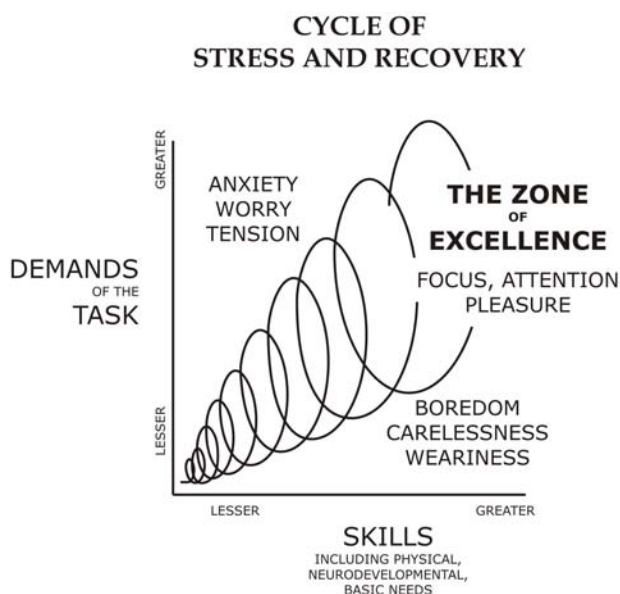


FIGURE 5: Stress and Recovery applied to The Zone of Excellence

The key in employing the concept of stress and recovery in the classroom is to get to know students both as individuals and as a class, so that they can tell us by their performance and behavior what that optimal degree of stress and recovery is. To help with this, we need to be continually on the lookout for signs to indicate where students are in the continuum of the Zone of Excellence. We can ask ourselves the questions, "Is the student trying?", "Is the student scared or resistant to an activity?", or "Is the student bored or distractable?" The answers to questions like these help to determine how much challenge we should apply and how much recovery time we should give to our classes. For example, if a student is scared (this means he already has a lot of stress), we can plan to allow more practice time (so he can recover more). If a student is clearly bored (she does not have enough to challenge her), we can introduce more, deeper concepts. And if these students are engaged and trying (there is a good balance of practice and challenge), we know we have found the right amounts to help students find the Zone.

SPIRALS AND THE ZONE

The implications of using a spiral model to quantify the relationship between growth and the Zone in a classroom setting are several (see figure 6, below):

First, it confirms that the diversity of the classroom experience is one of the most important contributing factors to excellence in learning. Using a variety of instructional approaches not only addresses the various learning styles of the students in the classroom, but it can help learners become more flexible in their learning. Most learners have a preferred learning style, but this does not mean they are strictly dependent on that style to learn. They will be comfortable with and able to learn from several other styles as well. Exposing students to a wide variety of activities that draw on several different learning styles will enable them to become more flexible learners, but will also promote a good balance of stress and recovery.

Second, it reinforces the need to obtain, but also to give, real-time feedback on the performance of our students. Both the teacher and the students need this so they can know if they are getting closer to our goal or moving away from it. The feedback is best if it is immediate and clear. This enables everyone to improve, monitor progress, and to concentrate.

Third, it makes clear that, in order to accommodate such a diversity of elements, it is essential for the teacher to have—and to communicate—clear and consistent goals. Not only do teachers need to know what they want to accomplish so they can properly give and interpret feedback, but students must be able to understand where the teacher is leading them and what the expectations are. This does not mean that the teacher cannot retain some element of surprise regarding the end result. Mystery does, after all, trigger interest and curiosity.

Fourth, it emphasizes that we, as teachers, can help students succeed by providing them a certain degree of control over their learning path. When students are preparing and

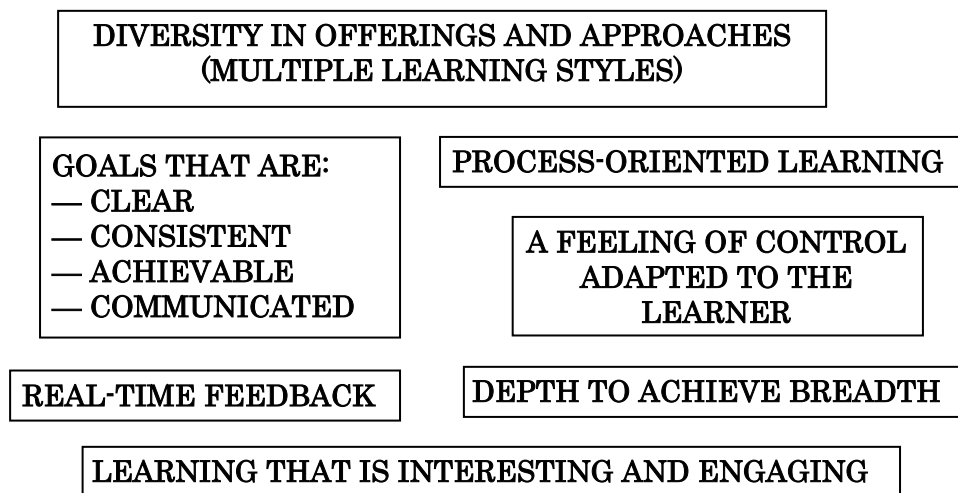
practicing in their own way, for example, they are often less concerned with what other people think or what their grade will be and instead become more concerned with their own growth. Ironically, perhaps, this leads to a greater sense of belonging and unity among students in addition to higher levels of self-esteem.

Fifth, it lends fundamental support to the idea of using depth to achieve breadth in content coverage. Put another way, as students internalize basic skills, they become the foundation from which much deeper, broader and more complex connections can be made.

Sixth, it promotes a culture of process-oriented learning. The longer they are exposed to a spiral method of learning, the more students recognize that, as they make their way to complete mastery of a skill, the road will involve many twists and turns, successes and failures. They will understand that they are resilient and flexible, and able, with time and practice, to conquer whatever challenges are presented to them.

Seventh, it dictates that the learning process itself, and not just the result, should be interesting and engaging. The impression of discovery and creation helps put people into the Zone, and flow experiences have been commonly documented in moments of play or artistic creation. This strongly supports the idea of “serious play” as an intense learning opportunity during which students willingly give large amounts of energy and attention.

FIGURE 6: Lesson Elements that Help Learners Find The Zone



Based on what we know about optimal learning, flow and about self-theories of intelligence, we can develop a model of curriculum and lesson design that will effectively promote the Zone in the classroom. One such model is called The Learning Spiral.

THE LEARNING SPIRAL

The fundamental purpose behind any model of curriculum design is to effectively and efficiently allow learning to take place according to the instructor's aims and ideology, allowing for assessment and evaluation of both student and instruction. The Learning Spiral model serves this purpose, but does so in a way that allows both teacher and student to work in the Zone. It is based on the idea that the quality of any learning experience is a function of perceived challenges and skills and, as such, can be made into what Csikszentmihályi terms an "optimal experience" by observing four basic routines. These routines are represented in figure 7, below.

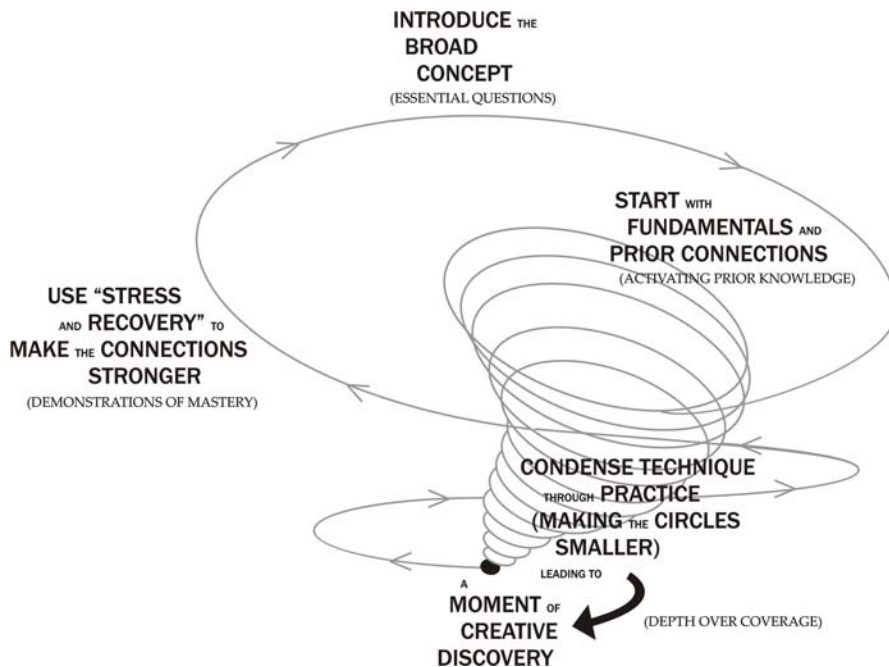


FIGURE 7: THE LEARNING SPIRAL

First, the teacher introduces the broad concept—what the students will be expected to master. The teacher makes it clear what the students need to learn, and the means by which this may be demonstrated. This concept is one that the students will perceive as challenging, but achievable, and they feel like they have some control over how they approach the process of learning. The idea of embarking on this journey is appealing to the students, and they are excited about both the process and the eventual product of their work.

Second, the teacher starts with the basics—what the students already know. These can be fundamental skills or knowledge, but the idea is to allow students to start from a place of familiarity. They will perceive as impossibly difficult any task that forces them to work beyond what they know or are physically able to do. When the students are able to make connections to their own experience, they are more willing to view the process of learning as achievable and relevant.

Third, the teacher guides the students in practice and refinement of techniques necessary to master the broad concept. This does not mean, however, that teachers must start at *the beginning* of a process. Josh Waitzkin, author of the book *The Art of Learning* (2007) emphasizes the value of teaching “endgame before opening”. That is, we should begin our teaching with the concepts or techniques that are the least complex, wherever they fall in the continuum of content, and use those to expand and refine more advanced skills.

As basic skills become internalized (they are able to be recalled automatically), the teacher adds layers of complexity to the students’ practice, so that they are able to transfer their intuition and instincts to other parts of the broader concept. Eventually, students are able to draw conclusions and make connections to many concepts all at once. They are able to break down barriers between areas of their experience, so that they all are enriched by a sense of interconnectedness. This is their moment of creative discovery, and it is the quintessential experience that drives them to work in the Zone.

Finally, the teacher allows students to return to familiar ground and use their solid skills and knowledge to put their new information into proper context, make stronger the connections uncovered by their moment of discovery, and add these to their toolboxes for use in the next learning adventure.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

Teachers might mistakenly infer that they must allow their students to dictate the direction of their classes in order to provide the kind of learner-centered environment required to help them find the Zone. This is not true. Rather, when we can direct students to think, feel and care on a deeper level, we will automatically arouse their interest in learning. This is what we call *controlling intention*, and it is a function both of a high degree of knowledge about teaching methodologies and a deep understanding of the individuals with whom we are working. The most effective way in which to do this is to design lessons and curricula that draw on individual interests and passions. Doing this allows us to help students tap into their inner, authentic selves, where they will more likely find the intrinsic motivation necessary to enter and remain in the Zone.

The process of building a foundation of skills and knowledge adequate to allow students to enter into the Zone easily when exploring complex concepts takes time and begins slowly. Teachers are often unprepared for this. One way to help this process along is to draw on students’ interests and passions. These are often areas in which students already have many internalized skills and deep knowledge, and this can be of help in classes where there is a certain degree of homogeneity. Another is simply to be present. Teachers often talk about creating “magical” moments in the classroom, but looking for these means that they do not make the most of the opportunities that are already presenting themselves. This does not mean to imply passivity; if students are not able to reach the Zone in the way you have planned for them, change tactics. Plans, like rules, are often made to be broken.

ACTIVITY 1—WHAT DOES THE ZONE LOOK LIKE FOR YOU?

Close your eyes and take several slow deep breaths to center yourself. Allow the thoughts and distractions of your world to shift aside for a moment. When you have reached a state of calm, imagine that you are standing on a gleaming, glowing path. Take a minute to feel the texture of the path. Notice the warmth of the light on your feet and the sensation of power that emanates from it. Now, begin to walk. As you walk along this path, feel the warmth rising up from the path, filling up your feet, then your ankles, your calves, your knees and thighs. Feel the warmth rising even further, filling you up with bright energy. You can sense that you are beginning to glow, the energy shining from you bright and strong. You can feel the power of it, and you know you can do anything now.

Now, visualize yourself doing something you love. Imagine where you are, what's around you. Let your awareness take in for a moment the smells and sounds of the place. Bring your attention to what you're doing. Feel how wonderful it is, how perfect, how effortless it is. Your movements are smooth, clean. You're practically tingling with energy, yet you are completely relaxed. Your mind sees everything all at once. All the possibilities are there. The whole of the universe is part of what you're doing at this moment.

Now, describe the experience you just visualized. Use this space below to compose your thoughts.

ACTIVITY 2—RECONSTRUCTING AN ACTIVITY TO CREATE THE ZONE

***ACTIVITY:** Have your entire group form a circle. Distribute to each person in the circle a card that will be passed back and forth. Tell your group that, when they have mastered the task of passing the cards back and forth, the facilitator is going to read them a story. Every time they hear any word that sounds like “right” or “left”, they are to pass the card to the person on their right or left, depending on what they hear. After the story has been read, you will answer questions about its content. You will be evaluated on your ability to pass the objects back and forth effectively (each person in the group ends up with the correct card) and on your ability to understand the content of the story.*

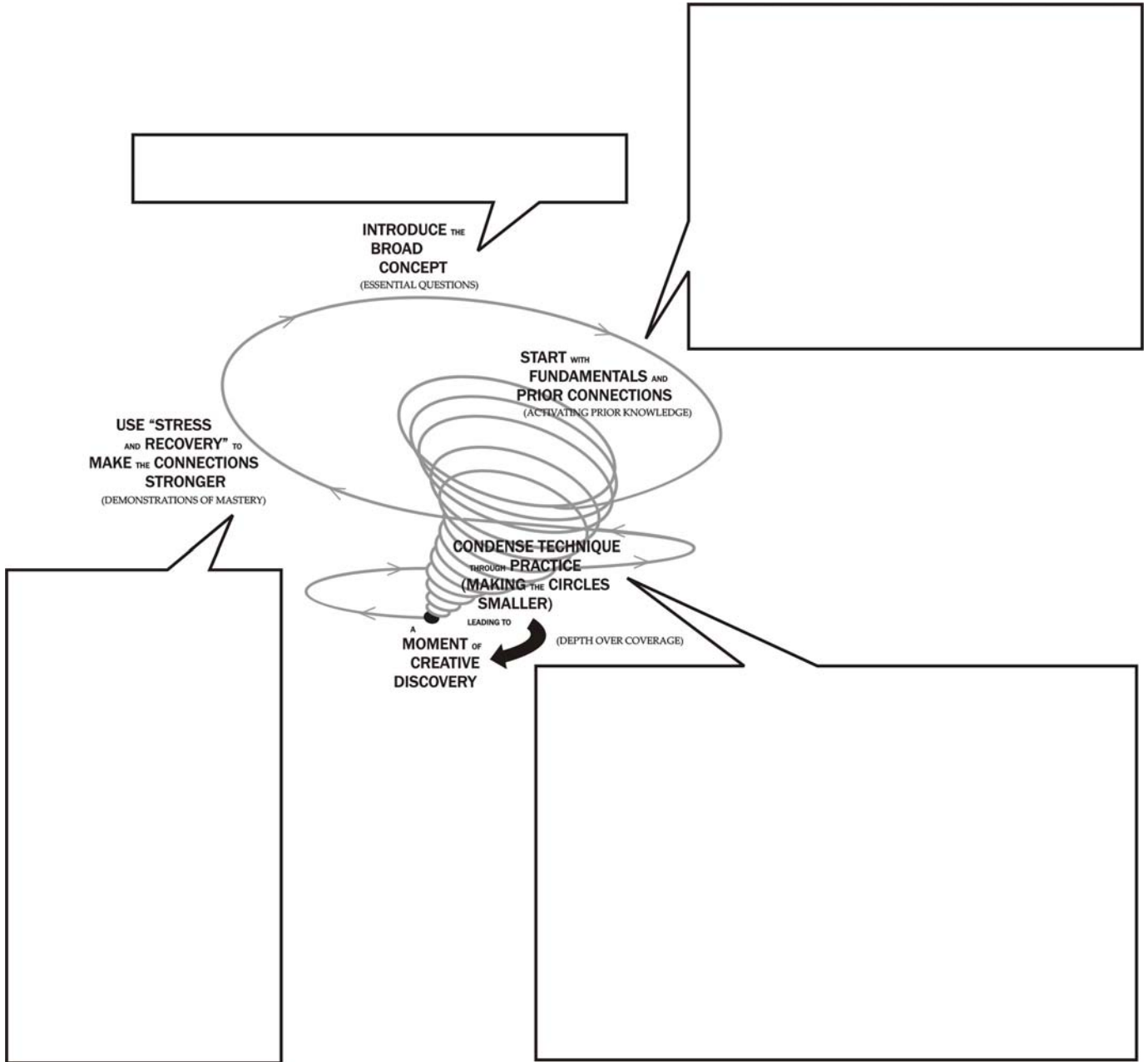
The story “LIFE WITH THE WRIGHT FAMILY” is available online using the following link: www.wacaonline.org/DOCS/wright_family.pdf

***QUESTION:* How can we create the Zone with this activity?**

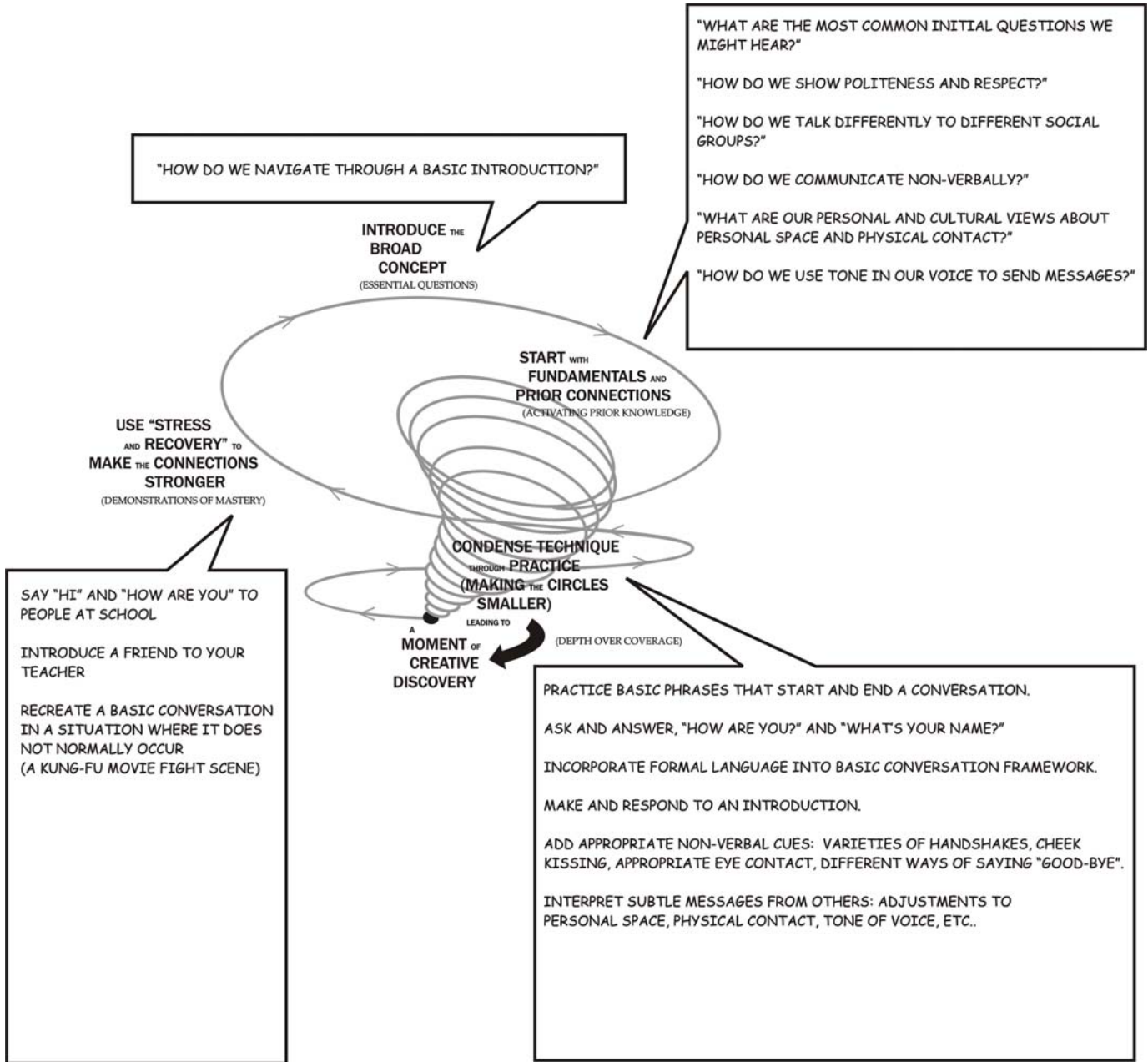
Here are some questions to help guide your discussion:

- What made the activity difficult? What would make the activity easier to accomplish?
- What made the activity fun?
- How was the activity presented to you?
- What did you understand about the goal of the activity?
- How could you feel like you were in control of how you approached the activity?
- How did you know if you were getting closer to success?

ACTIVITY 3—THE LEARNING SPIRAL MAP



ACTIVITY 3B—AN EXAMPLE



ACTIVITY 4—A DIFFERENT WAY TO LOOK AT THE SPIRAL

STEP 1: THE BROAD CONCEPT

What do you want students to know or be able to do?

STEP 2: THE BASIC SKILLS

What do they already know about the broad concept? What skills do they bring?

STEP 3: MAKING SMALLER CIRCLES (EXPANDING AND REFINING SKILLS)

Where do you start (put the skills and knowledge in order of complexity)? How do you connect from one skill to the next?

STEP 4: STRESS AND RECOVERY

What brings the big idea back again and again to what students now know and do?