

JUST GO WITH THE FLOW

Nora Franzova

Entering a classroom is like opening a box of chocolates. You never know what you are going to find (to paraphrase from the movie *Forrest Gump*). As many of us daily enter classrooms we are very well aware that multiple factors will create the experience that is about to begin.

It is almost magical how much, and yet how little, we as instructors can influence this experience. Even before you enter, there is some energy in the classroom. This energy is being created by many outside influences. Is there homework due? Is this the day of the exam? Sometimes the energy is even the feeling that was left from the previous class (boredom, excitement, etc.). There are also personal factors that each student experiences such as lack of sleep, hunger, temperature in the classroom. The majority of these are created without our influence, but that is the energy that we are entering into.

We bring our own energy that is built from subjective factors – sleep, commute, personal problems – and more objective factors – is the upcoming lecture one of those that is always a joy to teach or is it one that will be on the painful side?

Newton's First Law of motion states that a body in motion remains in that motion unless it is acted upon by external force. Our students in the classroom are in a state of some motion and we are the external force that will direct them and change their motion. As I enter the classroom, the energy that is present and the energy that I bring will combine. Quite often I have made the mistake of rushing the process. The energy that I have as I enter the classroom-rushes me because there is so much to cover during the given time, or the topic is so exciting that I just head right into the middle of it. Now, if the initial energy in the classroom is a mellow discussion about the past weekend, I might be able to get the students to join me in my fast paced presentation. On the other hand if the energy in the classroom is a frantic work to finish the last homework questions, I realize I will not be able to pull them into my pace.

It always frustrates me when students are already in a working mode for my class but resist my working pace and my energy obstinately. An obvious reason is that their motion is towards a different goal than my own, so I have experimentally learned that if the level of energy in the class is very high, I have to give up my plan, and join the students. Just go with the flow. Occasionally, this means abandoning the "perfect" lecture and starting to solve the one question from homework that bothers them the most. It often costs valuable time, but pleasure from the time spent doing so is usually worth it.

What if we cannot slow down and abandon our “perfect” plan? “We must put effort and energy into everything we wish to change” writes Erin Morgenstern in *The Night Circus*. Thus, if we need to change an already very high energy situation to our liking, it will require extra effort and extra energy from us to stand by our “perfect” lesson plan. It is certainly possible, but quite draining on the instructor. There is definitely going to be a line-up of students at the end of class asking questions. These would be the students who get swept by our energy either a bit too late or a bit too strong, and afterwards need to clarify parts they missed during the transition.

To summarize, there is no right or wrong direction in which to place our effort and energy. We all will find our preferred approach and that might be different from class to class. As long as we put effort and energy into our daily meetings with students, we will be able to create change.

Nora received her PhD at the University of Rochester. Since then teaching is her passion, because that gives her the good and the bad energy she needs to get her through her days. She does not always get it right, but that makes it more interesting. Nora Franzova teaches mathematics at Langara College in Vancouver. She can be reached at nfranzova@langara.bc.ca.