**THE JOY OF LEARNING**

1. **Introduction:** My name is Renata Słowińska and I teach Psychology in the Diploma Programme. Some people believe that psychologists can read other people’s minds. That’s not quite true, fortunately, or unfortunately, but just for a second, let’s pretend that it is. Please, **Think of a moment in the past when you experienced joy at school.**

What are your thinking? My guess is, that lost of you are visualising having fun during a break, or on a Friday afternoon. Better yet, on the last day of school.

I get that. Humans enjoy resting, having some time off. It’s our evolutionary legacy- it’s smart to conserve energy unless absolutely necessary.

**2. Learning is certainly not the only source of happiness**.

You have just had two months of summer holidays. Except for 2DP, who were busy writing their EEs and IAs, of course. It felt great, didn’t it? The pleasure of not having to do anything, the blissful hours spent lying on the beach, reading a good book, the excitement of travelling to new places, having the all the time in the world to sleep, rest and take it easy. On the 1st of September, we are all painfully aware, that for the next 10 months we will probably have to sacrifice some of those pleasurable pursuits- meeting with friends, family, travelling. Let me be clear, I am not going to argue that learning is the only source of happiness, or even the biggest source of happiness. There will be days during the school year, where you will feel that learning is not a source of joy, but it’s direct opposite. Let’s deal with that elephant in the room.

1. **Learning can sometimes feel pretty miserable**- -

A few months ago, most of you had the chance to see the amazing performance of the Monnet Theatre of *Ferdydurke.* You probably remember the scene, where Bladaczka- the teacher, so amazingly impersonated by Natalia, strolling back and forth, tries to convince the students that “Słowacki wielkim poetą był” (perfect English translation). And then Julia stands up, wrings her hands in despair, and cries: „Ale ja nie mogę zrozumieć! Nie mogę zrozumieć, jak zachwyca, jeśli nie zachwyca." „Nikogo nie przewierca. Nikogo to nic nie obchodzi, wszystkich nudzi.”

I think we have all been there. Feeling „forced” to learn something, that doesn’t seem at all important or engaging. Truth be told, not every little thing that you are required to learn is important or relevant.

If it’s any consolation, you are much more fortunate in that respect that students of the past, or even many students of the present. The IB in its infinite wisdom recognizes that committing formulas to memory is not as valuable today, in the age of Google and smartphones in your pocket. After all, the IB is more than happy to provide you with formula booklets in maths and in sciences during your final exams, right? And you can have a graphic calculator? Tell that to your parents or grandparents.

You will probably reply, that even with these “upgrades”, the system is far from ideal. But in defence of the educational system, as imperfect as it is, we need to appreciate that designing a curriculum where everything is relevant and interesting for everybody is extremely difficult, if possible at all.

There is also the bigger question. **Should learning always feel great?** Let me answer that question with the words of Rowdy Gaines, and American swimmer, who won gold for the United States in 1984 in 100m freestyle. It has been calculated that in the years up to the Olympics, he swam equivalently around the world, right? Roughly 20,000 miles. Angela Duckworth, a psychologist, known for introducing the concept of “Grit”, once asked him in an interview: “Do you love practice?” Here's what he replied:

“Are you asking me if I love getting up at 4 in the morning, jumping into a cold pool, and swimming laps looking at a black line on the bottom, at the very edge of my physical ability where my lungs are screaming for oxygen and my arms feel like they’re about to fall off? No, I don’t, but I love the whole thing. You know, I have a passion for the whole sport.”

1. **Not being able to learn can be the most limiting experience**.

Let’s move on to another idea. What if I told you that school is cancelled? Fantastic, right? But think about it for a minute longer. Dreams of becoming a doctor? A lawyer? A scientist? Gone. Just as we are evolutionarily destined to be lazy, we are also inherently curious. Thus, not being able to satisfy that curiosity – hurts.

In his famous novel, “1984”, Orwell takes that idea to the extreme. He depicts an anti-utopian Oceania, where truth is only relevant as long as it allows to perpetuate the myths of the totalitarian regime. Winston Smith, the protagonist, is acutely aware of that, as he works in the Ministry of Truth and his role is to change historical data. He is tormented by the fact that he cannot ask questions, inquire, explore. Doing so would call the attention of “thought police”. Remember, the Big Brother is watching. For Winston, this was a fundamental violation of his basic need and a basic right. ““Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four”, and he was not granted that freedom.

Orwellian fiction is not that far from historical reality. Think of pre-war Europe, or South Africa during apartheid. Think of all the ways in which various minority groups have been denied access to education. Correction: strike “minority groups” and strike “historical”. Think of countries like Afghanistan, where girls can no longer attend high school. The bounduaries of their world will be most likely defined by their marriages and their motherhoods.

It’s important to ask the following question: Why was limiting access to knowledge recognized as such a crucial tool to maintain political status quo? It’s simple. Because of the recognition that

**Knowledge is power, and learning is empowering-** It makes the world bigger and more exciting, while at the same time, giving you control and freedom. And an immense sense of mastery. Isn’t that worth striving for?

1. **How can we maximise the joy of learning?**

A sense ofaccomplishment, satisfaction, elation- these are pretty amazing. But we are talking about the long-term, about working in the today, in order to benefit from it in the future. How about the joy of learning *here and now*? Does it exist and how do we maximise it?

In the 1970s, an American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, was interested in what makes people happy. And yes, that is a real surname, as he is of Hungarian origin. What gives life meaning? He put forward a concept of **flow.** The describes it as a state of intense immersion in the task at hand, maintaining sustained focus, while being totally calm and at peace. The example that is often given here is that of the proverbial artist, who upon finding his inspiration, spends the entire day painting, or composing music, or what have you, hardly even noticing, that time is passing. It’s supposed to feel a bit like stepping into alternate reality. a transcendental, trans-like experience, culminating in a state of immense satisfaction and accomplishment, even euphoria. It is about losing yourself in the pleasure of creating, discovering, mastering something. Or as Bill Burnett put it, engagement on steroids.

Luckily, it is not only reserved for artists. Flow can happen during pretty much any mental and physical activity, or a combination of both. Perhaps you have felt that way, for instance, when playing video games, which often provide perfect conditions for the state of flow. Or maybe dancing? Hiking? Or, dare I say, while writing your Extended Essay? Indeed, just as any other activity. Learning can be a powerful source of flow. Imagine starting a class, and quickly becoming immersed in this fantastic experience, not noticing the time go by, feeling calm, focused and hiper-positive. Then you hear the bell ring, and you don’t even know how the 45 minutes went by.

Sounds incredible? Sounds familiar? So how do we get there? How do we get to experience flow when we study?

According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow arises in that sweet spot beyond fear and beyond boredom. What this means that you need to be internally motivated, rather than scared of a bad grade. Secondly, the task needs to be difficult and challenging enough. Finally,, the learning experience must feel like play. After all, flow is sometimes referred to as “play for grown-ups”, so it needs to retain that characteristic.

Today you might not know all the things that give you flow. No worries, you have time, so be curious and explore. Remember, that what gives you flow can change over time. What fascinates you today might no longer feel that way in 5 years. It might be therefore useful to have knowledge from various areas to fall back on, rather than specialize too early on.

1. **The joy of collaborative learning**

There. The joy of learning here and now. But that’s not all. Flow is usually described in terms of an individual experience. But at school, you are hardly ever alone. You talk to others, you discuss, sometimes you agree with them, and sometimes you disagree, you fail together, you succeed together, you have fun, and you grow. You might realise it or not, but you are making life-long friendships. Psychology rarely agrees on anything, but it does agree on one thing for sure- relationships are the key source of happiness. And so many of them start in adolescence or young adulthood.

1. **Think of all those moments, when you will experience the joy of learning.**

Thank you.