

## Group Flow States of Intergenerational Networks Within Age-Friendly Academic Settings

Alexander G. Flor

Professor, University of the Philippines Open University, Philippines, alexander.flor@up.edu.ph

### Abstract

*This paper proposes a theoretical framework for investigating group flow within intergenerational networks. The framework is based on preliminary observations of intergenerational engagement among faculty members of an online open university. In describing, explaining and predicting group flow dynamics, the framework borrows heavily from autopoietic theory (Maturana & Varela, 1987), systems theory (Bateson, 1972), and flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kotler & Wheal, 2017).*

*A flow state is described as “an optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.5) Technically defined, it is the mental state of operation in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process. Flow states may be experienced not only among individuals but among groups, the latter termed as group flow or *communitas* (Ibid).*

*Autopoiesis, on the other hand, carries much intergenerational resonance since it is concerned with the renewal, regeneration, and evolution of living systems. A university, constituting different generations of academics, would represent such a living system engaged in a continuing effort of self-renewal and self-reinvention. Oftentimes, age, generational, and ideological chasms are wide enough to result in tensions that lead to system dysfunction even within open and online settings. During group flow states, intergenerational differences are diminished in a manner conducive to system renewal and reinvention.*

**Keywords:** *flow states, communitas, Autopoiesis, age-friendly university*

### Introduction

Organizations emerge from communication. Such is implied in the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) represented by separate schools of thought in organizational communication theory (Torres, 2019). Luhmann’s Social Systems Theory (1997), in particular, submits that the entire social world is constituted through communication and through communication only.

A university is a microcosm of the social world. Can Luhmann’s assertion be applied to an institution of higher learning, specifically, an online open university under circumstances of intergenerational transition? How does communication figure into the renewal, regeneration, and evolution of a living organization? How is communication constitutive of a university in its liminal moments of transition?

The University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) is the fifth constituent campus of the University of the Philippines (UP) system, which was founded in 1908 as a land grant college when the Philippines was still a US colony and eventually a commonwealth. Compared to other UP

campuses, UPOU is more progressive by nature due to the open education philosophies that it espouses and more innovative by necessity due to its online delivery system. All of its 30 academic programs from baccalaureate to doctoral levels are offered online.

UPOU is also Southeast Asia's first age-friendly university by virtue of the age-range of its faculty and student populations. Unlike other institutions of higher learning, it does not impose age limitations among its students. Furthermore, it encourages continued involvement of retirement-age faculty members either as extended full-time members or professorial lecturers.

Being the living system that it is, UPOU undergoes continuous albeit unobtrusive renewal and regeneration exemplified in the succession of leadership roles. With this "changing of the guards" comes shifts in ideological paradigms, dominant traditions, curricular focus and research agendas often redefining the sense of identity of the institution. At this liminal phase, generational and ideological chasms are wide enough to result in tensions that lead to system dysfunction even within open and online settings. Overcoming these chasms is now a subject of interest of the UPOU Faculty of Information and Communication Studies (FICS) and the purpose of this paper as well.

### Theoretical Framework

Established in 2004, FICS is unique among UP constituent units as well as other national and international universities because of the clustering of computer science, information systems, multimedia arts, and communication science under one college. FICS anticipated the convergence and, more importantly, appreciated the historical links between these domains. Early on, it cited the seminal work of Claude Shannon (1949) as evidence of this affinity. Traditionally, however, these ties are not reflected in established information and communication curricula and academic structure. Hence, the Faculty found itself compelled to justify its *raison d'être* (reason for existence) to gain a solid academic foothold within the disciplinal space. Capitalizing on its innovative beginnings, its academic agility as well as the affordances attendant to open and distance e-learning, the Faculty turned to transdisciplinary sciences such as systems theory and discovered Autopoiesis as a potential buttress.

Autopoiesis is the process of self-creation, self-production, and self-maintenance within and among living systems. The process is driven by cognition (Maturana & Varela, 1987) involving both information as an entity and as a process, i.e., communication. Adopting this as its theoretical scaffolding, the Faculty's core function is to study, explore, and analyze how information and communication supports living systems at all levels and hierarchies, i.e., life itself. Autopoiesis is consistent with information science, human-machine interface, cybernetics, systems theory, environmental communication, knowledge management, and networked communities— areas of study which has preoccupied the Faculty for the past decade. It also supports previous articulations on what the Faculty stands for.

1. Living systems are open self-organizing life forms that interact with their environment. These systems are maintained by flows of information, energy, and matter.
2. Living systems occur at different levels of existence, from the simple to the complex (unicellular organisms to the most highly evolved), from the biological to the social, from the singular to the composite.
3. Autopoiesis is the process of self-creation, self-organization, and self-maintenance among living systems. The process is driven by cognition.

4. Cognition within living systems is achieved through communication: the reception, processing, and transmission of internally-emerging and externally-sourced information. Communication is a critical function among living systems and its substance is information.
5. Information and communication studies are inextricably linked.

The challenge is to apply autopoietic theory in the intergenerational dynamic using the Faculty as the subject.

This paper proposes a theoretical framework for investigating system renewal and regeneration within intergenerational networks. The framework is based on preliminary observations of intergenerational engagement within the UPOU FICS. In describing, explaining, and predicting intergenerational dynamics, the framework borrows heavily from flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kotler & Wheal, 2017) apart from autopoietic theory.

**Flow and Communitas.** A *flow state* is described as “an optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.5). Performers, particularly, musicians experience it regularly. So do professional athletes, extreme sports enthusiasts, and gamers. It is the state of mind that surfers seek when they go “off-the-lip” a giant wave or the consciousness that the Zen Buddhist monks aspire for in their constant mindfulness. It is both the poet’s and the rapper’s zone where creativity dispenses abundantly, spontaneously.

Technically defined, flow is the mental state of operation in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process (Ibid). Whether in sports, dance, music and any other creative endeavor, flow states result not only in peak performance but in peak experiences as well.

Kotler and Wheal (2017) enumerate four attributes of flow states, which come under the acronym, STER: selflessness; timelessness; effortlessness; and, richness. While in a state of flow, the sense of bodily self seems to dissipate. Time would either seem too slow or too fast. Every action done is effortless and faultless, and the entire experience is described as rich.

Kotler has commented in a YouTube (2019) video that those who experience flow find it difficult to analyze it, while those who analyze flow, find it difficult to experience it, intimating the state’s extra-cognitive and ephemeral nature. As academics, the members of FICS fall under the second category. Apart from the desensitizing effect that intellectual analysis brings, making us hopelessly incapable of grasping the spontaneity of the phenomenon, we tend not to perform in public, compete professionally in athletics nor engage in extreme sports and online computer games being predisposed to the so-called, “life of the mind”.

However, there have been vivid instances when we, individually or as groups, felt selflessness, timelessness, effortlessness, and richness. Incidentally, flow states may be experienced not only by individuals but among groups also, the latter referred to as group flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) or *communitas*, described by Turner (2012, p.22) as a “group’s pleasure in sharing common experiences” or “collective joy.”

In the case of the Faculty, under what circumstances do these flow states arise? These states manifest individually and collectively during episodes of intense, engaged academic discussion.

Under what conditions do they occur? Casual observation indicates the following:

Firstly, the novelty of subject matter appears to contribute to the manifestation of individual and group flow states. The fact that information and communication studies deal with cutting edge innovations and social disruptors have contributed much to this condition. There was always something to be excited about.

Secondly, an atmosphere of collegiality even between intergenerational groups exist. There were no dominance of ideas nor impositions of seniority. An environment where conditions that encouraged, in Turner's (2012) words, the "spontaneous feelings of belonging to flourish, illustrating the inherent informality of the experience." There existed a "temporary absence of the usual rigid social order."

Thirdly, the communicational abilities of the participants played a hand in triggering these states. Being part of an academic unit that specialized in communication implied the preponderance of skills beyond imparting information or plain academic debate. Besides explainers and elucidators, the group included a number of enchanters (Popova, 2016).

Fourthly, there exists an implicit awareness of what the participants can bring to the table. In an intergenerational discussion, for instance, the younger generation, who are about to replace the old guard, would be authorities on new technology. The older generation, who are about to hand over their leadership roles, are authorities on the social impact of this new technology. Both parties respect the value that the other brings.

Fifthly, there is a shared recognition of relationships among concepts discussed. This often occurs non-verbally with cues that a realization has been individually or collectively reached.

Lastly, there is a build-up of a spontaneous discovery of emerging patterns in the discussion that may potentially lead to new knowledge. In other words, collective "Ah ha!" moments characterize the exchange.

During these intense episodes of intergenerational exchanges, participants individually and collectively feel less conscious of themselves, lose their normal sense of time, generate ideas effortlessly and experience the richness of the moment joyfully.

**Autopoiesis.** These intergenerational experiences also carry resonance in autopoietic discourse since the theory is concerned with renewal, regeneration and evolution of living systems. A university, constituting different generations of academics, would represent such a living system engaged in a continuing effort of self-renewal and self-reinvention. Oftentimes, the age, generational and ideological chasms are wide resulting in tensions that lead to system dysfunctions even within open and online settings. During the states of *communitas* described, intergenerational differences are diminished in a manner conducive to system renewal and reinvention.

### Conclusion

Communication may indeed be constitutive of any social system, be it a network, an organization, a community or society. The flow states that manifest individually and collectively during intergenerational engagements and exchanges may be indicative of autopoietic progression within that system.

---

## References

- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Kotler, S. 2019. *How to enter a state of flow with ease*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmcNgOeKVCU>
- Kotler, S. & Wheal, J. (2017). *Stealing fire: How Silicon Valley, the Navy SEALs, and maverick scientists are revolutionizing the way we live and work*. New York: Dey Street/ Harper Collins.
- Luhmann, N. (1997). *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (2 vols). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. Published in translation as *Theory of Society* (2 vols.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2012 and 2013.
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1987). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Boston, MA: New Science Library/Shambhala Publications.
- Popova, A. (2016). *Gradations of writing*. <https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/08/16>
- Torres, A. (2019). *The communicative constitution of hospitality organization: A ventriloquial analysis of guest service*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of the Philippines Open University
- Turner, E. (2012). *Communitas: The anthropology of collective joy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.