

Working with Brain Zones

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What is a zone and how do you enter it?

The word 'zone' is used to refer to a state of mind that is especially useful for a particular function. The field of athletics pioneered in this work decades ago and offers an incredible model for coaching. The fields of music, theater, visual arts, dance and the martial arts have also cultivated many strategies for coaching their students to find the optimal zones for practice, performance and artistic growth.

We would be shocked if a football coach simply gave chalk talks about the plays and then expected the players to perform at the game with no practice sessions, if a music teacher introduced new musical assignments and asked the student to go home and practice without explaining how to use that practice time effectively or if an orchestra conductor sent members home with the scores to practice and expected them to come together to play without group rehearsals, or if an art teacher showed the student what to draw, but not how to develop drawing skills.

But what about zones to make all kinds of thinking easier, zones for the brain?

Teachers often ask students to pay attention, to study and remember what they read and hear, to write papers, and even to do complex research projects. They give out highly detailed instructions about WHAT they want, but almost no information or coaching about HOW to get one's brain to do that! After decades of working with students at all grade levels, and helping the faltering students to improve, I am convinced that the biggest factor separating the "good" students from the "poor" ones is information about how to use their particular brains. Good thinkers seem to have stumbled on a wide array of brain zones and know when and how to use them.

Here are some of the most important zones and how to work with them.

Flow, Focus, Memory and Deep Thought – Critical Brain Zones for Thinking

Each of these zones can be coached. If you know how and when to use each zone and are able to enter them at will, you will have the tools to become a very good thinker.

Flow

This is the zone that makes all of the others work well. Without it, focus becomes difficult or lacks flexibility. Then memory starts to pull away from reasoning and becomes robotic or “rote”, rather than making sense or being “meaningful”. Without the sense of flow, your thinking may rely too heavily on memory and strenuous drill. If that happens, you could end up with a collection of the thoughts of others but no thoughts of your own. You may still be able learn the thoughts of others if you try hard enough, but don’t settle for that. If you can maintain a subtle sense of flow as you think, then your own thoughts will be able to arise with ease.

Focus

This zone can be a lot of fun to learn and it involves so much more than the simple demand to “pay attention”. We tend to refer to those who fail to “pay attention” as having a form of attention deficit. Actually their behaviors should more properly be called attention excess disorders. They are usually noticing way too much and aren’t targeting in on the details that would serve them best.

There are many kinds of focus and the trick is to choose the right one for the task, and to learn to sustain it. Proper focusing involves regulating the zoom, so you can move from the big picture to the finest detail.

Focusing also involves selecting the number of tracks you want to monitor at once – from a single minded focus to tracking 2 or 3 variables in complex conversations to full multi-tracking for attending to puzzling situations where you don’t yet know what details will end up being critical ones. There are even times when your goal may be to focus on nothing and to hold that open focus for a long period of time. A guard on sentry duty or the watchman in a nuclear plant is faced with this kind of challenge. Both of them must stay alert and pay attention to nothing, so that if something does happen they will detect it fast.

There are two additional conditions that need to be met in order to be able to hold a focus. You need to learn to attend at various speeds, from slow and relaxed to fast and intense. And, finally, you will need to learn how to set the timer and hold your focus for as long as your task requires attention. Some thinking tasks are quick and you can take lots of breaks without losing your train of thought. But some ideas will take longer to think about and if you can’t hold your focus, you won’t be able to follow them all the way through. Then you might think you aren’t really smart, when the real problem is that you can’t hang in there long enough to get the big picture. It is important to practice focusing for longer and longer periods between breaks to build up your endurance. Then you will be ready for those complex ideas.

Memory

You may think you either have a “good” memory or a “poor” one. However you actually have many kinds of memory, ranging from extremely short term to very long term memory, from memory for procedures and memory based on making associations, to the temporary ability to hold information in your mind while you think – we call that working memory. Your memory strategies can involve different channels as well, from auditory to visual to body-based or kinesthetic channels. Each of us has our own best channels for taking in information and our own top strategies for organizing and storing that information. Finally, we each have our own preferred channels for recalling and putting forth information, which may not be the same channel we used to take it in.

Deep Thought

This last zone is very tricky to enter because it hovers just above the zone for sleep and yet it demands alertness. You can only enter it if you are well rested. Otherwise you will fall asleep trying. In order to enter this zone, the other three zones – flow, focus and memory – need to be functioning well.

Then you will discover the real joy of being a scholar and having your own insights and thoughts. It is a zone where your great ideas incubate and take form. Your first task is to study your subject well. Then you can begin to tap into your own thoughts about the matter. Try to stay in this strange, relaxed attention state until your own ideas are ready to bubble up.



About Dee Joy Coulter

Dee Joy Coulter is a nationally recognized neuroscience educator, known for her unique ability to present complex ideas in clear and humorous ways that are useful for educators. Dee lives on a small ranch just outside Boulder, Colorado. She has tended that land for nearly thirty years and has reached a sense of deep familiarity with it. She shares the ranch with her four Icelandic horses whose antics often remind her of a junior high lunchroom. [View all posts by Dee Joy Coulter →](#)