

# Ireland: Adaptability, Mindfulness & Flow

Michaela Patton

The Irish Association of Snowsports Instructors (IASI) Demonstration Team was the first full team that IASI has sent to ski and present at an Interski Conference, and in Pamporovo they were completely self-funded. A number of fully certified instructors from the British, French, Italian and Canadian systems have joined the Irish system and are helping it grow and achieve international recognition in the instructing world.



Irish Interski Team, IASIsnowsports.com

I participated in Ireland's on-snow workshop with IASI Chairman, Examiner and Alpine Educator, Derek Tate, and Alpine Educator and Examiner, Federico Sollini. Their workshop was titled "Lose the drills, keep the skills", but went beyond this simple catchphrase to focus on developing functional movement in a mindful learning environment.

Derek and Federico shared two main themes:

- **Being adaptable, versatile and coping with changing conditions helps to create functional movements rather than set forms or tasks, and;**
- **Being mindful of learning, even at the autonomous phase, to aid ski improvement and enjoyment.**

**Adaptation:**

Chatting to Federico on the chairlift, he explained IASI's Basic Principles Model:

*Respond to and create **forces** with appropriate **movements** to aid effective **balancing** for accurate **steering** of your skis.*



Federico Sollini, IASIsnowsports.com

So, at all levels of skiing and ski instruction, they refer to these four principles: **Forces, movements, balancing** and **steering**.

Even just hearing these terms, I would describe them as adaptable, moving, fluid, evolving or relative, rather than static, predetermined or confined. Derek and Federico's explanation of "Lose the drills, keep the skills" echoed the same perception I had of the IASI Basic Principles as adaptable and relative to the task. They maintained that a drill can be very useful to train certain movement patterns or skills, but we shouldn't be looking to perfect the drills themselves.

As a trainer and an instructor who tends not to use so many drills, I found that my teaching and training styles really lined up with this concept. However, when I put myself in the shoes of an instructor who is perhaps newer to the industry or hasn't had as much training, my experience is that they tend to gravitate towards certain drills and end up trying to perfect the drill, rather than the movement or skill.

Derek echoed this sentiment when I asked him to summarise the versatility theme from the workshop:

**"...we're trying to get people to be adaptable all-mountain skiers so there isn't just one strict form..."**

we want people to be very functional, and so this idea is that we're using drills when we need to use drills to develop certain movement patterns, and then trying to incorporate those movement patterns into our 'normal' performance, if you want to call it that."



Derek Tate, IrishInterskiTeam.com

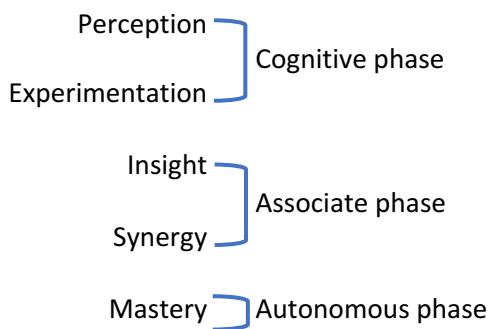
Something that I really would like to work on this year as a trainer is helping instructors to better understand technical skiing concepts, and more importantly, how to communicate these concepts to their guests. Perhaps if instructors have a better understanding of technical skiing and its many practical forms and applications, then they may not become so stuck at using drills as their "go-to" lesson plan.

## Mindfulness:

The second component of the IASI on-snow workshop focused on being more mindful of the way that we ski, learn to ski and teach people to ski.

In a typical model of skill acquisition, such as the one the APSI uses, the amount of cognition required to complete a task reduces as we become more proficient at performing it.

### The Learning Phases



APSI Manual, Chapter 2, page 62

Derek and Federico explained that **the predicament of the autonomous learning phase is that we don't have to think very much about the task we are performing.** While this is sometimes a relief after many hundreds of hours spent in the cognitive and associate phases, we sometimes lose touch with being mindful of our movements.

In the workshop, we were given the task to be more mindful about our skiing and learning, both on the chairlift and on the slopes. Mindfulness was described as being more aware of our movements, our surroundings, the situation and our reactions. It was an interesting task, and made many of us aware that often our chair rides are used to continue teaching, chat to our students and learn about them, or to generally switch off. But rarely are chair rides used for deliberate and guided reflection of the task that we are performing.

Derek posed that the cognitive vs autonomous stages of learning could be described as effortful vs effortless. After reflecting on this concept, I made the connection that perhaps they could also be described as thoughtful vs thoughtless.

Ultimately, when we are in the autonomous phase of learning and we can perform well without thinking a huge amount. Derek's research suggests that **the amount of cognition required in the initial phases of learning is similar to the amount that we are capable of in the later phase of learning.**

So why not use that extra capacity to be more mindful of what we are doing? Could a lack of attention whilst in the autonomous phase lead to a missed learning opportunity?

After the workshop, Derek stressed to me in an interview how important it is "...to be continually aware of what we're doing when we're performing. So while we, in one sense, want to be autonomous in certain parts of our performance, we still want to be quite awake with our attention and be focused on probably more external cues as the performance gets stronger."

## Flow:

The point at which performance is in an autonomous phase and a person is able to be very mindful about what they are doing is called "flow". Bear in mind that this type of flow is a mental concept, rather than a physical one that may often describe rhythm or linking of certain movements. This was explored further in the IASI indoor lecture, where we were given some more academic definitions of mindfulness:

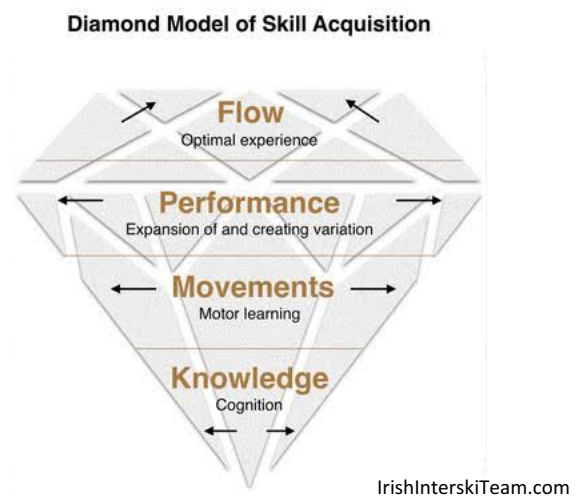
"Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally"

– Jon Kabat-Zinn

"Mindfulness is a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present noticing new things"

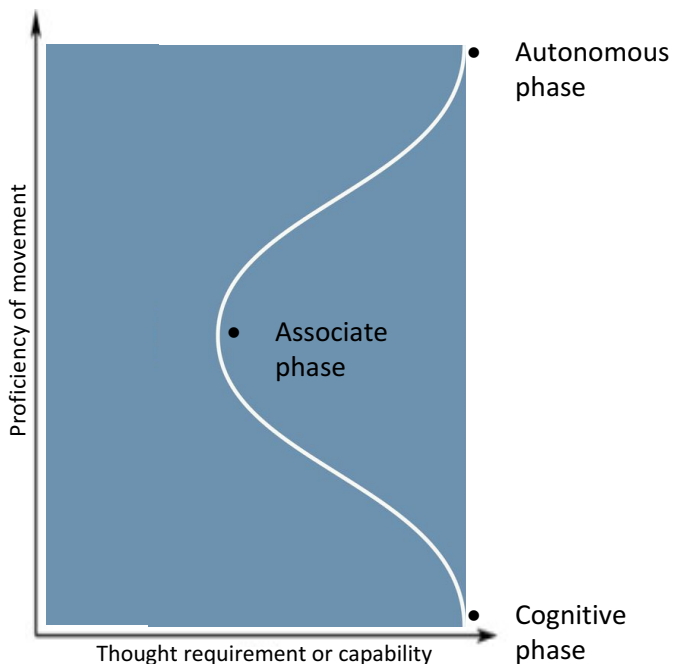
– Ellen Langer

Using their Diamond model of skill acquisition, IASI suggests that after the three main learning phases (defined here as Knowledge, Movements and Performance, but what the APSI refers to as Cognitive, Associate and Autonomous), a fourth phase can exist:



So you can see that in both early learning and in autonomy, there is a lot of cognition that either *has* to occur or *can* occur when performing the activity.

This line graph is how I now think about the learning phases, where the vertical axis represents proficiency of movement, and the horizontal axis represents the amount of thought someone is capable of while performing that movement.



Michaela Patton, 2019

So why should we be aiming to be open to being mindful in autonomy, and not just switch off and find ourselves in a state where we don't have to think?

The answer is more fundamental than you may think.

**A few things occur when we are experiencing "flow".** According to positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the man who first coined and described the term "flow", **we enter a state of "optimal experience".**

**This is "a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand... Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted."**



Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, [https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly\\_csikszentmihalyi\\_on\\_flow](https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow) 2019

Derek differentiated between optimal experience ("flow") and optimal performance ("the zone"). While **flow may not be associated with an athlete's best performance, entering a flow state can be a precursor to optimal performance.**

The first references to "flow" began in 1975 when Csikszentmihalyi asked himself, **"When in our normal experience do we feel really happy?"** He followed and studied creative people such as artists and scientists, **"trying to understand what made them feel that it was worth essentially spending their life doing things for which many of them didn't expect either fame or fortune, but which made their life meaningful and worth doing."**

Sound familiar?

**"An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even if it is difficult or dangerous."**

See where I'm going with this?

Derek concluded that **"by creating more flow experiences for ski instructors training for and taking their exams, there is potential to increase their overall enjoyment and well-being,** which in turn could lead them passing this on to their guests".

**So, what did I learn from IASI at Interski?**

- The Irish are focused on functional movements, rather than a prescribed skiing form or position,
- Mindfulness is being curious, open, present, attentive, accepting and non-judgemental – characteristics that we could all use a little more of;
- Encouraging instructors and their guests to be more mindful of their movements can lead to improved skiing performance;
- When skiers enter a flow state, they will ultimately improve their enjoyment of the sport.

**So, if skiing with mindfulness can result in a flow experience, and flow has been described as a state of true happiness in an everyday experience, then maybe skiing is the secret to happiness?**

Thanks to all of the APSI members for all of your support during our Interski 2019 journey. I'm really looking forward to sharing more ideas and experiences with you over the course of the year.



See you on the slopes,  
Michaela Patton

