

Pedagogies of Engagement by Steven M. Brown

Ongoing research in cognition and brain-based learning increasingly points to pedagogies of engagement that are learner-centered, active, and involved in personal meaning making. Mounting numbers of studies and mega-studies suggest that people learn best when they are engaged cooperatively in active learning, in which they can make personal meaning.¹ Brain-based research and mega-studies of instructional practice suggest centering learning around core concepts or essential questions² on which learners can hang the details of declarative knowledge leading to useful procedural applications. Over ninety years of research in cooperative learning³ points to this instructional approach as one of the most powerful, not only in helping people learn, but also in orchestrating caring, supportive classroom climates that emphasize the mitzvot bein adam lachavero (between man and his fellow man). Similarly, active learning in which students are seen as constructors of their own knowledge increasingly has been the focus of research and practice. Personal meaning making, i.e., the notion that we build new knowledge or schema on previous knowledge, thus valuing the learner's previous experience and sensibilities, is a powerful way to engage students in what is new or foreign to them.⁴

As director of the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education, I try to apply this ongoing and unfolding research to innovative projects that create pedagogies of engagement, active learning, and personal meaning in Jewish schools and informal settings. The Center is currently engaged in several projects that make use of pedagogies of engagement; authentic assessment; and constructivist, learner-centered education that take Jewish content very seriously while promoting the application of that content to learners' own lives.

Project Etgar

A learner-centered approach (developed and sponsored by Melton, together with the Department of Education of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism) to reshaping the Conservative synagogue school classroom, Project Etgar is based on a curricular model developed by Bernice McCarthy called 4MAT.⁵ McCarthy elegantly weaves the many strands of learner centered, multiple intelligence constructivist learning into a template that allows teachers to guide students through what she calls a natural learning process of asking and answering the following questions: Why should I learn this? (links learner to previous experience and cues attention); what do I need to learn?(what are the concepts, texts, declarative and procedural knowledge I need to master); how can I use this? (how do I practice, gain ownership, and turn into useable information and understanding what I have learned); and what if I use this new learning in the following way? (how can I apply it to a new situation or to my own life.)

Thus the 4MAT circle of learning (see aboutlearning.com) is used, for example, to craft core units on such topics as Bikur Holim, Sifrai Kodesh, Kashrut, and Friendship for sixth graders. Each unit is holistic and integrated around big ideas or essential questions. 4MAT impels teachers to teach to a variety of learning styles. (Remember, we tend to teach the way we have been taught or the way we learn best. That's not necessarily good for up to 75% of the students in our classrooms!) The 4MAT approach values different learning styles, multiple intelligences and allows everyone to shine at least 25% of the time, stretching their learning styles and modes of thinking at other times. In Bikur Holim, students begin with stories of students their own age confronting issues of illness in friends. They move on to an integrated exploration of texts from

the Bible, Siddur, and Shulchan Aruch on visiting the sick and helping the community deal with illness. They create welcome home baskets for members of the Congregation who come home from the hospital (many people go in and out so fast these days, they are home before anyone knows they went in!). The unit culminates in the sixth graders developing information booklets for teens on how to visit the sick--do's and don'ts designed by the students based on their new learning. The unit on Kashrut starts with segments from the film *The Karate Kid* as a way of cueing students' previous knowledge and experience on self-discipline, value systems, and developing a person ethic. A 4MAT unit on the Avot in the Amida uses a scene from *The Lion King* to draw students into an appreciation of the concept of Z'chute Avot.

Project Etgar also places heavy emphasis on the process of school change and support for faculty trying new things. ETEs, or Etgar Teacher Educators, master teachers specially trained in the new approach, support classroom teachers by visiting schools and communicating by phone and e-mail to help faculty deal with problems or stay on track. All faculties together with their educational directors must participate in summer training institutes in order to become a pilot school. Currently, there are 22 pilot schools scattered over the country. We have developed sixth and seventh grade materials, are working on the eighth, and hope soon to get funding to start from the bottom up-k-5.

This interest in emphasizing multiple intelligence, active learner-centered education and expanding teacher repertoires has led to the creation of Meltonarts.org. A project of the Melton Coalition for Creative Interaction (a cooperative undertaking of the Melton Centers at Ohio State University, The Hebrew University and JTS), this innovative website serves as a major new resource for the arts in Jewish education. The site hosts juried unit and lesson plans on excellent use of the arts in Jewish education for all milieus and ages. It seeks to help educators provide more entryways into Jewish life and practice through using the arts in all their varied formats. Meltonarts.org is committed to activating students' interest in learning and personally experiencing Judaism, which, for all its wonders, is a very scholastic and verbal tradition. Often, our schools and informal institutions send the message that to be a good Jew means being able to easily manipulate and interpret language. Limiting students to the verbal/logical intelligences narrows the pathways into deep understanding and application of Jewish values and practice. The Meltonarts.org site provides replicable educational experiences; exhibits of student-produced work; and rich resources such as introductions to artists-in-residence available to involve students in schools and camps with their art, as well as links to fabulous museum collections and research articles from around the world. Soon to be mounted are dynamic and learner-centered interactive games produced by our colleagues at the Melton Center in Jerusalem, making use of the Hebrew University's world class Jewish art collection.

Ma'ala

Learner centeredness is at the heart of Ma'ala (Mivtza Ivrit L'gil Harah), our Early Childhood Hebrew Language Immersion Program. Funded by a grant from the Covenant Foundation and the Gross Hebrew Language Institute of JTS, this project is based on increasingly exciting research on brain-based learning. The best time to teach a second language is when children are very young, from ages 2-5. Moreover a substantial body of research attests to the positive intellectual and academic consequences for later learning, when second languages are begun at a young age.⁶ Early childhood Jewish education is now almost universal, with many children beginning at two years of age or younger and attending pre-schools five days a week for at least six hours a day.

The immersion program requires 2-3 hours per day in an exclusively Hebrew-speaking environment with a native or near-native speaker as teacher. The contents of the language immersion are all the regular pre-school subjects, plus Judaica orchestrated through thematic, holistic units of instruction. Pilot programs where we began working with pre-school educators (who worked with three- and four-year-olds, immersing them in Hebrew for one-and-a-half to three hours a day) have proven it is quite feasible to create fluent Hebrew speakers by age five. Ma'ala is now expanding to twelve pilot sites around the country that will form a network of schools and BJE's pioneering this learner-centered language acquisition approach. Not only do these early language gains improve the children's self image, academic, and intellectual functioning, but school after school also has reported enthusiastic changes in school culture and receptivity among parents who are thrilled with their children's accomplishments.

Since knowledge of Hebrew is a gift of identity and connection with Israel and enables access to the Jewish people's greatest literary treasures, the power of early Hebrew language acquisition to promote Jewish identity and belonging cannot be overstated. In one original pilot school, the children leaving the pre-school would have spent only one day a week in the synagogue religious school kindergarten. The parents there demanded at least a two-day-a-week program — a 100% increase in Jewish education time on task. If successful, this immersion program will have profound consequences for rethinking the synagogue school curriculum and the intensity with which day schools can really be places where Judaica content can be learned in Hebrew. The approach is aural/oral, making use of multiple intelligence learning and the best of second-language teaching applications developed from research on general second-language acquisition.

Standards and Benchmarks

Emphasizing pedagogies of excellence, the Melton Center has embarked on an ambitious project to create standards and benchmarks for Judaic studies in day schools. Funded by a grant from AVI CHAI, this trans-denominational project is developing overarching standards of achievement and developmental markers or benchmarks of success in the area of Bible for Reform, Conservative, and community day schools. It seeks to utilize the best of the Standards movement in American education and avoid the pitfalls.⁷ Led by a steering committee made up of leaders of these three day school movements, and staffed by talented teacher-writer-educators, the project has completed the first draft of what a literate graduate of a day school should be able to know, understand, feel, do, and value in Bible study. The overall menu of standards and benchmarks will need to be reviewed and adapted by individual schools, based on their mission and vision. But the purpose is to raise standards, provide content choices, and guide educators in authentic, learner-centered performance assessment.

The goals of the Standards project include:

- Helping schools better assess existing curricula.
- Defining the mission of Judaic studies.
- Defining professional development programs for Judaic studies.
- Defining learning outcomes.
- Helping develop coherent curricula.

The standards and benchmarks are based on the following basic assumptions of what is essential to signature

pedagogies of excellence:

- Cognitive and affective learning
- Student-centered learning
- Development of critical thinking and analytical skills
- Alternative assessments
- Development of multiple intelligences

A standard is an overarching learning outcome exhibiting a synthesis of knowledge, attitudes and/or behaviors in a given domain of learning. A benchmark is a learning outcome, i.e., what a student will be able to know or do linked to developmental levels. A performance-based assessment is an observable behavior for assessing development towards a benchmark. Currently there are eight standards for grades K-12 in Bible.

- Standard 1
Students will become independent and literarily astute readers of the Biblical text in Hebrew.
- Standard 2
Students will be engaged in the learning of ancient, rabbinic, and modern modes of interpretation of the Biblical text and will see themselves as a link in this ongoing chain of interpretation.
- Standard 3
Students will view the TaNaKH as the formative narrative of the Jewish People past, present and future.
- Standard 4
Students will, through the study of TaNaKH, understand and value that the Land of Israel informs and shapes the historical, theological, and sociological experiences of the Jewish People.
- Standard 5
Students will develop an appreciation for the sacredness of TaNaKH as the primary record of the meeting between God and the people of Israel and as an essential text through which Jews continue to grapple with theological, spiritual and existential questions.
- Standard 6
Students will understand through the study of TaNaKH and its interpretations, the role of mitzvot in the shaping of the ethical character and religious practices of the individuals and the Jewish people.
- Standard 7
Students will develop a love of Torah study for its own sake and embrace it as an inspiring resource, informing their values, moral commitments, and ways of experiencing the world.
- Standard 8
Students will appreciate TaNaKH as a multi-vocal text with a complex history of development.

In addition to raising the level of Jewish studies' sophistication in our day schools to that of mathematics or science education, these standards, used properly, help define the learning path for all learners. They insure much more fairness. Most teachers tend to evaluate their students based on who does best in the class, not necessarily on who has really mastered what is necessary to advance to the next level. Would you want to fly in an airplane with a pilot who was best in his/her class or one who evidenced mastery of the skills and knowledge it takes to fly a plane? Likewise, it may take some students longer to master a benchmark, but fairness is helping them all towards achievement and progress.⁸

These Bible standards and benchmarks first will be reviewed by ten schools across the continent representing Reform, Conservative and community day schools of various sizes, shapes, and histories. Then, professional and lay leadership of ten pilot schools representing these diverse constituencies will be brought together for training in how to think about implementing the standards and be asked to undertake a year-long program of creating an action plan for their schools to seriously consider adapting the work to their own institution in terms of curriculum modification, professional development, budget, scheduling, lay buy-in, etc.

MaToK

As an example of negotiating among learners, content, and teacher needs in engaging students in serious text study, MaToK (Mivtza Tanakhi Konservati - "Conservative Bible Project"), a Bible curriculum for grades 3-8, is under development and currently being used in thirty-eight Solomon Schechter Day Schools in the United States and Canada. The curriculum is jointly sponsored by the Melton Center and by the Education Department of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

The curriculum seeks to impart a sense of kedushah (holiness), develop Bible study skills, build on the students' sense of inquiry, and relate biblical narrative to the students' lives spiritually, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and morally. The project is generously supported by a grant from the Jim Joseph Foundation. MaToK is a multi-layered curriculum and teaching approach designed to teach the TaNaKH from a Conservative point of view,⁹ layering the text study with activities designed to create independent learning /text access skills, appealing to multiple intelligences, helping students make personal meaning, and creating many opportunities to share and cooperate in discovering the power and wonder of the Biblical text. Intensive teacher training and support are part of this initiative that seeks to teach the text to day school students in the original Hebrew, thereby helping them become lovers of Torah study and highly competent in both textual knowledge and interpretive approaches.

Thus the Melton Research Center is trying to implement learner-centered models and approaches to teaching and learning in a variety of educational settings. All Melton Projects have extensive evaluation components by both internal and external evaluators to give both formative and summative reflections on our projects. For more information check out the Melton Website: <http://www.jtsa.edu/davidson/melton/index.shtml>.

Endnotes:

1. Feden, P.D. and R. M. Vogel. *Methods of Teaching: Applying Cognitive Science to Promote Student Learning*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003.
2. Wiggins, G. and J. McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1998.
3. Millis, B.J. and P. G. Cottell, Jr. *Cooperative Learning for Higher Education Faculty*. Phoenix, AZ: Onyx Press, 1998.
4. Wolfe, P. *Brain Matters: Translating Research Into Classroom Practice*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2001.
5. McCarthy, B. *About Learning*. Barrington, IL: Excel, Inc., 1996.
6. De Houwer, A. "Two or More Languages in Early Childhood: Some General Points and Practical Recommendations," in *AILA News*, Volume 1, Number 1. International Association of Applied Linguistics (ERIC Digest EDO-FL-99-03), July 1999. See also: *Eric Digest*. *Fostering Second Language Development in Young Children*. National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and

Second Language Learning, October 1999. www.cal.org/ericcll/digest/ncrcds04.html

7. Marzano, R.J. and John S. Kendall. A Comprehensive Guide to Designing Standards-Based Districts, Schools and Classrooms. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1996.
8. Reeves, D.B. Making Standards Work. Englewood, CO: Advanced Learning Press, 1996.
9. Conservative Judaism believes in revelation, the uncovering of truth emanating from God. We recognize that there is a range of views within Conservative Judaism about what is revelation, all of which understand revelation as being mediated by humans. In interpreting the Bible, we reject fundamentalism, making no assumption that the Torah is a historical accounting and it is certainly not a scientific accounting. We do assume that it contains great ideas, values and meaning; that it reflects the meeting of God and Jews and it is a place where God and Jews continue to meet.

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