

White Paper:
Jewish Learning in the
Digital Age





Dear Colleagues,

We are pleased to share with you this white paper, *Jewish Learning in the Digital Age*. The publication was developed by a consortium of Jewish educators to help build the case that educational technology can enrich and transform Jewish educational life, and help foster engagement with lifelong Jewish learning and living. The white paper is also available at www.bjeny.org. Additional printed copies are available upon request from BJENY.

The project developed from a shared interest in furthering the field by the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York and JECC, the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, the Associated Talmud Torahs of Chicago and the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston, with support from the Covenant Foundation. The BJENY and JECC were both recipients of Covenant Foundation Grants to develop cadres of leader practitioners in the area of educational technology for Jewish education. Among the lessons learned was the need to build on previous initiatives to move educational technology further on the Jewish educational agenda.

Dr. Ellen Meier, Co-Director of Teachers College's Center for Technology and School Change, and Stan Silverman, Director of The New York Institute of Technology's Technology Based Learning Center, served as executive consultants to the project. A number of Jewish educators served as key informants to the project. They included representatives of national and local agencies for Jewish education, educational content producers, educational technology consultants, administrators, and classroom-based teachers affiliated with day and congregational schools, reflecting the range of religious movements. These educators provided invaluable information about challenges and observations from the field, based on their practice.

In addition, a draft of the white paper was presented at the 2006 NECC (National Educational Computing Conference: www.neccsite.org), for comments and feedback from participants at the Jewish Educators Network session.

It is anticipated that this publication will generate meaningful discussion and activity among key stakeholders including educational practitioners, administrators, executives of central agencies for Jewish education, funders, advocates, and producers of educational resources. Clearly, educational technology must be included in the Jewish educational agenda.

Sincerely yours,

Rabbi Marty Schloss and Sara Seligson, Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York

Maury Greenberg, Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC)

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Introduction

Discussions of effective, quality Jewish education are not complete without attention paid to the medium through which it is designed and delivered. Increasingly, this involves new technologies, including computers, telecommunications, video, webcasting, audio files, and more. It is therefore incumbent on the Jewish educational community to encourage the appropriate use of new technologies and multiple media in the creation, delivery, and support of Jewish learning.

Overview of the Educational Landscape

Today's learners – children and adults – are living in a digital world. Younger learners, the so-called digital natives, as well as older, digital immigrants are tapping into these new venues for recreation, work, and learning. They are both consumers and producers of this world and are actively engaged with ideas and projects that ignite their curiosity and provide outlets for their creativity. The educational world is also increasingly turning to digital resources for teaching, learning, and providing access to an unprecedented variety of resources. Jewish education, both formal and informal, must take into account the millennium generation and how they encode, decode, and learn. Some educational settings and individuals are taking the lead in developing appropriate, technology-rich environments for learning. For the most part, however, the majority of institutions and educators are not yet able to take advantage of their full potential.

Research and conversations with practitioners confirm that there are tremendous opportunities and challenges associated with the integration of technology into education, including Jewish learning. When used appropriately, these tools and resources can enhance teaching and transform learning. In addition to facilitating Jewish learning and supporting infrastructures, technology can be used in the service of promoting Jewish cultural values. It can provide ways to connect learners and Jewish learning institutions. It can help foster community and activities that build a sense of Jewish peoplehood and involvement. The use of technology can also enable more powerful connections between home and school, and formal and informal education. Of significant importance, the development of a critical appreciation of these educational opportunities will help to create and sustain habits of lifelong Jewish learning.

There are pockets of promising practices in Jewish education. However, there is no formal system for identifying, evaluating, and learning from them; for disseminating ideas and emerging initiatives; or, for championing the field. There is a clear desire among educators for more imaginative and meaningful ways for technology to facilitate Jewish learning. They would like to see, for example, the creation of more flexible interactive multimedia resources for learning Jewish content, and the greater development of meaningful online experiences that connect Jews to one another, such as virtual field trips to Jewish communities around the world, or guided, virtual treks through Israel.

Building Capacities for Change

Learners in Jewish educational settings must have access to the best quality learning and content. Current research on how people learn, in conjunction with the use of technologies that can facilitate and support this learning, holds tremendous promise. The benefits to learners and educators are many. Teachers can better support differentiated and individualized learning, and address special needs so that students have better opportunities to learn in suitable ways. Teachers and students alike can access resources that might otherwise not be available. Students can create multimedia presentations that demonstrate skills in research, communication, analysis, and synthesis. The use of technology can capitalize on the hypertextuality of traditional text-based Jewish learning. Students can also develop new literacy skills that will prepare them for the work world, such as information and communication technology. Schools and other learning environments use technology for organization and administration purposes, to strengthen connections between home and school, and to facilitate professional development.

Clearly, there are many challenges to address. Schools are not always equipped to take into account what is currently known about cognition and deep learning. Authentic technology integration requires adaptations in the established school curricula and culture. Often the use of these technologies requires a steep learning curve for teachers, not just regarding their operational use, but in how to incorporate them into existing repertoires of educational technique. Teachers must also be supported as they try to change their practices to take advantage of new digital resources. Administrators may not feel confident about their abilities to make appropriate curricular or budgetary decisions. There are gaps between resources available for secular education and those for Jewish learning. These challenges, to name a few, are real, but not insurmountable. There are ways to address them on the local level, while also advocating for more global systemic change.

For example, initiatives can be rendered affordable through partnerships with existing community infrastructures such as local colleges. In the area of professional development, many educators are already familiar with basic technology skills, but need assistance in applying these skills in productive ways to their teaching. In order to ensure success, technology should be integrated in ways that make educational sense, embedded as a natural part of the learning environment, and not merely as an add-on.

Moving Forward to Create and Implement an Educational Agenda

Experience shows that small, relevant changes can create a chain of significant effects that build a critical mass for larger, sustained change. Clearly, there are many entry points that can work toward systemic change for the use of technology to design, support, and deliver quality Jewish education.

What then, are some key entry points for creating an educational culture in which educational technology becomes a normative resource for Jewish learning?

- Vision and leadership are crucial. Educational stakeholders must continue to serve as advocates for quality Jewish education and recognize the role that technology can play in its support. They need to understand that successful implementation of educational technology is accessible, achievable, and incorporates elements of good practice. These leaders should convene on a regular basis and use technology to support their work.
- Administrators and teachers need to understand issues around educational technology so that they can make informed and educationally sound decisions based on their learner's needs.
- Cadres of technology-using educators – in addition to technology coordinators – need to be nurtured through a range of professional development and networking, and be given opportunities and the support to experiment. Early adapters and peer leaders can be enlisted to assist their colleagues.
- Teachers must be provided with incentives and opportunities to move from adopting applications to truly appropriating them as new ways to achieve their curricular objectives. Ultimately, they should be able to transform their practice by integrating technology in a seamless way as another resource to foster deep learning.
- Students and educators alike must become critical connoisseurs of multimedia resources and opportunities and develop habits of lifelong learning.
- Schools of higher learning, in particular teacher preparation programs, need to implement and model the integration of technology into content and teaching technique on a regular basis.
- Research and evaluations must be conducted and disseminated to help identify promising practices, to better evaluate digital learning in Jewish settings, and to avoid reinventing wheels.
- Financially viable venues need to be developed for the creation and dissemination of quality educational resources and initiatives that take advantage of the opportunities new technologies can offer.
- Creative ways to address funding issues should be developed and promoted.
- Support should be given to both cutting edge projects and more modest endeavors that integrate technology in relevant and appropriate ways. Attention should be paid to innovation, but also to what is more easily doable and accessible to most people. Opportunities should be provided to build on successes.

It is possible as a community to develop an effective system for advancing a critical mass of educators and learners who understand how to use technology-rich resources in educationally appropriate ways to support learning, and to generate quality educational products and initiatives. All of this demands an educational environment that values Jewish lifelong learning that is accessible to all, is open to innovation and risk-taking, and is supportive of those who endeavor in this field. Educational technology must become a transparent, normative part of the educational culture.

It is not, after all, about technology – it's about Jewish learning.

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