

SOME EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES CHOSEN FROM SECULAR EDUCATION

by Barbara Rosoff

In response to the question "Who is wise?" Ben Zoma replies "One who learns from all."¹ Rabbi Joseph Hertz reflects upon the eloquence and simplicity of both question and answer, and comments that, in addition, a wise person has an open mind.² (Hertz, 1945). With these sage words to guide us, we begin our quest to determine what we can learn from secular education that will enhance Jewish education.

An obvious place to start is with the teacher. Teachers' thinking, planning, and decision-making constitute a large part of the psychological context of teaching. Within this context, curriculum is interpreted and acted upon. This is where teachers teach and students learn. Secular school research in this area has just begun to describe in detail the many ways in which teaching is complex, demanding, and uniquely human. Suffice it to say that what is taught and learned by the student, the atmosphere in the classroom, and teacher-student relationships are motivated in part and frequently by the mental constructs of the teacher. It is incumbent upon both teacher and supervisor to be aware of and sensitive to this area.

We all know effective teachers. Research has been done on what it is that these effective teachers do to make them effective. Three variables constantly come up when looking at these teachers:

- 1) Teachers' knowledge of the subject matter.
- 2) Their clarity in presentation (e.g., organization, clear presentation of material, etc.)
- 3) Enthusiasm, warmth.

Obviously there are no formulas to mold an effective teacher, but the above characteristics have been shown to describe them. Medley notes that facts and cognitive knowledge must be taught in the classroom, but, as important as these are, the teacher's job is not merely to cram information into their students' heads.³ A main end result of education is to use these facts in the service of producing important and lasting changes in their students' behavior. There is no argument but that this is especially crucial in the Jewish school.

Research has indicated that teachers who set and communicate high expectations in all of their students obtain greater academic performance than those who set low expectations. "Self-fulfilling prophecy" describes a situation in which a teacher's expectations influence the teacher's behavior and, subsequently, the student's behavior. (However, it is important to reserve judgment and not to assume that all teachers' expectations are automatically self-fulfilling!) Video-taping the teacher as s/he teaches is very revealing. (At least, it was for me. Just watching myself after I had been video-taped [by my own request] was a shock for me; I did not realize how differently I reacted to some of my students.) Teachers often treat "lows" very differently as compared with how they communicate with the brighter students. (I was absolutely shocked to observe myself doing so!) Sensitivity (and video-taping, if possible) in this area is helpful.

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The physical organization of the classroom adds to the efficacy of teaching. Effective teachers arrange the room differently depending on variables. If much teacher-student and student-student interaction is desired, for example, a horse-shoe arrangement is best (if possible). Age of students, grade, and desired outcome are variables to be considered by the teacher.

Time management (especially in the afternoon Religious school) is crucial, as are teachers' systems of classroom organization and management. We all know that well-functioning classrooms do not just happen by themselves. There is a distinction between "time on task" and Academic Learning Time. "Time on task" is defined as when it appears to the observer that a student is working. Academic Learning Time (ALT) is defined as the amount of time a student spends engaged in an academic task that s/he performs with high success. The effective teacher is aware of this difference and is sensitive to it in the classroom.

The teacher is the most important element in the classroom. In that spirit, I quote the following, which I found very motivating and inspiring and hope you will also:

"The School is a direct means by which we impart Judaism to this generation of Jewish youth. The school . . . is charged not only with the task of providing information, but also has a responsibility to offer our students positive Jewish experiences . . . The responsibility calls for dedicated and consecrated teacher."⁴

I have never met a teacher who is complacent with regard to her/his teaching skills. You would not have read this article if you were. In this article, I have encapsulated briefly some effective teaching strategies. Because the effective teacher knows that learning is life-long, and that we learn not only from articles and workshops, I always come back to my favorite words in the *Talmud*: "I learned a great deal from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but most of all I learned from my students."⁵

B'hatzlachah! May you go from strength to strength.

Endnotes:

1. *Pirke Avot 4:1*
2. Hertz, J. *Sayings of the Fathers; Pirke Aboth*. New York: Behrman House, 1945.
3. Medley, D.M. "The Effectiveness of Teachers." In *Research on Teaching: Concepts, Findings, and Implications*, ed. By P.L.Peterson and H.J.Walberg. Berkeley, CA: The National Society for the Study of Education: 1979.
4. Tornberg, Robert. (ed.) *The Jewish Educational Leader's Handbook*. Denver: A.R.E. Publishing Co., 1998.
5. *Ta'anit 7a*

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