

NEW MEDIA DEVELOPMENT AND VIRTUAL CONTENT COMMUNITIES IN 21ST CENTURY JEWISH EDUCATION

by Efraim Feinstein

I enter this field as a technologist, not as a traditional “educator.” I am the volunteer lead developer of the Open Siddur Project, where we are building a web-based platform that will include a database of Jewish liturgical texts and related materials (such as commentaries), in addition to an application for choosing texts and compiling them into a customized, printable *siddur*. While the Open Siddur and similar resources have an obvious function as an online reference volume, its most important feature will be to allow its users to share their customized texts so that they may be found, reviewed, and built upon by other users. The aspects of sharing, peer review, and iterative development open up a new model of teaching and learning that is not limited by geographic boundaries or by a single institution's limited resources. This essay intends to discuss briefly what role projects such as mine have in the larger Jewish educational ecosystem.

The Internet has long offered many resources that provide materials suitable for use in Jewish learning. However, the promise of currently emerging technologies is in the expansion of the Internet from a read-only resource (“Web 1.0”) to a read-write, participatory resource (“Web 2.0”): a multi-directional communications medium that has the potential to facilitate simultaneous interaction between teacher and student, and each student with other students. It also enables connection and communication between disparate real-world communities.

Online content development serves a number of educational purposes. Firstly, it is a form of experiential education that requires students to engage creatively with the material they are learning. Secondly, its successful completion requires engagement on a deep enough level that it is communicable by others. Thirdly, it is by nature a social activity that may be designed to involve a form of peer critique by other students.

There are two ways content development can be entered: locally or globally. In the former, content development is performed either entirely in the classroom or on the school's local Intranet. An early example of that kind of project is PrayerLive, where students working in teams studied the *siddur* text, developed sections of the *siddur* annotated with pictures, and described why the particular prayer evoked the particular choice of art. The result was presented to the entire class.¹

One intriguing example is presented on the jlearn2.0 blog by Sue Loubser, Director of Technology at Greenfield Hebrew Academy in Atlanta, Georgia, in which a fourth grade class developed a working smartphone app.² The process of development was quite instructive and indicative of how participatory development projects can develop organically. Briefly, the class

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was learning about *berachot* and found that there was no free app for listing them. The class did the research and gathered the content, and the coding was done by the school's IT department. The app was then made available for download.

A second way to introduce students to new media development is by joining an existing content community. The largest existing community is Wikipedia, which relies on its community to perform research, edit its content, and assure its correctness. A recent *Washington Post* article discussed projects in which undergraduates added to Wikipedia as part of their course work.³ Many Wikipedia articles on Jewish themes are incomplete, and high-school level classes could participate in improving them. When joining such a community, one must be careful to learn and follow the community's rules and standards. By editing Wikipedia, one agrees to allow his/her writing to be "edited, used, and redistributed at will." The potential for reward is greater in a project performed in a global community: a Wikipedia article will likely be the first point of reference about a subject. One must be aware, however, that there is also some potential for conflict with other members of the external community.

Aside from Wikipedia, other projects also crowd-source content development, including Hebrew-language Wikisource (<http://he.wikisource.org/>), which is digitizing many Jewish books of religious and historical import. A large number of these books are partially digitized and incomplete. Eventually, my project, the Open Siddur, will be operating in this sphere as well.

Perhaps the most interesting development projects fulfill the students' perceived need, like the *berachot* app mentioned above. Building simple web-based applications has become much easier with the advent of easy to use website design frameworks and content management systems. Google has released App Inventor (<http://appinventor.googlelabs.com>), which allows users to build Android apps by putting together graphical building blocks. As more such frameworks are released on additional platforms, technical limits are increasingly less likely to present a barrier to content development.

More advanced students may choose to participate in actively developed open source software projects. The path to becoming involved in this type of project varies, but it usually includes reading the introductory documentation, downloading the code, joining the project's mailing list, and posting about your interest. In some cases, project developers may be willing to act as mentors for students who are interested in contributing to the project. Contact information is usually provided on the project's website. Not every contribution to an open source project has to be code. Many are also looking for testing, written materials, documentation, and artwork.

While local content development projects have the advantage that the virtual classroom is fully under the control of the teacher, participants lose the chance to interact in real time during development with the wider world and to have wider impact. Most students are already consumers of the content produced by virtual communities. Helping to develop and improve

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that content has value in learning the material itself, how to present it, and in interacting with other organically-developed communities that have interest in the same content. While this essay is by no means complete, I hope it will evoke thought about making development in virtual content communities part of 21st century Jewish education.

ENDNOTES:

1. Preiss, D. *Meaning-making in prayer: A model for the use of collaborative constructivist technology for spiritual engagement* (Ed.D thesis, 2009). Retrieved on June 12, 2010 from <http://www.lookstein.org/retrieve.php?ID=-2403008>.
2. Loubser, S. *Authentic Learning: A Beracha App for the Android System*, 2011. jlearn 2.0. Retrieved on May 30, 2011 from www.etheoreal.com/jlearn2.0/2011/03/30/authentic-learning-a-beracha-app-for-the-android-system/.
3. Johnson, J. *Wikipedia goes to class*. Washington Post Online, 2011. Retrieved on May 30, 2011 from http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/wikipedia-goes-to-class/2011/05/03/AGNF4NEH_story.html.

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