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HOT TOPIC: Is experiential learning too demanding for Jewish schools?

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

by Gabe Goldman

Experiential education / learning (EE) is not new. It has been a part of American Jewish education for decades. Years before EE entered the lexicon of Jewish education with the publication of Bernard Riesman's *The Jewish Experiential Book: The Quest for Jewish Identity*,¹ Jewish schools offered field trips, model *seders*, *sukkah* programs and weekend *Shabbaton* retreats. Over the past three years, however, EE has become increasingly popular, the newest "new initiative" in American Jewish education. EE programs and professional positions are popping up across the country. And many Jewish educators are discovering that it is far more difficult to implement experiential education than they had anticipated.

As the Director of Experiential Learning at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles (and a Jewish experiential educator for 30 years), I worked with Jewish schools and camps across the United States to develop EE programs and to train their staffs in the best practices of EE. Rarely have I found that implementing *any* kind of new curriculum is easy -- and experiential education is no exception. Here is a case in point:

A Jewish community high school decided to "go experiential" across all of its grade levels and took the correct steps in making the transformation. School leaders enlisted the support of its feeder schools; the school board funded a position for an Experiential Education Specialist; and class time was changed from once a week on weeknights to a once-a-month weekend retreat at a Jewish retreat center. The new EE Specialist and the School Director developed experiential themes for each grade level and the EE Specialist adapted/developed teaching activities based on thematic goals. The school hired the *teva* (nature) staff at the retreat center to develop and staff an experiential program of Jewish environmental studies for its tenth graders. By all conventional measures, the new approach initially appeared to be succeeding. Enrollment increased in each of the first two years. Student absenteeism decreased greatly, as did student behavior problems. However, in the third year, numerous problems became clear. For example, teacher dissatisfaction was at an all-time high. Teachers felt that they did not have adequate time to become comfortable using the activities they were given and to accomplish all of the goals expected of them. They therefore began to make unilateral decisions about which activities to use and which goals to achieve. Additionally, they would frequently resort to having small group discussions rather than implementing more active lesson formats.

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By the end of the year, the school scrapped the rest of its transformation plans and returned to a more conventional approach. While it continued to take its students to the retreat center, it opted to run classroom programs with only a small percentage of time devoted to more active, experiential learning. What happened?

Unfortunately, this school's failed experiment is not unique, but rather points up three of the primary challenges to establishing successful and ongoing EE.

Educators Need a Better Grasp of Experiential Education Principles and Practices

Very few Jewish educators realize that experiential education is an educational philosophy with defining qualities and guiding principles (whose roots are found in *Talmud*). Instead, Jewish educators think of EE as a type of "informal" education that takes place outdoors. This explains why so many schools are shifting their classes to "summer camp settings." It also explains the attitude that "if we just take students outdoors, they will have a phenomenal educational experience." But this does not happen without the skilled intervention of trained Jewish educators. And we just do not have enough of them now. What does *not* work is to simply transplant classroom teachers into the outdoors. Nor does it work to hire camp counselors to be teachers without giving them extensive additional training.

More importantly, Jewish educators need to understand that experiential education is NOT defined by being in the outdoors or by the degree to which students feel they are at camp. Ultimately, what determines experiential learning is whether students relate to their education *as an experience* (to be recalled, reviewed, cherished, and applied to their own lives), rather than as just another life event that is soon forgotten.

Based on a seven-year study of experiential education (in such diverse settings as Orthodox *yeshivot* and on Birthright trips to Israel) conducted by Jewish Experiential Fellows and graduate students in experiential education at the American Jewish University,² it is now clear that students are more likely to relate to an event *as an experience* if four particular conditions are met. Each of these involves a specific relationship -- between students and each other, students and their curriculum, students and their teachers, and students and their learning environment. Briefly stated, these relationships are:

- Feeling a community relationship to other students.
- Having a relationship of trust with their teachers,
- Believing that what they are learning has immediate value to them.
- Being in a learning environment that allows them to feel that what they are doing is exciting.

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(A side note: The most effect EE educators were found to give much thought to how to design a particular learning environment to bring about a desired experience.)

Experiential Teaching Takes More Time

Using experiential teaching techniques takes more time, a lot more time, than using conventional teaching techniques. For example, consider the difference between teaching students about the *Kotel* (Western Wall) by showing them pictures and reading a Wikipedia article on the Internet vs. having them construct a three-dimensional model of the Wall. It is simply not realistic to expect teachers to achieve the same number of goals and to cover the same amount of material when using experiential teaching techniques. When teachers cannot achieve the number of goals expected of them, their only option is to achieve some goals and to ignore others. Most teachers do not like being put in this position and, in fact, it is not the best practice to have teachers make unilateral decisions about school goals.

Lack of Experiential Curriculum

Curriculum is far more than a list of subject matter. It is a process through which what is being taught, why it is being taught, and how it is being taught are brought into harmony. Traditional curriculum leans heavily on what is taught, with only a nod toward the why and very little guidance about the how. Experiential curricula also must address how best to change the learning environment to bring about the desired experiences. This might mean anything from putting up posters in a classroom to seeding a trail with objects that students can find on a nature walk. Most of what are being called experiential curricula are instructions on how to carry out specific learning activities. All too often, teachers are given a version of the school's traditional curriculum and told to make it experiential. This approach is a recipe for failure. It places tremendous stress on teachers and generally results in their making only a minimal commitment to using creative and experiential teaching techniques.

Recommendations

1. School administrators and teachers need to understand the underlying principles of experiential education so that they can implement it effectively both in the classroom and beyond the classroom setting.
2. Schools and camps need to devote more resources to developing experiential curricula that guide teachers through the entire teaching process -- from the introduction of the subject matter to the final evaluation.

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3. School leaders and directors of Experiential Education need to review the goals teachers are asked to achieve to determine if they are reasonable.
4. A new type of curriculum needs to be designed and produced for experiential educators -- one which provides all of the resources they need to use, including a visual demonstration (possibly through YouTube) of how to use the resources most effectively, as well as a selection of experiential evaluation tools to gauge what in the curriculum works best, what can be improved, and what needs to be changed to suit a specific school.

Endnotes:

1. Riesman, Bernard. *The Jewish Experiential Book: The Quest for Jewish Identity*. Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing Inc., 1979.
2. Unpublished study with anticipated publication date of 2014.

Prior to his recent move to Pittsburgh, Dr. Gabe Goldman was the Director of Experiential Learning at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, CA. Now serving as director of Outdoor Jewish Classroom, Gabe has over 40 years of experience as a Jewish educator, is nationally recognized as one of the founders of the Jewish environmental movement, has published dozens of articles, and is author of Guide for the Spiritually Perplexed: A Jewish Meditation Primer.

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