

Implementing Project-Based Learning in Congregational Schools¹

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How do we make Jewish learning relevant to students and meaningful to their contemporary lives? One approach is to embed the learning of content and skills within exciting real-world projects that leverage student motivation to accomplish real work with real value. This approach, known as Project-Based Learning (PBL), reaches back to a dialogue between Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Akiva, and the sages, who debated the question, “Which is greater, study or action?” They concluded that study is greater because it leads to action – an early recognition of the connection between the two. Two millennia later, “learning by doing,” as John Dewey called it, is an attractive option for learning environments in which sitting and listening to teachers doesn’t work, especially in relation to after-school lessons in congregational settings.

The Boston Experience

In 2009, Boston’s Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) launched a bold undertaking to redesign congregational learning.² This initiative was inspired by lay leaders who, after experiencing the dynamic adult Jewish education offered in the Boston area, wanted children to be able to drink from the deep well of Jewish learning as an important alternative to conventional Hebrew school. CJP set out to help congregations develop such new models and then to disseminate them across the community.

Initially, pilot congregations were selected to receive three-and-a-half years of limited funding, consulting, coaching, and training for reimagining and implementing innovative change in their youth education programs. The two selected congregations were quite different from each other in terms of available resources and staffing, and they worked with different consultants who took different approaches. However, both congregations chose to make PBL a central element in their innovation. The initiative subsequently supported multiple additional congregations in adopting a PBL approach.³ In 2013, Boston’s Hebrew College’s Congregational Education Initiative (CEI) began offering a professional development program for congregations interested in using PBL.

The experiences of these congregations have surfaced some of the key challenges of implementing PBL, as well as effective approaches to addressing those challenges.⁴

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These challenges include:

- Designing projects that inspire students and provide instruction in Jewish wisdom.
- Preparing teachers to successfully implement PBL.
- Supporting collaboration among teachers, students, and congregation members.
- Finding time for planning.

This article describes this work-in-progress, which has been both humbling and gratifying.

Designing Projects That Inspire Students and Provide Instruction in Jewish Wisdom

Jewish education becomes truly meaningful when it offers students deep content and provides them with moving experiences with powerful life impacts. When students think what they are doing is important, they engage more fully and learn more deeply, even in the limited amounts of time afforded by congregational education. When students connect with others intellectually, creatively, and soulfully, a Jewish educational setting can generate enduring learning for life. We have found that projects (known as learning expeditions) that focus on core Jewish wisdom can provide this meaningful educational experience.

Boston congregational learning expeditions have included:

- Creating a book filled with stories that illustrate sayings in *Pirkei Avot* exemplifying being a *mensch* on the sports field.
- Creating an app that sends a daily Jewish blessing.
- Creating a children's *siddur* for the congregation.
- Creating a *Pesach Haggadah* supplement for drawing *Seder* participants into deeper conversation and learning about Passover.
- Creating a Wiki to help people with special needs access Judaism.
- Creating a Jewish history game.

A key element in designing these projects was setting clear learning targets: intentional goals written in language easily accessible to students. "I can explain a saying from *Pirkei Avot*" is one such learning target; "I can write a short story that offers a sports example for that *Pirkei Avot* saying" is another.

Learning targets help teachers select activities that will support student learning and help students understand where they are headed. Learning targets are especially effective when presented as specific statements of what students will be able to say at the end of a unit of instruction.

Kim Bodemer, Education Director of Temple Chayai Shalom in Easton, Massachusetts, says:

"Learning targets help us to craft meaningful lessons and activities, constantly checking, *Is this really what we want our students to come out knowing?* The targets help the learning to be more focused so that students leave with more depth of understanding."

One of the challenges of PBL, however, is time to create quality work. Unlike a traditional set of lessons, a learning expedition requires time for exploration and creation. Rabbi Judy Spicehandler, Education Director at Congregation Beth El in Sudbury, Massachusetts, reports on the challenges and benefits:

"We have worked hard to creatively find more time. For example, since our project is an *Aleph Bet Book of*

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Middot (character traits), we devoted most of our retreat this year to developing a *Middah* theme, *savlanut* (patience). We are doing the next Family Education program on *kavod*. I am building some activities around *Middot* into our Religious School *Shabbat* morning service. These are all ways that we expand the time we have with our students beyond classroom time. The added bonus is that the year feels like it has a deeper level of integration. We are looking through the *Middot* lens at things we have done before, like the *Tu Bishvat Seder*, and seeing things in a new way.”

Rabbi Spicehandler also found that focusing in depth on a single topic had unexpected benefits of breadth:

“I was initially worried that in using so much of our time for this project, we would lose some of the breadth of our curriculum. The pleasant surprise was how much the project encouraged us to explore across the prism of Jewish learning. Over the course of learning the *Middot*, we covered *Torah* stories, rabbinic teachings, and Jewish folk stories. We read the *Book of Ruth* for *chesed* and *Pirkei Avot* for any number of *Middot*. We have found that we don’t have to sacrifice breadth for depth.”

Other congregations balance depth and breadth over time. Kim Bodemer explains, “We balance the emphasis on depth by having different themes be the focus of different semesters, so each semester offers depth on a different core area of Jewish wisdom.”

One benefit of learning expeditions and their balance between breadth and depth is student engagement: for the first time they could recall, educators said, students requested to work on their projects at home on their own time, a striking example of PBL’s success in generating moving educational experiences.

Preparing Teachers to Successfully Implement PBL

If students engage readily with PBL, a significant challenge for congregations is engaging and preparing teachers who have been teaching conventional religious school. We’ve found that, as the literature on innovation suggests, one of the best ways to introduce PBL is to leverage the interest of teachers who are eager to try something new.⁵ Once these early adopters experience success, and the congregation sees the quality of student work and passion, other teachers usually will become interested in experimenting with PBL. Indeed, we’ve often seen reluctant teachers become fervent PBL advocates, once they’ve tried it.

One of the main challenges for teachers is shifting from teacher-centered instruction toward more student-centered work. In PBL classrooms, the teacher serves less as a source of information and more as a coach and facilitator of inquiry, research, and reflection. Rather than drawing on long-held knowledge, teachers often learn with students or are just a step ahead of them.

This position can feel scary and vulnerable to teachers, and they feel affirmed when educational leaders acknowledge this discomfort. Nonetheless, many find that this vulnerability can actually enhance the resonance of learning. For students, it can be exciting, real, and precious to hear how their teachers also are engaged and stretched by a learning expedition. When so much content, including Jewish content, is available online, having teachers serve as learning facilitators shifts the focus from giving students fish to giving them a fishing pole. It also tells young people that Jewish learning is something adults do, too.

As practical support for this transition, I’ve helped teachers generate criteria for a good lesson. We consider model lessons, identifying elements that make the lesson strong, and how the lesson aligns with the criteria. Teachers then share their own lessons and work collaboratively to improve them. From looking at lesson plans,

we move on to looking together at student work, so we can see whether students are meeting learning targets and how we can adjust teaching to support them.

Rabbi Judy Spicehandler says:

“Paying teachers for training time has been crucial to our success. The investment in time and effort is tremendous, but well worth it for teacher morale and building teacher community. Also, I believe my teachers are deepening their own Jewish knowledge as they look for material to share with the students. I know I am deepening mine as I reach further to help them.”

Supporting Collaboration among Students, Teachers, and Congregation Members

Shifting to PBL creates new roles and relationships for students, teachers, and congregation members. When students are engaged in work that meets a real need and has a real audience, their motivation to do good work increases. Learning expeditions usually depend on the contributions of many students – for example, each creates an element of a Wiki Space or of an e-book. This fosters interdependence and student desire to support each other.

In some learning expeditions, the class begins by learning content over a period of several weeks, before each student takes his or her own piece to focus on more deeply. But this individual work still draws on reflections and ideas collected at the end of whole class learning sessions. Rabbi Judy Spicehandler describes how this works for the *Aleph Bet Book of Middot*:

“As we teach each specific *Middah* to a group of students, we make sure to collect their output and keep it in a file, so that later, when students are working on creating pages for the final project, they will have a file of resources developed by peers from which to draw.”

Collaboration can also be a valuable tool for feedback. When teachers take time to look at student work, they can identify common issues that need to be addressed. In the next lesson, the teacher can engage all the students in considering one student’s draft (with the permission of that student), asking what makes the draft strong and how, *specifically*, it could be improved. Working together to give direction to one student provides support for the others as well. When this process is built into the classroom culture, students begin to turn to each other for supportive critique.⁶ The limited time at congregational schools leaves little time for multiple drafts and critique, which means teachers need to develop efficient feedback strategies, like this one created by David Blocker and Rabbi Randy Kafka, of Temple Kol Tikvah in Sharon, Massachusetts:

“We call our way of sharing feedback with and among students ‘Two Thumbs Up and a Wish’: the name implies beginning with two (or more) things that are effective about the work, and then adding ONE suggestion for a possible addition or new direction.”

Teen *madrichim* can be an essential part of a collaborative classroom community. Congregation Beth El includes *madrichim* in staff training and planning sessions. Rabbi Judy Spicehandler explains:

“Having our teen assistants attend faculty planning meetings has been a tremendous help. They add so much to our planning with their young vibrant perspectives. They recognize how much we respect their input. This is a gift to them. Our teen *madrichim* are also invaluable in supporting our students with learning disabilities and helping them remain active participants in the group. We are working with a broad age range – grades 3-6 – and we encourage the older students to mentor the younger ones.”

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The congregation is the final piece of the PBL puzzle. David Blocker, Education Director at Temple Kol Tikvah, in Sharon, Massachusetts, explains how community members come together to help design learning expeditions:

“Once or twice a year, we hold a brainstorming session to get ideas on what our next expedition will look like. We provide the basic topic (for example, Jewish lifecycle events), and then those who choose to come (usually a mixture of students, parents, and interested older congregants who don’t have students in the school) offer ideas of projects, big questions, audiences, experts to draw on, etc. This helps build the community’s involvement in the projects. During project creation time (usually the last several weeks of each semester), our younger students often need help. Parent volunteers come in and take dictation or otherwise assist students with the various software we use for production.”

Other communities have also found that PBL engages the congregation in collaboration. As Rabbi Spicehandler reported:

“The support of the community has been an important element in assuaging my initial concerns about achieving excellence in student work, given the limited amount of time we have. The project itself has generated adult desire for involvement. When I first spoke to the congregational rabbi about the *Aleph Bet Book of Middot*, he grew so enthusiastic that he called me back into his office to discuss the possibility of publishing the book. He said he thought there was a real need for such a book, and he knew of no other book that filled that need. He speculated about how we could achieve the necessary quality and suggested that we meet with our CJP consultant to discuss ways of engaging the broader synagogue community.”

Finding Time for Planning

One last small but crucial element of successfully implementing PBL is building planning time into teacher schedules. Teachers need time to debrief about teaching sessions and to collaborate on how to respond flexibly to student progress, needs, and feedback. Planning time also can let teachers reflect on their personal connection to and understanding of the content being explored, so they can bring their full selves more wholeheartedly into the learning experience.

Before a learning expedition, educators need time to identify a real community need and a real audience for student work. During the learning expedition, they need time to craft lessons that weave Judaic content and skills with project work. It also takes time for teachers to gain confidence with this new way of designing lessons. Rabbi Spicehandler explains how she is working with a group of teachers on their first expedition:

“There is no doubt that PBL is labor intensive for everyone – students, teachers, and educational directors. We have settled into a pattern of brief faculty meetings after every session and longer meetings once a month. For the initial expedition, this is augmented with one-on-one sessions with the director to discuss lesson plans before they are designed, and email exchanges for feedback after they are completed but before they are taught. As our teachers develop expertise with PBL, I am hoping some of this will not be needed. I am definitely working longer hours, but I want to avoid teacher burnout. So far, the rewards are well worth the effort, and I think my teachers agree. The building of a deeper relationship between members of the team is one of the biggest rewards for me.”

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Over time, teachers become more familiar with the work, but new challenges can emerge as more teachers transition to PBL. Many congregations choose to have more than one expedition in a school year, which adds more complexity. Kim Bodemer explains:

“There are a couple of factors that we have found challenging in creating two expeditions – one in the spring and one in the fall - that each serve almost 150 students. First, we found that trying to plan one expedition while engaged in another felt overwhelming. Teachers had trouble focusing their attention and mustering excitement for the new projects. In response to this, our plan for the next school year is to do the bulk of our planning for both expeditions in the summer. This way, our teachers will have the opportunity to plan in advance and more time to research content. I expect this will help us to meet our goals for expeditions that are rich in content and offer a finished product that is of high quality and meaningful to the community. “

High quality meaningful Jewish education is what matters to these congregations, and PBL is helping them move toward achieving it.

Next Steps

With a growing number of congregations engaged with PBL, we need to find ways for congregations to share their work and to share in professional development, so we can build on each other’s successes and challenges.

There is also a need for professional evaluation. While studies document the efficacy of PBL in public schools, its efficacy for supplementary Jewish education needs more evaluation. To this end, CJP has contracted with an independent evaluator to evaluate the PBL initiatives at Temple Chayai Shalom in Easton, Massachusetts, and Congregation Beth El in Sudbury, Massachusetts, congregations that received CJP’s pilot grants to innovate with PBL.

I look forward to the results of the evaluation, which will help us continue to move forward on this path, and I would be grateful to hear from others about their learning as they venture to bring PBL to supplementary Jewish learning. ♦

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Foototes:

1. This article was written in 2014.
2. This initiative, Jewish Learning Connections.
3. As of this writing, Jewish Learning Connections is supporting twelve congregations, three of which are implementing PBL.
4. Over the past four years, the author has served as the CJP consultant to three congregations implementing PBL with CJP support. The author also serves as a school and learning design consultant for two day schools using a PBL approach, and is the designer and trainer for the Hebrew College CEI project-based learning track.
5. Rogers, Everett M. (1962). *Diffusion of Innovations*. Free Press of Glencoe, Macmillan Company.
6. I first learned about critique and learning expeditions from Scott Hartl and Ron Berger of Expeditionary Learning. See <http://elschools.org/best-practices/ron-berger-critique> and I recommend Ron Berger's book *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students*.