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Changing the Face of Jewish Education

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Last year, seventh graders at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston studied traditional Rabbinic text in a fairly typical manner. Their teacher prepared materials, distributed copies of the selected text, and led the class in discussion.

This year, eighth grade students select their passages or themes according to established guidelines, and wrestle with the text in small groups. They research the material using books, software, and the Internet. The students formulate opinions and defend their positions. They create Talmudic-style responses and publish them through the school's Online *Bet Midrash* to share their work with the world and invite reactions. Their teacher moves from group to group, suggesting resources and providing feedback. Students learn less broadly as they interact more intensively with specific text.

"You can't call it a book class and you can't call it a computer class…"

Different students? Different teacher? Different school?

No. The students are a year older, but it is their second year with their teacher, Jeff Spitzer, at the Boston Solomon Schechter.

So what changed? The introduction of a new curricular initiative, the Rabbinics Lab (RabLab) in which students learn to understand traditional Jewish text and contribute to the ongoing conversation of *Torah she'b'al Peh* (Oral Torah).

Learning Together: The Computer as a Classroom Tool

Bill Aron Photography

RabLab, a project supported by the Covenant Foundation, is an example of how an educational vision can be facilitated by technology. Although RabLab is housed in a dedicated room with several computers, and a Rabbinic library of books and computer software, its appeal is not solely based on its "hi-tech" resources. The power of RabLab lies in the vision behind it, which focuses on helping students understand the meaning of Jewish text in their lives today. Factors that contribute to their successful learning include the dedication of the school's faculty to these goals, an emphasis on student-directed research, excitement about the project, and the sense that they are engaged in important and authentic work. Students conduct research and study text in print and online. They use word-processing skills and web design to produce their original work.

"You can't call it a book class and you can't call it a computer class," Ronna Krell mused. Ronna, an eighth grade student in RabLab, is quick to point out that computer-based work is

only one component of the course work. The energy in the class can be attributed to more individualized learning in smaller groups. Their teacher, Jeffrey Spitzer, who directs RabLab, is able to circulate from *hevruta* to *hevruta* and provide individual attention to his students. Because they can focus on topics that are meaningful to them – within guidelines – students are more engaged with the material and take greater ownership over their learning.

There are many factors that contribute to its ultimate success. The development of an instructional plan by key stakeholders (including teachers, parents, administrators and community representatives) that integrates technology helps to build a solid foundation for using computers, videos, and other media.

Josh Lerner is another eighth grader. He enjoys the class because it gives him the opportunity to respond to text in a personal way from a source of knowledge and insight into Rabbinic thought. "We're also learning computer skills that we can use in other classes," Josh observed.

Many Jewish day schools are feeling pressured to provide a technology enriched experience for their students and faculty. Day school administrators, faculty, and parents are concerned about providing their children with a quality educational experience and, as our society becomes more technologically advanced, this means access to computers and the opportunities for interactive learning that they can engender. Day schools are also faced with competition from other local schools, both public and private, some of which may be equipped with cutting-edge hardware and top-flight software and which use technology in very creative and sophisticated ways to provide opportunities for engaged learning.

Discussions about educational technology are really about our goals and expectations for education. Technology is a touchstone that engages us in conversations about what and how we teach and learn: what it means to be an educated Jew, what skills are needed to compete in the work place, how we gather information and transform data into knowledge. Judy Eber, the technology coordinator for the Stephen S. Wise Elementary School in Los Angeles, points out that technology is a medium and not an end in and of itself. One of its great strengths is that, with the proper supports, it affords educators the opportunity to examine their pedagogic assumptions and techniques in a new light. Another benefit is that students can become more motivated to use technology and often feel empowered by their abilities to become active and engaged learners. Educators agree that the most exciting aspect of educational technology is its capacity to facilitate and increase active learning. The challenge is letting the school's vision drive the use of technology in its work rather than amassing equipment for its own sake.

Ideally, a school's use of technology reflects its overall goals and core values. There is the dystopian vision of computers replacing teachers, and students staring vacantly at their monitors. In fact, successful technology-based projects often include interactive group work, such as the *Mishnah Project* at Milken High School in Los Angeles, in which eighth grade students construct a Hyperstudio program using song, text, video, and stories; other students create portraits of themselves to share with their partner school in Israel. In the Boston school, RabLab students are empowered to actively participate in the school's philosophy of revelation as a historical and ongoing process by wrestling with the texts, and creating new responses to Rabbinic literature.

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Beth Tfiloh Congregation and Community School in Baltimore County, Maryland is an example of an institution that uses technology to highlight the importance it places on the school as a learning community. A learning center for teachers is equipped for them to experiment with computer technologies on their own and to mentor each other. This center is enclosed by a glass wall and students who pass by this facility intuitively understand that teachers are learners as well. This sends a very powerful message to students, who see their teachers in a new light - especially since technology is an area in which students often excel beyond their teachers' expertise.

Technology can also extend learning beyond the walls of the classroom, or even the school. RabLab provides students with resources that they would not ordinarily access in their class;

in addition to traditional texts, students use databases from which they can better understand how the text interacts, and develop their new-found knowledge into creative responses of their own which they post to a website for sharing and critique. Distance learning is another means of accessing and interacting with resources beyond the local community. The Distance Learning Project of the Jewish Theological Seminary is piloting online courses for Jewish high schools to provide Talmudic studies for advanced students. ORT is working with Jewish school systems in Miami, Cleveland and Atlanta to provide teacher training and technical support. Students at Yeshiva Atlanta participate in virtual computer programming classes with Bramson ORT in New York.

People are the ones who develop and implement curriculum, software, hardware, and ideas.

Teachers in Jewish day schools are probably even less confident about the skills they possess. Rabbi Lenny Matanky, a longtime veteran of educational technology for Jewish education and director of the Goldman Computer Center, Chicago, affirms that teacher training and ongoing professional development are key to integrating technology in school settings. Some communities, like Atlanta and Los Angeles address this issue by convening technology-using teachers on a regular basis to network and share expertise in addition to providing workshops and one-to-one mentoring.

There has been some concern among educators and parents about gender differences and the use of technology. The Center for Children and Technology/Education Development Center has found that very often, boys are intrigued by the technology itself and as a source of power, whereas girls tend to focus on it as a tool and a means to interact socially. When teachers provide opportunities for research or creating original materials, girls are just as responsive to using technology as boys. Gender differences and other issues of access are important areas to consider when designing any curriculum.

Educational technology is only as good as the people behind it. There are many factors that contribute to its ultimate success. The development of an instructional plan by key stakeholders (including teachers, parents, administrators and community representatives) that integrates technology helps to build a solid foundation for using computers, videos, and other media. The plan needs to take into account issues of goals and objectives, desired skills, curricular needs, faculty proficiency, professional development, technology configurations, facilities, budgeting, systems for maintenance, upgrades, and appropriate supports. The process of planning will help to clarify issues and address concerns to the educational community and therefore maximize chances for successfully integrating computers and other media into the life of the school. This is particularly critical since technology can be resource intensive.

All too often people expect a computer in the classroom to solve the perceived ills of Jewish (and secular) education. But educational technology is a very human enterprise. People are the ones who develop and implement curriculum, software, hardware, and ideas. The big question is "How do we provide quality education to our students in Jewish day schools and how can educational technology be used as one vehicle among many toward achieving quality Jewish education?" The field is still young. Research tends to show, however, that when implemented in a thoughtful and planful manner and when provided with appropriate supports - human, financial, and technical - educational technology can change the way students learn.

Just ask Ronna and Josh.

Resources

RabLab: *ssdsboston.org*

JESNA: *www.jesna.org*
(Resources for technology planning can be found in the "Jewish Educators' Electronic Toolkit" on JESNA's website.)

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JESNA has committed itself to harnessing the power of technology to strengthen Jewish teaching and learning. **JESNA's Jewish Educators' Electronic Toolkit** is a new initiative in the application of technology made possible by the **Newton and Rochelle Becker Foundation**, the **Kaminer Family Foundation**, the **Morton J. and Louise D. Macks Family Foundation,** and the **Sosland Foundation**. The Toolkit brings together in one website a broad range of information, materials, and curricular guides to help Jewish educators use media and technology more extensively and effectively in their work.

JESNA was created in 1981 as the Jewish Federation system's educational coordinating, planning, and development agency. JESNA is widely recognized for its leadership in the areas of research and program evaluation, professional recruitment and development, media and technology, organizational change and innovative program design and dissemination.

JESNA is a national, non-profit agency governed by a board of directors comprised of lay and professional leaders in Jewish education from across North America, including individuals from the major Jewish religious movements. JESNA is a beneficiary of Jewish federations throughout North America and other private and communal funders.

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OUR VISION: Leading *the* Communal Commitment *and* Mobilization *for* Excellence *in* Jewish Education

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