Creating the Jewish Learner in the 21st Century

by Jeffrey A. Liberman

The slogan of the 1992 Clinton-Gore Presidential campaign was "It's the economy, stupid." This phrase, attributed to James Carville, the campaign's chief political strategist, expressed the nation's desire to reduce the burden of the $4 trillion deficit built up by the two previous administrations.[1] When they were elected, the Clinton-Gore administration took these watchwords seriously and looked at policy issues in the areas of commerce and finance, health and human services, and foreign aid to reduce the fiscal challenges. In addition, however, their vision included using education to create the next generation of workers who would be capable of not only maintaining, but also advancing the economy of the United States. They imagined an educational system enriched through technology as the primary catalyst for our nation's future.

With the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the Clinton-Gore administration effected a comprehensive revision of the country's communications laws. The Federal Communications Commission was charged with the regulation and implementation of the Act which affected local and long-distance telephone service, cable programming and other video and telecommunication services. It also focused on how these services would be provided to schools. In a landmark order on May 8, 1997, the Federal Communications Commission specified that nearly all K-12 schools would be eligible for discounts of 20 percent to 90 percent on the cost of commercially available telecommunications services, Internet access, and internal connections.[2] This order is now referred to as the e-rate program.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of e-rate which has provided a $2 billion annual subsidy to public and non-public schools towards their costs for telecommunications services and access to the Internet. In addition, the e-rate legislation led to the creation of the *first* national educational technology plan. The plan included four primary elements: connectivity to the Internet, teacher training, quality academic content, and multimedia computing.[3]

As a result of this and other changes, public and non-public schools, including Jewish day schools, have embraced integrated educational technology to demonstrate to their constituent families that they are "cutting edge" educational institutions. I have seen public school students web-conferencing and communicating via e-mail with marine biologists on lab ships deep in the ocean. I have visited day schools that are using interactive white boards in science, math, Talmud and Tanach to enrich their curriculum. Clearly, this generation of students is benefiting from the changes that e-rate-supported technology has brought about. However, not all students enrolled in Jewish schools are benefiting yet. Eighty per cent of the students who receive a Jewish education do so at a supplementary school that meets, on average, from 2 to 5 hours a week. We, as educators, must ask the question - are *these* schools taking advantage of and building on the skills and expectations that their students are exposed to in their public and non-public schools since the implementation of e-rate? Should supplementary schools also focus on teacher training, hardware acquisition, integration of curriculum with technology, or using technology-- both in school and at home-- to increase their students' learning time?

Classroom Teachers and Technology

In 2006, the Board of Jewish Education of New York, through its Nassau/Queens Center, conducted the Congregational School Technology Survey.[4] It polled 47 supplementary schools about their use of technology. Of these, only seven reported that they have computers in the classroom, a computer lab, or

library computer capability. When asked who is responsible for integrating technology into the school, only four responded that they have an instructional technology specialist. By contrast, individual classrooms are "connected", even if the school has no overall integrated technology plan. In fact, twenty-one schools rely on the classroom teacher to integrate such technology, and 55% of the schools reported that their staff used the Internet for research and lesson planning. Individual teachers, it appears, are using their technological experience to enhance their classroom work. Even in the supplementary school, then, teacher technology training, one of the goals of the national e-rate initiative, is relevant. Still, neither it nor the other e-rate goals are pursued actively by most supplementary programs.

The importance of classroom teachers in the successful integration of technology is highlighted in a 2007 study by JeMM Productions and the Colorado Agency for Jewish Education.[5] The study looked at usage and integration of an interactive educational CD- ROM, titled *jbop,* at five schools. Their findings state

> We observed that students benefited more when teachers actively facilitated some aspect of the *jbop* experience – either by asking students to follow a set sequence, posing fundamental concepts or questions up front, doing one or more activities frontally with students, circulating among students and engaging them about their work on certain activities, assigning an activity for work at home (and reviewing the work when submitted), or articulating connections between *jbop* and classroom work.

If teachers are a key to technology integration, are they prepared for the task? In his convincing article *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,* [6] Marc Prensky posits the following theory: "Our students today are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet… Those of us who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology are…Digital Immigrants." He notes that like all immigrants, digital immigrants have an accent – "our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language."

Even though some of their teachers are "digital natives", many teachers in the supplementary school system are still "digital immigrants" Some schools have tried to overcome this by creating "digital native" environments and setting up computer labs. But Maury Greenberg, Director of Professional Development and Educational Resources at the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, asserts that a supplementary school should also do comprehensive, long term planning for effective hardware integration.
After a funder gives the initial funding, there is an initial flurry of activity. But the computer labs, by and large, are not being used to promote higher-order, critical thinking skills. In addition, most supplementary schools don't have the capacity to provide ongoing support for computer labs. Down the road, the synagogue finds out what the costs are of staffing, IT maintenance and replacement and they can't budget for it. The labs generally become outdated or fall into disrepair.

Extending the Time for Learning
However, given the availability of so many other resources, we might ask whether the responsibility for utilizing technological advances more effectively should fall solely on the supplementary school itself? For example, one of the biggest perennial challenges for supplementary schools is time. Since almost 99% of our students' households have a computer that is connected to the Internet, wouldn't this provide us with an opportunity to extend the available time for student learning?

Congregation Dor Tamid in Duluth, Georgia, uses the Behrman House *Hineni* interactive CD. Jill Burns, Education Director for the Intermediate Grades, reports, "Dor Tamid does not yet have its own building, so we rent space for our religious school. We did not use the interactive CD's as part of our school day. They were used at home as a supplement to our program. Our religious school meets one day per week and we were looking for a way that the students might work at home, especially if a parent was not able to help."

Joy Kahn-Evron, director of Temple Beth Am Religious School in Miami, Florida, also chose to use Behrman House's *Hineni,* as well as their *Shalom Uvracha* CD.[7]

We decided to use the CDs as a way to encourage students to do more practice at home. Since we meet only twice a week, we needed to find a way to generate more practice time for our students. We also decided to explore the technology route. Since it is a favorite of many children, it would provide a tactile and visual learning experience, and it is used in secular studies as well… Students related very positively to the use of CDs…every student was on board with this new method. Some came back a few weeks later saying that they had finished the entire CD – or had finished a particular chapter and had successfully completed all of the concluding games.

Understanding the importance of a teacher's role in technology integration, the entire Hebrew faculty of the Temple Beth Am Religious School was brought into the computer lab for an introduction to using the technology. As Kahn-Evron reports, "we had the teachers complete the first chapter of *Hineni* so they could see first hand what their students would be doing. We also taught them how to go online to track their students' homework. At each subsequent faculty meeting, we assessed the value of the CDs and encouraged the teachers to follow through with their students."

Making the Student-Israel Connection

Most supplementary schools hope to create a relationship between their students and Israel. In a unique experiment in Boston, students at seven supplementary schools have been participating in the federation's Boston-Haifa Connection Virtual Meeting Project. Developed and coordinated by the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston, along with the Leo Baeck Education Center in Haifa, each Boston school is twinned with a Haifa school. The schools work on curriculum together, and in some cases have annual or bi-annual student exchanges. Two to three times a year, each class participates in a videoconference and has a virtual meeting between the partnering schools. Between these virtual meetings, students share an ongoing exchange of e-mails, most often sent from home.

Now in its third year, the project has learned from its growing pains. During the first year, each site had only one videoconference, limiting contact between the students. As one school wrote in its year-end report,[8]

Students developed a connection to the land and the people of Israel…. [They now] have an understanding of how Israeli children live and understand the similarities and differences between the two populations. Further, our students had not originally developed meaningful connections with the Israeli students. Even though the end-of-unit projects allowed the American students to understand how Israeli students live, the projects did not allow the American students to develop meaningful connections with their Israeli counterparts.

The recommendations that have been implemented since that first year include increasing the number of virtual meetings from one per year to two or three and increasing individual student contact.

Evidence of the changes can be seen in an e-mail David Strauss, coordinator of the program at Beth El in Sudbury, Massachusetts, sent to Peter Sorek at *Hugim* High School in Haifa, after a virtual meeting. "Our kids left the conference energized and excited to meet your kids in person in the spring…This is a great sign! It was interesting to hear their questions and watch them as they listened to the answers."

Roberta Bell-Kligler, from Project Oren in Haifa and is one of the facilitators of the project, observed this virtual meeting and wrote, "What was especially successful, in my opinion, was the speed with which the students entered into serious conversation. The issue of Jewish identity was actually brought up by the students themselves, discussed and debated. I am sure all the participants learned new things about being Jewish - here and there."

Using a Familiar Medium

It is clear that the students in supplementary schools can embrace technology as a learning tool when it is thoughtfully integrated into the curriculum. As the U.S. Department of Education is working with the third national educational technology plan, we know that the examples above are not the norm for supplementary schools. Nonetheless, it is clear we should be moving to meet our students where their public and private schools have taken them technologically. While public schools begin to embrace web

2.0 activities such as Wikis, blogs, podcasts, and RSS feeds, our supplementary schools are still figuring out if they can web quest. Suzanne Sobczak, Principal at Congregation Har HaShem in Boulder Colorado, a user of the *jbop* program,[9] wrote, "Taking into consideration that we are living in the year 2007, it is paramount that we engage our students in a medium in which they are interacting on a daily basis."

There is no simple prescription to enable supplementary schools to integrate technology into their programs. As they begin to utilize their students' technology skills, encountered and mastered daily in every-day 21st century life, the benefits will be obvious. Clearly, supplementary schools that focus on a combination of teacher training, hardware acquisition, integration of curriculum with technology, and using technology both in school and at home will have the greatest chance of success in building more effective schools.

Endnotes:

1. James MacGregor Burns and Georgia J. Sorenson, *Dead Center* Scribner 1999, page 76.

2. Federal Communications Commission *E-rate History*
http://www.fcc.gov/learnnet/welcome.html

3. Andrew Trotter, *Getting Up to Speed* Education Week March 29, 2007. available on line

4. Dr. Jed Luchow and Orna Sheena, *Congregational School Technology Survey* Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York 2006.

5. JeMM Productions and the Colorado Agency for Jewish Education, *Best Uses of jbop - Findings from a focus school process on incorporating technology into Jewish schools,* July 2007.

6. Marc Prensky *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* On the Horizon, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001 NCB University Press, available on line
http://www.twitchspeed.com/site/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.htm

7. www.behrmanhouse.com

8. Rachel Kest, Deena Bloomstone *2006 Reflections on Yachdav 5th Grade Program End of Year Analysis.* Temple Shir Tikva (Wayland, MA) 2006.

9. www.jbop.com

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