

## Effective Curriculum Development: Rabbi Hirsch, Professor Hirsch, and Me by Steve Bailey

Over the past five years, I have had the unique privilege of creating a comprehensive, innovative model of Jewish Studies curricula at Sydney's Moriah College. With 1800 students, it is the largest Jewish day school in the Southern hemisphere. The project included planning and implementing the content, sequence, and methodology in all areas of Jewish Studies curricula for middle school through high school, including student texts, assessments, teacher's guides, staff training, and outcome research. I consider this opportunity a privilege, because I was contracted for a multi-year, on-site project with the freedom to "start from scratch" — a rare opportunity in Jewish education. I want to share some of the overall guidelines that shaped this effective and successful project, in the hope that Jewish schools may find some of my experience valuable for creating, renewing or refreshing their Jewish Studies curricula.

### The Three Big Issues

Creating and developing a curriculum plan requires attention to three key questions:

- What knowledge and skills need to be taught?
- How should the identified knowledge and skills be taught?
- Why should students expend the time and effort to learn the required Jewish knowledge and skills?

None of these questions is simple.

The issue of what to teach not only relates to choosing the "essentials" and developmentally sequencing Jewish knowledge and skills to transmit during a student's school career, but also to assessing the nature of the student population (what are the realistic levels of student interest, commitment, and valuing of Judaism?) and the realistic schedule constrictions of Jewish Studies within the congested school day.

The issue of how to teach relates to classroom atmosphere and teacher methodology, as well as the nature of learning materials (for both students and teachers), projects, assessments, monitoring achievement, and informal programming.

After the issues of what to teach and how to teach are addressed, one has to ask: Why should students exert time and effort in Jewish Studies — especially when they are competing with general studies (leading to university acceptance), sports, art, and music, which are inherently satisfying? This is the issue of motivation. Unlike general studies, with professional texts, sophisticated workbooks, and science labs, as well as obvious relevance to secular life and future education, Jewish Studies tend to be inherently distanced from meaningful adolescent experience or social-economic value. In other words, for the average student, Jewish Studies have little personally significant "pay-off."

These are complex, but real, issues for the curriculum developer and a well thought-out, sensible response to these questions makes the difference between an effective, successful Jewish education curriculum and an uninspired, misdirected one.

After studying the traditional “giants” in secular curriculum development, I culled most of my inspiration for my curriculum approach – and responses to the questions raised — from two “Hirsch”s and my own training.

### Rabbi Hirsch

The first is Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the great philosopher and scholar of nineteenth century German Jewry, who was not only the initiator of modern orthodoxy, but also a courageous and forward-thinking Jewish educator.<sup>1</sup> He broke ground regarding the value of secular education along side Jewish education, and most importantly, he insisted on making Jewish education relevant, inspirational, and applicable to a student’s everyday life. If we wish to show students that Judaism is a practical way of life, he said, we need to show that it speaks to their reason, feelings, and personal experience. This dynamic was a guiding theme for my curriculum, both in terms of what to teach and how to teach it.

While contemporary curriculum developers encourage us to make learning “fun” and entertaining, if a student cannot see the meaning and value of Jewish learning to his or her real-life experience, the learning, no matter how enjoyable, remains on the “outside” of the learner either as abstract ideas or quaint, but irrelevant, traditions. The values, attitudes, practices and ideals of Judaism need to be internalized to have a significant influence on the student’s life. This can only be accomplished if what the student learns is relevant and personally meaningful from the student’s perspective.

But this dedication to personal meaning and relevance is often distorted by well-meaning modern educators in an attempt to make everything personal. When learning biblical literature, Jewish law, practice or holiday observances, students are frequently asked questions such as: “If you were Abraham, would you argue with God?” or students are assigned to “write your own Ten Commandments” or “create your own haggadah that describes the oppression of Armenians by the Turks.” While the attempt is to personalize the learning, what actually happens is that the traditional Jewish text, historical context, law or observance is substituted by a student’s idiosyncratic perspective. Students miss the Torah’s lesson of Abraham’s unequivocal, courageous pursuit of justice, of the fundamental moral principles of the Ten Commandments and the historical meaning for Jewish identity of the Exodus. So students may personalize learned material, but remain ignorant of the traditional knowledge and skills we need to inculcate in order to perpetuate Jewish life for the next generation.

How can we retain personal relevance and meaning, as Rabbi Hirsch taught, and at the same time transmit the content and substance of our rich, unique Jewish heritage? Rabbi Hirsch accomplished this by maintaining the integrity and primacy of the traditional text, mitzvah or holiday observance and, at the same time, gave the ancient literature and practice “modern” symbolic meaning and relevance for the contemporary learner. In teaching, he always tied the learning to a source text and showed the psychological, theological or ethical lesson to be learned in the contemporary idiom. This preserved the inherent “message” of our traditional literature and heritage, while making the content relevant and meaningful to the contemporary student.

Following these guidelines in my curriculum project, I was sure to always present source texts — either biblical, midrashic, aggadic, legal, philosophic or historical — and then challenge the student to draw out the Jewish values and teachings from the material, in a meaningful way, rather than to impose his or her idiosyncratic concepts on to the material and ignore its “Jewish” intent and message.

### Professor Hirsch

But we still have a problem. How do we decide what knowledge and skills to transmit to our students from our vast resources, given the restrictions of time and competing educational requirements? This is where the other “Hirsch” — Professor E.D. Hirsch, Jr. — can help us.

E.D. Hirsch, Jr. is professor emeritus at the University of Virginia and founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation. In his groundbreaking book, “Cultural Literacy,”<sup>2</sup> he addresses the issue of what to teach. Professor Hirsch proposes that the nation’s educational systems focus on a sequenced curriculum representing core knowledge of “shared literacy.” What he means by the latter term for American education is fluency in a range of knowledge “taken for granted by speakers and writers of a shared culture” – in other words: core knowledge of American cultural literacy. This approach is often contrasted with educationalists (such as Gardner<sup>3</sup> et. al.) who posit that primacy in education be directed to “learning how to learn” (abstract, critical thinking and analytic skills), regardless of content. From E.D. Hirsch, Jr.’s contrasting view, a broad base of traditional knowledge, building sequentially, transmits the core knowledge of a culture and is more fundamental to education than the focus on development of content-free cognitive processes.

Applying E.D. Hirsch, Jr.’s approach to Jewish education would mean designing a curriculum that represents the core knowledge and skills shared by members of the identified Jewish community. In my curriculum project, I translated “shared literacy in Jewish core knowledge” into core knowledge and skills in areas of Hebrew language, Biblical literature, prayer, Jewish history, Jewish law, holidays, Israel, Jewish ethics, and Jewish thought. Students who demonstrated competent, shared literacy in these areas of Jewish knowledge and skills would be considered successful graduates of our school’s Jewish education curriculum. All assessments were comprised, primarily, of this core knowledge, so we knew our students graduated Jewishly literate.

### Why Learn Jewish Studies?

Now we have two of the three original issues addressed: what to teach and how to teach it. The third major issue relates to motivation. What will motivate students to expend the required time and effort, both in the classroom and at home, to study Jewish knowledge and skills when these areas are largely irrelevant for college preparatory purposes (and their grade-point average rewards) and can hardly compete with the social value of sports, music, arts, and leisure activities?

While it is true that some students come from families that place a high value on Jewish learning and practice, the sad truth is that most children in supplementary and day schools do not experience significantly powerful parental or peer support to motivate high achievement in Jewish Studies. In other words, for most students, there seems to be minimal external rewards for achievement in Jewish Studies compared with social and academic rewards for excelling in general studies and/or extra-curricular activities.

To address this problem, I needed to rely on my professional experience as a clinical/developmental psychologist.

Developmental psychologists and educators have demonstrated the power of an adolescents’ experience of success and competency in the middle and high school years. Erik Erikson,<sup>4</sup> for example, noted that as the

adolescent formed his or her identity, self-esteem (a positive self image based on experiencing success and competence) played a key role in the healthy resolution of this formative stage of personality development. Similarly, in a persuasive book entitled, "Schools Without Failure," William Glasser, M.D.,<sup>5</sup> focused on the critical role of students' experience of success throughout his or her schooling.

The finding that a student's experience of competency and success is inherently rewarding and motivating is key to our curriculum model. In face of little external reward for Jewish Studies achievement, we can encourage students to achieve in their Jewish education by making the experience one of personal success and competence. This, of course, does not mean that we give "free" inflated grades or present students with such easy, "fun" tasks that they easily excel. Students see through this façade and such false success not only has little effect on increasing motivation, but also denigrates Jewish Studies as childish.

### Shaping the Success Experience

How do we create student competency and success? First, we present the Jewish Studies material in a challenging, appealing way — parallel to the academic challenges of grade-level math, science, and literature— so that students will associate the seriousness of their Jewish Studies with the substantive, academic demand with which they approach their general studies. In this way the teacher assures that a student's work is serious and valued. Before final exams, we focus students on the material that needs to be studied, provide "how to study" guidelines, and help them prepare through review sessions. Next, we inform students that 60% of the questions will come from the workbook and quiz questions that have already answered and reviewed. Finally, we use a "mastery learning" approach, which assures competency and success by requiring students to achieve a score of 70% or more on their final term test or risk repeating the test until they achieve this criterion (to assure their acquisition of the core knowledge and skills required).

This may seem like a tremendous amount of effort expended to assure students' success in their Jewish Studies. But that is the whole point. We want all students to succeed by honest effort so that they can experience the pride and self-esteem that comes with earned competency. Brighter students average 80-90% on the core material and enjoy the admiration of parents and peers. They also are given enrichment tasks that challenge their thinking and critical skills. Students who are learning-disabled or have special education needs are given modified programs, but still experience success by achieving their customized criterion. Most importantly, however, the average majority of the class also experiences success (at least 70%) and develops a positive attitude to Jewish Studies rather than the typical failure experience that discourages continued effort and interest. It is just this valued success/competency outcome that will continually motivate the student, internally, to succeed and achieve in the shared literacy of Jewish core knowledge and skills.

### Initial Results

After implementing this project for four years, I asked teachers, administrators and students for feedback. Students in each year level were asked to complete a class evaluation form, anonymously, at the end of the third term. The form was a five-point scale of agree/disagree on issues such the quality and clarity of the class booklet, the level of challenge and interest of the material, and the relevance of what they learned in class. They also self-rated their feeling of success in the class. Between 70-80% of each class evaluated the items positively. Further, 85% indicated that their attitude towards Jewish Studies was positive.

At our last year-in-review session, teachers shared their positive observations about the sequential organization and professional production of learning materials and high quality of the teacher's guides and also offered suggestions for editing and expanding certain areas for the coming year. Many noted that the prepared material freed them to add their personal creativity to their classes while assuring that all students acquired the necessary core knowledge and skills. They were also relieved to find that students were more attentive, respectful, motivated, and actually enjoyed learning.

Teachers and the Department Chairperson reported a significant decrease in parent and student complaints such as "this is boring," "we learned this already" or "Jewish Studies are irrelevant." The Department Chairperson also found that the professional materials and assessments as well as classroom observations impressed potential families in relation to enrollment decisions.

Admittedly, a multi-year, on-site curriculum development project is a budgetary luxury for most schools, but the principles I have outlined can be effectively applied to large or small schools through trained, thoughtful, dedicated educators. Effective Jewish education is essential for our future. We need quality curricula by design, not by default.

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Endnotes:

1. Hirsch, S.R. "A Classic Principle of Jewish Education" in *Collected Writings*, Vol. VII (trans.). New York: Feldheim, 1992.
2. Hirsch, E. D., Jr. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. New York: Vintage, 1968.
3. Gardner, Howard. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
4. Erikson, Erik. *Childhood and Society*. London: Imago Publishers, 1951.
5. Glasser, William. *Schools Without Failure*. New York: HarperCollins, 1969.

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