

Design Principles for 21st Century Jewish Education: A Response

by Iris Petroff and Jeffrey Lasday

When an organization's major annual program contains the word "Alternatives" in its very name, it can only embrace a significant piece of Jewish educational work that calls for major change in "Redesigning Jewish Education for the 21st century." Renee Rubin Ross, Meredith Woocher, and Jon Woocher and the Lippman Kanfer Institute are all to be commended for their very thoughtful forward looking Working Paper, which is excerpted in this issue of *JEN*. (The full Working Paper can be found on JESNA's home page at www.jesna.org.) As an organization that has influenced and championed change in Jewish education for over 30 years, we are painfully aware of the difficulties and challenges that face educational reform. Reflecting upon the Working Paper, we raise the following thoughts and questions concerning the three key concepts that are at the core of the design principles:

Design Principles

1. Empowering the learner as an active agent in fashioning his/her own learning experience.

CAJE champions the basic educational concept of "student-centered learning" where students are empowered and the educational experience is crafted around the student's needs. However, this first design principle question begs the question of identifying who is the learner, who is the consumer, and what happens when the learner and the consumer are not one and the same? When talking about children, is the child the consumer or is it the parent(s) or is it the family or, possibly, all of the above? What happens when there is a basic conflict between the needs, desires, and goals of the learner, the school and/or congregation, and the family? What mechanisms need to be put in place that will allow a negotiation and ownership of the learning experience between all involved parties? If Jewish education indeed does need to be far more "market sensitive," then who is the market?

In addition, what about the student who "does not know how, or what, to ask?" Is there a body of knowledge we expect a literate Jew to know? If so, what is the balance between a constructivist, student-directed education and one that addresses a comprehensive curriculum?

2. The centrality of relationships and the social experience of learning as dynamic forces that shape an evolving identity and build commitment and community in a fragmented world.

The second design principle recognizes the importance of relationships and the importance of community. Jewish education isn't solely about cognition, about creating literate knowledgeable Jews. Jewish education is also about creating emotional connections, relationships, and a sense of belonging to a particular community. Central to Jewish education is the relationships built between students and teacher and student and peers. The power of community and social experience is epitomized in the Jewish camp setting and in classic Jewish youth groups. In fact, if we were to go back twenty years or so, we would find articles in Jewish educational journals calling for the creation of "camp-like" educational experiences within the Jewish school and the championing of retreats (*shabbatonim*). Twenty years ago Ron Wolfson¹ already was writing about the importance of creating community in the classroom. For some time now, we have known and tried to harness the power of informal experiential experiences. Yet, for the most part, our educational experiences are still bifurcated between what goes on in the classroom and what happens at camp or in youth group. Borrowing from the sense of community and the power of the relationships created within camp and youth group experiences, Joel Grishaver advocates for the development of "*madrichim*" programs. Similar to how youth groups operate, in the *madrichim* program older students are

recruited to become *madrichim*, accessible role models, for younger students. *Madrichim* themselves are grouped with others their own age to enable the belonging to a peer community, as well as the classroom community. However, despite what we know, most schools don't see community building as part of their core mission. Despite the acknowledged power of youth groups, they are in decline. Despite what we know about what "works" in Jewish education, youth group/informal Jewish education, for the most part is still segregated from the daily ongoing life of the school. Why? Despite the power of harnessing older students to teach younger students, we still don't see this as on-going practice within schools. Why?

Further, the activities of school and youth programs are typically segregated from the rest of the life of the synagogue. And, the life a young congregant might lead at camp or during an intense summer teen experience is also left in its own silo, despite the impact that study after study shows these experiences have. Imagine what could happen if participants of such programs could help design ways that our communal educational settings for students of all ages could build upon the "best" aspects of their experiences.

A bigger question to be raised is what bridges need to be built between institutions to create community beyond the walls of various buildings? How can both national and local organizations create collaborative models that best support the fostering of social relationships and learning that strengthens the individual, the community, and its various institutions?

3. Jewish learning as "life-centered," addressing the totality of our aspirations, concerns, and experiences

Clearly, Jewish education needs to be relevant to student's lives. Clearly, "Judaism is not a subject to be studied; it is a way of life to be lived."² And, clearly, "the content of Jewish education should grow out of, reflect, and respond to authentic questions and life experiences of the learners."³ So if we agree with these statements, then how will this design principle find expression in our curriculum? What will we teach? How will this affect how we teach basic building block skills such as Hebrew language and participation in a prayer service? Who and what will define what it means to "live Jewishly?" How can what we know about the impact of family education help us move from the event/program-based model that exists in most settings today to an ongoing, evolving process that supports all family members in living Jewishly?

Additional Thoughts

We endorse and applaud these three design principles for the 21st century and believe that if implemented indeed would provide a dramatic change for the betterment of the Jewish community. At the same time, we recognize that to bring this vision to reality will take a great deal of work. In addition to the issues and questions raised above, as the article points out, our Jewish educators will need new skills. They must be treated as professionals and supported in a pursuit of excellence with ongoing and high quality professional development, and with a community value that supports education and the educational professionals.

As part of its conclusion the Working Paper declares that the design principles described "are by no means new, but they are radical."⁴ What makes these design principles radical is the fact that, despite the fact that they have been stated and accepted over time, "they do not characterize the normative practices of Jewish education today."⁵ Given this reality we leave our readers with three key questions:

1. If the described design principles aren't new, sound logical, and would provide for a more enhanced educational experience, then why haven't they already been integrated into normative practice? What is stopping us from reaching the vision of 21st century Jewish education articulated in the Working Paper? What is preventing us from instituting change and moving forward into the 21st century? What and who must change to create this new reality?

2. After we are able to articulate the obstacles and the reasons why the proposed vision isn't our current reality, the pragmatic question then arises as to what it would take to move from vision to

reality. What do we need to do? What silos need to be bridged? What national and local, inter- and intra-institutional, collaborations need to be fostered? What must we do and what do we need to make it happen?

3. An important question to think about is, what would Jewish education look like if we were to implement the design principles? The full Working Paper (found on the JESNA web-site www.jesna.org) includes a snapshot of how three families might engage in Jewish learning in a world embracing these three design principles. How would your students, from babies through adults, engage in Jewish learning if you were to take on and implement the design principles in creating your own future educational setting? What would your Jewish community be doing?

We look to our members for your thoughts and further questions. Your reactions can be posted to caje.org.

Endnotes:

1. Marcus, Audrey Friedman (ed). *The Jewish Teacher's Handbook II*. Denver: Alternatives in Jewish Education, 1981.
2. Ross, Renee Rubin, Meredith Woocher, and Jon Woocher. "Design Principles for 21st Century Jewish Education" in *Jewish Education News*, Summer 2007.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

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