

What is the Challenge in Experiential Jewish Education?

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David Bryfman

bryfman@nyu.edu

“Life’s challenges are not supposed to paralyze you, they’re supposed to help you discover who you are.”

Bernice Johnson Reagon¹

Challenge in Experiential Jewish Education

In a recent, yet to be published, article Professor Joseph Reimer and I articulated a conception of experiential Jewish education. (Reimer & Bryfman, (In press.))

In articulating a definition of experiential Jewish education the three core initiatives of recreation, socialization and challenge were deemed essential.

“Recreation - As recreation, experiential Jewish education aims to provide its participants with social comfort, fun and belonging in a Jewish context. Experiential Jewish education operates primarily as a set of leisure-time activities. Participants voluntarily choose to participate in the programs that are offered. They must enjoy these activities or they will cease to attend. As recreation, Jewish experiential education provides safe space for Jews to enjoy the company of other Jews in pursuing common cultural activities.

Socialization - As socialization, experiential Jewish education aims to provide the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be an active member of the Jewish community. When people feel part of a social unit, they begin to identify with its procedures, rules and world view. They want to belong and become an identifiable “member” of that unit. We call that process of identification “socialization.” In the Jewish world, we encourage participants to identify with a Jewish group and to internalize those behaviors, attitudes and feelings that characterize members of that group. We also encourage their identifying with the Jewish people in some broader sense.

Challenge - As experiential educators, Jewish educators aim to encourage participants to undertake the challenge of stretching themselves and growing towards a more complex participation in one’s Jewish life. Because there is a lot more to Judaism than participating skillfully in the activities of one’s Jewish camp or youth movement, experiential educators need to motivate individuals to stretch beyond their comfort zone and creatively explore a variety of Jewish modes of expression. The goal is to deepen and personalize individuals’ Jewish experiences so they feel they are on a Jewish journey and are not simply a member of a Jewish club.”

¹ **Bernice Johnson Reagon** b. 1942 is a singer, composer, scholar, and social activist, who founded the a cappella ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock in 1973.

Questioning “Challenge”

In Reimer and Bryfman, “Challenge” was broadly referred to as a process whereby participants would, undertake the struggle of stretching themselves and growing towards a more complex participation in one’s Jewish life.

Further it was explained that, “at the level of challenge, exploration is the point,” and that this process was essential to experiential education.

“We believe in the values of exploration and growth (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and want to see experiential Jewish education aim to challenge Jews to creatively engage with their Judaism (Kaplan, 1934).”

Key Questions

- What is the challenge in experiential Jewish education?
- What moves something from being recreation and socialization in Jewish contexts to that of experiential Jewish education?

Toward a theory and practice of challenge

The concept of challenge is derived largely from our understanding of **Challenge Education**. – often mistaken for **Outdoor Education** – when it is in fact much broader

Challenge Education utilizes elements of risk taking, problem solving, and purposeful reflection to enable individuals to learn and grow from experiences.

Its theoretical principles are based on the philosophy of **Experiential Education**, which proposes engaging learners in the educational process, promoting a hands-on approach, and stimulating authentic thoughts and reflections in order to promote effective learning.”

A Philosophy of Challenge - 5 key philosophical underpinnings

1. Learn and You Shall Grow

- Education leads to growth. Organisms are given opportunities to transform.
- Development is overwhelmingly positive in nature as organisms strive to improve
- *Psychosynthesis*: as the natural process of growth of the whole person leading to a gradual change and becoming of each individual's personality.(Assagiolo, 1971)

2. Making the World a better place

- Intent on making the world a better place.
- Each individual needs to find their own improvement by looking inward, finding significance in smallness, and then finding connections with others so that society at large could be improved (Schumacher, 1973)
- Tikkun Olam (repairing the world) being dependent on corollary Kabbalistic notion of Tikkun Nefesh (repairing the self)

3. Educate the Whole Person

- Humanistic education seeks to engage the 'whole person' in any educational endeavor – cognitive, affective, active (behaving) and interpersonal.
- Fifth dimension – that of spirituality – for which it would probably serve the western world to look closer at religion and other cultures.
- Engaging the whole person in education recognizes that each learner is unique in who they are, who they will become, and how they will get there. (Gardner, 1993)

4. Individuals and Groups

- Human beings do not exist in isolation from one another.
- Although the growth may ultimately be personal, the experience is built and shaped by those around the individual.
- Challenge within education is acutely aware of the interplay between the individual and the group.

5. Experience and perception of experience

- Kneller's 6 points summarizing Dewey's concept of experience in education (Dewey, 1938):
 - a) education should be life itself, not preparation for living
 - b) learning should be directly related to the interests of the child
 - c) learning through problem solving should take precedence over the inculcating of subject matter
 - d) the teacher's role is not to direct but to advise
 - e) the school should encourage cooperation rather than competitions
 - f) only democracy permits the free interplay of ideas and personalities that is necessary as condition for true growth (Kneller, 1971)
- Seventh element is also essential. Experience does not become educational unless the process of reflection has taken place. (Kolb, 1984)
- This reflection does not just take place on an individual level but also utilizes the field of perceptual psychology which allows us to make collective meaning of experiences which is often as meaningful for human beings. (Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1976)

Operational Guidelines of Challenge within experiential Jewish Education² – How do you know it when you see it?

Completing a crossword puzzle. Abseiling down a mountain. Learning a new recipe.

What do these activities have in common?

- a) Clear Objectives
- b) Struggle
- c) A sense of adventure/chartering something new
- d) Constitute a new experience – or at least the feeling that they were conquered for the very first time.
- e) Once one reflects upon these experiences one can begin to consider what was learned from these experiences and can be utilized in future similar or related events.
- f) Transformation, as minor as it might be, is all part of what constitutes human growth and development.

For challenge to occur in experiential Jewish education it broadly needs the following elements³:

- 1) Focus on Experiential Learning*
- 2) Sequential Approach to Activities*
- 3) Awareness of Ethics*
- 4) Goal Setting*
- 5) Process/Debriefing *
- 6) Solo time for introspection*
- 7) Research and Validation
- 8) Desire for pre- and post- program involvement
- 9) Team building

Three elements – Concern for environmental impact, Awareness of Perceived Risk and Safety Standards, although important, are present in the Operational Guidelines of Challenge Education but not within Experiential Jewish Education.

These Elements are replaced in the Operational Guidelines of Challenge within Experiential Jewish Education by:

- 10) Taking Place in a Jewish Context
- 11) Based in Jewish Learning and Values
- 12) Concerned with the Jewish Behavior and Identity of the Individual and the Group

² The following development of Operational Guidelines of Challenge with Experiential Jewish Education is adapted from Operational Guidelines of Challenge education as described in “The Theory and Practice of Challenge Education” (Smith, Roland, Havens, & Hoyt, 1992)

³ An Asterix suggests that this element is mandatory, while no asterix indicates that this element is highly desirable for challenge to be identified in experiential Jewish education.

1) Focus on Experiential Learning*

Just because an activity takes place in an informal setting does not make it experiential.

A useful definition of experiential education is one supplied by Herbert.

“In the experiential model, the learner is actively involved in his/her education. Decisions are made by the learner that have a direct bearing on what is learned and how it is learned. The teacher’s role is that of guide, resource person, and clarifier. Their attention is on both the content of what is being learned, as well as the process of learning that is taking place.” (Herbert, 1981, pp. 1-2)

2. Sequential approach to Activities*

Some activities offer an “immersion approach” - most activities involve some sort of scaffolding – introducing participants to a sequence of increasingly more challenging activities that build upon prior experiences and challenges.

3. Awareness of Ethics*

Challenge education often raises the ethical stakes – often talking about what people ‘ought to do’ – dilemmas for which there is often no singular right or wrong answer

Safe Space - Such learning can only take place in environments where people are made to feel safe, respected, appreciated, motivated, challenged, when they have opportunities to make choices in their lives and when they can build on their strengths and weaknesses.

4. Goal Setting*

Development of goals as they relate to individual and group needs.

5. Debriefing*

Bloom (1956) – taxonomy of cognitive processing/thinking levels – Knowledge, Comprehension, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation (Bloom, 1956)

6. Solo Time for Introspection*

Need to reflect, listen and make individual meaning

7. Team Building

Common goal in many challenge activities is building a team- recognizing that community of learners is ongoing and does not appear by chance.

8. Research and Validation

Need for research – to help measure success of events and also to describe the processes involved so that they can be replicated and improved

9. Pre and Post Programming

Regarded as highly desirable operating procedure in challenge education – so much of what they do is one offs – could claim the same for Jewish educational experiences. Want to claim that in Jewish education that this is mandatory – that one shot deals cannot and should not exist in a vacuum – even though pre and post programming might be a luxury for some programs

Nu? – So what makes Challenge Jewish?

10) Taking Place in a Jewish Context

This does not mean that the setting must necessarily be a Jewish one. But that it is set up with parameters that define it as a Jewish experience.

For example, we have many informal Jewish experiences that are intentionally taking place in non-Jewish worlds (e.g. AJWS, Panim). Even though the physical settings are not Jewish, that being under the banner of a Jewish organization, and within the framework of Jewish learning and Jewish values that these programs also take place in Jewish contexts.

- Majority (overwhelming?) of Participants must identify as being Jewish.
- Majority of facilitators, and certainly key educators, must identify as being Jewish.

11) Based in Jewish Learning and Values

The key values and learning must be rooted in Jewish principles, thought, belief or practice.

The definition of what is “Jewish” must be as broad as possible – this is both a practical and philosophical statement about challenge in experiential Jewish education.

Jewish texts should be a central background to experiential Jewish education.

“Jewish texts” is an extremely broad category, and not restricted to what has often traditionally been ascribed to a certain canon.

12) Concerned with the Jewish Behavior and Identity of the Individual and the Group

Challenge in experiential Jewish education is not only cognitive learning. It is learning which is also aimed at affective and behavioral transformations in the learners. Often the fourth element of dealing with the spiritual of the learners will also be addressed.

Implications of a Theory of Challenge Education in Experiential Jewish Education

- 1) Not everything that has been called “informal Jewish education” is education. It might be recreation or socialization – but we should be able to call it what it is.
- 2) Challenge is engaging. To achieve challenge experiential Jewish education should aim to establish a state of Flow.
- 3) Challenge within education has the capacity to transform, individuals, groups and communities.
- 4) Challenge necessitates that the outcome of learning is not necessarily known from the outset. Although goals are set, the end result may develop along a different track.
- 5) Process rather than knowledge is more valued as part of the Jewish educational experience.
- 6) Educators become facilitators rather than the holders of all knowledge
- 7) Experiential Jewish learning environments must also encourage pluralism and respect for differences, collaboration and cooperation, nourishment and support among people, and opportunities to generate alternative solutions to problems.

In Jewish youth education today, challenge as a core element of experiential Jewish education should be viewed as essential in engaging and retaining Jewish youth in enduring and meaningful Jewish educational experiences.

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