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EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

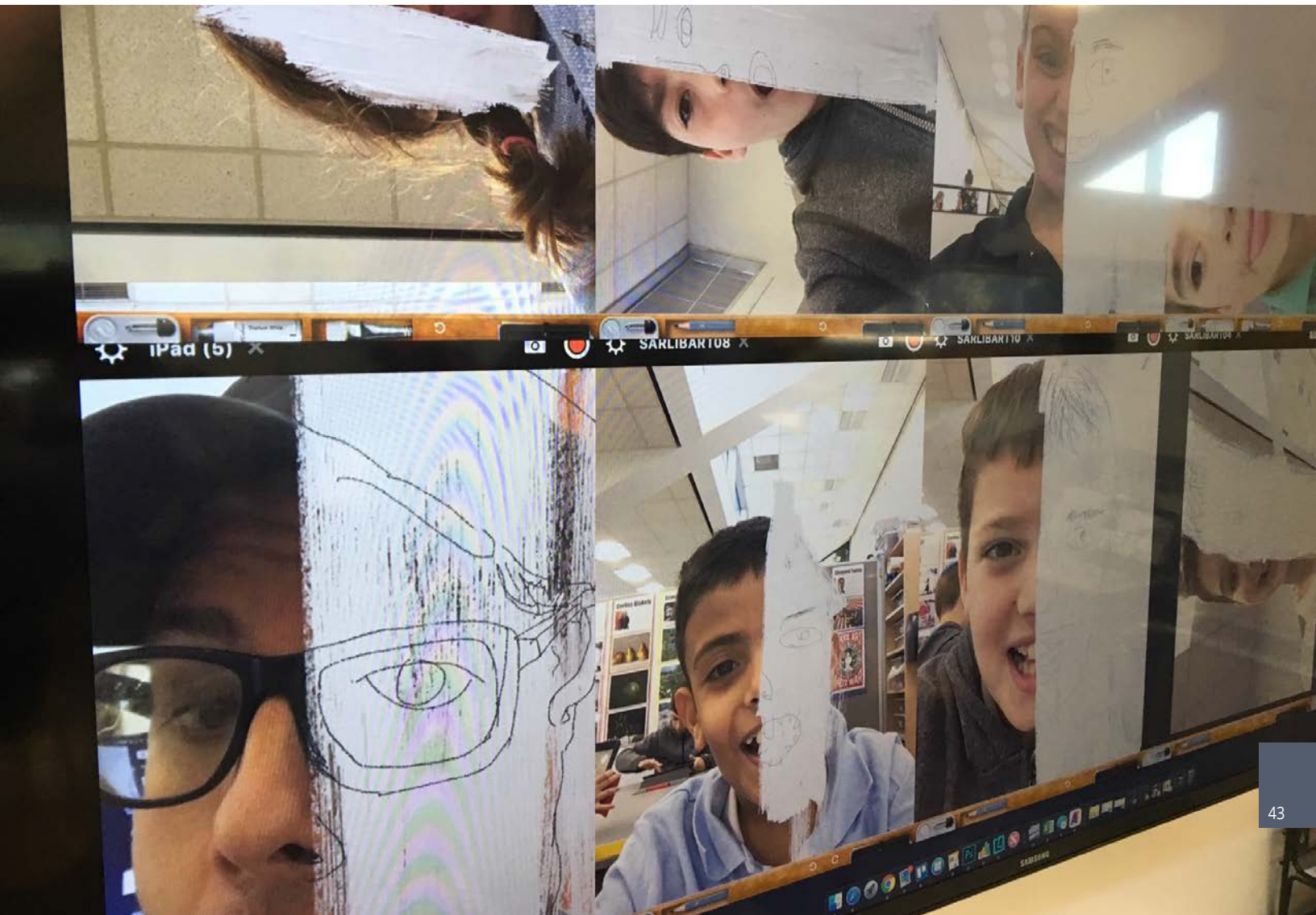


PRIZMAH

Center for Jewish Day Schools

The Gifts of Seeing: Making Excellence Visible in Arts Education

How often do we hear that an artist, whether a painter, sculptor, musician or writer, is gifted? Indeed they are, and certainly we all have predispositions and abilities, yet inherent in that assessment is: They are gifted therefore they can create masterfully; someone else is not. The haves, so to speak, and the have-nots. Do we leave it at that, and not strive to nurture what could be possible beyond the obvious?





As I drive my three-year-old granddaughter to SAR Academy each morning, we pass a doghouse, yellow on the bottom, blue on top, with an arched opening. It's just the right size for a little dog, one she imagines is soft and can curl up in her lap.

Approaching the home with the doghouse, my car fills with anticipation. Maybe one time we will even spot the dog who lives there. Then one morning, the doghouse is gone. Oh no. What should I say to my granddaughter? Before I could figure that out, she emphatically announced, "There's the doghouse."

"What? You saw the doghouse?" I ask.

"Yes. It's yellow on the bottom and blue on top," she answers.

The same reaction the next day, and the one after that. That doghouse means so much to her that she still sees it. Magical thinking? Her imagination rearranged memory so the past is also present and perhaps even future, all at once, converting linear time into what eternity might look like, a resurrection of sorts. What a wonderful world.

Children are dreamers, and great educators are the keepers of those dreams. Pedagogues are also cheerleaders, guiding lights and visionaries, reminding students what is possible to express on their evolving canvas.

SAR Academy's arts departments practice nurturing excellent student work and embed gifted education pedagogy into our study. Our adherence to a broadened conception of giftedness and human potential debunks the myth of art-making as an elite conception, that real art is produced only by a gifted few and appreciated by an audience only slightly larger.

When we paint a painting, create a musical composition or write verse, we have adopted what European art educators instill. Central in their approach is making greatness in the arts visible through explicating qualities of excellence in each particular discipline, rather than thinking this reconnaissance stifles creativity. This conversation is foundational in building a framework to utilize tenets of gifted education pedagogy.

We pointedly ask, "What makes this portrait, this landscape, this symphony, this fable, these lyrics, excellent?" Suddenly, it is no longer just a stunning painting, or just a beautiful song or poem, though most of us would agree that van Gogh's iconic "Starry Night" or Franz Marc's "Dog Lying in the Snow," Claude Debussy's "La Que Plus Lente" and John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" are indeed masterworks. Mysterious as they all may appear in their mastery and often magical in their ability to move observers/listeners emotionally, intellectually or spiritually, or all three at once, with clinical assessment they are also decipherable compositions comprised of tangible elements and quantifiable skills. Gifted is now qualifiable.

The arts indeed can raise a person's sensitivity to seeing, to hearing, to understanding, yet we don't leave our experience of the arts to only art

appreciation. Rather, we converse about greatness and try to understand it. Ron Berger, founder of Expeditionary Learning, writes, "When young athletes work hard at their sport, they watch older students, Olympians, and professionals and imprint that vision in their hearts and minds.

Unfortunately, when young students are engaged in academic work in school—creating a scientific report, persuasive essay, geometric proof, or architectural design—they typically have no idea of what would constitute excellence, no provocation, and no vision. We give students written assessment rubrics, but absent models of excellence, those rubrics are just a bunch of words. Picture the difference between reading a rubric of proficient play in soccer, and watching a World Cup soccer game. But models alone are not enough. We need to analyze models together and discuss and debate the criteria for excellence." George Couros, author of *The Innovator's Mindset*, says, "If you want to be great at something, learn from someone great."

In faculty discussions about qualities of excellence in music, art and literature, we make transparent to ourselves what greatness looks like. In the process, we become further equipped in leading those conversations with our students, in music and art and library class in the early elementary grades and in our Voice & Choice program in the upper elementary and early middle school grades.

Generated from those discussions, our arts team built an anchor document for our protocol, "Qualities of Excellence," that continuously evolves, listing qualities of excellence in art, music and literature. All this conversation about greatness, about what is excellence is significant in raising the bar for students in how they consider the arts and is employed to help deliver gifted education pedagogy, the overarching framework for our work in the arts. Our discussions about what is excellent include consideration of components of gifted education as spelled out by the [National Association For Gifted Children](#) and in the research of Joseph Renzulli at the University of Connecticut. We utilize gifted education elements in our work through disseminating advanced content, integrating historical perspective, having concern for advanced methodology, escalating student performance, familiarizing advanced vocabulary and providing organic experiences to use that vocabulary, encouraging application of skill, pursuing high-quality product development and creating opportunities for students to present to an authentic audience.

Children begin to hone the capacity for considering what comprises a masterwork and what applicability there might be to their own endeavors. When children were asked, "Why look at masterworks?" they responded:

- to discover what makes an artist's or musician's work great
- to be inspired and then do your own unique work
- to use as a model
- to copy some parts to learn
- to observe technique



And when shown van Gogh drawings, our fourth grade students made these observations:

- Space is used to give perspective.
- A variety of lines are used and a lot of lines.
- There is so much detail from just lines.
- Van Gogh creates mystery and surprise by having houses without windows or a door.
- Even without color there is use of value by having lighter drawing and darker drawing.
- The artist shows light by leaving space between lines.
- There aren't specific leaves drawn but there's the look of leaves from lines loosely representing them.
- He uses representational drawing instead of drawing completely realistically.

We do the same with musical composition and literature, and in addition to considering masterworks, we guide students by structuring their study with a mastery objective, learning targets, criteria for success and rubrics. As their work in the arts progress, we introduce descriptive peer feedback and critique, drafts and redrafts, all toward nurturing exceptional student work.

Steve Seidel of Harvard Graduate School of Education and Project Zero writes, "Quality is best viewed not as an end-state, but as a discussion. A stellar symphony orchestra or sports team can only keep quality high by constantly analyzing and critiquing—discussing quality during rehearsals and practices and after performances. If the analysis and discussion stops, quality will deteriorate." We discuss, we analyze, and students work rigorously, with engagement and joy. Through these efforts, excellence becomes achievable.

Having said all this, I would be remiss to conclude that Qualities of Excellence refer only to academic or aesthetic components of arts education for students. It refers also to us, qualities of excellence as human beings, as educators. Our delivery and approach, our structure, how we communicate and encourage and engage students and conduct ourselves is itself a work in progress, as we too, are works in progress.

Our sages knew something of this, I suspect, when those versed in Mussar tradition suggested we live, "as-if." As-if we already are all we can be, all we hope to be, all of the transcendence that is possible.

We are right here right now, but if we visualize greatness well, as we are instructed to do, we can bring the future into the present. Everything that limits us we have to put aside. The trick, they say, is to begin by seeing ourselves as having already arrived, in a place where we, our work, our characters are excellent. Time travel for transformation.

So much is in seeing, and when we perceive possibility, "as-if" is angled inward like a mezuzah's blessing on an arched doorway opening to where, as Louis Armstrong sings, "I see skies of blue and clouds of white, the bright blessed (yellow) day, the dark sacred night."

Greatness. Now we see it... Abracadabra: Now children see it. Giftedness, made transparent, discussed and deconstructed into its decipherable skills and abilities, enables magic to happen. "And I think to myself, what a wonderful world."

Qualities of Excellence

Literature

- Uses questions
- Uses dialogue
- Puts readers in the minds of characters
- Celebrates language
- Takes readers on a journey that touches the heart
- Is well-crafted, using accurate interesting words, spinning sound, alliteration, rhythm, simile, metaphor, no superfluous words
- Presents powerful images and new perspectives
- Is well-organized and shows clarity of thought
- Tells a story with a distinct style and voice
- Builds concrete and vivid images, and makes things happen in the mind of the reader
- Evokes a response and connection to the work; is impactful
- Has staying power, making the reader feel compelled to return to the work again and again
- Can convey values

Art

- May include symmetry and show perspective
- Uses materials well and/or in unique ways; masters the medium
- Strokes are well-planned
- Evokes emotion and invites the viewer in unexpected ways
- Tells a story, often pointing to something not to be missed; revelatory
- Offers a satisfying composition, cohesion and rigorous beauty
- Provides intellectual content; uses metaphor
- The color palette is pleasing and evocative
- The viewer's eye moves through the piece
- Evokes a response and connection to the work; is impactful
- Leaves a memory and has staying power. The viewer feels compelled to return to the work again and again

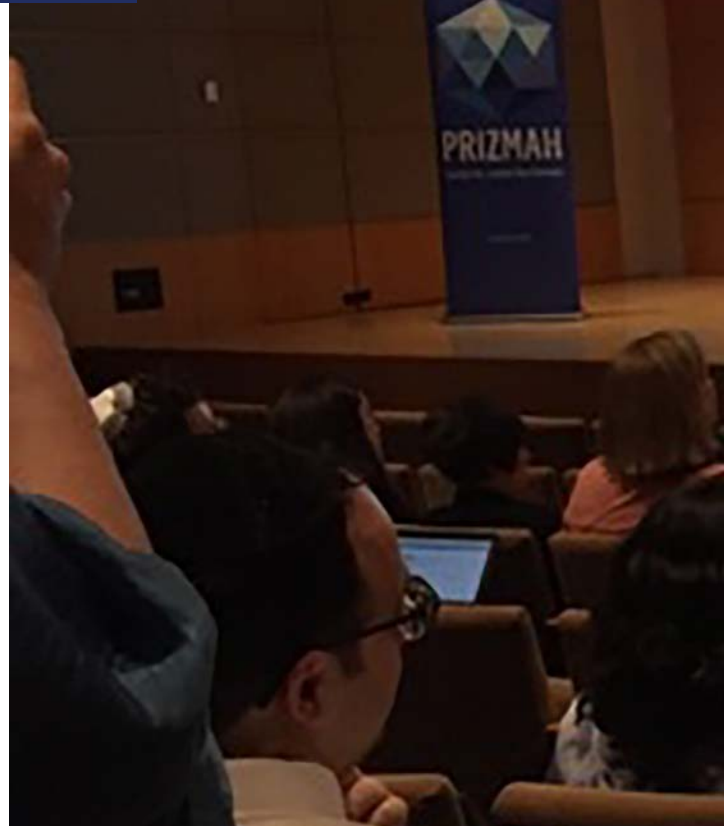
Music

- Gives the audience a sense of familiarity (form has some predictability) combined with an element of surprise
- Harmony, melody and rhythm work cohesively
- Evokes a response; triggers a memory
- Audience can hear musicians listening and responding to each other
- Has texture/timbre
- Is technically well-executed; there is consistency of tempo, melodic, rhythmic
- Communicates musical ideas
- Appeals intellectually, emotionally and spiritually
- There is an inherent sequence and development of ideas
- Has appeal after repeated listening
- Listener feels stimulated and enriched after having heard a piece
- There is a satisfying conclusion
- The works is impactful, evoking a response and connection to the work
- Has staying power. Listeners feel compelled to return to the work again and again

INNOVATOR SUMMIT

On June 26, in partnership with Jewish Interactive, Prizmah held the first-ever Jewish Day School Educational Innovator Summit. The event took place at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, in conjunction with the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) conference. More than 60 Jewish day school educators and experts in STEM and educational technology gathered for an opportunity to share practices and learn from one another. The day included a networking lunch, a keynote presentation from Rabbi Michael Cohen, aka “The Tech Rabbi,” and breakout sessions led by experts in the field. We also used this gathering as an opportunity to launch our new Reshet for EdTech Administrators.

Daniel Weinberg,
Associate Director, Educational Innovation



TZVI HAMETZ, Director of Creativity & Innovation, Educational Technology Director, and the manager of the Innovation Lab (a Makerspace) at Gindi Maimonides Academy in Los Angeles

“Biblical Blueprints for PBL: Making Jewish Learning Experiences that Stick”

You can make 915,104,765 combinations with only six standard Lego bricks. This is why I start all creativity sessions with the Lego Duck Challenge, which gives people one minute to make a duck out of six Legos. This simple activity demonstrates that having the same instructions or information and the same tools does not mean that you will achieve the same result. Judaism in all its forms and combinations has the same basic principles: It gives us materials—vastly more—and requires us to create something with them.

Our essential question for the day was, How are we designing experiences in our classrooms for our students to create in their Judaic learning? We dove into planning two Judaic Project Based Learning modules to be utilized in our classrooms, one involving the creation of a ritual object. We investigated the history of Jewish ritual items and create 3D models of our own. The group then challenged themselves to think about what Jewish ritual item should exist that doesn't. How would this object fundamentally change the way you interacted with Judaism? We ended on this note: Our great Mesorah is not simply a generational game of content knowledge “telephone”; it is a cosmic drama that must be played out with the full range of human emotion and experience.



MICHAEL VOSKOBOYNIK, Technology Coordinator, Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

“Creativity and Collaboration: Exploring Cultural Identity Through Modern Technology”

Our collaborative Virtual Worlds project engages upper elementary and middle schoolers in a creative global studies inquiry-based mission while integrating technology with the humanities and arts. Using cutting-edge tools (including Firestorm and CoSpaces) for research and presentation, as well as coding, students explore a country of significance to their personal family history through the conceptual lens of the “cultural universals” including language, religion and family traditions.

During the last school year, our middle school students worked with their peers from the Sulam Tsur school (near Nahariya) on a very special Virtual Worlds project. They created six groups and “traveled” to six different destinations in Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and North Africa, where Jewish communities still exist. Students from both schools discovered together the pre-Holocaust history and rich culture of those communities; researched, in-depth, what happened to the Jews there during the Shoah; and reached out to current representatives of those communities. The results of the work were put together on shared Google Sites and placed in the Virtual Reality platform, Virtual Worlds, so students and teachers from other schools around the world could learn from our findings.

We plan to continue this unique collaboration for the next school year, adding more virtual communities. We hope to add more schools to join us in this project.

JUDAH MANTELL, graduate and teacher, Frisch School, Paramus, New Jersey, and CEO, MidnightCoffee, Inc.

“EdTech Innovation Through Virtual Reality in the Classroom”

Virtual Reality is one of the most compelling technologies in recent years, and one of its best uses is in Jewish education. After receiving a student-driven solutions grant for furthering Jewish education through technology, I developed The Jeremiah VR Experience, a virtual reality application that takes students through the book of Jeremiah to help their understanding of biblical texts through an immersive experience. Though VR can be incredibly engaging, not everyone has access to the tools to create large-scale VR programs. My presentation consisted of an overview of the current VR market, how it can be used in a Judaic studies classroom, and how students and teachers can leverage CoSpaces, a web-based VR and AR tool, to create immersive applications that allow users to understand Tanakh like never before.

LEAH SPECTOR
ORRY JACOBS

Multiple Subject Areas, Multiple Life Skills: Integrated Project Based Learning (IPBL)

One of the primary functions of a Jewish day school is to help create healthy, functioning members of both society-at-large and the Jewish community. With this goal in mind, we at the Mandel Jewish Day School in Beachwood, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, have adopted an approach to education called Integrated Project-Based learning (IPBL). We have been amazed at how this approach to education has impacted our students at all grade levels, involving them more directly in the educational process, thereby creating excitement, nurturing a thirst for learning and aiding in leadership development.

IPBL is a dynamic academic approach in which students gain domain knowledge and skills by working collaboratively for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to a complex essential question. Essential questions are rich and open-ended ones that can be viewed in-depth and at many different levels, and they can be revisited over time. Examples are: What is freedom? What responsibility do humans have toward the environment?

WHY ADD INTEGRATION TO PBL?

Traditionally, a teacher will decide to use PBL in his or her classroom to deepen the students' understanding of a topic, with an eye toward authentic learning. While this approach is still effective for particular classrooms, often it hinders students' ability to make critical connections that can enable them to deepen their understanding. Integration allows students to understand the world around them as a place of connectivity. Students learn that the world is not compartmentalized, and neither is their learning. Whatever their future profession, it is likely to require proficiency in multiple areas that are interconnected. Students are asked to respond to complex problems using research and critical thinking, and to do so through the lens of different subject areas and skill sets.

Adding Integration to PBL allows concepts and events to be observed and examined through multiple lenses and subjects. Integration elevates the students' connection with the subject matter. IPBL has students identify, investigate and respond to an essential question using knowledge gained through different subject areas and by making cross-curricular connections.

This approach to PBL includes learning fundamental life skills related to communication, creativity, public speaking, teamwork and leadership. Integration involves learning not just multiple subject areas but also multiple life skills. An additional life skill is emphasized in each grade level.

IPBL helps students become more resilient in the face of adversity. As Thomas Edison said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Making mistakes, trying a new path, and reflecting on where one is in the creative process are all critical parts of the IPBL process.

DESIGN PROCESS

Our approach to IPBL, which continues to evolve, has been based upon design thinking, which is a creative process founded on the "building up" of ideas. It uses techniques like observing, interviewing, empathy mapping, storyboarding, relative thinking and creating low-tech prototypes. We have added a focus on community, so that each project connects students to the broader community and incorporates tikkun olam, one of our core values.

Our IPBL process involves substantial teacher planning, including:

- Brainstorming project ideas with students to find a project that interests them. In our lower school, the focus is on projects for which students have passion. In the middle school, the focus is on projects reflecting empathy.
- Meeting with faculty colleagues to determine commonalities across subject areas. Faculty review common core standards and preexisting subject units. We usually begin

Integrated Project Based Learning Life Skill Acquisition									
Focus Areas							Emotional Intelligence	Emotional Intelligence	Initiative
							Productivity	Productivity	Productivity
						Aesthetic Design	Aesthetic Design	Aesthetic Design	Aesthetic Design
				Digital Literacy	Digital Literacy	Digital Literacy	Digital Literacy	Digital Literacy	Digital Literacy
			Collaboration	Collaboration	Collaboration	Collaboration	Collaboration	Collaboration	Collaboration
	Flexibility	Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking
Foundational Skills									
Grade	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

with science, math and social studies, and then weave in language arts, Hebrew, art, music and technology.

- Developing the essential question that the project must answer. Buy-in is cultivated through a kickoff event or an interesting activity.
- Identifying potential community partners and community experts who can be invited to participate.
- Making effective student teams based on student interests, academic abilities and social-emotional characteristics.
- Developing ideas for exhibiting the final project. Issues considered in collaboration with the students are: what space will be used, how the space will be transformed and project budget.
- Creating a timeline complete with meetings, project milestones and the schedule for what is being taught and by whom.

The IPBL design process used is as follows:

Project Kickoff. The kickoff is all about creating excitement and intrigue from the students’ perspectives. The kickoff might include field trips, simulations, video trailers and possibly guest appearances. Brainstorming takes place with the students to discover what they know about the topic and to determine the ways in which the project may contribute to the school, Jewish community and/or local community.

Learn. Assignments are tailored to elicit responses to the essential question. Assignments are differentiated to meet the needs of all learners, and students are provided research tools. Mini-workshops are held to enable students to successfully develop prototypes.

Project Development. As the project unfolds, it is essential that students have a voice and that they have choices to make. Opportunities are provided for students to problem solve and for them to decide how best to improve prototypes and written documents.

Feedback. Constructive feedback is provided both by teachers and peers, and time is allowed for students to make revisions and to assemble different project components.

Public Presentation. Students and teachers brainstorm the logistics of the presentation (time, place, schedule and layout). We believe that the presentation is as important as the project, as it provides important experience in public speaking and presenting. We require it to be professional, so it requires multiple rehearsals. All stakeholders are invited to attend, including other students, parents, community members and field experts.

Community Connection. Whenever possible, we try to connect the project to the larger community. Sometimes project products or money are donated to community organizations. This helps the students to develop empathy for others.

Reflection and Assessment. At the end of the project, students are debriefed and led in reflecting on everything they have learned. Both students and faculty complete an individual evaluation, which is shared with the class. Faculty also administer an academic assessment to measure the development of skills.

SAMPLE PROJECT: MODEL CITY

The third grade undertook a project with the essential question, “How can we change Cleveland to reflect the use of its natural resources?”

For the kickoff, the students watched a drone video of downtown Cleveland, and listened to the song “Cleveland Rocks.” Later, students heard from an engineer and a Cleveland artist, and they participated in a field trip to Cleveland. Guided investigation included reading articles about Cleveland and related topics, and reviewing building blueprints.

Multiple subjects were incorporated:

Writing—essays on creating your own city, and summarizing and sequencing an assigned novel.

- Math—learning metric measurements, measuring circumference, learning about 2D and 3D shapes, and creating prisms, cubes, pyramids and cylinders.
- Social Studies—integrating map skills, comparing and contrasting Cleveland to other cities with bodies of water, and learning about how other cities use their waterfronts.
- Hebrew—introducing Hebrew vocabulary for shapes and writing Hebrew narratives about what students like about Cleveland.
- Art—creating prototypes of proposed changes to Cleveland.
- Technology—creating a storyboard, designing a brochure about proposed changes to the Cleveland waterfront and using Google Draw to devise prototypes.

Students created a 3D scale model of Cleveland, including mini-models of buildings and elevation sketches. After building the model, the third graders noticed that Cleveland does not utilize its waterfront very much. They compared Cleveland to other waterfront cities, and developed plans to make better use of the waterfront. Street signs were made, as well as plaques for major landmarks. The final public



CONSIDERATIONS IN IMPLEMENTING IPBL

Successfully implementing IPBL is a journey that takes years and is ever evolving. We've made a number of mistakes over the years, and we continue to make changes every year. Some of the keys to success are:

- Having strong backing from the board, head of school, and the senior leadership team.
- Recognizing that a change in culture is required, involving much more collaboration among the faculty and with the students.
- Taking the time to develop buy-in from the faculty.
- Actively involving students throughout the process at every grade level. Seek the input even of preschool students.
- Educating parents about IPBL, so that they can be supportive and helpful to their children.

presentation showed the different landmarks, provided an explanation of the model buildings and highlighted the differences between Cleveland and other cities.

Community involvement was secured through:

- Displaying the proposed city model at the local library.
- Donating funds to a local organization that is helping to develop the Cleveland waterfront.

- Adding more layers to the project; this year, for example, they plan to meet with the Cleveland mayor to pitch their ideas for a new waterfront.

After six months of work on the project, students were assessed on their final product and presentation skills. At the end, teachers and students reflected on the process and the final product through written reflection and discussion.

IPBL can be an effective program that helps prepare students for success in life and the 21st century work environment. Students become very engaged in their education, and they develop skills that will serve to provide a solid foundation for further growth and development.

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Jewish Literature Reimagined in the High School English Classroom



Like most English teachers, I entered the profession in the hope I could inspire others to love words on paper as much as I do. Once I entered the classroom, however, I discovered that there were other significantly more achievable goals. You could get students to care about learning how to write—they knew this skill was valuable. You could teach students how to analyze texts and parse language. You could even make them appreciate the beauty of certain Shakespearean plays. But you could not make them love books. Books did not sell themselves, and no matter how hard one pitched them, Sparks Notes and Snapchat were there to enable students to avoid actually cracking the spine of a text.

Most students felt about English the way I felt about Judaic studies when I was in high school. Give me a book, and I'd crawl into bed and read all night. Give me a Jewish book, and I'd stare at it like it was some sort of strange creature that was theoretically interesting but not realistically approachable. The lines upon lines of Hebrew alphabet arranged in maze-like blocks of texts seemed impenetrable.

It was only once I went to Israel for a gap year that I began to love Tanakh as much as Tolstoy. The two truly began to click after many Jewish literature courses in college. Upon graduating, I wondered why someone could attend 12 years of yeshiva day school without interacting with the authors, artists and scholars who make up the modern Jewish literary canon. These college courses asked questions about being Jewish that were energizing and enthralling. Only now it seemed so obvious to consider struggles with faith against the backdrop of Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*. As a descendent of Holocaust survivors, I find Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* to be the perfect text to help one consider their identity and relationship to Jewish trauma. Surely, these were lost opportunities.

Part of the impetus for wanting to teach in a Jewish school was having an opportunity to test the theory that integrating Jewish and general studies in an English classroom could create a space in which the analysis of texts provided a springboard for discussions about Jewish identity. It was only after a few years of teaching and encountering how difficult it had become to get students to read a book in a regular English class that I went back to the idea of a yearlong Jewish literature course, with the goal both of inspiring students to read and connecting them to their Judaism. I was hoping that if the texts we read connected to some of the challenges they faced in their everyday Jewish life, they would be more motivated to read them.

As opposed to the college lecture hall, high school classrooms offer students the opportunity to analyze literature in relation to themselves, as a means of reshaping their Jewish identities. Our class was built around Rabbi Aryeh Ben David's Ayekah model of soulful education, in which students receive questions that force them to interrogate themselves simultaneously with the texts being studied. Each unit comes with a writing exercise that pushes students to reflect on how they will personally answer the questions relating to Judaism that arise in the texts. There are 10 larger essential questions about Judaism that surround the course (see sidebar), and the goal is for each student to be able to use the reading and writing exercises throughout the year to be able to answer each of these questions for themselves by the end of the course.

Having taught Jewish Literature and Identity over the past three years, the curriculum has surpassed my expectations. The goal was to engage in an in-depth study of Jewish literature and art, while considering how it might shape or influence one's own sense of American Jewish identity and affiliation, but I had no idea how much students would actually identify with the literature. One of my students became obsessed with Yiddish literature; others told me it was their "favorite class in all of high school." In the survey at the end of the year, one student wrote, "It was such a meaningful way to explore Judaism and understand how culture and religion ties into writing and affects it." Another said, "I think a big reason why I enjoyed this class so much was because it connected to me and allowed me to reflect on my own Judaism."

There are many unique and innovative elements of the course that became part of its recipe for success.

Keep texts short. The class has very few large overwhelming pieces. Rather, it weaves together short stories, articles and poetry to help synthesize students' ideas about a Jewish theme and teach them how

Ten Essential Questions

What does the category of Jewish literature mean? What makes something “Jewish”?

How do individuals build identity? Do we have control over who we become, or does our environment decide who we become for us?

How can we be both loyal to our Jewish identity and American identity? What happens when the needs of these two identities conflict with one another and we have to decide where our allegiances lie?

Usually when we talk about “assimilation,” the word has negative connotations. Is assimilation a bad thing?

As 21st century Jews, how can we deal with the realities of our history of Jewish trauma and oppression (Holocaust, pogroms, exile, anti-Semitism, etc.) without letting the past or present trauma define our Jewish future?

Is there such thing as a Jewish language? What makes a language Jewish? Does Judaism actually need its own language and if we invented one, what would it look like? Would it be/is it a language that could be translated or read by those who do not affiliate as Jewish?

How do secular American Jewish men and women define and relate to their Jewishness? How is it different from the way a religious Jew relates to their Jewishness?

Is it a contradiction to be religious and struggle with your belief in God? To be truly religious do you have to struggle with your belief in God?

Is there something universal about the Jewish experience, the experience of the “other”? Is the Jewish experience different than other minority experiences?

How has the viewpoint of Judaism or Jewish literature changed when comparing Yiddish, American/English and Israeli literature?

to build connections between a variety of disparate texts that could have been written centuries apart.

Shape the course around identity building. Students have opportunities to write about their struggles with their “personal Judaism,” explore times when their Jewish identities conflicted with that of their parents, and understand the ways in which the Jewish institutions they are part of fulfill their aspirations and/or disappoint them. These reflections do not just stay on paper but form the basis for our classroom discussions.

Inspire students to become Jewish authors. We don’t only study the literature, but the students use many of the texts as mentor texts. We try and imitate some of the classic Jewish authors to help put ourselves in their shoes and teach the students to become Jewish writers themselves. For example, after reading samples from the early 20th century Yiddish advice column *A Bintl Brief*, the students write their own contemporary versions of these questions, considering the socio-religious dimensions of our Los Angeles Jewish community. They then develop answers to these questions and discuss the larger issues facing our community. These types of exercises push students to think practically about how they can change their day-to-day behavior to enrich Jewish life and become the Jews and citizens of the world they would like to be.

When we also read excerpts from different Jewish memoirs, students wrote three pages of their own memoir, focusing on an important religious moment in their lives. The project is called a “Religious Retrospective,” after which the students also complete a different assignment called “Your Jewish Future.” These exercises help them reflect on the foundations of their Jewish identity, but also encourage them to think about how they want to build their Jewish future.

Get out of the classroom. Look around your city to find a Jewish performance, author or even restaurant to which you could take students. One year we went to hear Michael Chabon speak; another we saw a performance of *The Chosen*. These experiences show kids that what we study is vibrant, current and being created and recreated all the time.

Bring the community into the classroom. Most cities and Jewish communities have locals who are in fact experts on a subject or theme within Jewish literature. Bringing in a Klezmer group, a Jewish film buff or any expert from your community also illustrates that a larger world of adults that care deeply about what we are studying exists. Having the students subscribe to Tablet Magazine also enhanced our class conversation and achieved this goal, giving students insight into a larger world of Jewish culture that they can be part of.

Keep it current. Constantly reshape the class around the current news cycle or conversations you hear students having in the hallways. For example, when gender became a hot topic this year, I created a project around tracing gender in Jewish literature. We looked at different gender models in the texts we studied and asked what Jewish literature has to say about the topic. We then tried answering the next question of how Judaism perceives gender roles today and thought as a class about whether these roles are helpful or harmful.

Help students find their own Jewish questions and answers. Have a large independent research project that runs throughout the year in which students pick a larger research question they have about Judaism and then find the answers that Jewish texts have given to their larger question. They then have to write a thesis-based research paper describing the answer they have found.

Create a cohesive learning experience. One of the most difficult parts of teaching so many different short Jewish texts is that certain pieces can get lost in the shuffle. Build a broad list of essential questions around which all the texts circulate; keep coming back to those questions and recall previous answers given as you read different texts throughout the year. Some important questions that have been useful are:

- How can we be both loyal to our Jewish identity and American identity? What happens when the needs of these two identities conflict with one another and we have to decide where our allegiances lie?
- Usually when we talk about “assimilation” the word has negative connotations. Is assimilation a bad thing?
- As 21st century Jews, how can we deal with the realities of our history of Jewish trauma and oppression (Holocaust, pogroms, exile, anti-Semitism, etc.) without letting the past or present trauma define our Jewish future?
- Is there something universal about the Jewish experience, the experience of the “other”? Is the Jewish experience different than other minority experiences?

Through close reading and writing, offer your students the opportunity to bridge our two worlds, the Jewish and the American, with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the life we live as Jews in America today. Maybe you’ll even be lucky, and they will fall in love with reading in the process.



ASSESSING OUR WORKPLACES

One of the most frequently asked questions we hear from heads of school is, How can I find and retain top talent in my school? In order to support our schools in ensuring they are great places to work and to create conditions to attract top talent to the field, Prizmah partnered with Leading Edge, the Alliance for Excellence in Jewish Leadership, to offer their Employee Experience Survey to day schools. This initiative was offered at no cost to schools through the support of generous federations and foundations.

In May, 22 schools administered this survey, and more than 1,400 staff and faculty participated. The survey focuses on employee engagement: the level of connection, pride, motivation and commitment a person feels for their work and how likely they are to stay or leave their place of employment. At Prizmah, we want to ensure our schools are incredible places to work. At the heart of our work is the people, and this tool supports schools in their efforts to identify ways to ensure the people who have chosen to devote themselves to the enterprise of day schools feel wholly engaged and supported in their work.

Among the key survey findings:

Jewish day schools excel at ensuring employees feel strongly connected to the mission of the school. Employees express a good understanding of the school's mission, they deeply understand how their work contributes to the organization's mission, strategy and goals, and they state that the mission of their organization makes them feel like they are making a difference in their work.

Employees feel comfortable asking for help from one another when needed, and they seek opportunities to collaborate with peers. The highest rates of favorable scores reside within teams where people feel most connected to the work and to their colleagues.

Faculty and staff value flexibility and autonomy within the school and appreciate the opportunity afforded by their positions to do challenging and interesting work.

Direct managers have great leverage in creating conditions within their teams where employees feel supported, well-cared for, and clear about priorities and responsibilities.

The data reveals areas where improvements would advance employee engagement:

Strengthening internal communications. *Employees give higher scores for communications with direct managers and within departments than within the organization overall.*

Managing performance through appropriate and ongoing feedback. *Fewer than half of respondents said they receive regular feedback on how they are performing.*

Ensuring a more even distribution of work across portfolios. *While employees felt they have the information and resources to do their job well, fewer feel there are enough people to do the work.*

Setting and communicating an organizational compensation philosophy. *Few employees understood how salary decisions and raises happened at their organization and how salary scales compared to similar positions in other schools.*

All of the organizations that participated in the Leading Edge survey were offered a one-on-one consultation with a Prizmah consultant to identify an approach to address the opportunities and challenges they face in their school and develop plans for next steps. Prizmah offers support to schools in facilitating leadership-team retreats, workshops on school culture, and coaching for senior leadership and boards.

Often, so much in a school feels both urgent and important. This tool is an effective way to identify what levers to pull on to maximize impact, create a safe space for employees to reflect on their experience within their organization, and give shared language to schools as they chart a path forward. We look forward to measuring progress over time and to supporting our schools in developing strategies and prioritizing work to ensure we create conditions where leaders can thrive.