

Embracing Experimentation

■ by JONATHAN WOOCHEER

RAVSAK is delighted to welcome Dr. Jonathan Woocher, a renowned visionary in Jewish education, to the pages of *HaYidion*, where he will have a platform to offer his guidance and inspiration to our readership.

Almost since its beginnings, American Jewish education has looked to the larger educational environment for ideas on how to carry out its mission. The great wave of Jewish educational innovation that began almost a century ago under Samson Benderly and his disciples was deeply informed, perhaps even inspired, by the progressive educational ideas and developments of its day. Thus, it is not surprising that the topics that fill general education journals and blogs today are showing up increasingly in our publications and schools (and our camps, youth programs, ECE programs, etc.) as well.

This is a good thing. Jewish education needs to be refreshed by good ideas whatever their source (including re-mining our own long history of learning and teaching). But we also need to be mindful that latching on to the latest trends in general education is not a panacea. The history of educational innovation and change argues for a cool skepticism about many of the ideas being touted so enthusiastically. Educational structures and practices are difficult to change, and often for good reason, given education's vital role as a cultural transmitter across generations.

We need, therefore, to embrace new thinking and new approaches with an experimental mindset. Viewing the adoption and adaptation of ideas now prominent in general education from an experimental perspective doesn't just mean that "we'll try them

to see if they work." It means doing so with the measure of rigor and reflection that we associate with scientific experiments. As in experimental science, learning from the accumulation of innovations should be our primary initial goal.

The record of Jewish education in this regard has not been great. To our credit, we do try lots of things. But we frequently fail to do so in ways that both enable us to identify and articulate what we have learned and to share those learnings, even with those pursuing similar pathways.

The formula for capitalizing fully on today's thirst for innovation involves several steps that are simple to state, though (admittedly) not always so easy to implement in a day school or other setting. It involves:

1. Formulating hypotheses that we can test. Why do we believe that introducing online learning (or another innovation) is a good thing? What do we expect to see happen as a result? How can we know if this is in fact taking place?
2. Carefully monitoring what happens. We should look not only for evidence for or against the hypotheses we have formulated, but for unanticipated effects as well.
3. Iterative learning. It's rare for a new practice to succeed fully right out of the box. Innovation today is increasingly done through a cycle of quick trials and refinements (or even "pivots," where you move in a different direction to seek the same goal).

4. Reflection. Taking the time to step back and assess what has been learned and what the next steps are. Ideally, this should involve all of the stakeholders impacted by the innovation being introduced.

5. Sharing. The best learning about the potential value of new educational approaches for Jewish education will come from sharing the experience of multiple experiments. Educators and institutions need to report publicly on what they are learning and to participate in conversations that allow broader frameworks of knowledge to emerge.

There is one more critical requisite for implementing this experimental approach across the Jewish educational landscape: support from funders. It's obvious that introducing new programs and pedagogies requires resources. What is perhaps less obvious is that creating the infrastructure for a learning-oriented approach to innovation requires resources beyond those needed for the innovations themselves. Happily, there are some notable funders who have made support for experimentation and fieldwide learning core elements of their philanthropic approach. However, in the understandable eagerness for "results," the recognition that some experiments not only may, but must fail for learning to advance can be too easily lost among all parties.

Our job is to ensure that these experiments yield real learning and, ultimately, real gains, for students, schools and the field as a whole. ■



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