Novice teachers are often, understandably, consumed by a focus on what to say, what to do, whom to be in the classroom.

The trick for teacher educators is to gently guide them away from thinking about themselves and toward thinking about their students.

So when I recently heard a novice teacher of Tanakh begin to talk about his students’ experience, we seemed to be heading in the right direction! But as I listened further, I grew uneasy. “Every student needs to find his or her own passion for the material,” he said. “Tanakh can be relevant in so many different ways … for example, the musician can put a Psalm to song.” “Unless they find the personal connection, it will all be meaningless.” This teacher, I began to understand, was admirably focused on the learners – but like many educators, novice and experienced, he had not yet learned to focus on learning.

What do I mean?

First, while students do need to be motivated to learn something new, that motivation is not a dormant faculty within the student that is waiting to be activated by the teacher. Motivation emerges from real work, genuine exploration, authentic engagement with the material, learning something new and vibrant and exciting and intellectually compelling. To assume that students are only motivated to do what they already know how to do, or what they already like to do, or what popular culture tells them is worth doing, is to radically constrict the possibilities of learning.

Second, a focus on learning means that we are working with an idea of who the student is going to be, not just who they are right now. The notion that a musician ought to find a musical way of relating to Tanakh (or any subject) takes one aspect of that student’s identity and assumes that it is fundamental and permanent. It under-values another real or potential
aspect of that student’s identity, what we might call “being a text-person,” the kind of person who has the capacity and the motivation to engage with the texts of the Jewish tradition seriously and substantively. Again, it narrows the possibilities of learning – not just of learning particular ideas or skills but of learning entirely new practices or habits or ways of being in the world.

The most fundamental issue, however, is the imperative of identifying and articulating what we believe our students ought to learn. The novice teacher wants them to connect to the study of Tanakh – but connection, alone, is not enough. In fact, “connection” alone may well be nothing. Without a robust conception of what ideas, what skills, and what dispositions he wants them to develop, his teaching may wander aimlessly in a desperate search for something, anything, that will get them engaged. With such a conception, on the other hand, he will know why he is teaching Psalms, what Psalm-specific ideas – ideas specific to the content of Psalms, their literary structure, their historical significance, the liturgical role, or something else entirely – he wants the students to explore. His focus will be not just on the learners, but on their learning.

It may still be the case that the musician has an opportunity to put a Psalm to music in this teacher’s class. That may be a wonderful, creative occasion for articulating new ideas, new understanding, in a familiar language. But the key is this: that creative exercise will be an opportunity for learning about Psalms, not just practicing his music.

Gil Graff recently added his voice to a chorus calling for Jewish education to focus on learners. “The shift from school-like classrooms to learner-focused experiences,” he writes, “is the real breakthrough in Jewish education.” Well, almost. Mark Young, for his part, framed the issue in terms of the power of experiential education. “The real breakthrough is to recognize that … we should focus primarily on the approach, one that can achieve both substantive learning and meaningful engagement.” This too is helpful, but misses the mark, because simply focusing on an “approach,” a set of pedagogies or engagement activities, puts the cart before the horse.

The real breakthrough, I believe, is not a shift from classrooms to experiences, and not a shift from teaching to engagement, and not a shift from teachers to learners. Dewey reminded us long ago that the pendulum swing from teacher-centricity to learner-centricity is misguided. Instead, the real breakthrough will be a consistent and sustained focus on learning, together with a rich and robust conception of what we most aspire for our students (or campers or program participants) to learn. In the end, the learning is all that matters.

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