Blog Post: Making Learning Whole in Jewish Education

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Is there a best way to learn? As part of a discussion about good books for Jewish educators, I asked my colleagues for recommendations and found myself with Making Learning Whole by Harvard education professor David Perkins. My take: if you only read one book about education this year (or for the next few years), this should be the one.

In Making Learning Whole, Perkins recalls how he learned to play baseball: he did not first spend a lot of time learning information about baseball. Instead, he learned baseball by playing a “junior version” of baseball: Sometimes he and his neighbors played with fewer than four bases or in a space that was smaller than a regulation field. But from the beginning, he was able to get a feel for the different elements of the game by actually doing them.

Perkins contrasts this experience with much of what happens in schools. Too often, students study subjects without understanding why they need this knowledge or how it might help them to function better or master their environments. How does it connect to themes and dilemmas encountered in everyday life? Perkins refers to this way of learning as “aboutitis,” learning about something without actually experiencing it or seeing its connections to life.

What is the relevance to Jewish education? Let’s look at the example of b’nai mitzvah. Making Learning Whole suggests b’nai mitzvah are an opportunity for young people to show that they are able to participate as a member of a Jewish community by reading from the Torah, interpreting Torah, and helping to lead the community in prayer. However, b’nai mitzvah are only effective if they are, indeed, a “junior version” of something that adults also do. Any discussion about the importance and relevance of b’nai mitzvah should take this into account: The skills and knowledge building leading to b’nai mitzvah should not be an endpoint to learning, but rather preparation for further participation.

Making Learning Whole describes how we might apply principles from research to improve the quality of our learning experiences. I’ve just scratched the surface of the many important and accessible ideas in this book. Perkins's framework speaks to Jewish teacher education, informal education, and virtually all learning experiences. If you take education seriously, you should pick up this book and consider how, as teacher and learner, you might make learning more whole for yourself and others.