Blog Post: Creating the Conditions for Successful Partner Work in Classrooms

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“Two are better than one …” (Ecclesiastes 4:9)

This is an old idea, but is it always true? In a classroom, how can we make sure that two students working together will really learn? The question for researchers and practitioners to consider is what kind of conditions do we need in order to leverage the power of two because simply putting two together does not guarantee a better outcome.

Infusion: Integrating Jewish Values in the General Studies Classroom, a webcase created by Orit Kent and Jocelyn Segal, considers this very issue in the context of elementary school life.

This webcase is based on Jocelyn’s work as a third grade teacher, in which she adapted frameworks and tools from the Mandel Center’s Beit Midrash Research Project to integrate Jewish values in her classroom. Two components stand at the heart of this work: ongoing study and reflection on core Jewish texts related to the theme of community, and the practice of havruta learning (learning in student pairs), which allows students not only to delve into these texts and ideas together but to also regularly put into play the values about which they are learning.

So what conditions does Jocelyn create to leverage the power of two? I want to highlight just a few.

Creating a Classroom Environment: Before Jocelyn even begins to engage her students in partner work, she first creates an appropriate classroom environment. This entails developing cooperative classroom norms, honestly exploring with her students the pros and cons of partner work and developing classroom rituals for partner work. Under Jocelyn’s guidance, her students don’t merely assume that “two is better than one,” but engage in a critical exploration of this idea and consider when it is and isn’t true. Jocelyn places the core texts and student generated ideas on classroom walls and supports students to refer to and build on these ideas over time. The texts and student ideas become part of the fabric of the classroom environment.

Core Skills: Jocelyn explicitly teaches her students the skills they need in order to engage in partner work successfully. She focuses on teaching core havruta practices, such as active listening, articulating, supporting and challenging. She makes time in the class for students to hear about these ideas and think about them together, and to practice them with their partners, holding each other accountable to the behaviors that they have identified as important.

Jocelyn also models these skills in large group discussions and encourages students to use
them both in their partner work and with the larger class. In this way, the different learning structures become mutually reinforcing. Jocelyn helps students use these skills for work in other subject areas, as well, so that they come to understand the true value of being able to communicate with and work with other people.

In one of the last video clips in the webcase, we see Jocelyn engaging in a conversation with her students about how to welcome back a student who has had to step out of the classroom. Rather than do this behind the scenes, Jocelyn uses this moment as a learning opportunity to think with her students about how they might put to use the ideas and skills they’ve been learning together to welcome back a classmate so he will feel comfortable and safe rejoining the group. Students come up with a wonderful list of suggestions and all are eager to take the lead in welcoming the student back.

The valuing of one’s classmate and the idea that two is better than one are not just abstract ideas to these third graders. With their teacher, they have given these texts, values, and ideas real legs on which to stand. Through their ongoing study and partner work, they have begun to cultivate what Ruth Ann Charney calls “habits of goodness” (1997) in their classroom.

Explore the Jewish Values Webcase