Blog Post: Looking Ahead: The Center’s Learning Agenda

By Jon Levisohn
July 1, 2014

Today, Jon A. Levisohn, the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Professor of Jewish Educational Thought at Brandeis, becomes the Mandel Center’s second director. Founding director Sharon Feiman-Nemser will continue at the center as senior scholar and continue to teach at Brandeis. In honor of the occasion we offer these thoughts from Jon about the Center’s future direction.

What is the biggest challenge facing Jewish education today? And how can we address that challenge and contribute to a thriving, vibrant Jewish community? We’ve been thinking about these strategic questions over the last eighteen months or so.

We believe that Jewish educators, policy makers, lay leaders, and curriculum and program designers are flying blind.

As we planned for our leadership transition, we knew that we wanted to take advantage of this moment to clarify what we want the Center to be and do.

Our answer to the first question, about the biggest challenge facing Jewish education, is this: We believe that Jewish educators, policy makers, lay leaders, and curriculum and program designers are flying blind.

What does this mean?

Too often, we are unclear or imprecise or just unsophisticated about our desired learning outcomes across the various settings where Jewish education happens. We lack the language to articulate those outcomes in compelling ways, in terms of knowledge and skills but also in terms of the dispositions that we seek to cultivate, both moral and intellectual. We assess inconsistently or not at all, in part because there are few if any effective instruments for measuring our most ambitious goals.

Nor is the problem limited to learning outcomes: We do not know enough about the learners, either. We do not have a clear picture of learners’ or participants’ understanding of the subjects that we teach, or of what sense they make of their educational experiences. We
do what is expedient or what seems like it might be engaging, but we actually know very little about what students think or feel, how learners learn whatever we are trying to teach, what they understand about specific subjects or about their world, or what they are able to do as a result of the learning opportunities constructed for them.

What’s the alternative?

When Jewish educators—in any setting, formal or informal—are clear about what we want our students to learn, care about, and be able to do, when we cultivate shared responsibility for their learning and devise appropriate assessments, when we articulate both ambitious learning outcomes and the processes or conditions that are necessary to achieve them, and when we are deeply and relentlessly curious about students’ understandings, then we move toward vision-guided Jewish education. That kind of Jewish education—accountable, powerful, transformative—can make a deep and lasting difference in the lives of students and the entire Jewish community.

At the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, we now call this our “learning agenda.” Hence our tagline: learning about learning. The learning agenda includes not only focusing on learners and learning in our own work in Jewish education but also promoting that focus in others—researchers, policy-makers and Jewish educational practitioners alike.

We are proud of what the Center has accomplished during its first twelve years: books and articles, conference presentations and seminars, and professional development programs along the continuum of teacher learning. The major focus has been on understanding teachers and the work of teaching. As we look ahead to the next phase of the Center’s work, we envision a shift from the focus on teachers and teaching to a focus on learners and learning. We are eager to advance the learning agenda through a number of projects already underway, and through a number of others that are in the works. But we are especially excited about the possibility of partnering with others who share this agenda. We look forward to hearing from you!