

Virtual Education on the Move

By Anna Hartman

Online courses may just be the best learning you have never experienced.

That was certainly my experience when, this winter, I enrolled in an online course entitled “Introduction to Jewish Educational Leadership.” (The course, offered by HUC-JIR and taught by professors Samuel K. Joseph and Adriane Leveen, is a pre-requisite to the school’s Executive MA in Jewish Education.)

Picture me, in my new hometown of Swampscott, MA, missing my former study pals and feeling sorry for myself for not living close enough to Boston to participate regularly in a new learning circle.

Picture me, opting then to take an online course as a consolation, expecting to acquire some new knowledge while bearing the nuisance of the university assignments I recalled from college.

Now behold, as I did, what the best of online learning actually looks like:

Vision: A learning community.

A series of short videos made by fellow students offered a personal start to the course. As my classmates revealed information about their learning styles, many shared elements about themselves. I began to learn about fears, life journeys, and scary challenges still facing these new friends. As I eagerly logged into the learning management system to see new videos, I continued to be moved and inspired by these human beings with whom I would be studying. Almost immediately we began submitting comments on one another’s videos. By the time I was assigned to engage in a 2-hour havruta session with someone I had never met, I was ready.

Vision: Accommodation for diverse learning styles.

Half the battle in any course is staying organized, especially when you are already so busy. Here, my instructors offered us a choice of ways to stay organized. To see deadlines and assignments, we could consult either the class Google calendar or a weekly module (like a table of contents) that outlined the week’s tasks, including both an estimation of the time the assignment might take and a nudge to start a long-term project that would be due in a few weeks.

Another challenge in the course might have been the varying technical fluency of the students. Here, too, the differentiation was readily available. Don’t know how to make a YouTube video? Read the attached instructions and then email for further help. Already proficient in YouTube? Here are three advanced tips you might not have considered.

Other considerations made by the instructors: Need access to last week’s materials? Check the course site. Need to complete this assignment offline? Here is a

download you can use. Visual learner? Here is a transcript of this week's video. Need to discuss a text with a small group? Here is a pre-formatted Google Doc to scaffold your discussion.

Vision: Learners feel known and supported.

How do professors get to know their students? In our case, the regular flow of brief assignments allowed opportunities for teachers to reflect on our work and offer us constructive feedback. The key here was brevity and timeliness. Teachers would insist on the page-count limits that would enable their prompt responses. In turn, students could read teachers' brief comments and address them in the next assignment.

On a related note, I could get used to having tech support available to me 24/6! Before our first live session, tech support led an orientation during which we focused on the process and tools. Every live class session was attended by a tech specialist whose purpose was just to ensure that all ran smoothly. In addition, we were invited to email a central tech support email address whenever we needed help.

Vision: Learning that meets the learner where she is (on the train or even in the hospital waiting room).

Sometimes a work project causes me to miss my favorite exercise class; not so with online learning! Scheduling around my prior commitments, I studied at my convenience, with my new motto: have wifi, will ~~travel~~ learn. I engaged in chavruta while on the train to New York and even attended a live course session while in the hospital waiting room following a family member's heart surgery. In the event that I could not attend the 10 am class, there was another one offered that same day at 1 pm. And still, if not, the recording of the class would be available on our course site.

Vision: Learning that is purposeful.

Like anyone reading this article, I am busy and I care about the work that I do. Thus when a homework assignment comes my way, I find that I can prioritize it when it asks me to reflect on and enhance my work.

Furthermore, I try to use my time wisely. In a flipped classroom, one's time is never wasted. In this environment, readings are chosen with care, lectures are pre-recorded and edited, and it is for only one hour a week that I am expected to take part in a live class. During this live session, nothing is rehashed; rather we democratically discuss the material and deepen our understanding, using the technology to virtually raise our hands and look at one another when we speak.

This course now behind me, I have not only acquired new understandings to utilize in my work, but I have also borne witness to a model of excellent instruction. This explains why I find myself dissecting, discussing and applying the elements that made this course so effective.

In *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* we are taught that “A friend is someone with whom you study Torah.” As Facebook fans have discovered, friendships can flourish even from great distances. The task before us now is developing and realizing a vision for how technology can make the study of Torah equally vibrant among friends new and old. The pioneers in the field are showing us the way; how might we join them?

Anna Hartman is an early childhood education consultant with [The Paradigm Project](#) and is a student in cohort 3 of HUC-JIR's Executive MA Program in Jewish Education. From January-March 2013, she was a student in HUC-JIR's online course, "Introduction to Jewish Educational Leadership." Anna also serves as a mentor for the Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute, a joint program of HUC-JIR and The Jewish Theological Seminary.