

What We Learned from Designing an Online Course

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As part of an executive master's degree at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Jewish Education, we (Dr. Sam Joseph of the Cincinnati campus and Dr. Adriane Leveen of the New York campus) designed a seven week long online, distance learning course, first offered in January 2011: Introduction to Jewish Educational Leadership. What did we learn from designing such a course? Technology can be an extraordinary asset! That statement comes from two professors who are “technological immigrants” and had approached the technological dimension of the course with noticeable hesitation and some grumbling. Yet, aided by the skill and creativity of our educational technology specialists, we found ways to enrich and reinforce our goals in a variety of electronic formats.

Prior to taking the course, students were required to have at least five years of experience in the field in Jewish educational settings. The course content combined theoretical approaches to organizational systems and leadership with case studies of biblical leaders. We assumed that an interaction of Jewish textual tradition and contemporary theoretical materials would create powerful and rich possibilities for creative thinking and reflective practice.

The diversity of formats allowed different types of learners access to the course's content in different ways, and allowed them to remain in their settings, across this country and Canada, throughout the seven weeks of the course. For instance, each week's content was introduced by the use of digital media (from documentary and television clips to Dr. Joseph sitting in a chair having a fireside chat in Ohio). Dr. Joseph divided the students into

small groups, each of whom were tasked with an assignment to pore over a variety of synagogue ads from the past several years. They were then asked to identify ways in which the religious settings were presented to the public by their staff and boards. Dr. Leveen used the age-old Jewish tradition of 'havruta' or paired study to give the students the opportunity to delve deeply into biblical texts. Such study gained new power and resonance by being done by partners who sat in California and New York, Boston and Rochester, Washington and Boulder.

Almost every week at a pre-set time the entire class gathered together, sitting in front of a computer screen framed by our faces. We liked to note the backgrounds in each square. One student sat outside in beautiful Northern California while another was in snowy Minnesota. One had photos of student work behind her while another had a clear window looking out onto a playground. In each 'live' class, the whole formed a tapestry greater than the parts. The walls of our classroom had clearly expanded to cover entire regions, north, south, east and west.

For their final project each student selected a figure within his/her community who they considered 'transformational.' After filming an interview, each student posted his/her footage along with an analysis of its content. Other students would do the same and then respond to each other's work through a series of guided questions. The results were quite remarkable. We now have an online archive of leaders from across the USA and Canada discussing and reflecting upon the skills and challenges of leadership.

But what is unique to an online course in what we have just described? It is a course whose classroom stretches across a continent. Thus, students from different types of Jewish communities (small and large) can hear a variety of perspectives and learn from an

array of experiences. We have groups of students (and their professors) who are becoming more aware of the possibilities, as well as the rapid changes, in digital media while at the same time becoming critically proficient in its use. In follow-up discussions with the students, they repeatedly express their excitement in turning their own familiar work sites into a 'lab' as part of fulfilling the requirements of the course. They observe their settings with fresh eyes, which in turn invigorates their work. They report wondering what new discovery they will make next.

Above all else, the course allows students to develop a professional network that extends well beyond their own communities throughout the USA and Canada. This newly developed network has become a source not only of needed personal support but also of fresh and abundant professional resources and ideas. As a result, students report a striking and elevated sense of personal and professional satisfaction. An online course makes this nationwide network of students – and the many benefits that come from that – much more feasible to develop, cultivate and maintain.

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