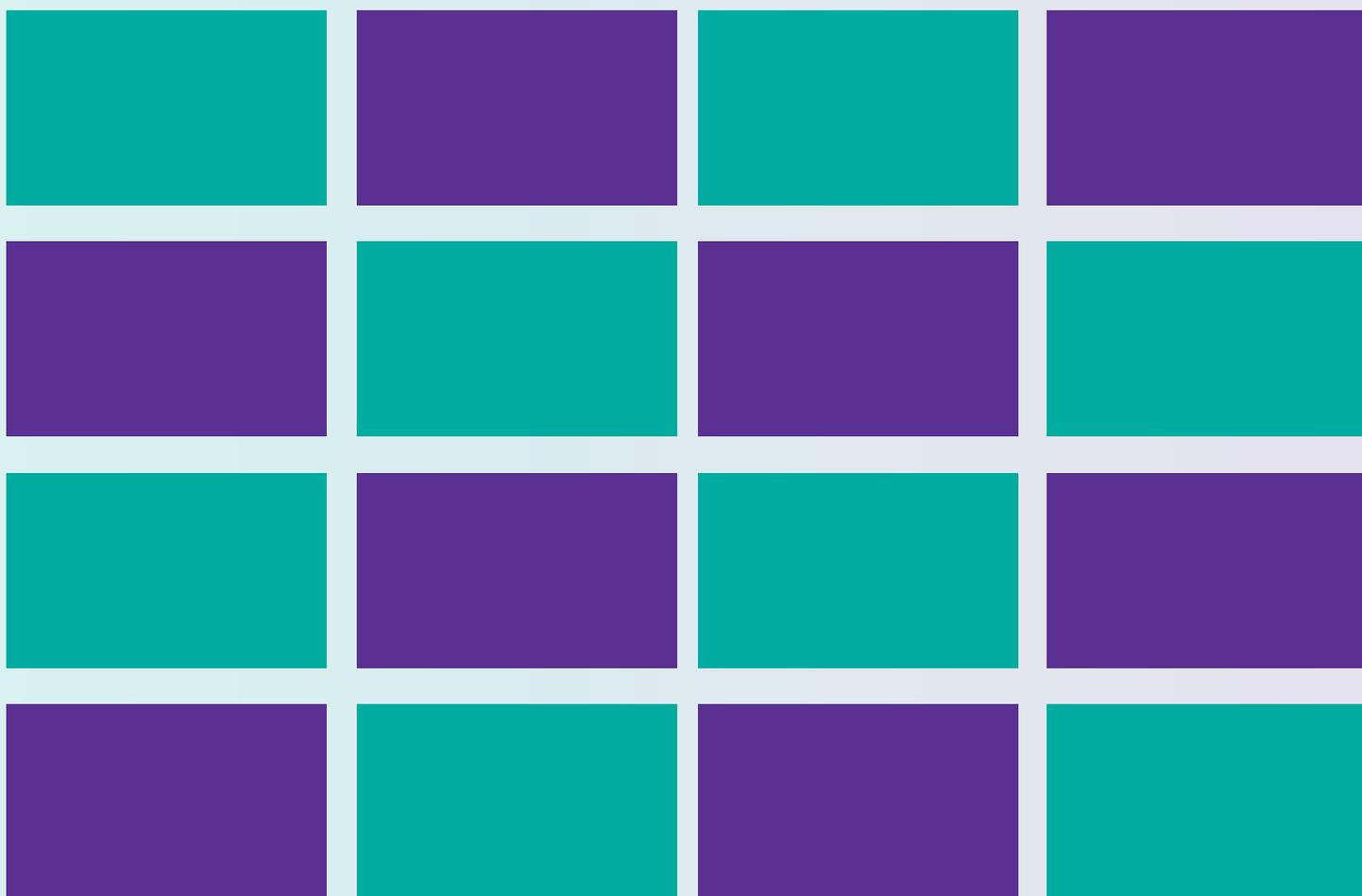
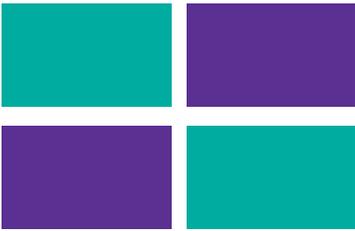


Virtually Developing:

Exploring the Potential and Pitfalls
of Online Professional Development
and Adult Learning



January 2021



Executive Summary

Introduction

During summer and fall 2020, Rosov Consulting engaged in a multifaceted study of 13 Jewish adult learning and professional development programs that shifted their offerings online due to COVID-19 (nine are part of the Jim Joseph Foundation Professional Development Initiative, four are from other Jim Joseph Foundation grantees). In the first stage of our research, we interviewed program providers about the challenges they faced in moving to online learning, the positive “silver linings” of the virtual experience, and the longer-term impacts of reimagining how they do their work. In the second stage, we explored the experiences of and impacts on program participants through a survey of more than 1,600 participants and follow-up interviews with 14 of them. The programs included both those specifically for educators and Jewish professionals as well as general adult Jewish learning open to all. We sought to understand the personal and professional impacts of online learning; the strengths and limitations of the experience, particularly as compared to in-person learning; and what facilitates and impedes learning through virtual modalities.

Strengths and Benefits of Online Learning

Expanded Access Increases Learning Opportunities and Diversity of Participants

The accessibility of online programming is by far its most unique aspect and, for many participants, the most valuable. In interviews and survey comments, participants highlighted the benefits of being able to access programs without having to consider **location or logistics**. They also

appreciated the **flexibility of online programming** that allowed them to “pop in and out” and fit the programs into their lives. Some also noted the increased **accessibility of programming for people who need accommodations** that are not always feasible when learning in person. Several respondents also appreciated that **lower registration fees and no travel costs** made online programs much **more affordable**. Parents of young children were grateful for the opportunity to **attend programs while also engaging in childcare**. All these factors contributed to increased diversity among attendees due to lowered barriers for program entry and ongoing participation.

From the provider side, all of the organizations we spoke with have found that moving online has expanded their audience and reach. Many have seen their now-virtual programs transcend prior geographic boundaries or niche appeal to attract diverse participants from around the world. Others are reaching entirely new populations of learners who now have greater time and/or motivation to participate. Finally, the online format facilitates access and convenience for educators and presenters as well as learners, as organizations are able to bring in speakers who might not have been able to appear in person but have an hour or two to join a Zoom call.

Increased Knowledge and Skills for Learners and Educators

Overall, 79% of survey respondents across all program types agreed or strongly agreed that they “gained new knowledge” from their online learning programs. Interview and survey comments suggest that this learning is often directed toward augmenting specific skills, in

particular specific technical skills, techniques, and strategies that enhanced their professional work. Some felt that the online format allowed for the transmission of specific information, content, and skills in ways that may have been even more efficient and focused than in-person equivalents. Program leaders have also had to gain comfort and skill with online modalities to be able to teach effectively, and a number of organizations have provided professional development for staff to help them become more skilled and creative at engaging learners online.

More Room for Experimentation and Creativity

While pivoting programming online was a strategy borne of necessity not choice, many organizations have ended up welcoming the opportunity to exercise their creativity. Some have experimented with program structures that would have been hard to conduct in person, such as daily “micro-sessions” for meditation or text study, or “drop-in” hours for mentoring or conversation with peers. Having to re-envision multi-day immersive retreats as a series of virtual sessions spread over weeks has also inspired new thinking about how to deliver content and keep participants engaged over time. Many of the interviewees reported that their programs became “savvier” and more creative over time by incorporating feedback and anticipating and adapting to participants’ needs. It’s not surprising that many program providers anticipate that their future programming will be a hybrid of in-person and virtual opportunities, and that their investments in expanding online learning capabilities will strengthen their organizations.

Limits and Challenges of Online Learning

For Most, Virtual Connections Are Less Satisfying

Despite the dedication and creativity that organizations invested in moving programs and

events online, many program providers and participants deeply feel the loss of in-person connections. While people can connect online via breakout groups and other strategies, it is very difficult to replicate the experience of getting to know a new colleague over lunch, reflecting with fellow learners in the hallway after a session, receiving informal mentoring from an instructor, or even connecting with a unique space and setting as part of the learning process.

Online Learners Are Often More Distracted and Less Engaged

Another frequent criticism of online learning was the difficulty staying focused due to distractions in the home environment and/or the mental challenges of too much screen time. In interviews and survey comments, several participants spoke of feeling what one called “the classic challenge of Zoom fatigue.” Other participants highlighted the challenge of balancing learning with competing family and home responsibilities. While participants appreciated what their programs had been able to offer, a number expressed that there was simply “no comparison” between the experience of online learning and the dynamic energy and depth of engagement that can be achieved in person.

Cohort Programs Can Offer an Effective Hybrid Model

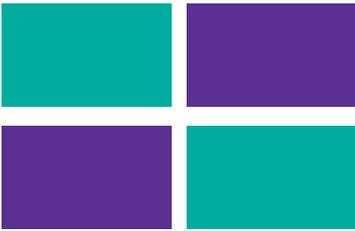
Many of the long-term cohort programs we studied had already incorporated quite a bit of online learning and interaction from the start as a way to connect their geographically scattered members. However, as many participants emphasized, the virtual elements only worked because the groups came together in person initially and periodically during the program to launch and then deepen relationships. A solely online program, they felt, could not provide a truly satisfying cohort experience. Thus, they were grateful that they had the opportunity to forge connections with

each other before their programs went entirely virtual. By combining the two modalities, cohort programs can offer the best of learning both in person (meaningful relationship building) and online (convenience, flexibility, and diverse participation).

Online vs. In-Person: A Valuable Role for Each

The choice to deliver professional development or Jewish learning online or in-person—or in combination—should be driven by two factors: the primary goals of the learning experience and the intended audience. For in-depth engagement and developing meaningful relationships and networks, in-person experiences (both one-time conferences and longer programs) are generally superior. However, online programs greatly expand opportunities for those whose locations, work and family commitments, financial circumstances, or other life realities do not easily allow them to travel and/or make time for learning and professional development. Programs and educators have made enormous strides this year in harnessing technology to deliver valuable content to thousands of learners across the globe.

The shifts programs have made to preserve Jewish learning and professional development during the pandemic can offer a valuable model in which online learning is a meaningful complement to (but not a substitute for) in-person connections and engagement. Moving forward, if programs embrace a spirit of “both/and” rather than “either/or”—matching approaches to needs, goals, and populations—they will continue to both deepen and broaden learning and development opportunities and thus have a beneficial impact on the field as a whole.



Introduction

On a Zoom screen an instructor shares a PDF with side-by-side English and Hebrew and provides rich interpretation and explication of the ideas in the text. The over 100 virtual attendees are largely silent, but most seem to be listening raptly. In a different online program session, the facilitator begins by asking participants to stand up and move away from their computers, then walk back, take their seats, and simultaneously take three deep breaths. This brief opening exercise, she explains, will “center” everyone’s attention and bring them into a shared virtual space. Later in the session (the third of six in this series), breakout groups use the Padlet app to brainstorm program ideas while listening to a Spotify playlist curated for fun and inspiration. A third virtual program has brought together a cohort of 16 professionals over a period of months, often in small groups with a mentor or in havruta pairs. This session involves the entire group, who clearly have developed good rapport and a comfortable rhythm with each other. Participants are highly engaged, responding enthusiastically to discussion prompts. The animated facilitator is skilled at rephrasing and augmenting participants’ contributions, including those shared via the chat box, within which comments continuously flow.

These brief snapshots from three online adult learning and professional development programs—from Hadar Institute, M²: Institute for Experiential Jewish Education, and Hillel International—illustrate the diversity of content, approaches, and tools that educators are using to engage Jewish professionals (and other learners) around the world. Since summer 2020, Rosov Consulting has been engaged in a multifaceted study of thirteen such programs, nine from the Jim Joseph Foundation

Professional Development Initiative (PDI) cohort, along with programs of four other Jim Joseph Foundation grantees. In the first stage of our research, we interviewed program leaders and providers about the challenges that organizations faced when moving their programs online, the positive “silver linings” of being forced to reimagine how they do their work, and which elements they thought might continue once people can gather in person again. Our interviews captured how quickly Jewish educators and professionals had to adapt in order to become adept creators and practitioners of online learning. We also learned the extent to which many anticipate that future programming will be a hybrid of in-person and virtual opportunities, and that the investments they are making today to improve and expand their online learning capabilities will strengthen their organizations and the field as a whole.¹

In the second stage of research, we sought to understand the other side of the online learning picture: the experiences of and impacts on program participants. In August and September 2020, we fielded a survey to participants in online programs provided by the 13 organizations to which 1,600 people responded (a 20% response rate). The programs were of three kinds: one-time learning sessions; multi-session programs (usually with four to six sessions); and long-term cohort programs. The one-off and multi-session programs were a mix of those specifically for educators and Jewish professionals and general adult Jewish learning open to all (cohort programs were generally provided for Jewish educators/professionals). Following the survey, we conducted interviews with 14 participants in programs across seven organizations.

¹ The full report detailing our findings can be found on the Jim Joseph Foundation website at <https://jimjosephfoundation.org/learning-resources/zooming-toward-the-future-the-challenges-strategies-and-opportunities-of-distance-learning/>.

Both the survey and interviews explored the following questions:

- ➔ How effective do participants find various online learning modalities?
- ➔ What facilitates and what impedes the online learning experience?
- ➔ How do participants find the online learning experience compares to in-person learning focused on similar content? What about each learning experience is better or worse than the other?
- ➔ With what personal and professional outcomes are online learning and professional development programs associated?
- ➔ What facets of the online experience aid or impede these outcomes?

Finally, members of the Rosov team conducted virtual observations of five online programs (from which the opening vignettes are drawn) in order to get a “participants’-eye” view of the learning experience. From these various data sources, we have developed a more comprehensive understanding of the potential strengths and benefits of online learning, the strategies and tactics that improve online programs and help them achieve these benefits, and the limitations and challenges of the virtual environment.

Organizations Participating in Study

Ayeka

Hadar Institute

Hillel International

HUC-JIR School of Education

The iCenter

JCC Association of North America

JPRO Network

M²: Institute for Experiential Jewish Education

Makom

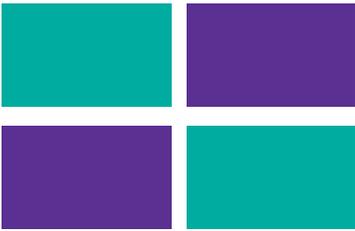
Moishe House

Moving Traditions

Shalom Hartman Institute of North America

SVARA

The Jewish Education Project



Strengths and Benefits of Online Learning

Expanded Access Increases Learning Opportunities and Diversity of Participants

The accessibility of online programming is by far the most unique dimension of this learning format and, for many participants, the most valuable. Seventy-five percent (75%) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their online program was more convenient to participate in than in-person courses, and 58% that the online program was easier to fit into their schedule. Numerous participants highlighted the benefit of being able to access professional development programs without having to consider **location or logistics**. Although some missed the experience of travel, many participants were thrilled not to have to leave home or their regular work. As one Ayeka participant shared, *“There was no stress or pressure related to traveling, taking time off, and details related to that. It was nice to be able to participate from my home.”* Some emphasized that they would not have been able to participate in their program were it not online, particularly those on the US West Coast and in Canada, South America, and Israel, who perceived most opportunities to be based in the US Northeast. Many participants also appreciated that the **flexibility of online programming** allowed them to “pop in and out without a full commitment” and easily fit learning into their busy schedules. They enjoyed being able to “choose your own adventure” and drop in to only the sessions that were relevant to them without feeling pressure to commit to more, as was expressed by a Hillel participant:

“I participated in a short experience—an hour—that I would probably only get at a conference when having to choose between

a number of sessions. I felt it was freeing to be able to sign up for a one-hour session in the middle of my day. That helped me get that kind of experience I would only normally get once or twice a year.”

Some interviewees also highlighted the increased **accessibility of programming for people who need accommodations** that are not always feasible when learning in person. This mirrored the survey data, in which three-quarters of respondents said that online learning made it “much easier” to accommodate “access and bathrooms for wheelchairs and/or walkers,” “attention to food allergies,” and “fragrance-free environments” as compared to in-person programs. Several respondents also appreciated that **lower registration fees and no travel costs** made online programs much **more affordable**. Parents of young children were also grateful for the opportunity to attend programs while also engaging in childcare. One M² participant commented, *“Attending with a small person while on what was meant to be my maternity leave but turned into my unemployment yielded a few things. For one, I was able to do professional development even when I was cut off from working. For another, I was able to attend even with my baby sitting on my lap for most of the sessions I attended.”* Some respondents also appreciated the unique opportunity for **intergenerational programming**, both in the diversity of ages attending programs online and the ability of parents and children to participate in programming together. All these factors contributed to increased diversity among attendees due to lowered barriers for program entry and ongoing participation.

Finally, the online format **facilitated access and convenience for educators and presenters** as well as learners. A number of participants greatly valued the opportunity to learn with well-regarded educators from around the world, particularly those in Israel who North American audiences would otherwise rarely get to hear. A JCC Association educator encapsulated the multiple ways that increased access and lowered barriers has enhanced the programming offered by their institution this year:

"Online gives professionals the opportunity to study with or engage with people from all over the world. As someone who oversees classes and programs for a JCC, it opens up an entirely new world of possibilities. We have teachers from Israel interacting with our community. We have Jewish people from cities in our state who are unable to participate in our wonderful programs because of distance who can now participate. This year, for our Jewish Book Fair, we were able to get every author we requested because travel schedules were not a deterrent and there are no travel fees."

Online Programs Effectively Transmit Knowledge and Skills (Especially About Online Teaching)

The strongest outcome of online learning programs for survey respondents was their sense of having "gained new knowledge," as 79% of survey respondents across all program types agreed or strongly agreed that they experienced this outcome. The impact was greatest for participants in multi-session programs (84% agreed/strongly agreed) and cohort-based programs (82% agreed/strongly agreed). Most cohort program participants also came away with increased professional skills, as 74% agreed/strongly agreed that they "gained skills or tools that are useful to my professional practice." (Far fewer participants in multi-session or one-off programs experienced this impact, possibly because more of these programs were geared toward general Jewish learning rather than professional development.)

Participants' interview and survey comments suggest that professional learning from online programs is mostly directed toward augmenting their toolbox of skills, rather than deeply developing their professional selves or changing their perspectives on their roles and their work. Some felt that the online format allowed for the transmission of specific information, content, and skills in ways that may have been even more efficient and focused than in-person equivalents. For instance, rather than a general session covering several topics, programs could be structured to target specific learning areas and/or audiences. One participant described a Jewish Education Project program as, "utilitarian, the tangible product is high level. It gets information out in a productive, optimal way."

A number of participants appreciated that online learning helped them improve specific technical skills, techniques, and strategies that enhanced their professional work. Especially during the pandemic, programs provided a much-needed introduction to, and training in, Zoom features, educational software, games, and other digital platforms that participants relied upon to successfully transition their work and education online. A Jewish Education Project program participant found learning such technology skills to be easier online than in-person: "Tech training on Zoom feels more intimate and immediate. The new tools I'm being trained on feel accessible, and my success feels possible. Tech training in an in-person format has never felt like that!" An attendee at a JCCA session appreciated hearing from "experts in virtual engagement" who, even in just a single session, offered valuable "best practices and important information I could take to the rest of my organization." Participants in an M² online workshop series commented on how the content expanded their online teaching skills and resources:

"I was able to learn/pick up those sorts of skills (Zoom and Jamboard and whatever else) by attending these webinars. This was a SUPER helpful catchup tool for me."

"I am incredibly grateful for the online workshops I have taken since March, offered by M². They have definitely expanded my ability to teach online and to train my staff to teach our teens online."

"The magic of the Hartman Summer was that the enthusiasm of the teachers, the willingness to reach out and engage us in the topic, and the overall excellent range of choices made this an outstanding experiment that I believe will change the future of Jewish learning, making our deep tradition more accessible."

Finally, a member of a Jewish Education Project cohort-based program described how the experience of being an online learner helped to push their thinking about the assumptions behind online learning and how to be a more effective educator in the virtual space:

"It got me thinking about how the expectation is on the learner on the other side of the camera. The default is they sit there, and I realized that I wanted to shift that frame. ... A classroom dictated by the teacher is no longer relevant. ... It forced me to start thinking and get creative about teaching in the new environment."

Online Learning Can Provide Jewish Inspiration and Growth

Slightly over half of survey respondents (55%) agreed or strongly agreed that participating in online Jewish learning programs led them to "experience personal Jewish growth" and "feel (re)inspired to engage in Jewish life." This was true even for one-off programs, in which, respectively, 51% and 52% of participants agreed/strongly agreed with these statements. These percentages were higher for multi-session programs (57%/54%) and cohort-based programs (56%/64%). Though these scores might seem only mediocre, given the potential of online programs to attract a much larger audience than in-person (due to their accessibility and affordability), realizing these positive impacts for 55% of participants is not a bad return on investment. One Shalom Hartman Institute participant offered high praise for the program in a survey comment, noting that the format offered the potential to spread the "magic" of Hartman and Jewish learning more widely:

Some Learners Find New and Broader Connections Online

Although the survey data indicate that most participants did not find building connections between learners to be a strength of online learning (as will be discussed in a later section), for some, online learning is a unique opportunity to interact with a broader cohort of professionals in their field. With geographic barriers removed, these programs offered the chance to meet people from across the country, rather than connect only with other professionals in the same community or region. This is likely why 38%² of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their program "developed my professional network," and 14% agreed/strongly agreed that online programs "provided better opportunities to meet new people" than in-person programs. Some participants shared in interviews or survey comments that the wider scope of connection offered the sense of being "part of something bigger" professionally for the first time:

"I didn't feel like I was part of the Jewish professional network until I did this program. ... Now I feel very much part of something bigger than my institution or my work, it opened my eyes to a bigger world." (HUC-JIR participant)

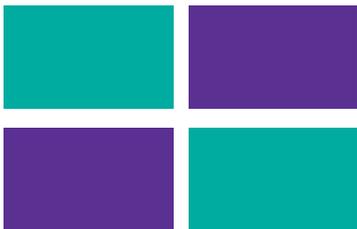
"I found it so great to be able to be involved in trainings all over the country. It opened my eyes to what was out there and helped me to feel connected to the greater Jewish community." (JEP participant)

² This percentage was significantly higher for cohort-based program participants (74%), most of whom did meet pre-pandemic through in-person retreats or seminars. Nevertheless, 28% of multi-session and 26% of "one-off" participants also agreed/strongly agreed that they had developed their professional networks through programs that were fully virtual.

"I have truly appreciated active, engaged coworking with peer execs and senior lay leaders around the country. It's brought both new skills/expertise to the conversation, faster progress and a neat sense of national 'kinship' with people in the JCC movement." (JCCA participant)

"Dwell in Common was great because it allowed me to connect with Hillel pros from around the world (Israel, USA, and Canada) and it helped me feel even more connected to the Hillel movement during the time of physical distancing." (Hillel participant)

A few participants felt that that being online encouraged them to interact with new people, as at in-person programs they tend to mostly socialize with those they already know. Some also noted that the connection and sense of community that their program provided was especially welcome as a counter to the loneliness and social distance of the pandemic. As one Hadar participant noted, "Online experiences are convenient and, as shown in this pandemic, often vital to create and maintain connections with those outside one's own walls."



What Makes Online Learning Effective?

Quality Teaching and Content Transcends Format

When asked to describe what they liked best about their online programs, many participants identified elements that, in truth, comprise good teaching and learning in any format. Participants praised programs that were efficient, well-prepared, detail-oriented, managed expectations, clearly outlined their specific learning goals, and consistent in their timing and framing. They also appreciated when facilitators checked in with them individually about their expectations, progress, and learning outcomes, and actively solicited feedback. Two components that participants strongly emphasized (and are indeed vital for educational excellence) were compelling and relevant content and having a skilled and dynamic program leader/facilitator. Essentially, the quality of the subject matter and/or the person presenting can make a program captivating enough to overcome the limitations of being confined to a screen:

"My experience throughout is that high quality outweighs challenges with not being in person, with the screen as a barrier to the experience as a whole. High-quality content overcomes challenges. I don't need it to be interactive in order to benefit from it—it's fine if not everything is interactive. As long as the content is good, I'll pay attention." (Hillel participant)

"I loved how engaging the moderators/leaders/presenters were in the virtual programming, how they made themselves available by email for additional questions, and especially how they embraced that we were all in this together." (JCCA participant)

"Such skilled facilitators, and so facile with technology and creativity—a mix of content expertise and technological expertise." (SVARA participant)

"I find the online teaching works nearly as well as the in-person teaching. The content in Hadar classes is excellent as always—and it translates well to the online format. I find the faculty is able to maintain the high standard of teaching—even in online format." (Hadar participant)

The capacity of compelling content and teaching to transcend the virtual format was evident during an observation of a Hadar online program. Though it was a rather “low-tech” online experience (in that the Zoom technology was used solely for frontal teaching), the two articulate and skilled presenters were able to easily hold participants’ attention for the entire session. When the screen was switched to speaker view—with the presenter’s face larger than life—the teaching felt even more intimate and powerful.

Taking Advantage of Technological Tools Can Enhance Programs

While the above example shows that online programs do not have to employ technological “bells and whistles” to be effective, the various tools available through Zoom and other platforms, when used well, can certainly enhance impact and enjoyment for participants. Table 1 below shows the percentage of survey respondents who experienced the most common modalities of online learning, and the percentage that rated these elements as “effective” or “very effective.”

Table 1: Modalities of Online Learning and Their Effectiveness

	Experienced Modality	Rated “Effective” or “Very Effective”
Synchronous programming: Simultaneous participation and content delivery	75%	88%
Virtual presentations/panels/salons	48%	83%
Virtual breakout rooms	42%	81%
Asynchronous programming: Content could be accessed at a time that was convenient	27%	85%
Interactive tools (e.g., annotation in Zoom)	23%	83%
One-on-one phone conversations	12%	91%
Audio-based presentations/panels (e.g., podcasts)	7%	81%
Virtual drop-in/office hours (one-on-one)	4%	81%

Other modalities that were used much less frequently were also rated quite highly by those who experienced them, suggesting that more programs should consider their use. Interestingly, the modality rated highest overall (with 91% saying it was “effective” or “very effective”) was also the most low-tech: one-on-one phone conversations. This suggests that when it comes to creating meaningful connections, good old 20th century technology still has a place alongside the latest cutting-edge innovations.

Many of the interviewees reported that their programs improved and became “savvier” over time by incorporating feedback and anticipating and adapting to participants’ needs. Several enthusiastically described programs’ use of various creative and interactive elements, such as videos, presentations, quizzes, and even live cooking demonstrations:

“Multiple modalities—breakout groups, Poll Anywhere, Quizlet, online interactive, everyone participates in real time—that really speaks to me.” (JCCA participant)

“[The program] opened my mind to talk about Israel in different media with not just texts, but with song and videos also.” (Hillel participant)

“Online was definitely a shift from the normal conference format of sitting in a circle. They had a cooking demo—an interesting choice—doubling down on movement and show and performance with the expectation that we would follow along from home.” (iCenter participant)

Participants appreciated when program leaders intentionally set the tone for the session by transitioning into the learning with music, brief ice-breakers or rituals (recall the “centering breaths” in the introductory program snapshots), opening the meeting early to allow people to greet each other, and asking participants to clear away distractions and create a comfortable physical environment. During sessions, participants found virtual “breakout rooms” for small-group discussion to be an effective way to debrief material, ask questions, and form connections, as long as groups are given sufficient

time and clear instructions or facilitation.³ One Hillel participant suggested the program would benefit from “more time in breakout rooms to discuss in smaller setting where people would feel comfortable sharing.”

Another tool online programs can take advantage of is using asynchronous programming to augment live sessions. Participants particularly appreciated the ability to review recorded sessions and materials afterwards, and share them with colleagues and friends. One Hadar participant commented, “I loved the opportunity to watch and re-watch. Having the chance to watch a lecture, read, reflect and revisit the lecture enabled a deeper learning experience.” A Hartman participant noted that recordings were particularly useful when they wished to attend multiple sessions taking place at the same time, “I also could ‘try’ a few different/new teachers and classes. Then I could go back and watch the videos from a class at the same time I might have missed.” Another Hartman participant described how participants connected by recommending favorite sessions to one another: “Was also fun to have some participants together and we all talked about our favorite talks of the past week or so—and then find what others recommend and listen/watch.” In addition to recordings, some programs sent out links to materials to be reviewed before or after live sessions. A Jewish Education Project participant felt that being online actually facilitated access to these tools and materials: “I think it was helpful to have this program online, rather than in person. Better to access the links, materials, and experiment with the tools recommended.”

Creative Use of Zoom Chat Adds a Unique Element

Perhaps the most ubiquitous and unique element of Zoom learning is the “chat” function. In an in-

person classroom, sharing one’s thoughts nearly always requires voicing them aloud, thus making the speaker the focus of discussion at that moment (and discouraging those who prefer to remain in the background). Zoom chat introduces a kind of “subtext” into the learning experience, a running commentary that may or may not be incorporated into the main “text” of the group’s discussion. A number of participants noted that having a parallel channel for communication can increase learners’ comfort with sharing thoughts and questions, and enhance the experience for all by revealing ideas that might otherwise have gone unexpressed:

“For introverts, the ability to participate either by speaking or by chat—I really noticed the benefits of that. In a variety of settings ... there are learners in the space who wouldn’t speak up in person, they have a strong presence in chat now. The facilitators are great, they are able to hold space and facilitate and keep track of the chat and lift that up.” (SVARA participant)

“LOVED being able to follow and participate in the CHAT conversations—learning/‘hearing’ in a more immediate way thoughts, ideas, and reactions of others in the group!” (Hadar participant)

“[I liked the] ability to read classmates’ thoughts and questions via the chat function, even when the teacher couldn’t address them.” (JCCA participant)

“The ability to ask questions via the Zoom chat is a big benefit of virtual meetings, I think. It’s a lot easier to ask a question when it comes to you, and there’s less pressure without the need to present it in front of the group as a speaker.” (JCCA participant)

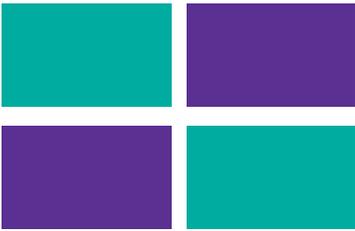
³ We did observe an instructive example of how breakout groups can flounder when not well managed. Participants spent most of their session time in small groups with little support from the host/facilitator to keep discussion moving and focused. Some groups clearly struggled, with long silences interrupted by asking, “What should we be talking about now?” “Anything else we had to get through today?” Other groups had more lively conversation, though sometimes completely unrelated to the task at hand. At no point did the facilitator “pop in” to a group to see how things were going, a technique that can be highly effective.

Many of these chat dynamics were seen in our virtual program observations. Facilitators often invited participants to ask questions in the chat or posed a question to be answered there. This approach seemed to encourage a flow of ideas that might have been less fluid and lively if participants could only share verbally (given some people's reluctance to be the center of attention on camera). In an interview, a SVARA participant described a creative use of chat to close a session and facilitate meaningful reflections:

"Instead of everyone saying something they are grateful for, you'd think about it and type it in the chat. Then we sent all together at the same moment. It was like a 'chat waterfall,' and we scrolled through together and read. While we scrolled through, the facilitator made a word cloud with the information we submitted, and two minutes later that was shared with us. It really helped with our reflection."

In cohort-based programs where participants had formed close relationships pre-pandemic, the chat also produced moving examples of peer support and encouragement. During one JCCA session, a cohort member shared a slideshow of innovations they had brought to their early childhood center. The chat allowed their colleagues to eagerly communicate their delight and admiration—"This is so beautiful, hooray!" "This is amazing!! I'm moving to your city!" "I am so inspired. Kol Ha Kavod!"—without having to verbally interrupt the presentation. While the online medium does make it more difficult to show emotion through facial expression and body language (in person this educator would likely have perceived more non-verbal excitement and joy from their colleagues), receiving real-time positive feedback in this way may actually be even more helpful and impactful.

It should be noted that not all participants appreciated having a visible chat box, as some found it too distracting and encouraging of off-topic comments. One Hadar participant expressed, "I often wish the public chat would be disabled so that the Zoom host could strictly moderate the chat and all participants wouldn't be subjected to the vocal minority." Part of being a skilled online facilitator, therefore, involves setting ground rules for how the chat can and should be used most productively.



The Limits and Challenges of Online Learning

For Most, Virtual Connections Are Less Satisfying

While some participants did find that online learning facilitated connections by removing geographic and logistical barriers, as was seen above, the majority of participants experienced the opposite. Fifty-five percent (55%) of survey respondents *disagreed* that online learning “provided better opportunities to meet new people” as compared to in-person learning, and 58% disagreed that it “allowed me to build deeper relationships with people.” In interviews and survey comments, participants said that they missed the camaraderie, shared learning experience, and personal connections of in-person learning. They found it challenging to have the kind of organic conversations that help create or deepen relationships. As a JCCA participant commented, “Attending a function/workshop/conference in person allows for a more personal connection. Meeting in person makes it possible to ask more questions and follow up on connections.” Many respondents particularly missed the informal interactions that take place in person during program breaks and over meals which are so valuable for expanding personal and professional networks. A SVARA participant explained that they “miss the in person feeling of taking walks and breaks and eating together, the ability to have unstructured, not working time—you just cannot do the same kind of things online. People have limited bandwidth for being online, so it’s all learning.”

Participants also found that online learning made it difficult to continue processing their learning after the sessions with fellow learners, or follow up with a speaker post-session to establish a connection or ask a question in a more low-stakes environment. A number of participants also longed for immersive retreat-style experiences where one can “leave

the rest of your life behind,” take a break from routines, and bond deeply with fellow learners. An iCenter participant noted that “In person there is an all-encompassing atmosphere the iCenter is so magnificent at creating, impossible to replicate online.” An M² participant similarly “missed being in unfamiliar surroundings, encamped with my colleagues, having meals prepared, and the simplicity of hotel living. Being immersed in my home-life and pandemic work-from-home responsibilities while attending sessions made the experience less impactful for me.”

Online Learners Are Often More Distracted and Less Engaged

Another frequent criticism of online learning was the difficulty staying focused due to distractions in the home environment and/or the mental challenges of too much screen time. Half of the survey respondents at least somewhat agreed that online learning “was harder to stay focused on” than in-person learning (while 31% disagreed and 18% were neutral), and only 18% of respondents somewhat agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed that online learning “was more engaging than in-person programs with similar content” (while 50% disagreed and 32% were neutral). In interviews and survey comments, several participants spoke of feeling what one called “the classic challenge of Zoom fatigue.” A JPRO participant expressed a heartfelt wish for programs to overcome this obstacle:

“In essence, the greatest challenge I know we are all experiencing is Zoom burnout, and I think the most valuable innovation we can focus on at this moment is how to make such gatherings more tangible, emotional, real, raw, live, and interactive—the way in person JPRO content is!”

Other participants highlighted the challenge of balancing learning with competing family and home responsibilities. An M² participant explained that “The online offerings were good, but because I am at home with distractions (kids) and being pulled in different directions with work obligations I found I wasn’t able to be fully immersed in the online sessions.” Still others reflected honestly on their tendency to “multitask” when in front of a screen filled with multiple media competing for their attention:

“I often check my email, Reddit, NY Times, and Facebook in online learning. Unless my screen is out of arm distance, I drift away. In the last learning I did with Hadar, the presenter said multiple times, ‘If you are looking at your email, pause for a second and listen to this.’ I found it SO HELPFUL! Others might have found it patronizing, but it is just true—we are distracted and multi-tasking, and doing a not great job of paying attention. Just naming it was great.” (Hadar participant)

“Like many millennials, I find it difficult to be in ‘one place’ online, especially when my success for that program really requires that. It was really hard for me not to do other things while participating, whereas if we were in-person I would have left my phone in my room.” (Hillel participant)

Perhaps because the online format struggles to overcome distractions, the feeling of disengagement was exacerbated by technological glitches or facilitators who could not manage the format well. Participants were frustrated with programs that were inefficient, took too much time to set up technical features, lacked focus or moved slowly, and by leaders or other participants who lacked the technical knowledge the programs required. A JCCA participant reported, “The hard part with online experiences is the vast ranges of technical know-how. As a savvy computer person, it can be hard to

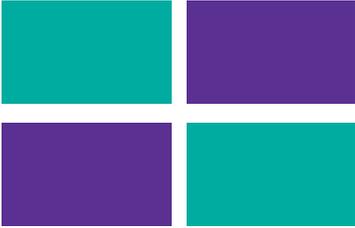
waste time in a session while the presenter fixes or helps people with tech issues.”

Finally, while many participants appreciated what their programs had been able to offer, they also felt there was simply “no comparison” between the experience of online learning and the dynamic energy and depth of engagement that can be achieved in person:

“No comparison between being in the presence of a living, breathing teacher of Torah and the learning community struggling to take in that Torah, and the on-screen. Important and helpful but a pale substitute.” (Hadar participant)

“There is no comparison between being together in a room vs. being on the screen. I have participated in many, many online sessions during this time and generally find that they lack the level of authenticity and connection of in-person learning. I would much rather clear the decks for a couple days in order to be together vs. squeezing in an hour here and there.” (JCCA participant)

“There is nothing like participating in the iCenter live experience. The iCenter pays attention to small details, brings in excellent educators who are engaging, passionate and knowledgeable. Online works, it just makes it more challenging not to be there in person with wonderful people—the learners and educators.” (iCenter participant)



Cohort Programs Offer an Effective Hybrid Model

For many participants in long-term cohort programs, shifting to an online-only format was disappointing for the opportunities lost, but not viewed as dramatic a shift as might have been assumed. Many of these programs had already incorporated quite a bit of online learning and interaction from the start as a way to connect their geographically scattered cohort members. However, as many participants emphasized, the virtual elements only worked because the groups came together in person initially and periodically during the program to first launch and then deepen relationships. A solely online program, they felt, could not provide a truly satisfying cohort experience. Thus, they were grateful that they had the opportunity to forge connections with each other before their programs went entirely virtual:

"Having the first section of the seminar was very useful in being able to build connections and relationships and to feel vulnerable. I think if the first part of the session wasn't in person, it would have been much harder to feel open and connected to my cohort. However, having the second part online was less difficult because I already felt comfortable with everyone involved." (Hillel participant)

"Since we had two previous seminars, we had established a deep connection with our faculty and cohort, allowing those connections to be nurtured (though in a much more limited way) in the third online seminar. Still, it couldn't replace what happens when you're in an immersive setting, away from your routine and other responsibilities." (M² participant)

"I enjoy the convenience of online classes but need the in-person sessions to build

relationships with the cohort. I was fortunate that we were together in person for everything except our diyyun and graduation." (HUC-JIR participant)

Despite the loss of in-person gatherings, the survey data indicate that cohort-based programs are still achieving key outcomes for most participants, as seen in Table 2.

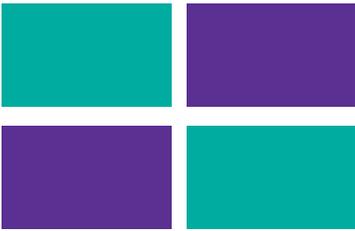
While it is certainly possible that these percentages would have been even higher if the programs had continued as planned, they support the idea that a hybrid approach can be successful for many cohort programs. The mix of modalities offers the best of learning both in person (meaningful relationship building) and online (convenience, flexibility, and diverse participation). Two participants who experienced the shift from in-person to online commented on how well their programs had navigated this transition:

"I know that this was an unexpected way to experience the second part of the Israel Masterclass program, but I still think that it was extremely beneficial to my learning and growth as a professional ... [the program leader] and the rest of the team did an incredible job at shifting the conference to a virtual setting." (Hillel participant)

"I think the iCenter did a great job translating the in-person experience into a virtual seminar. The most important things I walked away with was how I felt from the experience and it was really similar to in-person—the warmth, community, value of learning, and empowerment as we continue working in the field." (iCenter participant)

Table 2: Outcomes of Cohort-Based Programs

Outcome	Agree/Strongly Agree
Gained new knowledge	88%
Gained skills or tools that are useful to my professional practice	74%
Developed my professional network	74%
Feel (re)inspired about my profession	71%
Feel (re)inspired to engage in Jewish life	64%
Feel (re)inspired to engage in Jewish communal service	63%
Feel inspired to participate in more online learning experiences	61%
Developed a personal vision for professional leadership	60%
Learned about my leadership capacities	59%
Gained the skills to become an agent of change in my professional institution	56%
Experienced personal Jewish growth	56%



Online vs. In-Person: A Valuable Role for Each

While it may seem intuitive that online learning is in nearly all cases a “pale substitute” for what takes place in person, the findings presented in this report show that the reality is more complex. In fact, each modality has unique advantages, and the choice to use one or the other—or both—should be driven by two factors: the primary goals of the learning experience and the intended audience. For in-depth and immersive engagement, and for developing meaningful relationships and networks, in-person experiences (both one-time conferences and longer programs) are generally superior. However, the significant advantages of online programs in terms of convenience and affordability should not be discounted. As our data showed, online programs greatly expand opportunities for those whose locations, work and family commitments, financial circumstances, or other life realities do not easily allow them to travel and/or make time for professional development or Jewish learning. Online programs can be quite successful at transmitting knowledge, sparking Jewish growth and inspiration, and even somewhat helping to develop professional networks and commitments.

Although many program providers and learners will certainly be eager to resume gathering in person as soon as possible, online programming should not be regarded as merely an artifact of pandemic life. Programs and educators have made enormous strides this year in learning how to harness technology to deliver valuable content to thousands of learners across the globe. The shifts programs have made to preserve Jewish learning and professional development during the pandemic can offer a valuable model in which online learning is a meaningful complement to (but not a substitute for) in-person connections and engagement. Moving forward, if programs embrace a spirit of “both/and” rather than “either/or”—matching approaches to needs, goals, and populations—they will continue to both deepen and broaden learning and development opportunities and thus have a beneficial effect on the field as a whole.



info@rosoconsulting.com
www.rsoconsulting.com

USA
2095 Rose Street
Suite 101
Berkeley, CA 94709

Tel 510-848-2502

ISRAEL
Emek Refaim 43/a
Second Floor
Jerusalem 9314103

Tel 972-2-582-4322