



What We Are Talking about When We Talk about Engagement (We're Talking About Education)

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Crossposted on [Ideas in Jewish Education & Engagement](#) (JFNA's blog on this work - check it out!).

I was intrigued by Erica Brown's post in eJewishPhilanthropy from August, "[What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Engagement?](#)" because I spend most of my professional (and some of my personal) life doing just that. Since I was halfway through writing something that might have been titled the same way, I can instead offer my thoughts as a complement and response.

Often in professional conversation I don't distinguish between Jewish education and Jewish engagement. I know it can be annoying (or maybe just confusing): My co-conversationists often genuinely don't know what I'm referring to.

To be honest, sometimes I'm just talking too fast. But more to the point, in my work with Jewish Federations, I'm often trying to encompass the entire field of opportunities for Jewish learning and experiences.

Most of the time, I'm deliberately referencing something new—something that is not one or the other, but a practice where Jewish education and engagement have informed each other and become one, and neither is setting-specific; a practice wherein engagement and education are both acknowledged to facilitate helping people grow in the context of the Jewish narrative. This intertwined practice draws from the same set of pedagogies and ideas, implementing them in different settings.

This is really the prize we need to aim for.

My colleagues are confused because more often in the Jewish vernacular, when we say Jewish education and Jewish engagement, we mean specific activities. These words have become terms of art, descriptions of collections of projects and places.

What We Are Talking about When We Talk about Engagement (We're Talking About Education)

When we say “Jewish education,” we mean day schools, congregational schools, or preschools. “Education,” on the other hand, refers to a traditional institutional setting, organized around classrooms.

And when we say “Jewish engagement,” we too often mean what’s new. It’s definitely not schools, and it’s only sometimes camps. It’s OneTable, Moishe House, those initiatives designed through the Jewish Teen Funder Collaborative, Honeymoon Israel, and PJ Library, and we could list many more. For what it’s worth, when people use these categorizations, “education” feels stale and static, while “engagement” feels exciting, fresh, and relevant.

But Jewish education and Jewish engagement are each much more than just settings and programs. Each is a practice, a way of doing the work. And each serves a larger purpose.

When they inform each other, each benefits.

For sure, Jewish engagement implies that first connection to Jewish life. Activities considered to be Jewish engagement are intended for those already committed to Jewish life, but very often are also applicable for those not yet so committed or who are just stepping into it. They are designed deliberately to expand the number of people who are doing Jewish and to emphasize that first step, that first connection. Breadth—the opportunity to scale and the belief that participation numbers matter—is a priority baked into the strategy.

Because engagement activities are designed to reach mass numbers of people not yet engaged or committed, or even interested, they have taken a certain approach to Jewish exploration. The activities we often call engagement are experiential. They happen in real time and in real life. They take up big questions, those related to our purpose, our community, our relationships, and our roles as parents, partners, and friends. The process of engagement often takes place between two people: friends, a mentor and participant, a parent and child. The activities generally happen outside of institutions and, as such, are open to anyone.



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What We Are Talking about When We Talk about Engagement (We're Talking About Education)

Looking at activities referred to as engagement, we can identify five core principles. Engagement activities are:

- Rooted in doing: Experiential-, play-, or activity-based. For parents this looks like a playgroup; for Baby Boomers it looks like service; for twenty-somethings it looks like Shabbat dinner.
- Life-based: Focused on learners' growth as people, starting from real questions and not from Judaism. (What kind of partner do I want to be? What kind of daughter do I want to be? What do I want to do with my life? How do I communicate with people different from me? How can I be the best parent I can be?)
- Relational: With teachers as combination role models, mentors, and pastoral counselors—imparting content, but in a much larger and more complex context of human questions, growth, and relationships—and with peer teachers, mentors, and colleagues all engaging and discovering alongside each other.
- Radically accessible: To those raised inside of and completely without Jewish community, to Jews and non-Jews alike, to the children of intermarriage and to their children.
- Diverse: In traditional settings, including synagogues and day schools, at home (PJ Library), and in public (storytimes), and appealing to multiple intelligences. Engagement is emotional as well as cognitive.



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In other words, “engagement” activities are curated for a not-yet-engaged audience to create that first point of contact. In doing so, the activities model a way of exploring Jewish tradition and life that is appropriate for today’s zeitgeist. The activities are network-based, with permeable boundaries, and are learner-centered. Often, there is a DIY or bottom-up element, which is important not for its avoidance of educators with expertise but because engagement—as opposed to the 1990s practice of outreach—involves an opportunity for empowerment, ownership, and application within the context of real life. Engagement brings Judaism to people concretely, directly, and personally.

In doing so, engagement immerses people in the Jewish narrative (Jewish history, memory, wisdom, ritual, time, people, and more). This is intentional. Through engagement, we hope to help people grow as Jews and as humans. This past year, JFNA started developing a framework for Jewish Federations to

What We Are Talking about When We Talk about Engagement (We're Talking About Education)

define their desired [outcomes for engagement](#). These make manifest this idea of growth, outlining a web of attitudinal and behavioral goals for engagement work.

To emphasize: Engagement implies designing activities to reach people who are not in the center of Jewish communal life. The activities we have designed are meant to help people who are in a process of becoming. It's the people's growth that matters, not (only) their first step in.

This brings us to education.

Education is also a practice. This despite the fact that in Jewish communal vernacular (as well as in American vernacular, but that's a different article) we too often reduce it to swallowing information and receiving it passively, as if we as students have no role in learning.

Education isn't facts. It isn't only cognitive knowledge acquisition, it isn't school, and it isn't classrooms.

What is it, then?

It's "the having of wonderful ideas," according to Eleanor Duckworth. It's that moment when a human being weaves together different kinds of information to develop an idea that is wonderful in its newness, its inventiveness, and the fact that it belongs to them. The idea comes out of knowledge, but it also comes out of curiosity, experimentation, increasing comfort, motivation for exploration, and more. Wonderful ideas happen when we make connections between things (when we recognize that the questions about God that we have are the same questions that the rabbis of the Talmud asked). They happen when we develop a personal connection to the conversation we are having (about the value of ritual in human life; about the potential for ritual in our lives). And they happen when we have time to try out different possibilities and dwell in confusion (about the multiple narratives of the Middle East). Duckworth describes the "having of wonderful ideas" as the "essence of intellectual development." But in Jewish education, it's so much more.

Once, decades ago, I stood by the Kotel and suddenly felt, emotionally, both the repeated wars and the extraordinary Jewish experience those stones had seen over thousands of years. I can remember exactly how I was standing in that moment, the feel of the sun on my arms, the sudden and palpable attachment I had to the Kotel. That was the moment that Josephus came alive for me, that I connected it to the picture of the Israeli paratroopers in 1967, that I really understood my university class on the history of the Middle East. That was not (only) a moment in my intellectual development—it was a step forward in my multi-faceted relationship with Israel. It was a layered human experience, where I came to *feel* what I *knew*. It's because I had that moment of emotional and personal interaction, grounded in knowledge, that I could then have other moments of struggle, love, and exploration in my life.

In other words, education is transformational growth. These are not my words. "Transformational growth" was coined and described by Jack Mezirow, using ideas from educational theorists and developmental psychologists. Education as transformation assumes that we live in a constant process of

What We Are Talking about When We Talk about Engagement (We're Talking About Education)

understanding the world around us, of making meaning. This process might be tacit and affirming of what we already understand or it might be explicit and intentional, challenging us to examine our assumptions and understandings of the world and develop new ways of thinking and feeling.

Education as transformation is a concept that is particularly relevant for adults, as they are often not looking for new information. Their focus is instead on new ways of comprehending the layers of human experience they have already acquired and on new ways of coping with daily challenges.

Through transformation, both adults and kids develop what Mezirow called “habits of mind” (and, as educators later added, “habits of heart”). These habits aren’t *what* to think but *how* to think and feel—more *wondering at* than *wondering about*. In other words, my kid’s day school is concerned that my kid knows that there are six orders of Mishnah. But the school is much *more* concerned that my kid understands that since the fall of the Second Temple, Judaism has been a literary tradition, that the textual conversation has been collaborative, layered throughout time, both inherited and innovative, and simultaneously about memory, law, story, and history. The cognitive is necessary, but it is not sufficient.

And yet, these enduring understandings about texts are not even the relevant habits of mind. Speaking even more broadly, the relevant habits of mind are curiosity and inquiry; capacity for reflection; the skills in communication, empathy, and collaboration involved in study in a true *beit midrash*, and more. These ways of being in the world have moved the Jewish conversation for two millennia. These are what it means to *be Jewish*. When we teach the six orders of Mishnah, we start with the words or structure of the text but move far, far beyond that to focus on—again—who the whole person will be.

A total list of Jewish habits of mind and heart might include those related to how we approach inquiry, texts, history/memory, and learning; to the role of ritual and meditation in human life; to community and responsibility, authority and invention; to interaction with and celebration of special times; and to a sense that we are both of the world and “other” and how to live with both of those realities simultaneously.

An adult Jew—ideally a graduate of many and varied Jewish experiences—has and can use the Jewish habits of mind and heart in daily life, in both Jewish and non-Jewish situations. That kind of learning comes from “education”—and most certainly, from engagement.



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What We Are Talking about When We Talk about Engagement (We're Talking About Education)

Here's the thing. If Jewish engagement activities and programs are aimed at only the most basic level—focusing on attracting people to Jewish life and community—then what we are offering is very thin.

A similar observation can be made about Jewish education: if it's only an exercise in swallowing knowledge, in inheriting a tradition, Jewish education is almost irrelevant.

The problem, of course—and here is where Erica Brown's article was significant—is that both engagement and education of these meager forms exist. Moreover, our expectations of both can be too low. Too often in our engagement objectives, we focus engagement activities on numbers and educational activities on what cognitive information is learned. "That program is only for ten people?" we cry. "But he didn't learn the *Ein Keloheinu*?" we complain.

The (gentle) response to this needs to be yes, ten people engaged in an intimate discussion of empathetic listening in the context of romantic relationships and practiced that listening during a study of sacred texts about rabbinic relationships. And yes, they didn't learn that prayer because, instead, we spent time setting up a student-led inquiry into how the synagogue has structured prayer over the years, what Jewish prayer has looked like over centuries, and then asked students to build together the kind of Jewish spiritual, liturgical, and meditative experience that moves them today.

Education and engagement have come to refer to settings. But at their best, that's not what they are. They are complementary ways of structuring experiences so as to facilitate a process of human becoming, in dialogue with the Jewish narrative.

Our expectations of each should be great.

Those who facilitate each—in professional and lay capacities—should be trained to help North American Jewish families explore and learn Judaism, using both very old and very new methodologies (pedagogies).

We should all recognize that in any activity of Jewish exploration—education and engagement both—something tremendous is at stake. The vision of a lived Judaism that we teach must matter greatly, because we have human souls before us who are hungry for that level of learning, growing, feeling, and experience.

For further reading:

- Eleanor Duckworth: *The Having of Wonderful Ideas* (2002)
- Jack Mezirow: *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (1991)