7. Using Online Spaces for Collaborative Learning of Jewish Texts

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Abstract: Online learning tools may reflect how the social and textual act of interpretations built a community of readers and writers and learners and teachers. This paper presents a case study of an online *havruta* (paired-couple) platform called *Project Zug*. In this Jewish educational setting, 2 people virtually meet weekly to learn and discuss Jewish ancient texts while making connections to their personal lives. The main research question is how do online learning spaces create communities of practice through the collaborative interpretation of Jewish sacred texts? Using sociocultural frameworks of learning, I analyze data from semistructured interviews with Project Zug's team members and a sample of learners and find that this online learning space creates a community of practice through the collaborative interpretation of Jewish sacred texts. As adult lifelong learners, participants describe a sense of online community with a shared purpose of exploring Jewish content with others while actively creating connections between texts and their own life experiences. It enables an old pedagogical tradition to continue while using technology for more accessible, creative, engaging, and active learning participation. I hope that the implications of my research on Jewish studies and educational technologies will provide a deeper understanding of Jewish education in the 21st century.

Introduction

More traditional models of Jewish paired-couple learning *(havruta)* are often seen by the community as the intellectual predecessors of modern computer-supported collaborative teaching and learning practices. *Havruta* is an Aramaic term meaning "friendship" or "companionship" and these pairs learn with the same partner through a period of time. This Jewish learning pedagogy offers learners opportunities to interpret the texts together, to make meaning by raising questions and seeking answers collaboratively. This practice has great value for learners of varying ages, in different contexts, and different learning goals, and it does not require an instructor's close guidance. Through discussing and interpreting the texts, the *havruta* constructs and reconstructs the meaning of the text (Kent, 2010). Recently, social and religious changes in Jewish education have been shifting from being more "provider centered" to more "learner centered"; learners are taking a more active role in shaping their learning, making it relevant to their lives, as learning becomes more accessible with the option of developing personal growth (Rubin Ross, 2017). Perhaps, as a result, there has been an increase in online platforms that make Jewish history, Jewish thought, philosophy, and religion more accessible. However, "how people use technology to gather and generate information about Jewish life remains largely unknown" (Kelman, 2018, p. 64). This paper is part of a larger study addressing such questions to better understand how online platforms are used to learn Jewish texts in collaboration with others.

In their report, *The Future of Jewish Learning Is Here: How Digital Media Are Reshaping Jewish Education*, Kelman, Garcia, Zielezinski, and Bruch (2019) present several online Jewish learning platforms that reflect changes in current Jewish learning. Their key findings discuss how Jewish educational online media enable learners to accomplish five goals: "(1) Connect with others around Jewish learning; (2) Access Jewish knowledge beyond Jewish institutions; (3) Learn in sync with the Jewish calendar; (4) Utilize different platforms for different ends and, (5) Integrate online learning and offline practice" (Kelman et al., 2019, p. 4). These findings suggest that as online learning becomes more accessible, the Jewish learning opportunities and experiences are also changing. These changes include more approachable learning materials, creating new social connections, and engaging with Jewish content in new ways that reflect learning in the 21st century.

Despite the increase in online Jewish education platforms, little research has been done on how or what students learn through this medium. This paper presents an informal online collaborative learning space called *Project Zug* as a case study of online *havruta* learning. My central research question, therefore, is: How can online Jewish learning spaces create communities of practice through the collaborative interpretation of Jewish sacred texts? I investigate how this website supports (or does not support) collaborative learning through the lenses of connected sociocultural frameworks of learning: communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), computer-supported collaborative learning (Dillenbourg, Järvelä, & Fischer, 2009), and knowledge-building communities (KBC) as a pedagogical approach for knowledge creation and innovation (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2014). In this paper, I present preliminary findings highlighting how participants have created a community of practice through an online collaborative interpretation of Jewish texts.

Jewish Education in the Age of Google

More than five decades ago, the German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig called for a "new Jewish learning" that "no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life, but the other way round, from life, from a world that knows nothing of the Law, or pretends to know nothing, back to the Torah" (Rosenzweig, as cited in Woocher, 2012, p. 199). I wish to draw on this notion of a dialogue between Jewish texts (usually referred to as *Torah*) and learners through the use of online platforms.

Rubin Ross (2017) found that Jewish education organizations work on "(a) utilizing technology as a vehicle for empowering learners; (b) teaching involving guiding student learning; and (c) Jewish education encompassing content that is both Jewish and broadly human, and connecting the two" (p. 197). In addition, there are innovative shifts in the roles of learners, teachers, community, text, and social justice. This is part of a broader change occurring in Jewish education in the "age of Google."

According to Woocher (2008), some of these characteristics include the challenge that requires the reader to be able to determine which information from which sources is reliable. Woocher writes that Jews, as "People of the Book," need to adjust to the reality in which learning no longer occurs only through the written word, as multisensory and experiential learning is becoming the norm, and that both "virtual" and "real" networks strengthen existing ties and create new connections and new types of communities that otherwise would not exist. Learning is also about building communities around shared interests while using different tools for communicating, both face-to-face and electronically mediated.

In addition to shifts in Jewish education toward becoming more learner centered, relationship infused, and life relevant, there is the desire of individuals to be active co-creators of products they consume and in their experiences. This phenomenon is called *prosumerism* and in the religious and social context, prosumerists wish to co-create in their learning practice with others and not simply participate. This is also part of the shift from a "provider-centered" to a "learner-centered" perspective. Adults and children both seek to be active in deciding where, how, when, and what to learn while wanting to learn more as they do so (Woocher, 2012).

This also implies that there is a connection between one's personal life and the Torah, looking at the benefits of the wisdom that the Torah may provide. This is part of a 21st-century learning point of view that focuses on education that is "life relevant" and thus develops skills one will need to succeed in the world. This approach often speaks of the "five C's" that contemporary learners will need: create, connect, communicate, collaborate, and be critical thinkers. Similarly, "Jewish education becomes not only more relevant to the diverse population of today's learners, but a richer and fuller expression of Judaism itself" (Woocher, 2012, p. 201). Part of the transition to a digital age includes technological and cultural transformations, like "the transition from oral tradition to written text, and then from written to printed text" (Woocher, 2012, p. 190). Therefore, Jewish education is changing as well and these online tools or online learning

communities are examples of such changes. They also reflect a broader phenomenon of free choice and lifelong adult learning.

Free-Choice and Lifelong Learning in Jewish Education

Adults turn to free-choice learning resources to satisfy their intellectual curiosity as well as to fulfill the needs of other emotional, enjoyment, or spiritual fulfillment (Falk, 2005). Similarly, when seeking information on the Internet, adults enjoy new opportunities to learn new things. Therefore, people engage in free-choice learning for various reasons, although not many do so to become experts. "The term *free-choice* learning is used to refer to the type of learning that occurs when individuals exercise significant choice and control over their learning. Free-choice learning typically, but not necessarily, occurs outside school" (Falk, 2005, p. 270). Also, free-choice learning represents a bottom-up and individual-driven way of thinking about learning, as societies become more knowledge driven. Falk also points out the importance of understanding each individual's lifelong learning journey and his or her role in his or her social context as well as how that determines the direction of this journey.

Learning should be viewed across the lifespan and not according to traditional notions of a separation between education followed by work. Therefore, in the information society today, an educated person is someone who considers learning as a lifelong process. As Fischer (2001) describes: "Lifelong learning is more than adult education or training—it is a mindset and a habit for people to acquire. It creates the challenge to understand, explore, and support new dimensions of learning such as (1) self-directed learning, (2) learning on demand, (3) informal learning, and (4) organizational learning" (p. 1). The Project Zug platform is a lifelong learning tool as it represents a way of informal learning enabling learners to be self-directed and learn on demand.

Lifelong learning involves engaged learners of all ages creating and acquiring knowledge and skills through self-directed and authentic learning situations while taking advantage of the possibilities offered by new media. However, new media and technology are not sufficient by themselves to achieve certain learning goals. Therefore, educators and online learning designers should focus on how these spaces are best used to achieve these learning goals (Fischer, 2001). This is true in the case of Project Zug as an online learning tool discussed in this paper. Project Zug enables learners of all ages and levels of expertise to participate in the interpretation and learning of Jewish sacred texts.

According to Fischer (2001), "We must rethink and reinvent learning, working, collaboration, and education in the context of new media, and simultaneously we must invent and create new media in the context of learning, working, collaboration, and education" (p. 4). Project Zug, for instance, enables learners to create their connections across texts to their personal lives using new media for collaboration, as it also strengthens the ancient practice of Jewish textual dialogue and interpretation of texts with a *havruta* learning partner.

There are many reasons Jewish adults engage in adult Jewish education. As examples, Jews who have not had strong Jewish educational experiences in their childhood are more interested in exploring their Jewish identity (Grant & Schuster, 2011; Krakowski, 2011). In addition, college students who want to increase their knowledge and understanding of Judaism, and parents who feel "ill-equipped to properly respond to their own children's Jewish education" (Krakowski, 2011, p. 309) might turn to online Jewish learning. Krakowski (2011) claims that these examples reflect a need and an opportunity to change and enrich meaningful Jewish adult lives. This also shows that sometimes Jewish adults seek exploration and, given the constraints of adulthood, do so through alternative educational settings rather than through traditional classroom formats. The alternatives include experiential education, nonformal settings such as camps, informal settings such as *shul* (synagogue) attendance, or even formal settings such as schools. Adult Jewish learning in these contexts provides the individual learner or Jewish families resources to use and integrate into their cultural realities.

Adult Jewish learning is not only valued as normative Jewish behavior but is also embedded in Jewish tradition and "even elevates to sacred status" (Schuster & Grant, 2008, p. 162). This learning plays an important role in Jewish tradition since it is necessary to teach the next generation. Around the 1990s, adult Jewish learning emerged among contemporary American Jewry. This is also part of contemporary adults' understanding of adulthood as a time of change rather than continuity. As for adult Jews, these changes lead them to look for new Jewish learning and the meaning of Judaism in their lives. Also, when adults connect to discuss issues of meaning and religious faith, this collaboration leads to communal responsibility to other learners. However, adult Jewish learning has a wide range in terms of learners' backgrounds, learning styles, and interests (Schuster & Grant, 2008). This can be seen through the wide range of Jewish-content websites available today.

At all levels of participation in the Jewish community, people feel a degree of alienation and many adults still need support for finding their way "from the periphery back to the center; from the outside in" (Grant & Schuster, 2011, p. 683). Given the possibility of exchanging ideas through online spaces and tools, there is an increase in the number of Jewish adults who have access to online sources of knowledge in all aspects of Judaism. According to Grant and Schuster (2011), "Adult Jewish learning programs that encourage learners to gain a broad understanding of Jewish texts, history, philosophy, law, and values help such individuals to make responsible and personally meaningful decisions about their Jewish lives today and in the future" (p. 674). This also aligns with the goal of the Jewish pedagogy of *havruta* learning, as it provides learners opportunities for engaging with Jewish texts while making them personally meaningful.

One characteristic of the adult Jewish learner is independence; the learner typically looks for learning opportunities outside "traditional" communal organizations, with a preference to find and develop his or her study resources and learning partnerships. Such learners are attracted to the multiplying online Jewish learning opportunities that promote democratic participation in the teaching-learning process (Grant & Schuster, 2011, pp. 672–673). This participation can be found in the online *havruta* learning in Project Zug, for example, since the learner does not need to attend a "traditional" communal organization but does participate as a learning partner in a digital space.

Meaning Making

Meaning making is an important practice in Jewish literature and history. Jewish sacred texts are textually connected, as they include commentaries and further interpretations that became the Jewish canon. Today, the tradition of interpretation and commentaries may continue as learners in online learning platforms use digital features to share how they understand the text and therefore create and construct meaning together. This includes a wide learning community as the learners may be from different countries and even speaking different languages.

As learners become participants in this learning community, they also practice their digital media skills and "digital literacies," in the form of writing, reading, and using the language for consuming and producing meaning. Essentially, language, like all internal experience, is social, as is the external experience (Todorov, 1984). Through participation in online Jewish learning spaces such as Project Zug, learners could practice their digital discourse of Jewish sacred texts while using tools the platforms provide.

If we view the use of language from a sociocultural approach and a *socially distributed cognition* framework, learning is something that is not solely in the mind of the individual but is "distributed across people, tools, technologies, and social settings working together in intricate alignments" (Gee, 2015, p. 100). For example, in online *havruta* learning, when the *havruta* couple read and discuss a certain text, their thoughts, interpretations, and meanings that they create collaboratively are distributed across both learners, the tools they use such as computers, and the online digital space in which they interact and communicate.

Smagorinsky (2001) claims that in the process of reading, "each text is produced as a conversational turn in dialogue with

prior and anticipated future texts regardless of whether or not they are acknowledged" (p. 141). Meaning is constructed through two processes. First, as we try to make sense and articulate the text, meaning emerges. Second, through this process, some sort of image is produced, a newly constructed text, that serves as a place in which we keep meaning. It is this articulation that serves as a tool for new transformations. This process of concept development is at the heart of meaning construction. While being an online space, Project Zug enables the learners to search for additional texts or other information on other websites that might assist them in understanding the ancient texts.

In addition, understanding a text also implies that the learner is familiar with certain Discourses. *Discourses* (with a capital *D*) include much more than just language: "Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and, often, reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities by specific groups" (Gee, 2015, p. 4). In other words, Discourses provide us with our sense of self and our culturally specific language in which we speak and act. Therefore, if the learner is not familiar with a certain Discourse, one goes through a process in which he or she learns to participate in a specific social practice within a specific Discourse. For example, Segal (2013) found that during the learning process with a *havruta* partner, the partners learn to use a certain dialogue applying *epistemic appropriation*. This occurs when "the learner claims interpretive rights and almost authorship rights to the text, even as he may not add to or even truly understand it" (p. 160). This is perhaps a Discourse in which the learner's background can shape how he or she can develop a Discourse of epistemic appropriation. Such Discourses and social participation can be identified through discussions in the online *havruta* platform of Project Zug.

Case Study: Project Zug

Project Zug (https://www.projectzug.org/) is an informal online *havruta* learning platform in which two people meet weekly to learn and discuss Jewish ancient texts while making connections to their personal lives. To learn together, they use an additional online communication tool of their choice, such as Skype or Zoom. Project Zug partners meet for a 10-week session while learning together a course of their choice. Each learner enters the homepage where course materials are published. During every session, the *havruta* couple study a set of texts with guiding questions for about an hour. They read, interpret, and discuss a text together, trying to fill the "spaces" in the texts with personal stories and experiences. Similar to traditional *havruta* learning, they may discuss a biblical story, a phrase, or even a single word without the assistance of a teacher. It is an independent learning process in which the *havruta* couple decides when to meet online and how to approach the weekly learning section. If they choose to expand the discussion beyond the *havruta*, there is a course forum in which they can raise further questions with other course participants.

Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data-collection methods were used, which included two semistructured interviews with participants (i.e., the learners) as well as an interview with one of Project Zug's team members. Since I chose to take a case-study approach, this inductive research looks at the data of the online space to understand how Jewish online learning occurs. To answer my research question, I began with an open coding technique. I looked for themes that I found related to the participants' learning experiences, such as collaboration, sense of a learning community, digital learning, as well as understanding their backgrounds in Jewish learning. Second, I used In vivo coding in which the code refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record, that is, the terms used by the participants themselves. Through this analysis, I unearth the main characteristics of online Jewish studies as a community of practice shared by participants and how one learns to become a member of such a community.

Findings

The data suggest that Project Zug enables multiple, meaningfully different learning practices. It also provides an opportunity to form new memberships through a digital *havruta* learning community as well as taking advantage of digital networks and online resources to find partners with shared interests. Considering these themes, I contend that this online learning tool supports a growing community of Jewish learning. Table 1 is a summary of analytical themes and examples for how Project Zug functions as an online community of practice for studying Jewish texts.

Analytic Theme	Examples
Forming memberships in the online community	"We got to build community in that way and like get to know each other more deeply." "I'm building trust with people so that you can, you feel comfortable arguing with them." "I think that we definitely succeeded at, you know, like building, you know, good communication and trust and we're able to have really good discussions about texts." "[*Project Zug* is] something that I know I'm committed to and […] carve out time in my week to do." "I don't have a lot of the background knowledge, I'm sure many other learners do. So, I liked that there was a very low bar for entry." "It's odd how you never have to meet those people, but it's just kinda there, um, as a, this feeling of community in the background." "Having a digital, uh, a platform on which to learn with other people, um, that may become my only community." "My official title is *associate director of community learning* […] the bulk of my role is in partnership building […] to use products as a community building tool."
Learning with the online tool	"I guess it kinda changed my identity as a learner in that I feel like a lot of, you know, a lot of learning that I do is kind of passive." "This definitely felt like an opportunity to be a very active and intentional learner." "I feel like, you know, a lot of the productiveness of a *havruta* discussion as people kind of, arguing and disagreeing and trying to come to some truth from that process." "It was new to experience it in a meaningful way. Like I said, I felt I was learning in a way I had never learned before." "Overall, it was a, it was a good experience […] and it opened up new learning opportunities and a new connection."
A shared purpose of Jewish learning	"It definitely reinforced that, like, Jewish learning is a value of mine." "For me it's also been connection with interesting other Jewish people." "The joy of learning with another human being […] it's not just any human being. It's someone who is Jewish who has background enough- even if they don't identify as religious- background enough in Judaism." "There also is just a kind of nice feeling that there's thousands of other Jews, they're doing this." "[Jewish learning is the] content, context. Lots of different things. Purpose, um, basis. We're using the text, the Torah and then the Midrash […] to understand today and apply it. You can challenge what you can do if you see something that's wrong […] and you can also do it from a totally secular basis, just looking at it historically though, you don't have to be a religious person."

Table 1. Project Zug as an online community of practice.

Conclusion

Based on this data analysis, I present how Project Zug supports a growing community of practice for Jewish learning. The

learners describe a strong sense of being a member of a community of learners as they also emphasize the importance of Jewish learning. These adult learners actively create connections between the online learning content and their own life experiences, thus making it relevant. As lifelong learners, they also participate and explore their Jewish identity while collaborating with others through discussions of Jewish texts. Creating a community of practice through this informal online learning platform, the participants seek new ways of making meaning, as they value the importance of Jewish learning, making it a shared purpose as a community. With further data collection and analysis, I hope to be able to create a theoretical scheme of a Jewish online learning community. The implications of my research on Jewish studies and educational technologies will provide a deeper understanding of Jewish education in the 21st century, focusing on the formation of a community of practice through the digital collaborative interpretation of Jewish sacred texts.

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