A Digital Library of Jewish Texts as a Knowledge-Building Community: The Case of *Sefaria*
(Short Paper)

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Abstract

Sefaria is an online library of Jewish texts in Hebrew and English. As an open-source library, *Sefaria* offers users a variety of tools to read and engage with texts such as creating source sheets, learning groups, and participating in translations. The goal of this research is to understand how the case of *Sefaria* as a digital library of Jewish texts can be viewed as a knowledge-building community. According to the knowledge-building community framework, knowledge is created in collaboration rather than discovered as learners share ideas, multiple perspectives, and synthesize solutions. Interpretation and collaboration are essential elements in Jewish education as they are the foundations on which the Jewish canonical texts were written. I analyze data from four semi-structured interviews with Jewish educators who also identify as adult lifelong learners. Findings show that *Sefaria* supports collaborative online learning and creates a knowledge-building community through the interpretive possibilities for shared meaning-making. Also, teachers as learners become members of a larger community, while reading source sheets written by others and creating their own while making connections between texts. Learning is thus self-directed, informal, and engages learners of all ages in consuming and producing knowledge.

Keywords: Digital library, Knowledge-building community, Jewish education, Collaboration.

Knowledge-Building Communities

Knowledge building refers to a collective work that produces artifacts such as theories, ideas, and models. According to this view, knowledge is something that is created collaboratively rather than something that exists and needs to be discovered (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2014). When working collaboratively, knowledge-creating communities share ideas, include multiple perspectives, experiment, develop different expertise, work through discussion and argumentation, self-reflect in a variety of ways, and synthesize ideas and solutions (Bielaczyc & Collins, 2005). Therefore, knowledge creation is a social process where social interaction provides opportunities to connect and create new ideas between people rather than within individual minds. In this paper, I argue that online spaces can also be a place to produce collaborative knowledge-building and knowledge-creation.

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. "Jews ask questions about these texts [Tanakh, midrashic collections, Mishnah and Talmud, and their commentaries]. They pursue their meanings, often celebrating the questions more than the answers, and the process of inquiry more than the product" (Levisohn, 2013, p. 13). Today, the tradition of interpretation and creation of 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.

As learners become members of this learning community, they also practice their digital media skills and "digital literacies," in the form of writing, reading, and using language for consuming and producing meaning. 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). Thus, participating in collaborative interpretations creates a new artifact that includes knowledge distributed across both learners, the tools they use such as computers, and the online space in which they interact and communicate.

Case Study: Sefaria

Sefaria is a digital library that includes Jewish texts and their translations in Hebrew and English. This free open-source library invites learners and teachers to engage with the texts. The users are welcome to read the texts as well as to contribute to the library. One way to do so is by creating source sheets where they can mix and match sources from the library, add their own commentary or texts from outside sources, images, or videos, and share the sheet privately or publicly. Once published on *Sefaria*, there is a search option by topic, keywords, views, or date of creation. *Sefaria*'s vision includes four main issues this website wishes to address:

1. Access to texts.
2. Infrastructure: "All of our code is released under an open-source license […]".
3. Education: "Sefaria is not merely an archive for preserving Jewish texts […] designed to make Sefaria into a better learning and teaching tool […]".
4. Conversation: "Sefaria is making it easier than ever to explore the conversations of the past, while also creating a space for ancient conversations to continue in new ways […]" (https://www.sefaria.org/about).

In this paper, I argue that all these four goals support the creation and growth of a knowledge-building community of Jewish texts.

Methods

Data Collection

Data collection involved four semi-structured interviews with participants via the video chat program *Zoom*. The goal of the interviews was to gain insights from the participants about their teaching and learning experiences using *Sefaria*. Some of the interview questions focused on personal background in Jewish education, online learning, and experience with *Sefaria*.

I recruited the participants through a *Facebook* group for Jewish educators indicating that I was looking for individuals who use *Sefaria* to teach and study Jewish texts. The participants included in this study are two women and two men between the ages of 30-60. They are all Jewish educators who come from different religious denominations (three conservative Jews and one orthodox Jew). They also identify as lifelong adult learners interested in learning Jewish text through digital platforms such as *Sefaria*.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I began open coding, seeking themes related to the participants' learning experiences such as collaboration, interpretation, and digital learning. I also used other literature as well as in vivo coding, in which codes refer to phrasing from terms used by the participants themselves. Through this thematic analysis, I unearthed the main categories of *Sefaria* as a digital knowledge-building community (Table 1). These themes are based on the literature of knowledge-building communities (Cacciamani et al., 2018; Paavola et al., 2004; Peters & Slotta, 2010) as well as additional codes I found during the first-cycle data analysis.

Findings

This study shows that Jewish educators use *Sefaria* for their teaching and learning, as they consume and produce knowledge by using the digital tools *Sefaria* offers, such as source sheets. Part of this process includes reading and engaging with Jewish texts as well as making meaning of them. Therefore, during the interpretation of Jewish texts, learners interact with different tools such as other texts or other people for knowledge production. This process supports the growth of a knowledge-building community of Jewish texts using *Sefaria* as a digital platform.

Table 1.   *Sefaria* as an online knowledge-building community

Analytic Theme	Description	Examples
Explore	Raising a question, hypothesis, or idea.	"So typically, when I turn to *Sefaria* as a learner myself, I have a perek and pasuk that I'm looking at […], I have an idea, […] find some Jewish source, not technology-based, and then go to *Sefaria* and find […] how it spreads out from there."
Provide information	Sharing examples from personal experience or authoritative sources.	"When I make source sheets, I try to tag them so that they're more findable for people who might benefit from them."
Community-owned knowledge base	Producing and developing conceptual artifacts.	"I'm actually working on one [source sheet] right now. Primarily borrowing some other people's source sheets to make my own."

Sefaria's four goals (access, infrastructure, education, and conversation) support the online knowledge-building community as seen in Table 1. It enables access to a large database of Jewish texts, making it available for educators and/or learners to use and collaborate with others. One of the participants said that "Jewish text study has traditionally been done in collaboration […]. So, any aspect of *Sefaria* that allows people to comment on each other's source sheets or study texts together would make it Jewish […] besides just the content." Therefore, the case of *Sefaria* as a digital library of Jewish texts is also a tool that supports a long tradition of collaboration and interpretation of Jewish texts.

Conclusion

Sefaria is a digital Jewish library that can reinvent a long history of commentaries and books written about Jewish sacred texts as an accessible digital collection. Enabling learners to create connections across texts, *Sefaria* strengthens this ancient practice of Jewish textual dialog and textual interpretations. Aligned with KBC principles, *Sefaria* as a case study holds the potential to discuss how to use this tool as a KBC. *Sefaria* is used to consume and produce knowledge keeping these ancient texts "living" and supporting a knowledge-building community of Jewish texts in the 21st century.

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