Knowledge Building and Jewish Education: Forging an Interdisciplinary Perspective (Poster)

Etan Cohen
University of Haifa
etancohen@gmail.com

Dani Ben-Zvi
University of Haifa
dbenzvi@univ.haifa.ac.il

Yotam Hod
University of Haifa
yotamhod24@gmail.com

Abstract

Although distinct fields of inquiry, the learning sciences and Jewish education share some central themes. We believe that the conceptual framework underlying the Knowledge Building Community (KBC) model holds promise for achieving some of the aims of Jewish education that are grounded in a socio-constructionist perspective of Judaism. Therefore, we are working on a design experiment that would introduce a localized version of the KBC model to a secular school in Israel.

The past decades have witnessed rapid distribution of powerful information technologies, as well as the establishment of the learning sciences as an independent field. Today, learning scientists are faced with the challenge of tapping into the vast potential these technologies hold, with the aim of enhancing learning across a range of social settings (Sawyer, 2014). The Knowledge Building Community (KBC) model demonstrates how carefully designed web-based tools such as the Knowledge Forum can harness the power of social media technologies to scaffold collaborative learning, in an environment that is grounded in contemporary learning theories (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2014). Learning sciences research has also enriched the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that educators and researchers rely on to advance their understanding of cognition, learning, and identity (e.g. Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Sfard, 1998; Gee, 2001).

In Jewish education, scholars tend to focus on the content necessary to raise committed, knowledgeable, and active members of the Jewish community (e.g., Fox, Scheffler, & Marom, 2003). Underlying this focus is an essentialist view of Judaism as an independent set of ideas, beliefs, or norms (Sagi, 2006). Hence, the perceived role of Jewish education is to initiate youngsters through the transfer or guided discovery of a core set of ideas (Dewey, 2004). But theorists such as Gadamer (2004) and Anderson (2006) challenge this notion of Judaism, by emphasizing the role of social constructionism in forging collective identity (Hacking, 1999). In broad terms, these thinkers argue that the past and collective identity do not simply exist "out there", but they are constantly reimagined from a contemporary perspective; in other words, they are a product of distributed cognition and collaborative learning. Adopting this terminology to talk about Judaism could have a profound impact on how we teach and learn it (Bekerman, 2001). We argue that the epistemic shift proposed by Bereiter and Scardamalia (2003), from "belief mode" to "design mode", along with other attributes of the KBC model, could contribute to our understanding of Jewish education. Therefore, the crux of our study is an attempt to design a technology-enhanced Jewish learning environment according to the principles underlying the KBC model. We intend to adapt the KBC model to a secular Jewish studies class in a technology-rich high school, and conduct mixed-method design based research (Cobb, Confrey, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003). Our aim is to measure

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learning outcomes, as well as to advance our understanding of Jewish learning.

Keywords: Knowledge building community, Jewish education, social constructionism.

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