Synchronous or Asynchronous?

Selecting the Best Online Learning Options for Your Students

■ by **Aryeh Eisenberg**

Online learning options are divided by one main criterion: time. Is the offering ready made, accessible at all times, or is it live with real people teaching? This article maps this territory and explains the differences in cost and benefits.

Online learning options have become a standard part of the academic programs of many Jewish day schools. For a variety of reasons including cost savings, staffing, and technology integration, schools have been relying more and more on online class resources. As with traditional educational options, it is important to understand the different types of online educational programs that are available. Different options can cater to the needs of different students. It is important that educational providers know the options available and how to select the best program for your students.

When online learning first became available, websites such as Khan Academy were viewed as the industry standard. It is a simple enough premise. Students just need to go online, search for the subject they want to learn and watch the videos. While the videos themselves may be fairly dry and even boring, there is little doubt that the content being delivered is of the highest quality. Sounds easy enough, but the question is, does this type of approach actually meet the needs of the majority of our students?

In many cases, schools that start with this simplistic approach end up seeking a replacement. While online educational options do enable schools to offer more options, the needs of the students still must be acknowledged and met. For the "average" student, watching non-interactive videos and answering questions does not really fill the educational need. Luckily, the number of online learning options and the types of available online classes have both increased in recent years, giving schools and students several options.

When choosing an online learning program, schools must first decide whether to use a synchronous or asynchronous learning platform. Asynchronous options are self-paced and prerecorded lessons which students can access online and proceed through the provided materials at their own pace. Several companies currently provide asynchronous learning options, including Khan Academy as well as Pearson, K12 and IXL. The benefits to asynchronous platforms include low costs and the ability to start and stop at any time. The available course lists are also vast, meaning that in most cases schools can find an online option, even for a specialty subject. In addition, most of the asynchronous options allow a school's teachers and administration to view the progress and marks of enrolled students at any time.

However, there are two main problems with asynchronous offerings. First, this type of program works well with the motivated students but has not proven as successful with the less motivated students. Second, these programs are not at all personalized. If a student needs additional help in a specific area, there is no one to provide the needed assistance.

Some schools have experienced a lot of success with asynchronous programs such as K12. Lauren Ariev Gelman is the director of the Pre-Collegiate Learning Center in East Brunswick, New Jersey. The high school uses a variety of blended learning techniques to teach the students, and uses online courses as a central part of the in-school instruction. For Gelman, asynchronous courses have often been a perfect fit in the blended learning environment. "Students can work at their own pace to complete the assigned work. Our teachers are here to answer questions and to give additional instruction. So while the support system may not always be part of the course, we provide any help requested by the students. In addition, most of the asynchronous course options are very reasonably priced, which makes adding new courses and continuing existing courses easy."

The Ben Gamla Charter School in Plantation, Florida, uses online courses provided by the State of Florida's Virtual School. According to Ben Gamla's principal, Rabbi Chaim Albert, the list of available courses is vast. "Students can take just about anything they need online. If we do not offer a specific course in-house, there is almost sure to be an online option through the Florida Virtual School platform." In order to track students and to provide aca-

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demic support, the school has supervising teachers who are available to students during office hours, study halls and by email.

Despite its flexibility and affordability, asynchronous learning has not been the answer for all schools. Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School in Baltimore, a pre-K to 12 community Jewish day school, was one of the first Jewish day schools in the US to integrate technology into the learning environments. Online courses and technology integration are quite common at Beth Tfiloh. While the school offers a wide range of traditional courses, the ability to use online class options as a supplemental tool enables the school to provide each student or groups of students with the specific educational programs they need.

According to Zipora Schorr, Beth Tfiloh's director of education, Beth Tfiloh has used several different online course platforms in both the middle school and high school. While asynchronous options were certainly easy to arrange and implement, the school has had more success in the past few years with synchronous online courses. "The live courses do a much better job of blending with the traditional learning environment. Students are already used to working with a teacher and they know what to expect. Knowing that the student's learning styles and needs are being addressed makes us much more comfortable with online courses."

NFTY's EIE program brings US public school students to study in Israel for a semester of high school. While the students are in Israel, they must continue their current courses assigned by the schools back home. After comparing asynchronous platforms with synchronous solutions, the school realized that the live class structure works better overall. Rabbi Baruch Kraus, the principal of NFTY's EIE program, agrees. "With live classes, we know that the students are being mentored and are being tracked. If there is a problem with a student, we know that we will be informed, just like with a regular class."

So while asynchronous courses can be a perfect fit for certain students, many students still need the traditional student-teacher interaction. As discussed, asynchronous courses are essentially take-em-or-leave-em; the product will likely be high quality and professionally produced, but it will not be tailored to your school's needs and vision and certainly not differentiated to your students' learning styles. Synchronous programs generally are much more nimble in their ability to tailor their product to specific schools and students, because they provide a live online teaching experience.

While students are not in the same physical location as the teacher, the online sessions work very much like traditional classroom-based classes. In most cases, students participate in their synchronous online classes during the regular school day. When their classmates may be in a regular classroom, students assigned to an online class go to the school's computer lab or another similar location. Students log in and work live with the same teacher throughout the course. The online teacher teaches an interactive class which includes participation as well as traditional class elements such as homework, projects, quizzes and tests.

There are several advantages to synchronous online classes. Because the sessions are live, students actually become active participants, rather than passive learners. Most online teachers require regular participation as a main part of the class grade. Many of the providers offer personalized classes, meaning that the classes are designed to meet the needs of the specific students enrolled in the course. The school ordering the online class becomes a part of the educational process rather than just an observer. Many schools have found more success with synchronous classes because of the personal nature of the courses. Even the less motivated students are able to succeed as they are encouraged and monitored every step of the way.

My organization, Bonim B'Yachad, ran a pilot program this past academic year with The Binah School, a new Jewish day school for girls in Sharon, Massachusetts. The school uses online and blended learning solutions as an integral part of its academic program. The school took its Hebrew language classes and decided to shift the entire program to synchronous online learning. Rina Hoffman, the school's director, explained, "Hebrew language was a subject that needed a different approach. The students up to that point really did not enjoy learning Hebrew and therefore did not put forth the needed investment into their Hebrew studies. The thought was that by introducing students to a new way of learning Hebrew, we could bring back the excitement and passion for the language that was missing before." We collaborated to create a personalized program that met both the skill levels and the interests of the students. The program was highly successful and will be expanding for the coming school year.

So what are the down sides to synchronous online classes? For one, the price is often higher than for the asynchronous model. For example, K12 charges between $400 and $500 for a typical yearlong online course, which is roughly the monthly cost for synchronous courses. Second, asynchronous courses really are self-contained, meaning that whether there is one student or twenty students enrolled in a given course, the school has little to no responsibilities. While the school has the option of staying invested in a course's progress, this is not mandatory.

Currently, there are a number of companies in the US that provide synchronous services to Jewish day schools, including Bonim B'Yachad, JETS and Tomorrow's Genius. These companies offer different types of personalized learning programs. Another option is the VHS Collaborative, which, while not specifically for Jewish schools, has several Jewish day school members. VHS offers live courses for students from schools all over North America; participating schools have no input in scheduling, and with so many students there is often little to no personalization or individual attention. Several colleges and universities also provide online courses that can be made available to high school students (www.onlinecourses.com), depending on the state and school district.

With so many options and so many different variables, how can each school choose the online course option that works best? Well, there is no easy answer, but each administrator knows his or her students strengths and weaknesses. At the end of the day, the goal is to give students the tools needed for academic success. Some students can handle asynchronous options and have the motivation to make sure that the work is submitted. Other students need more personal involvement, making synchronous learning a better fit. If there is a need for Judaic studies or Ivrit-based online learning, the options are a bit more limited as platforms such as K12 do not offer these subjects.

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Reshet Teva Gets Off the Ground

Calling all environmental educators! You are invited to join RAVSAK's Reshet Teva, a network designed to offer guidance, inspiration and shared learning for educators working in this field. If your school has a garden or is thinking of starting one, whether you have a window box, an herb garden or a ten-acre farm, if you have a recycling program or composting, teach about making challah or healthy eating, carbon footprints, hunger issues or LEED design—Reshet Teva is a place for you to talk to peers, share and collaborate on curriculum, gain knowledge from experts, hear of funding opportunities, and more.

Reshet Teva launched following this summer's Nevatim conference, co-sponsored by RAVSAK, at the Pearlstone Center outside Baltimore. Participants enjoyed three days in beautiful surroundings, with the farm on one side and woods on the other. The conference was designed to serve beginners as well as experienced garden educators. Some schools had established programs, while others sought basic information on soil and seedbeds. Some sessions catered to each group separately, while others provided inspiration no matter the school's level.

Participants not only acquired useful information and expert curricular lessons; they also got to experience the learning firsthand. They took part in a scavenger hunt, connecting Jewish texts with aspects of the farm; planted aleph-bet boxes, with seeds that will grow into the shape of Hebrew letters; harvested wheat, threshed and winnowed it, then ground it into flour, while learning of the 11 melachot, tasks, that the Talmud derives from making bread; practiced hitbodedut, a spiritual practice pioneered by Rebbe Nachman, among many other activities. They visited the Irvine Nature Center to get ideas for designing outdoor recreation spaces beyond the garden/farm.

A highlight of the conference was a session entitled "From Farm to Table." Participants picked their own food and prepared it themselves, using their own recipes; some made delicious salads and roasted vegetables while others learned the basics of cheese-making. After two and a half hours of hard work, how delicious this banquet tasted—beteyavon!

Sign up for Reshet Teva today! Contact Elliott Rabin at erabin@ravsak.org. ■

Flipping In-Service Professional Development

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activities is shared with the teachers, who are allowed to control the flip.

When teachers share control of the extent and repetition of their use of activities we design, we also acknowledge their individuality as learners and empower them on their journey toward independence from the outset.

In short, providing learners with the means to repeat the lessons at their own convenience, need and pace empowers each person to learn the material *al pi darko*, in his or her own way. ■

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A few things to keep in mind when choosing a partner company:

Get references. Any reputable online learning company should be able to provide more than 1 or 2 other schools as references.

Pilot. If the company being considered is new, or if online learning is new for your school, then run a short-term program with a few students before making a long term commitment.

Vet. Make sure that the teachers working with your students meet your approval. There is nothing wrong with asking to interview an online teacher, as you would a regular staff member.

Supervise. Whether you are using synchronous or asynchronous online classes, stay involved as you would with a regular class. Pop in to sessions every so often and access the back ends so you can see how the students are performing. Do not wait until it is too late to fix a problem.

Explore. Maximize the usage of online learning. Online courses are a great way to expand your academic course offerings. If you are apprehensive about online learning, start with an elective course. Then, once you are more comfortable, you can introduce online core courses.

Online learning has enabled schools to create more educational possibilities and to engage the students in new ways. Some experts say that within the next ten years, a majority of school courses will be in an online format. According to a recent study commissioned by Pearson Learning, 6.7 million students are currently taking at least one online course. As educators, we must strive to find the tools that will help our students the best. Online learning is no longer the future of education—it has arrived. Take advantage of the numerous resources available to bring your school and students the most and best educational options possible. ■