

# JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

because educators think before they teach

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## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY LEARNING

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# It's All About Asking the Right Questions

## Gary Hartstein

*Gary Hartstein explores what technology can contribute to education by looking first at learning and educational needs.*

It's not often that something I hear in a presentation or panel discussion makes me want to stand on my chair applauding and shouting "Bravo!" It's just as infrequent when that speaker is echoing something I've heard myself screaming from every imaginable soapbox for at least the last 10 years. So it was all I could do to contain myself during the closing keynote at this year's iNACOL conference ([www.inacol.org/events/symposium/](http://www.inacol.org/events/symposium/)) when Rick Hess and Bror Saxberg talked about their book, *Breakthrough Leadership in a Digital Age*. When I heard one of the authors rhetorically ask why on earth anyone would spend money on technology without knowing how they planned to use it, I actually felt a surge of excitement well up within me; they were speaking my language. (*Education Week* did a nice job talking about the book in more detail at <http://tinyurl.com/q7ds5ve>.)

I believe there is one important takeaway to highlight, especially for those still questioning whether or not technology helps students learn. In and of itself, technology does not help student achievement one bit. That is to say, it doesn't help any more or any less than a white board, a book, a choral reading chart, a crayon, or a #2 pencil. Would anyone seriously ask, "Where is the research that white boards help student achievement?" So why do we want to bring technology resources into our classrooms? Why is having this access better than simply sticking with a great teacher and the face-to-face resources we've always used?

I've long maintained that well planned blended learning can help improve student outcomes – and it's not because the technology magically makes it happen. Like any great tool, technology resources in the hands of a skilled practitioner – in this case a good teacher – can bring about new learning opportunities by giving students access to content previously unavailable in a face-

to-face class. A great example of this is Rabbi Segal, a Gemara teacher at the Ida Crown Academy in Chicago. He realized that since his students had a variety of learning needs, the traditional lecture was only helping some students learn. It bothered him that many students were struggling to keep up and not getting the same learning opportunities as their classmates who happen to do well in lecture environments. So he decided to flip some of his content. He could have taken the easy way out and just recorded his lectures. But he went the extra mile and created video lessons that were more than a talking head on a screen. His videos highlight important elements of the text in new ways, engaging students who had felt left out before. More importantly, he gave students control over their own learning. As one student told me, "You can't rewind your teacher if you don't understand something."

Beyond more student control and developing independent learners, his videos and follow up activities also allow him to formatively assess work along the way. He then uses that data to drive one-on-one and small group sessions with students. He is not only getting to know his students better, but actually teaching all of them!

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A great teacher can use media to make history come alive. S/he can bring science experiments out of the lab and to students' desktops, even when there is no budget for lab equipment and science supplies. Students can use gaming environments to practically apply mathematical concepts to real-world situations. I've talked to teachers who have used virtual environments, such as Minecraft (<http://minecrafteu.com/page/>), to build replicas of the Temple. Rather than simply reading about it, students got to use the text as a resource to build a virtual version. Reading and discussing turned into a cross-curricular lesson that brought math and Judaic studies together for an intrinsically motivational learning opportunity.

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We can include many students with special needs into regular classes when we have the right tools to help differentiate instruction; blended learning can play a major part in facilitating this more inclusive learning environment. And data from online work can be easily generated for formative assessment to individualize instruction for all learners.

The real questions should be about whether or not good planning, teaching and learning are taking place. The answers will help us identify the solutions, *including* what technology or blended learning resources are called for. We *should* be asking questions such as:

- **How and how often are we assessing students?** Do we wait until the summative assessment at the end of a unit to find out if a student is falling behind? Or do we collect formative data along the way?
- **How do we use assessment outcomes and data to inform our instruction?** Do we adjust on the fly and practice agile teaching? Are we willing to scrap a lesson plan and change course on a moment's notice because the class simply isn't ready? Or do we just plod along regardless of how many students aren't "getting it?"
- **How are we making sure every student is learning at the appropriate level?** Do we differentiate instruction? Or do we just teach to the middle and hope for the best?
- **How do we make the best use of classroom time?** How much of classroom time is spent in full-frontal lecture? How much is spent working with individuals or small groups? Do we spend any class time practically applying important concepts from the learning? Or do we just want our students to memorize facts long enough to regurgitate them for the next test?
- **What does student workflow look like?** Do we have an easy way for students to collaborate, and maybe even share documents and other resources? Do we incorporate project based learning? Or are projects simply end-of-year culminating activities? Do we engage students in real world application of learning? Or do we just teach them concepts, rules and formulas? How much control *do* students have of their own learning?

This year DigitalJLearning Network (<http://digitaljlearning.org/>) schools went through a mini-planning process to articulate how the blended learning they are doing supports academic needs and goals. For many, it was a new way of thinking. But in going through the process and asking the right questions, schools that did it well noticed the benefits almost immediately. During a call with one of the schools, an administrator told me that while she was hesitant at first, the process helped to clarify what they were doing and why. It also gave them a foundation from which to build and a framework under which to access. In other words:

They weren't just doing blended learning because everyone says it's a great way to teach. They're using it because they've identified the right match for it and the desired outcomes they expect to see as a result.

The questions above, and others like them, are what should be driving the educational discussions. Using technology does not mean we have plug-and-play solutions that close learning gaps, improve student achievement and fix what's not working in education. Hardly! In that sense, mediated resources, computers, tablets and the like are no different than papers, pencils, books and other familiar learning tools.

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Even the most sophisticated learning and assessment software, with the best adaptive remediation capabilities, is only helpful when it's used properly. We don't just put students in front of computers and expect knowledge to beam through the screen into their brains, any more than we expect students to learn math from simply reading textbooks and working independently on the problems.

They know that well at Yeshivat He'Atid ([www.yeshivatheatid.org/](http://www.yeshivatheatid.org/)) in New Jersey. A PK-2 school (and growing), all of their classes are set up for rotational blended learning. Students work independently, collaboratively and in small groups with teachers – just like any elementary school doing it right. They also rotate through a computer center where they work with age-appropriate online resources that help students learn and provide data for the teachers. A small part of each student's day is spent online. The data produced from that short time is used, along with other methods of assessment, to make sure every student is learning at an appropriate level. In schools like Yeshivat He'Atid, they understand that to be effective, online resources need to fit with the other pieces of the puzzle that make up the learning process.

Blended learning can most definitely help improve student achievement, but not if the teacher doesn't understand how to blend the learning properly. Technology resources, including blended learning models, can help us access information and learning opportunities we may never have dreamed possible before. In order for them to be any help at all, they *must* be integrated by a talented educator who understands what drives their use, and knows how to use them meaningfully in support of learning. When blended learning is successful, it's not so because of the technology alone. It all boils down to thoughtful planning and good teaching, whichever tools you choose.