Design Thinking, Day Schools, and the d.school

By Shara Peters

Artificial intelligence. Self-driving cars. Industrialization's carbon footprint. Treatment-resistant diseases. There are so many game-changers headed our way (or already here), and schools need to prepare graduates who are ready to tackle these curveballs. And to do so ethically.

We educators have often heard that we have to prepare students for a world that we cannot yet imagine, and for jobs that do not yet exist. It's become pithy – because it is such a real concern. Because of technology's lightning-pace development, we truly do not know what knowledge will prepare our students for this future.

For the most part, Jewish day schools have acknowledged this crisis. Many look to technology, ensuring that they provide extracurricular options like robotics and coding. That's a start… but not nearly enough. There are a lot of education buzzwords that you will hear, like critical

thinking, grit or resilience, blended learning, and the general label of "21st century skills." The benefit is that these skills are enduring, and will last beyond the technological advances of the day. The drawback in their use is that they tend to be vaguely defined, and are rarely assessed in their own right. Their importance is belied by calling them "soft skills." Students are still largely assessed on content mastery.

Instead of adjusting aspects of programming and curriculum to check the boxes next to education buzzwords, Jewish day schools need to embrace how fast the world is changing and be open to deep, meaningful change themselves.

What has always drawn me to day school education is the opportunity to teach through a strong lens of ethics, and to be able to integrate general studies content with Judaism so that students do not grow up with a bifurcated identity. *But that isn't enough anymore*. We need students who, as adults, will think with empathy about the people affected by societal change.

Design thinking, or human-centered design, sits at the intersection of skills and ethics that will truly prepare students to be the answer that the future needs: innovation, collaboration, communication, research, resilience, and creativity, all through the lens of empathy. In Jewish day schools, we have the opportunity to expand "empathy" by looking to our tradition and *middot* (values), and to help students truly understand how to repair the world by doing.

It is natural for design thinking and Jewish tradition go hand in hand. Tom Kelly, partner at renowned design and innovation consultancy IDEO, defines the empathic beginning to the design thinking process as "…challenging your preconceived ideas and setting aside your sense of what you think is true in order to learn what actually is true." Striking the same chord, Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most prolific Jewish thinkers of all time, charges that "the principle to be kept in mind is to know what we see rather than to see what we know." We have the unlimited capacity for innovation once we open our hearts and minds to the world. Our tradition can guide us, help us to care about what we see, and design thinking can help us to change it for the good.

At Adat Ari El Day School, our vision is to turn these philosophical ideals into actionable steps and problem-based learning for students. And through grappling with these real issues, students learn math, social studies, literary, Judaic, and Hebrew skills in authentic, applied context. Through design thinking, students apply their learning and make it visible in their world.

To give an example: every year, our first graders learn about ecology. This particular group of 6 and 7-year-olds were passionate about polar bears. When they learned that the polar bears faced a real threat to their environment, they began to apply design thinking principles. What might it feel like to have your home start to shrink around you? Why is it happening in the first place? What can we do to help? Is there a new way of thinking that can change things? How can Jewish tradition help inform our actions?

After consulting with an environmentalist, and learning in Judaic studies that our tradition charges us with stewardship of the environment, these students decided to address the impact of fossil fuels. They made canvas reusable shopping bags, sold them to our community, and

donated the proceeds to the Polar Bear Foundation. They also created a public service announcement to make sure that they were educating their customers, not just selling them bags. All of these solutions were 1st-grader-generated.

The mission of our school is to, through Jewish vision and values, raise up students who know themselves, serve others, and act to improve the world. Design thinking is the road that can take our students to that destination.

Abiding by the tenets of Project Based Learning, we strive to connect our students with experts in the field. In the 2017-2018 school year, we will be walking the talk for our faculty; we are entering into a collaboration with the K12 Lab Network from Stanford University's d.school. A focus of our work will explore the intersection of innovation with *Tikkun Olam* in order to foster a culture at our school that aligns with our values.

The K12 team and our faculty will be regularly blogging about how the collaboration unfolds, and I invite you to join our conversation here! I encourage you to try design thinking at your institution, and to post about how it's going. Let's work together so that this collaboration becomes the beginning of a conversation, one from which our greater Jewish educational community can benefit.

Preparing students for the unknown challenges of the future may seem like an insurmountable task, but with our deeply rooted Jewish tradition and values and the tools provided by our collaboration with the K12 Lab Network at Stanford, we are working to prepare our students to be ethical change makers for the future and for right now.

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