

Educating by Understanding Our Learners

By Stacie Cherner and Yonah Schiller, November 27, 2024

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What can social science and education research help us understand about how people learn?

We are asking first-principle questions about the nature of Jewish education and, even more fundamentally, how do we learn anything? The science of learning is a rich and established field of academic study that has a lot to teach us when we think about our vision for Jewish learning. Yet, for all of its rich resources, Jewish education has no theory of learning.

As part of our [Emergent Strategy](#) at the Jim Joseph Foundation, we have a desire to explore new and more effective pathways in understanding and practicing Jewish education. To this end, we looked to familiarize ourselves with landmark research and learning theory. We turned to Ari Y. Kelman, the Jim Joseph Professor of Education and Jewish Studies at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education. Kelman [shares a model](#) for how people learn that we think is foundational for understanding more about how people learn to *be* Jewish.

As opposed to starting with specific pieces of “content” or knowledge that people need to acquire to learn to be Jewish, Kelman illuminates, more fundamentally and impactfully, *how* people learn. By understanding the obvious and less obvious ways in which people learn, we begin to better understand effective approaches, interventions and modalities needed to achieve educational impact and desired outcomes.

The model posits that learning how to do or be Jewish is not actually uniquely or exceptionally Jewish; 80% of the ways that people learn to be Jewish can be explained by understanding how all humans learn anything. Often educational approaches are dwarfed by and blinded to this much larger learning context. Failing to acknowledge, examine or understand the relationship between learning in general and learning to be Jewish will curtail the effectiveness of Jewish education.

The model, described in part below, is an important shift to centering learners before programs.

How people learn: Schema is king

A schema is generally defined in psychology as a mental construct that helps individuals organize and process information about the world around them. These mental frameworks are important for understanding the complexities of their environment, as they allow a person to make sense of new experiences through the lens of preexisting schemas.

In Kelman's model, schema is defined as a relatively stable, mainly internal and personal composition of largely informal and shared cultural norms accumulated over the course of a person's life. Everyone carries with them their own schemas through which they process and make sense of the world and themselves. Educators are in the business of influencing learners' schemas. Doing so is delicate business, as educators undoubtedly confront and interact directly with their learners' various schemas. Kelman's model makes the case that accounting for the

diversity of our learners' schemas might be one of the most challenging and critical aspects of achieving an effective educational experience.

Learning is updating our schemas

The work and theories of Jean Piaget, a giant in the field of learning science, helps us understand more specifically how education relies on two important processes: How we integrate new information, experiences and interactions into our current existing schemas; and how we change our schemas to adapt to new information, experiences and interactions. Humans are in a constant state of evolution and learning, always assimilating information and experiences to fit our existing schemas of how the world works and accommodating our schemas to fit with new information or experiences.

To foster healthy educational experiences, educators have to understand this dynamic. Sometimes we need to account for and work with the existing schema to carefully and sensitively introduce new information in a way that the learner can grapple with and integrate. Other times, we might present information that might directly confront or contradict an existing schema. This is tricky territory, but the risk is much greater when we don't acknowledge that our learners enter the educational experience with strong, specific and well-developed worldviews and perspectives.

As a team, we've spent time reflecting on this model and how it might impact Jewish education, educators and Jewish learners. The past 20 years of research and learning at the Jim Joseph Foundation have made it clear that the U.S. Jewish population has a lot in common, yet our individual schemas are increasingly diverse, often divergent and far from monolithic. The wonderful and inspiring diversity of our peoplehood is certainly mirrored in the full spectrum of identities that we hold as a people.

This model has prompted us to explore and ask questions such as: What is the full range of our schemas? How have dominant schemas changed over time? What are the dominant schemas today of U.S. Jews? Is there one schema that defines Jewish life, or are there many? What schemas are we unable to see in our work with young people? What are the educational design implications in recognizing and honoring the full range of our schemas? Do some of us in the educational and institutional landscape, consciously or unconsciously, avoid some schemas? What are our own often unrecognized schemas that shape how we approach staffing and designing Jewish education?

We look forward to continuing to share our questions and learnings as we delve deeper into this line of inquiry. Additionally, we will share some of the many inputs mentioned above that play an outsized role in the development of individuals' schemas and add to our understanding of the mechanics of education and the process of learning.

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