

Studying Curriculum Materials: A Strategy For Improving Teaching*

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Curriculum materials are used by teachers on a daily basis; they are the ‘stuff’ of lessons and units, activities and worksheets. This paper will suggest ways of helping teachers investigate curriculum materials as a vehicle for increasing their subject matter knowledge and improving the quality of teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Lee Shulman has explained curricular knowledge in the following ways: “The curriculum and its associated materials are the *materia medica* of pedagogy, the pharmacopeia from which the teacher draws those tools of teaching that present or exemplify particular content and remediate or evaluate the adequacy of student accomplishments.”¹ Curricular knowledge defined in this way is analogous to a kind of knowledge that doctors have. For example, given a patient’s profile and history, doctors are aware of the pluses and minuses of various medications. They have strategies for trying out medications and combinations of medications, taking in knowledge from the patients’ subjective reports as well as from objective tests to measure the effectiveness of the treatment plan. This kind of knowledge has several components:

- a familiarity with the range of available instruments;
- analytic tools used to decide among alternatives based on a range of considerations, including context; and
- strategies for monitoring and assessing effects so that modifications can be made.

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¹ Lee Shulman (1986). “Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching.” *Educational Researcher* 15 (32), 10.

In order to drive home the importance of this kind of knowledge, Shulman asks: “Would we trust a physician who did not really understand the alternative ways of dealing with categories of infectious disease, but who knew only one way?”²

Extending the metaphor from medicine to education suggests that in order to use materials well, teachers (as well as principals and other educators) need to know at least the following:

- There are alternatives; that is, there are curricular choices to be made among various materials designed to teach the same subject matter to students of the same age, learning in similar settings.
- They need analytic tools to help them study these materials in principled ways, thinking about which materials can be best used for what purposes.
- They need strategies to help them learn how to monitor and assess the ways in which teaching and learning are proceeding as they use the materials.

The medical model does not go far enough however. While it is true that educators need diagnostic and evaluative strategies, they also need to think pedagogically about ideas and materials to be able to choose and design paths for students to explore and learn those ideas and materials. Close study of curriculum materials can lead to more profound understanding of the subject matter, as well as to an understanding of ideas which enable teachers to use, revise, and tailor the materials to their own students. Although learning to study curricular materials does not sound complicated, stories that teachers and principals tell about how they use them suggest that structural and

² Shulman, Ibid.

conceptual work needs to be done to move us from where we are now to where we ought to be.

I would like to share three stories which describe two different challenges we need to address in order to change the ways in which teachers and principals think about using curriculum materials. Each story is based on a true conversation or experience in which I was involved.

STORY 1: CURRICULUM MATERIALS ARE NOT RECIPES

I observed a class in which a teacher was using new materials designed to help teachers and students become “close readers” of Torah. The materials included questions, urging teachers to ask questions in order to help children learn to read a Biblical text and make sense of its meaning. The teacher used the questions suggested in the materials. When children did not respond with answers that were “the same” as those provided in the sample lessons as possible answers, the teacher supplied the suggested answer as the “correct” answer.

On that day, the teacher was asking students to compare the place of man at the end of Chapter 1 of Genesis versus the place of man at the end of Chapter 3 of Genesis. Her questions included:

When does man appear in the Creation narrative?

What is his place in the story?

When does he appear in the Eden story?

Do you think that there is any difference in the place of man in each story?³

³ Leonard Gardner 1996). *Genesis: The Teacher's Guide, Experimental Edition*. New York: Melton Research Center, p. 117..

When students did not understand the line of questioning, rather than asking them to go back to the text and read the verses from chapter one and then the verses from chapter two and three, she supplied answers which she found in the materials.

In the Creation story, man appears almost at the end of the story.

He is the last creature to be created, he is the ruler of the earth, with him the creation is completed.

In the Eden story, man appears at the beginning of the story.

In the first chapter, man is treated as a part of the whole creation. In the second-third chapters, man is the center, he is the important subject of the story.⁴

By using these materials in this way, the teacher actually subverted the goals of the materials. Instead of helping her students learn to read carefully and use investigative strategies for making meaning, she actually taught them a set of facts (i.e., “correct” answers) using the questions provided in the curriculum materials as a vehicle.

This story points to one particular understanding or misunderstanding of curriculum materials: they are designed to be used as recipe books. They provide technical instructions written by experts, designed to be followed more or less exactly as written in order to be “fail-safe.” In this case, by providing answers to each question as a guideline, the curriculum developers encouraged this misunderstanding by presenting the materials in “recipe” fashion.

While it is true that curriculum documents are written to be used, they are not meant to be recipes. Recipes assume that if the same ingredients are used in the same measure, and cooked or baked for the same amount of time, the results will be predictable. We know that although you may be teaching the same subject to the same

⁴ Ibid.

age children in the same setting and even have the same goals, each instance of teaching is actually different. The students are different, the community is different, the teacher is different, and interactions between students-and-students, as well as between teacher-and among students, are different. Materials must be adapted for each new set of conditions. Few teachers or principals act on that challenge sufficiently.

STORY 2, VERSION1: CURRICULUM MATERIALS ARE NOT THE SUBJECT MATTER

In interviews that I conducted with novice teachers, I asked a young Hebrew School teacher: “How do you prepare to teach?” “What do you mean, she asked?” I reframed my question, “How are you going to get ready to teach this afternoon?” She answered, “I’m going to read the textbook and when I get class to I’m going to have a discussion with the kids about what it says.”

This story highlights a significant problem: confusing the curriculum materials or textbook with the subject areas they are designed to teach. In this particular case, this novice teacher was *teaching* the textbook, not Torah or Jewish Values or Holidays. Because she was such a novice, her case represents an extreme version of this problem. Lacking even the simplest form of pedagogical thinking, she had no idea that she needed to create a lesson plan. She was not certain if the textbook she was using came with a teacher’s guide. It had never occurred to her to ask. Nor had she ever asked herself: what do I want children to learn from what we will do together this afternoon? And what is my role in making that happen?

STORY 2, VERSION 2: CURRICULUM MATERIALS ARE NOT THE SUBJECT MATTER

I was talking with a school principal about the ways in which teachers in her school were using curriculum materials to teach Torah. She talked glowingly of reinforcement exercises that teachers had created to make the materials come alive. I asked: “What role does reading the text of Torah play in teachers’ preparation?” She replied, “I don’t think they ever read the Torah itself.” I asked, “Have you suggested that to them?” “Not really, she replied.” “Why?” In exasperation, she said, “Gail, I’m surprised that you are asking this question. No parent has ever called to say, ‘why did the teacher not prepare by at least reading the original text,’ but they often call to say, ‘why is class so boring?’ These teachers are focusing on making class interesting!”

While this approach represents a more appropriate and sophisticated stance than that of treating materials as recipes, and while it represents a deeper understanding of the role of the teacher, it is another version of mistaking the materials for the subject matter. The starting point of this teacher’s pedagogic work was to embellish the materials in order to make them appropriate and interesting for her class. She did no work on thinking about the text itself or about the appropriateness of these materials for her school or her class.

A Torah story summarized, retold or edited by a curriculum developer is not the same as the account of the narrative found in the Torah. The curriculum developer’s story represents choices that the curriculum developer and/or publisher have made about what they want children to learn. Consequently, it is often choices made by curriculum developers, not teachers or the principal which shape the opportunities learners have for

understanding not only the “basic facts” of a subject, but in a larger sense, what it means “to know” a subject.

The Problem

. These three stories suggest that many teachers have only a minimal understanding of what they are supposed to do with the curriculum documents they have. The teachers described in the stories above did not understand that they needed to study, understand and evaluate the materials in their hands in order to use them in the service of teaching. No matter how materials are presented, no matter how good they are, they require teacher work to transform them from words and suggestions on a page into learning opportunities for children in their classrooms.

Thinking about the work that curriculum transformation entails on the part of teachers will require a change in stance toward curriculum materials. Teachers must learn to see “curriculum” neither as a given nor as an ideal, but as a *possibility* that needs their active review and reshaping. Teachers will need to understand that curriculum materials are not neutral tools. They embody various assumptions both about what is worthwhile learning and how learning ought to take place. Teachers must learn to analyze materials in order to understand the assumptions upon which they are based and then actively work with and on the materials in order to transform them in the service of teaching a given group of students.

We can improve the quality of teaching and learning in our schools by creating opportunities for teachers to come together regularly to study and analyze the curricular materials they are using or asked to use. Such opportunities would help teachers develop

curricular knowledge and would support both teacher and student learning. Instead of providing easy answers to the question: “what should I teach tomorrow?” materials would become texts for study and opportunities for teachers to work together to deepen their content knowledge and sharpen their approach to teaching this content. It would require them to confront the “original,” the true subject matter and their own understanding of it. Unpacking materials in this way and then learning to think about them pedagogically will help teachers know more and become “smarter” about choosing and designing learning opportunities for their students.

PURPOSES OF CURRICULUM STUDY GROUPS

In *Knowing and Teaching Elementary Mathematics*⁵, Liping Ma describes how teachers in China meet on a regular basis to study curricular materials. It is instructive for us to think about what she learned from visiting these teacher study groups and interviewing teachers who participated in them. For these teachers, participation in such study groups provided a window for better understanding of mathematical ideas. It enabled them to use, revise, and tailor the materials to their own students in more productive ways. Interestingly, these teachers claimed that such study was instrumental in helping them develop what they called PUFM, “Profound Understanding of Fundamental Mathematics.” Given that one of the challenges facing us in Jewish education is creating a knowledgeable group of teachers and students, the idea that studying the materials that we use in teaching can help us learn more about PUJS, “the Profound Understanding of Jewish Subjects,” is very appealing.

⁵ Liping Ma (1999). *Knowing and Teaching Elementary Mathematics*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. NJ

As one reads Ma's description, it is easy to picture the process that she is describing. Imagine what it would be like to be involved in such a process with your colleagues.

They study it constantly throughout the school year when they teach it. First of all, they work for an understanding of "what it is." They study how it interprets and illustrates the ideas, why the authors structured the book in a certain way, what the connections among the contents are, At a more detailed level, they study how each unit of the textbook is organized, how the content was presented by the authors, and why. They study what examples are in a unit, why these examples were selected, and why the examples were presented in a certain order. They review the exercises in each section of a unit, the purpose for each exercise section, and so on. Indeed, they conduct a very careful and critical investigation of the textbook. Although teachers usually find the authors' ideas ingenious and inspiring, they also sometimes find parts of the textbook that from their perspective are unsatisfactory, or inadequate illustrations of ideas in the framework.⁶

What is clear from reading this description is the seriousness with which these teachers approach this task. Their study groups resemble in some ways good adult Torah study groups. In both the written word is studied carefully; it is unpacked and analyzed. In the curriculum study groups described by Ma, there is one difference. Not only does this close study of curriculum materials lead to more profound understanding of the subject matter, it also leads to a kind of understanding of ideas which enables teachers to use, revise, and tailor the materials to their own students. Both of these outcomes seem critical in improving teaching in Jewish settings as well. Curriculum study groups would help us reach both these goals. Let us examine each of these processes—unpacking and adapting—in more depth.

⁶ Ibid. 131, 132.

UNPACKING CURRICULUM MATERIALS FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

The backbone of this strategy lies in determining what a given set of materials is about, what its stated purposes are, and what teachers and students must do together in order to reach its goals. It is critical in using this approach to understand that curriculum materials represent choices that curriculum developers make as they construct their materials. These choices center on what Joseph Schwab has called the four commonplaces of education: teacher, subject matter, learner and context.⁷

Studying two sets of materials allows us to compare the way each deals with the same issues (and will give some sense of what can be learned from unpacking and comparing materials in the service of purpose one above, selecting appropriate materials). In the excerpts from curricula on the Tower of Babel below, some of the choices that two curriculum developers made about subject matter as they created materials for teaching Torah can be seen. I will particularly focus on what can be learned about the subject matter in this example in order to indicate how teachers studying together might develop more PUJS (profound understanding of Jewish subjects) and thus improve their capacity to teach. After the example, I will suggest a 'generic' template which can be helpful in unpacking a curriculum from the vantage point of any one of the commonplaces.

⁷ Joseph Schwab (1973). "The practical: translation into curriculum." *School Review* 81, 501-22.

AN EXAMPLE OF UNPACKING CURRICULUM MATERIALS WITH A FOCUS ON UNDERSTANDING ITS CONTENT

The account of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) is commonly taught to children between the ages of eight and ten. Since the text of the Bible is difficult, even in translation, most curriculum developers prepare simplified versions of the story in addition to developing questions for teachers and worksheets and activities for children. The choices developers make about how to retell the story *interpret* the original subject matter. To fully understand the choices made by the developers requires teachers to first read the text of Genesis.

Comparing and contrasting two sets of materials (in the following examples) allows teachers to understand that different materials:

- tell the biblical story differently
- posit different goals for Torah study
- provide students with different opportunities to learn both “the facts” of the text and “the norms” by which it is studied.

The Tower of Babel opens with a decision by humanity to build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. The two different sets of materials represent the people’s decision, their motivation, and God’s decision to intervene in different ways. In order to understand clearly the choices that the developers are making, take the time to read the text of Genesis 11: 1-9 before reading further:

Textbook #1⁸

⁸ Seymour Rossel (1988). *A Child's Bible*. New Jersey: Behrman House, p. .41

They decided to build a mighty city and a tower of brick. “We will make the tower so tall it will touch the clouds in the sky,” they said. “People will then remember us and praise our name. People will want to live in our city forever.”...

“God saw the bricks becoming a city and a tower. God watched as the hearts of the people became as hard as bricks. The people of the earth stopped loving one another. They forgot how to love God, etc.”

Textbook #2⁹

(3) People said to their neighbors: “Okay, let us make bricks and burn them hard.”...

(4) Then they said: “Okay, let us build a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let us make a name for ourselves, to keep us from being scattered over the face of all the earth.”

(5)The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that Adam’s children were building.

(6) The Lord said: “Now, they are one people with one language. This is only the beginning of what they will do. From now on, they will be able to do whatever they feel like doing.

(7) Okay, let us go down and babble their language so that people will not understand their neighbors’ language.”

In Textbook #1 the builders’ motivation is clear (people will remember us and praise our name) as is the reason for God’s intervention (people stopped loving each other; people stopped loving God). In Textbook #2, people want to make a name for themselves; God decides to prevent them otherwise “they will be able to do whatever they feel like doing.” The actual biblical narrative is closer to the version of the story in the second textbook. Although people’s intentions are mentioned in both, the moral overtones are not clear in the second. The biblical text and the version of it in this textbook are opaque. A reader is left to puzzle over the meaning of the narrative. What did the people do wrong? What is so bad about building this tower? Why does God decide to punish the people?

⁹ Joel Grishaver (1986). *Being Torah*. Los Angeles: Torah Aura Publications, p. 57.

In trying to “unpack” these two sets of materials, teachers need to ask two different kinds of questions:

- 1) What is the curriculum developer’s perspective on the subject matter?
- 2) What will students learn about the Torah and about studying the Torah if these materials are used well?

Examining more than one set of materials designed for use in comparable settings makes it easier to discern that choices have been made in how curricula “represent” subject matter.

From the excerpts above, we can infer that the curriculum developers of Textbook #1 are concerned that students learn that the Torah contains moral values because they chose to make explicit the moral they wished to teach. We might infer that the curriculum developers of Textbook #2 want to create a text that is close to the one in the Torah, while leaving the interpretation of the text open to the learners.

Teachers Guides: These inferences are borne out when we examine portions of the teachers’ guide to each. In Textbook #1, there is a section entitled: “What does it mean?” In this section of the materials, the developer summarizes lessons that students should learn from their reading:

The builders on the tower looked down and saw everything below getting smaller and smaller. It made them feel stronger and more important than the people below. They began to think that they were as mighty as God.

You do not have to be on top of a tall tower to look down on other people. You can just say or think that a person is someone to “look down on,” someone less important than you.

But really, God makes each of us special, so every person is important. Every person has something special to offer the world. “Looking down” on people is always a mistake. It’s like “making war with God.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Rossel., p. 43

The underlying assumption that the Bible communicates religious and moral values and that its narratives are to be understood as helping the reader learn how to act in the world are explicit. This is an approach to the teaching of Torah that is familiar in the context of religious education.

This is not the approach of Textbook #2, which adopts what might be termed a literary critical method for studying and teaching the Bible, which aims at opening up the complexity and ambiguities of the biblical narrative. Its pedagogic approach asks readers to “read the text closely” in order to uncover its multiple meanings. In these materials the biblical stories are recounted in words that closely conform to the Hebrew text. Just as the biblical text omits attributions of personal motivation and intention, so too does this textbook. Thus students are often left puzzling over the message of a given story. In this lesson, children learn that the Bible is a book with multiple messages for them to discover.

The differences in these textbooks extend to the assignments and questions in the materials and teachers’ guides. Textbook #1 tells us what the people did wrong; in Textbook #2, the students are asked: “what did they (the people in the story) do wrong?” Children learn that this question has multiple answers in three different ways: (1) The question is asked and they themselves generate possible responses. (2) After the story, there is a page in the textbook called “Commentary.”¹¹ Such a page follows each narrative. This page has photographs of four children, each of whom has presumably grappled with the same question, and their responses to the question being posed. (3) The teachers’ guide brings additional texts from the Jewish tradition that contain rabbinic

¹¹ Grishaver, p. 58.

responses to the same question. Studying these two sets of materials raises many questions for teachers, particularly: What are our purposes for teaching Bible? What do we want the children who are eight years old in our school to be learning? How will we help children reach these goals, no matter what textbook we use?

This example vividly illustrates that curriculum developers have a point of view about subject matter. This is not only true in a subject area such as Bible, where developers are creating the story line itself. Examples abound in other disciplines as well. For example, history can be studied from a political or social perspective; history books can be organized chronologically or thematically; and primary sources can be made accessible to students or not. Each of the decisions made by the curriculum developer represents history in a different way and, therefore, creates different opportunities for students to learn some things and not others.

A GENERIC TEMPLATE FOR UNPACKING CURRICULAR MATERIALS

Exploring curriculum materials' stance toward each of the four commonplaces can be used as an opening for curriculum study group's investigations. In the same way that the former example demonstrated what teachers might learn if they focused on unpacking materials from the standpoint of subject matter, questions can be developed which promote the study of each of the commonplaces. An example of a "generic"¹² set of questions that can be adapted/ developed for a variety of subject matters follows:

¹² Many of these questions were developed by Miriam Ben-Peretz, Gail Dorph and Sharon Feiman-Nemser for a seminar of teacher educators who were part of the Mandel Foundation's Teacher Educator Institute.

About the Subject Matter:

1. What are the goals of these materials? Or, what goals seem to be implicit in the design of these materials?"
2. What are the main concepts that this curriculum is trying to teach?
3. What is the basis for the organization and sequence of the content?
4. What disciplinary lenses shape the curriculum? What other lenses could be used?
5. What orientations to the subject matter inform these materials?
6. What modes of inquiry are presented or implied in the materials?
7. What is the role of primary sources (texts) in developing the concepts?

About Teacher and Teaching:

1. What roles for teachers are anticipated in the materials? (e.g. are teachers sources of knowledge? Guides for independent learning? Others?)
2. What assumptions does the curriculum make about teachers' personal knowledge of and attitudes toward content?
3. Do the materials state specific teaching strategies? Are teaching alternatives offered?
4. Do the materials disclose to the teachers the developers' choices and reasoning?
5. What does "good teaching" using these materials look like?

About Learners and Learning:

1. What image of learning is implied by the materials? (e.g. active inquiry, the acquisition of specific knowledge/ habits/ skills; others?)

2. How do the materials respond to different motivational needs of learners (e.g. the need to excel, the need for social interaction, curiosity?)
3. Does the curriculum treat learners as individuals or as members of a uniform group?
4. How could the materials be adapted to varied populations of learners?
5. If students learn the ideas/concepts/skills “well,” what will they actually learn?

About Context:

1. Do the materials reflect an ideological or denominational stance? If so, what is it?
2. What's the fit between the materials and the family background of students and the local community?
3. Do the materials mention the impact of the subject on society?
4. What's the fit between the materials and your classroom situation? (e.g. time, resources)
5. How would you adapt the materials to fit your context?

Developing questions such as these and using them to unpack and study curriculum materials can be a first step for teachers' groups discussing curriculum. These explorations have the potential to lead to deepening understanding not only of the subject material, but also of the role of the teacher and the developers' ideas about what it takes to learn something.

ADAPTING MATERIALS FOR INDIVIDUAL CLASSROOMS

In her book, *The Teacher-Curriculum Encounter*¹³, Miriam Ben-Peretz suggests that teachers are freed from the “tyranny of textbooks” when they understand that curriculum materials themselves are interpretations. Knowing more about what is “behind” the materials they are using allows teachers to engage their students in more sophisticated and far-reaching ways. The questions teachers investigate and the knowledge they gain will make an impact on their choices as they plan what to teach. Thus, their planning will become more sophisticated and comprehensive, and their capacity to enact the curriculum will be expanded.

In her work, Ben-Peretz suggests that curriculum materials not be viewed as static suggestions of the ideal but rather as expressions “...of educational potential, of intended, as well as unintended, curricular uses which may be disclosed through deliberate interpretation efforts”¹⁴. The idea that a teacher’s use of materials may go beyond the intention of a curriculum developer emphasizes the notion that in the enactment of curriculum, teachers themselves actively become partners in the development of the curriculum.

When teachers spend time investigating curriculum, they can develop an understanding of the material’s stance on the subject matter, its explicit goals, what the materials contain and what they omit, the projected role of the teacher and what children are expected to learn. Such knowledge can be a building block toward teachers actively and intentionally becoming involved in uncovering multiple uses for curriculum in their setting and prepare them for the role of curriculum developer (suggested by Ben Peretz).

¹³ Miriam Ben-Peretz (1990). *The Teacher-Curriculum Encounter: Freeing Teachers from the Tyranny of Texts*. New York: SUNY Press.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

Through studying materials together, teachers become aware of their role in adding to, adapting and modifying the materials at hand.

...the notion of curriculum potential is dependent on the interaction between teachers and materials. Materials offer starting points, and teachers use their curricular insights, their pedagogical knowledge, and their professional imagination to develop their own curricular ideas on the basis of existing materials. . . . The spectrum of ideas about potential uses of curriculum materials that teachers may generate is dependent on their knowledge of subject matter, their past teaching experiences, their feeling for and understanding of classroom reality, their interpretative skills, and their openness to new ideas.¹⁵

Adapting Curriculum-- Developing Curriculum Potential: What's the Big Idea?

The following example of teachers studying curriculum materials takes place in the context of an afternoon school setting.¹⁶ A consultant is working with three teachers who were about to begin teaching a unit about Shabbat. They begin by stating their understandings of the goals of the written curriculum. Barbara, one of the teachers, explains: "These are the objectives of this unit. This is what I want kids to come away with. They need to know all three prayers and they need to realize that everyone celebrates Shabbat differently."¹⁷ The group tries to understand how the objectives of the unit could, on the one hand, be so specific (all three prayers) and on the other hand, so open-ended (everyone celebrates Shabbat differently). As they talk, they realize that they are ambivalent about how to present Shabbat to the children in their classes. They have some ideas about "traditional" ways to celebrate, as well as an understanding of the reality of their community, a community in which traditional observances are not the norm. On the one hand, they want children to understand that the day is "special," and on the other hand, they don't want to teach them some version of "correct practice" which

¹⁵ Ibid., p.. 53

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 463.

they may not have seen and which parents may resent. The only idea that the materials contain is the notion that Shabbat is special. But when they try to fill in what makes the day special, it is hard to distinguish between the concept “week-end” and the concept “Shabbat.”

The consultant suggests a conceptual framework that she feels offers a Jewishly authentic and substantive way of thinking about Shabbat and that she believes will be meaningful to the team members and consonant with the school community. Fromm’s *The Forgotten Language*¹⁸ develops the concepts of work and rest in the following way: “‘Work’ is any interference by man, be it constructive or destructive, with the physical world. ‘Rest’ is a state of peace between man and nature”¹⁹ These ideas about work and rest still present a challenge because decisions must still be made about how Shabbat is to be celebrated. However, it is an idea that teachers feel they can work with because it explains the restrictions of Shabbat in a way that might be more understandable and relevant to the members of this community.

Now that they have a conceptual framework on which to build, the teachers turn back to the curriculum and discuss ways in which they can use this new big idea to both frame the unit and adapt the learning activities suggested by the curriculum developers. Just because they have figured out an idea that helps them make sense of Shabbat does not mean that they have figured out what and how to teach their students. They now need to address the questions:

1. What exactly do we hope these young children will learn?
2. How will we help them learn those things?

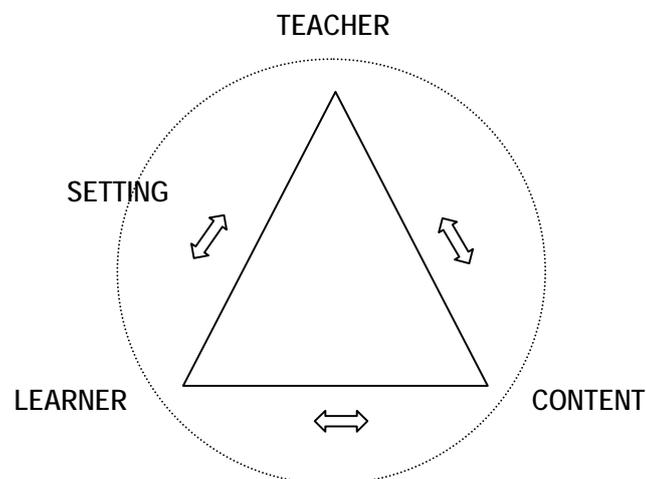
¹⁸ Erich Fromm (1951). *The Forgotten Language: An introduction to the understanding of dreams, fairy tales, and myths*. New York: Grove Press.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 244.

3. How will we need to add/modify the materials that we are using to reach these goals?

These are different questions than were addressed in the unpacking investigation above. Although one can unpack curriculum materials from the perspective of any one of the commonplaces (preferably from the perspective of all four) the work of adaptation cannot stop there. Teaching happens in the interaction between and among teacher, students, content and settings. Thus the questions that need to be asked require not only analysis but imagination.

Teachers must navigate among (1) their own knowledge, beliefs, and ideas of learners, content, and setting; (2) the real students who sit before them (and those students' abilities and capacities as well as their prior beliefs, knowledge, understandings); (3) the subject matter, its complexities and the ways in which they are represented in specific curriculum materials; and (4) the unique features of the setting and community in which they teach. It may be helpful to visualize this dynamic with teacher, learner and content as points of a **triangle**, each one linked to the other two, and set inside a larger circle indicating the setting, as in the diagram below:



The arrows represent the dynamic interaction between and among the various corners of the triangle. Groups of teachers figuring out issues of curricular adaptation must have this dynamic in mind as they work.

During the process of curricular adaptation, the teachers in this school decided to look for a story that would capture the idea of the specialness of Shabbat and chose the classic story, “The Sabbath Taste.”²⁰ The story develops the idea that intention and effort are the ingredients that make Shabbat and the foods that we eat on it different than those that we enjoy during the rest of the week. In addition to finding the story, they created a set of questions to help children understand the ideas that are developed in the story. They brainstormed possible answers that children might give and tried to imagine the pitfalls they might encounter. In essence, they were working on giving “some meat” to the concept—“special.”

VALUE-ADDED: BONUSES ACCRUING FROM THE WORK OF CURRICULUM STUDY GROUPS

There is more to curricular knowledge than the development of subject matter expertise and the ability to adapt materials for use in a given classroom. Such study groups may take on at least two other critically important tasks:

- Setting goals and choosing materials that “teach toward those goals;” this would include studying alternative materials for a given topic or subject within a grade
- Aligning a school’s curriculum (making sure that the goals and approach to teaching and learning proposed in materials chosen for one year match up with

²⁰ Sadie Rose Weilerstein (1942). *What the Moon Brought*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society. pp. 55-62.

and build on goals chosen in other years) in order to create a more coherent educational experience for learners

Such work could be instrumental in informing curricular choice and selection and could lead to productive discussions about goals for the students with regard to a particular subject area across the grades.

An additional gain of curriculum study groups comes under the heading of adult learning. This important secondary gain can be demonstrated from the case of Brenda,²¹ a principal of a Reform synagogue school with 450 students in a medium sized Jewish community. She has been conducting voluntary monthly study groups for her faculty for the last four years. This group began as a series of teachers meeting to align the school's holiday curriculum. Teachers came together to examine the materials they were using to teach holidays over the course of the five years of religious school. They wanted to know what ideas and practices they were actually teaching and to understand how a child's ideas about these holidays would grow and deepen over the years.

As their work together developed, teachers realized that they needed to learn more about the holidays and get in touch with their own beliefs and commitments. Brenda organized a series of meetings devoted to studying the holidays, including study of appropriate primary texts,

in order to connect it to our lives today, and also to figure out how to teach this ...to create different curricular objectives and activities for each holiday and ...by the end of the year, a holiday curriculum ...that was developmental throughout the grade levels.²²

²¹To learn more about Brenda and her seminar see: Gail Z. Dorph, Susan Stodolsky and Renee S. Wohl (2002). "Growing as a Teacher Educator.: Learning New Professional Development Practices. *Journal of Jewish Education*.

²²Ibid., p. 7.

They developed a strategy that included monthly meetings with the whole faculty in which they studied the holiday, and grade level groups in which there was careful study of the curriculum materials in use. In advance of each of these holidays, they would work through their ideas about what would be important to teach this year and why. They brainstormed activities that would add “meat” to the ideas embedded in the curriculum and decided what they would skip either because they felt it did not add to their current sense of what it was important for children to learn or because they realized there would not be enough time to do everything.

Over the course of the years, not only did they deepen their personal knowledge of holidays, (the focus on adult learning of Jewish content was becoming stronger), they also developed some common language for talking about teaching and learning and developed more trusting attitudes toward each other. Last but not least, they improved the curriculum for their students!

One final rationale for creating ongoing curriculum study groups in your own educational settings. Educational research (Little and McLaughlin; 1993; Little, 1993)²³ has shown that significant teacher learning and development occurs over long periods of time. Thus effective professional development programs must be sustained and coherent, providing enough time for teacher reflection and growth. Ongoing Curriculum Study Groups can provide one such opportunity for teacher learning. Because working on

²³ Little, J. W. (1993). “Teachers’ professional development in a climate of educational reform.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 15, 129-151.

Little, J. W. & M. W. McLaughlin. (1993). *Teachers’ work: Individuals, colleagues, and contexts*. New York: Teachers College Press

curriculum means working both on the content of teaching and on its enactment, it is a powerful strategy for working on improving both teaching and learning.

HOW TO BEGIN

Simply put, the way to begin would be to follow the advice of *Pirkei Avot*, (The Ethics of the Fathers) “*K’neh lekha haver,*” find a study buddy, another teacher who wants to investigate what students in their classes are learning. And just begin! Reread your materials and ask yourselves:

If we use these materials well, what would students be learning?

Is this what we want them to learn?

The insights you gain from this first inspection can be the springboard to constituting a small or large study group in your institution to continue studying curriculum materials in a systematic way. Your process may include using or adapting the questions found in the generic template suggested above or devising your own questions. Your path may take you to adapting the curriculum you have in hand or to studying other materials in order to develop a more eclectic approach to your students and the subject matter.

Bio

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