

Sikkum/Notes
MTEI Cohort 7 –Seminar 1
June 28 – July 1, 2015

Sunday June 28th. We find the room where the MTEI seminar will meet; we are greeted by faculty and food. We search for our name tent; for our place at the table. Some of us are relieved. We don't have to decide where to sit, with whom to engage. Others wonder: why can't I sit where I want to. We look around. We wonder how will we actually even learn the names of all of the people in the room.

We begin with Miriam greeting us, asking us to meet and greet the others at our tables; familiarizing us with our notebooks. Seymour introduces us to Mr. Mandel and the principles of business leadership that he embraces (showing us the book that the Foundation has provided as a "present" to each of us). Gail shares a little bit about the history of MTEI and the news that there is life after the program in the form of a graduate group that learns together and serves as a resource to each other.

Then we really get to work. Gail asks us to write in our journals for the first time. We create some space for our own hopes and fears as we begin our MTEI work. And then we meet Rabbi Nehunyah and we study a short rabbinic text that describes his practice: saying a short tefillah before he enters the beit midrash and as he exits. With our havruta partner, we delve more deeply into the text. We use the questions that Barry Holtz prepared in advance to aid us in our discussion. We realize that as educational leaders we share some of Rabbi Nehunyah's hopes and anxieties. We then add to our journal entry thinking more deeply about our own hopes, wishes, concerns.

After dinner, Kathy introduces us to the final word protocol. She asks us to divide into groups of 3 where there are 3 roles: the presenter, listener 1 and listener 2. And in a very structured way we are to respond to the prompt: When you enter your beit midrash, the place where you lead professional development, what are your concerns or worries? What kind of stumbling, yours or others have you experienced?

We are surprised by how “long” 2 minutes is when we have a chance to be the presenter and how difficult it is to “listen attentively” –that is to listen in order to hear and not to give advice, fix, repair, share our own experience that is like the speaker’s. And yet, as we actually follow the instruction, we experience that the space that the protocol allows creates a certain intimacy and trust. And although we each only spoke to one other person, we feel safer in the whole group. We intuit somehow that this is going to be a setting where we will be heard; where we will be allowed to finish our thoughts.

Monday June 29th: On Monday morning we split into two groups of about 20 each. One group studies with Miriam first; the other group studies with Elie and then we flip.

With Miriam, we work on carefully observing and describing a photograph of young children painting and a video of a young child playing. In each case, we are asked to describe what we see (three different times for each). It’s not easy to describe and not to interpret. Are the two small children holding hands? Is one child trying to stop the other from messing up his paint? Is the child with the rumpled head a boy or a girl? What’s our evidence? Do we have some gender “notions” that come up when we notice that the children are not wearing shirts?

Some see a matzah on the first viewing of the video. Others of us do not see it until it is pointed out and then can’t actually notice it til the 3rd round. Did the child get the square shape into the boxlike structure? Were the sounds that the child made meaningful or just sounds. Some heard the sounds as oogah oogah oogah. Others did not make that connection. Did the child put the round cylinder in his mouth before or after putting the cylinder into the spaces in the toy?

We noticed that it was difficult to both take notes and to notice carefully. We were aware of how much of the action we missed. And some wondered.... If this is how it goes when we observe a still photograph; a 1 and ½ minute video of a child, what do I miss when I enter a classroom in my school?

We noticed our own preconceptions as we described what we noticed. .

With Elie, we explored our own preconceptions still further. Elie began by introducing us to Reb Menahem, a stranger who comes as a guest to our

Shabbat dinner table. A man we do not know, but about whom we realized we had many preconceptions. He had a long long beard, a black suit, payot. But we are polite. In the spirit of hakhnasat orhim, we engage him in conversation, trying to learn more about him. To our shock, he seems to know about the Cleveland cavaliers and in general be an avid sports fan. YIKES, who was he? We needed to shift our horizon, our expectations. We realized that what we anticipated and what we had in front of us were not the same.

But this was only a prelude to meeting Hama bar Bissa, whom we also got to know slowly, by asking questions, by projecting some of our preconceptions, (ideas we didn't even know we had), by hearing that our partner in study wondered about different things. At moments, we felt the cracks of our horizons moving. And we heard the voice of one member of the group saying at least twice, "I think something bad is going to happen here."

Some puzzled about the slow deliberate work of describing the photo, the video, the text. By the end of the morning, we were coming to understand something about the power of slowing it down, giving space to listening to ourselves, to our texts, to each other... It was pretty powerful.

After lunch, we came back to new table groups, getting a chance to sit with new colleagues. And we had an opportunity to do something unusual—to witness a conversation between those who had just taught us and an open, curious colleague.

Usually the only conversations with teachers in which we participate are those we are part of—we don't have the luxury of being observers. In this case we had the luxury of observing conversations in which attentive listening played an important role.

Kathy asked Miriam: What's alive for you? Miriam shared that she felt relieved. More than relief, she was excited that the group had had the opportunity to practice a skill that she values so much—the capacity to describe without judgment, and she had some questions about her plan—had it worked to do both the photo and the video?

Sharon asked Elie: What makes a good text to read line by line? How do you fit the text to the method?

Monday afternoon, Dan introduced us to Ozzie and Rabbi Binder – and although we laughed as Dan read us the Philip Roth story from the conversion of the Jews, we were deeply troubled by Rabbi Binder’s response to Ozzie. Most of us felt that actually Ozzie had taken what he had learned with Rabbi Binder seriously, that he was not a trouble-maker and that his questions deserved careful attention. We noted not only what happened when a student asked a question in which the teacher did not want to engage; we were witnessing the danger of inflexible pedagogic horizons.

Kathy had a “post lesson conversation” with Dan as well. They talked together about the characters of Binder and Ozzie. Dan commented that the important thing was for teachers to face their “Ozzies” as students with real needs.

Although we were supposed to conclude our afternoon in small study groups focusing on our attention on the article by Vivian Paley distributed before the seminar, we didn’t. Gail called this article an “oldie but goodie.” The faculty had placed this discussion of this article at this point in the seminar, because Paley was an example of a teacher who modified her pedagogy in dramatic ways because of listening (vs. rabbi Binder) –BUT because we were trying to practice listening to our students, we bagged the discussion because we saw that people needed a break. At dinner, there was a small group that sat together and reflected on this article.

After dinner, on Monday night, we roamed the big basement room, seeking Group Level Understanding. Miriam had set the room up with multiple flip charts each asking a different question: What is a bumper sticker that describes your job? What are the values that should guide MTEI? We thought, wrote, laughed, and thought some more. At our tables, we looked for common themes. “Working together with a group of people to realize a shared vision and implement it despite limited resources.” We learned that relationships are central and key motivators. Communication is important and fraught.

Tuesday: As we entered the room, we wondered, “Had we only been learning together for a day and a half?” Whew! As we entered, we realized that once again we were assigned to new table groups. We were greeted by a revised schedule based on the feedback cards from Monday evening.

We began our learning with Elie, with a rabbinic text that was not a story. He began by reading the text aloud and showing us how it was organized: 3 rabbis responding to one “prompt” — kol hamelamed et ben havero Torah. Each statement supported by its own proof text. In order to support our havruta work, he prepared a chart that delineated the structure of the text and included for study the proof text associated with the first of the rabbi’s statements.

What is the text saying? Is it the student, the text, the teacher that is transformed? What exactly is a proof text? How does it work? Elie suggested that it is an invitation to thinking NOT a proof. We are brainstorming new terms. Perhaps spring texts?...

Finally, Elie asked us to work as table groups and create a graphic representation of the whole text. After all they appear in the Talmud as a unit, not as three separate statements that are disconnected. As people worked together they uncovered some of the ways in which their understandings were different from the understanding of others.

After about 20 minutes of grappling with the relationship of the rabbis’ opinions we were treated to 5 different graphic representations and verbal explanations of this text. Each revealed the artistic talent of our group, and the ways in which trying to graphically represent something is different from talking.

Our Mystery Experience: In response to the suggestion that we try to make more personal connections with more individuals, after our intense learning experience, we went outside for a mystery experience. We organized ourselves into two circles and as Kathy gave us prompts we talked to probably 10 other people, had a chance to introduce ourselves, put more names to faces and learn some fun stuff like: How did you get your name? What are your plans for the summer? And professional stuff: What do you like about your jobs?

Then we regrouped in our seminar room and Sharon began our engagement with David Perkins and learning for understanding by asking us to solve and then tell a story of the following math problem: $1 \frac{3}{4}$ divided by $1/2$. Do you invert and multiple? Did I try to divide by 2? Or did I try to understand how many halves fit in? We realized that there is a big difference between solving a problem using an algorithm and understanding a problem. Cans of paint or pieces of cake?!

Tuesday, after lunch we continued to think about learning for understanding. We reviewed the schedule and thought, when were moments where I worked on understanding. We realized that we had identified different moments and when we chose the same moments, we often came up with alternative understandings. And what happens when we plan our teaching for students to develop understanding of one idea, and they walk away working on other ideas? What is our end-in-view?

After a welcome break, we returned to the idea of attentive listening, As a way to actually practice the difference between being a participant in the final word protocol and the leader of such an event, we thought deeply about prompts. What is a prompt that will engage my faculty? What it is good for? What is it not good for? We wrote, we practiced, we edited. Don't use it to pass the salt. And then we tried out our prompts in two rounds of the protocol.

Wednesday morning: After a night off to rest, eat Chicago pizza, exercise, breathe, we regrouped. To practice bringing text study as a professional development practice that we can take home, we all tried our hand developing a lesson using the Rabbi Nehunyah text. Will it last 15 minutes, 10 minutes? What are our purposes? Who exactly will be our audience? And then we got a chance to try out 5 minutes of the lesson –choosing a selection from our plan that would require a response. What a treat to plan with a havruta, to refine our plan with two other colleagues and then to ‘try” it out” with 2 other colleagues!

After lunch, we came back into our seminar room one last time. We walked us through the sessions of the seminar using this Sikkum as a kind of guide. Gail invited us to re-visit the text of Rav Nehunyah and conclude with a two-part journal entry that we would be willing to share: What is your tefillah as you

leave our MTEI Beit Midrash? Re-read your journal entries from Sunday and reflect on how today's entry is similar/ different from the earlier ones.

We wrote final reflections and had an opportunity to hear Elie explain the two posters that were on the board:

ולא נתן ה' לכם
לב לדעת
ועינים לראות
ואזנים לשמע
עד היום הזה

God has not given you
a heart to know
and eyes to see
and ears to hear unto this day. (Deuteronomy 29:3)

כי אדם לעמל יולד

The human being is born to strive (Job 5, 7)

ללמד על מנת לעשות
ללמד על מנת לעשות

Hebrew is not perfectly aligned

In the hallway, we each chose one word to reflect our experience — gratitude, full, overflowing, inspired.....

Singing Shalom Haverim, our first seminar comes to a close. We have met new colleagues, new faculty. We will meet in our phone groups, in our Facebook group. We will reconvene in November, after the hagim, when the weather will be cooler, school will be in session, and life will have a different pace. L'hitraot!