

“The False Promise of Group Harmony”: The Centrality of Challenging Practices in Teachers’ Professional Development

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This article discusses an action research study of a week-long Summer Teachers Institute which immersed teachers in the study of Jewish historical and cultural texts. We investigate how this kind of cultural immersion created opportunities for transformative learning – the kind of learning that would not merely be the application of “new lessons,” but that would also help teachers reconceptualize their teaching practices regarding Jewish religion and culture. Our findings suggest that text study practices of challenging – in tandem with practices of supporting and voicing – were central in constructing a “relational learning community.” Such a community was a necessary condition for transformative learning.

Effective professional development has long concerned researchers, administrators, and teachers as it is a core dimension of educational reform (Guskey, 2002). A consensus has emerged over the past decade about what constitutes “effective” professional development in Jewish and “general” education (Dorph, 2011). As a field, however, we are still working to understand the kinds of practices that will yield sustained growth in teachers’ learning. To achieve such understanding, it is necessary to build a firm understanding of adult development and learning, and the ways in which professional

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development practices support adult growth. The following article illustrates how practices that challenge teachers' assumptions, understandings, and interpretations can be central to such growth.

We introduce you to a weeklong Summer Teachers' Institute (Institute)¹ that was launched with the proposition that deeply immersing teachers in the study of historical and cultural texts (e.g., documents, film, and physical spaces) reflecting Jewish culture and civilization could help them address the complexities of teaching about religion and culture. We investigate how this kind of cultural immersion created opportunities for transformational learning—the kind of learning that would not merely be the application of “new lessons” but that would also support teachers' growth in revisiting their teaching practices regarding culture. We identify the kinds of obstacles that can be constructed in these contexts, the place of “challenging practices” in deconstructing and traversing these obstacles, and possibilities for growth and development in the context of a relational learning community.

It is the third day of the Institute and 13 teachers are gathered in a spacious, sun-filled conference room. Coming from a variety of school settings, most of the teachers enrolled in this weeklong professional development seminar were responsible, in some way or another, for teaching Jewish history/culture/literature/arts content. Some teachers sitting at the tables hailed from Jewish supplementary schools while others came from secular public or private schools. We had intentionally recruited a diverse population of teachers in order to facilitate a cross-cultural exchange of understandings concerning the teaching of culture. The Institute was rooted in John Dewey's conception of learning: deep learning grows from educative experiences (Dewey, 1963). The goal of the Institute was to help teachers experience a core aspect of Jewish culture, specifically text study, through culturally embedded pedagogical practices, so that they could construct deeper knowledge of Jewish culture and civilization.

One culturally embedded practice of the Institute is that of *bevruta* learning, a traditional form of Jewish text study. While there are many forms of *bevruta* study, this kind of learning refers to a pair of students studying a common text in an effort to understand the text thoroughly. In the Institute, we implemented a model which curricularized particular practices including attentive listening, voicing, and challenging.² This conception of *bevruta*

¹The Institute was sponsored by the University of Cincinnati's Center for Studies in Jewish Education (CSJEC); The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives on the HUC-JIR campus; The Ohio Humanities Council; and the University of Cincinnati College of Education, Criminal Justice and Human Services. Additional guidance was provided by the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Brandeis University.

²The Institute's approach to *bevruta* is based on the work of Brandeis University's Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education model; see Feiman-Nemser (2006), Holzer (2002; 2006), Holzer and Kent (2013), and Kent (2008).

learning, in which the roles of teacher and learner are fluid and in constant negotiation, and in which traditional teacher/learner power positions are challenged, has been described by participating teachers as “transformative” (Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009). Hence, the participants have assisted us in deriving our conception of transformative learning for teachers. We understand such learning as a process that reexamines and potentially deconstructs previous understandings about teaching and learning, constructs new understandings, and applies these new understandings to teachers’ lives.

On this third day of the Institute, Elie Holzer, one of the Institute faculty, is teaching about a key practice in our conception of *bevruta* learning—that of supporting and challenging.³ Standing amidst the teachers, who are sitting in pairs facing each other at tables scattered around the room, Elie begins by saying, “Challenging is something that you want to practice, obviously when you disagree, but even when you agree [with each other].” With water bottles, cups of coffee, and granola bars in hand, the teachers attend closely to Elie’s words.

Continuing to teach us about the practice of “supporting,” Elie explains, “the emotional support needs to be there all the time even when you are challenging.” Support also must come in the form of “bringing more evidence or explaining how it explains more detail” so that a stronger interpretation can be rendered.

Elie then adds the third element to the discussion—that of “voicing”; explaining that it is the idea of being willing to say something, even if you are unsure about it. He helps us understand that “voicing” moves us past the inhibitions that keep us silent:

So we have a beginning of an idea, we’re not sure about it, and we’re not saying it because we want to be heard as knowing precisely what we know. Or sometimes we have an idea where it leads us to a place where, “hmmm, would that be the idea that the text would have, that doesn’t sound very [politically correct].” So we are silencing ourselves because we would prefer not to be identified with this idea.

With this opening, Elie has laid out core learning principles of the Institute. Not only do we want to immerse the participants in culturally embedded practices, but we also want them to experience and understand the pedagogical principles and conceptions of learning that are core to our Institute’s orientation and goal.

This article will focus on the ways that the participants wrestled with the practice of challenging. As Elie’s teaching so clearly articulated, the practice

³For a more detailed explanation of this enactment of *bevruta* learning, the practices of supporting and challenging; see Holzer (2006), Holzer and Kent (2013), Kent (2008), and Raider-Roth and Holzer (2009).

of challenging is linked to supporting and voicing. Our findings suggest that while the participants identified “challenging” as one of the most important ideas and practices that they learned, supporting and voicing were important key corollary aspects of this process, especially in the construction of what we call a “relational learning community.” In addition, our findings teach us that because the act of challenging was not only *invited*, but also *required* of them during the Institute, participants engaged in “role sanctioned” challenging, offering them the opportunity to take risks that they might not otherwise have felt comfortable taking. Moreover, by taking these risks the teachers experienced a kind of authority in their learning—that is, authoring the knowledge they were constructing in this context. We suggest that embedding challenging practices in professional development frameworks can provide powerful opportunities for transformative learning. Thus, in this article we argue that when participants engage in “role-sanctioned” challenging, they have the opportunity to author new learning, which is often accompanied by an internal sense of disequilibrium. In this recursive process of challenging, destabilization, and new learning, teachers have the possibility of engaging in transformative learning.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the following section, we root our understandings of teachers’ transformative learning within a relational framework, drawing on Freire (1970) and Dewey’s (1963) philosophical foundation of the relational aspects of the educative experience. Additionally, we discuss Kegan (1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009) and Mezirow’s (2000) psychological theories concerning adult development and change.

Relational Conceptions of Learning

Key to our understanding of transformative learning is Freire’s (1970) framing of the relational context that fosters transformation. In challenging traditional conceptions of power in teaching-learning relationships, Freire highlights the “joint [responsibility] for a process in which all grow” including teacher and student (p. 67)—a fluidity that has been noticed by the participants as a distinctive quality of the Institute’s professional development experience (Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009). Freire’s notion of joint responsibility—which suggests a moral dimension to this egalitarian conception of teaching and learning—is fundamental to *bevruta* learning, and to the purpose of the challenging practices in which our participants engaged.

Another important philosophical lens in our relational understanding of transformative learning is John Dewey’s (1963) conception of the

“educative experience”—one that draws upon the learner’s past knowledge and offers an environment with carefully chosen materials that can allow the learner to build new knowledge. The notion of interaction, underscoring the social and transactional nature of learning, is central to Dewey’s conception of experience. Transformative learning, in our view, is predicated on experiences in which interaction is a focal force for triggering disequilibrium, deconstruction and reconstruction of core ideas, understandings, and assumptions. The Institute grounded the curriculum in repeated interactional experiences, such as *bevvruta* learning, in order to create such learning opportunities for the participants.

Relational Conceptions of Adult Development and Learning

The conceptions of adult development guiding our approach to professional development are derived from Robert Kegan’s (1982, 1994) constructive-development model which help us understand how an “evolving” self occurs and the necessary learning environments for such growth. Human development, according to Kegan (1982), “involves a succession of renegotiated balances” which are “intrinsically cognitive, but. . .no less affective; we are this activity and we experience it” (p. 80). By positioning developmental processes as “evolutionary,” he captures the dynamic nature of individuals’ responses to the world and to others in it. He suggests that, “In considering where a person is in his or her evolutionary balancing we are looking not only at how meaning is made; we are looking, too, at the possibility of the person losing this balance” (Kegan, 1982, p. 114). Thus, a “loss” of balance can be an *asset* rather than a deficit if we see it as necessary for finding new meaning. Kegan’s argument harkens back to Dewey’s (1933/1989) conception of a “felt difficulty”—the recognition of a “perplexity” that has been “felt” (that is to say “directly experienced”), and that moves the individual to seek an answer in order to resolve the difficulty or disequilibrium (p. 200).

For Kegan (1994), this balancing act requires shifts in what is thought of as subject and object in an individual’s view, leading to his well-known stage theory of adult development. While a detailed discussion of this aspect of Kegan’s work is beyond the scope of this article, essential to our understanding of adult human development is Kegan’s (1982) notion of psychological “disequilibrium.” This is experienced as an old self, is released and a new self is constructed when faced with the realization that “how we know” is not sufficient for the demand we are facing.

Especially relevant to our research is Kegan’s discussion of the place of challenge and support in adult development. Kegan (1994) describes what is required of an environment for it to facilitate the growth of its members: “People grow best where they continuously experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge. . . . [T]he balance of support and challenge leads to vital engagement” (p. 42). Kegan’s theory suggest that this “ingenious blend”

is a dynamic state of balance that, when achieved, supports human growth. The balance he refers to in this case refers specifically to the environmental and relational dimensions that shape development. Kegan's theory, in relation to our work, echoes the practices of support and challenge enacted in the Institute. Placing Kegan's theory beside the challenging, voicing, and supporting principles of the Institute provides a ripe opportunity for understanding teachers' growth.

In addition, [Kegan \(1994\)](#) helps us understand that key to adult development is a:

Holding environment that provides both welcoming acknowledgement to exactly who the person is right now as he or she is, and fosters the person's psychological evolution. As such, a holding environment is a tricky transitional culture, an evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over (p. 43).

In the pages to follow, we describe the holding environment as a core component of the Institute as it supports the development of a relational learning community (RLC). Where Kegan's holding environment is described as fostering a "psychological evolution," the RLC also attends to the relational evolution that participants must make in order to experience this level of transformational learning ([Drago-Severson, 2009](#); [Kegan & Lahey, 2001](#); [Mezirow, 2000](#)).

Our understanding of transformational adult learning is also informed by [Mezirow's \(2000\)](#) foundational work in this domain. Beginning with "a disorienting dilemma" and continuing through a range of experiences that include "a critical assessment of assumptions," "planning a course of action," "provisional trying on of new roles," and "a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective" (p. 22), Mezirow offers a hint regarding the place that experimenting with "role" occupies in adult learning. While the notion of a "disorienting dilemma" is echoed in many other theories, including Kegan's notion of "disequilibrium" and Dewey's concept of "a felt difficulty," Mezirow alerts us to the idea that experimenting with the roles that one plays and the consequent reorganization of identity is central in transformational learning. Our study addresses this question of role directly as we examine the place of role-sanctioned challenge in professional development settings.

In sum, our theoretical lenses for analysis guide us to connect core aspects of transformative learning: relational educative experiences that trigger disequilibrium or felt difficulty, deconstructing previous understandings, experimentation with role in the learning experience itself, and the reconstruction of new understandings. In the sections to follow, we will illustrate the ways in which these dimensions emerged in some of our participants' learning.

METHOD

Participants and Data Sources

This study is based on our research with 12 participants from the 2009 Summer Teachers' Institute.⁴ While all participants' data was studied, we focus below on the experiences of five teachers whose descriptions of their own learning was especially instructive for us as researchers, and illustrative of the themes we found among all the participants' narratives.

We draw our findings from a variety of data sources: semi-structured interviews, observation during the Institute, reflective writings by the participants and the facilitators, and participants' essays exploring their own teaching practice subsequent to their Institute experience. This expansive data set provides a window to their "reflection-on-action" as participants slowed their thinking and practice processes down and opened them for our collective exploration (Schön, 1983).

From our analysis of prior Institute participants' experiences (Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009; Raider-Roth, Stieha, & Hensley, 2012), we know the *bevruta* partnerships are central to their learning throughout the week. Therefore, Institute facilitators used a pre-Institute writing assignment that focused on the individuals' backgrounds and preferred learning styles to create these pairings prior to the weeklong experience. We also sought to pair participants whose background, knowledge, and exposure to Jewish culture differed. The *bevruta* dyads remained intact for the weeklong seminar.

Recruitment for the Institute was conducted through the CSJEC website and listserves, partnering organizations' websites, and through University of Cincinnati and HUC-JIR Cincinnati course catalogues.⁵ These teachers came to the Institute from a wide variety of backgrounds and educational roles. They ranged from early- to late-career educators, from public and private schools teaching elementary, middle, and high school students. Three taught supplemental school in synagogues and one—an Episcopal priest—taught youth and adults in his church's supplemental educational program. Two taught in Jewish Community Center educational programs. Several of them explained that they came to the Institute for purely "selfish" reasons; as lifelong learners who were drawn to the topic, they sought to explore Jewish culture through text and film. A few enrolled to earn continuing education credits required for their teaching certification. They were a diverse group. Perhaps it is this diversity in perspective and purpose that makes the learning community that we describe so compelling.

⁴There were 13 participants in all. One person declined to participate in the research study.

⁵UC and HUC-JIR students had the option of receiving graduate credit for their participation in the Institute.

Summer Teachers' Institute Curricular Context

In order to contextually ground the forthcoming findings, we offer a brief overview of the curricular practices that shaped this Institute. As a seminar rooted in a relational and reflective orientation, our first effort was to create a productive “holding environment” (Kegan, 1994). This involved community-building exercises each day of the Institute—including ice-breakers, sharing meals together, singing a *niggun* (traditional Jewish wordless melody) each morning, and setting norms for discussion and collective work. Additionally, we asked teachers to share feedback on their learning each day with the faculty so that we could adjust the curriculum and agenda of the day to accommodate teachers' needs.

As discussed in the opening vignette, *hevruta* learning was a key practice in constructing the Institute as both an experience of Jewish culture as well as a pedagogical orientation. *Hevruta* partners studied ancient Talmudic texts which focused on teaching-learning relationships. Approximately half of each Institute day was dedicated to learning in *hevruta* and about the practices that best supported this form of dyadic learning.

The other major curricular strand of the Institute was studying about American Jewish history in an effort to assist teachers in building their subject area expertise, and understanding the multiple dimensions of American Jewish life. Many teachers had witnessed or experienced forms of racism, including anti-Semitism in their own school communities, and were wrestling with understanding how to deepen their own understandings and pedagogy of Jewish history and culture. Core texts studied including films (e.g., *The Tribe*), paintings (e.g., The Franks-Levy portraits), archival letters (e.g., George Washington's letter to the Jewish community of Newport, RI). In addition, understanding the notion of “place” as text was core to our study and involved a daylong field trip to historic Jewish sites in Cincinnati such as Plum Street Temple, the Southern Baptist Church (once the Adath Israel congregation), and the Walnut Hills Cemetery. The Institute's materials/texts were carefully selected with awareness to Dewey's (1963) conception that carefully chosen materials are central to educative experiences.

Inquiry Action Research

This study was constructed as an inquiry action research study. That is, as we designed the curriculum for the Institute, we also designed a research component that could help us understand the impact of our teaching practice and curriculum design (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). As part of a recursive process, we have been conducting inquiry into our Institutes (four in all) and weaving our findings back into our professional development practice since 2007 (Raider-Roth, 2013; Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009; Raider-Roth, Stieha,

Kohan, & Turpin, 2011; Raider-Roth et al., 2012; Stieha, 2010; Stieha & Raider-Roth, 2011, 2012).

This study received IRB approval and all IRB procedures were carefully followed. At the beginning of the Institute, all participants were asked if they would like to participate in this research project, and all were offered informed consent documents.

We intentionally designed reflective moments during the Institute itself to help participants keep their fingers on the pulse of their learning and help us understand how their learning was unfolding in the midst of the Institute. Additionally, some teachers wrote final papers for the Institute in order to receive university credit for their participation; these papers were part of the data set. For the present inquiry, we conducted interviews with the participating teachers 3 months after the Institute, asking them to reflect on their notions of themselves as teachers and learners and how these notions might have changed, been reinforced, and/or been challenged as a result of their experiences in the Institute.

Data Analysis

Our analysis is rooted in feminist grounded theory (Clarke, 2007) and influenced by the Listening Guide (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003; Raider-Roth, 2005; 2011). We began by listening closely to the voices of the participants as we moved through their written and interview narratives. As we listened, we carefully noted the flow of the stories they told, the qualities of the voice as they narrated, marking the texts for deeper analysis as we moved through them. These “first listenings” then helped us identify selections of narratives for “second listenings,” practices we attribute to the Listening Guide (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan et al., 2003; Hartman & Stegel, 2007). In the second listenings, we selected data to follow the “I voice”—the voice of the narrator as he or she spoke of the self in relation to others, as these listenings gave us important clues to the relational qualities of their learning. We did not seek a single “Truth.” Rather, we sought to understand the multiple experiences of our participants as adult learners during and after these professional development experiences.

These processes marked our analysis as particularly feminist in that we placed primacy on the voices of the participants to drive the emerging themes, voices, and tensions (Clarke, 2007). When we heard issues of “challenging” voiced clearly in many interviews, we decided to follow these narrative threads. By listening for the silences in the texts, for the ideas that diverged from dominant cultural understandings, we positioned ourselves as resisting listeners—a feminist analytic stance (Fetterly, 1978; Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Finally, by claiming our own positionalities as researchers,

teachers, and learners; we attempted to understand how our cultural, personal, and professional stances shaped our emerging understandings.

FINDINGS

In this section, we describe four central findings from this study: the importance of a “relational learning community” for challenging; the importance of challenging as a role-sanctioned act; the ways that challenging contributed to some teachers’ sense of authority; and the identity disequilibrium that some teachers experienced.

The Summer Teachers’ Institute as a “Relational Learning Community” for New Learning

As we have argued previously in this journal (Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009), an essential component of the relational learning community is the quality of the relationships participants have with the self, with the other, and the text. Our participants described the Institute’s environment as one that invited them to try out challenging practices they might not have otherwise risked if it were not for the “right amount” of support from the group as a whole, and their *bevruta* partner in particular. To establish an environment with the right blend of support, we began the week with community-building experiences; we created ample time for the *bevruta* partners to meet each other and get to know each other’s learning dispositions, we discussed and recorded ground rules for the group regarding the way discussions would be conducted, and we created daily routines for reflection and feedback. In the discussions of ground rules, we also made explicit that we expected disagreements to occur, and that they were not viewed as a failure of the group, but rather as a necessary part of the learning experience. In this exercise we discussed the cultural norms that the group needed in order to cultivate fertile ground for productive disagreement, an essential component of challenging.

In analyzing the participants’ interviews, reflections, and final papers, we found that they noticed and remarked on the effort put forth to create the learning community. Interestingly, their attention to the relational dynamics of the group was often tied to their experiences of challenging. Marie,⁶ a Catholic veteran language arts teacher at a Catholic middle school, described the “challenging” practices of the Institute to be central learning for her:

Well, you know, I had to get comfortable with the idea of challenging, too. Which is what I am now having my students do. But I had to get comfortable with that. . .and I had the perfect partner during the [Institute]

⁶All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

because she was not comfortable with it either and so, the two of us struggled through that together. And of course we had to help each other, you know. Um, it helped that she was a nice person (l. 136-140).

Marie described the group as “a big safety net” that surrounded her experience of challenging. Her language drew us to Kegan’s (1994) description of a “holding environment” and opened us up to the possibility of viewing the learning community in this light.

Marie described the relational dynamics of the Institute that helped her feel at ease and lessened her concern that she might feel isolated as a non-Jewish teacher from a Catholic school. She began by saying that the “confidence-building activities. . .were very helpful because it made me feel like I was able to be a part of the group and not isolated from the group” (l. 177-179). By highlighting these activities, ones that we had originally thought of as ice-breakers and community-building activities, as “confidence building,” Marie described a link between trust in the group and trust in herself. In this sense, the RLC facilitated feeling a part of the group and strengthening of self.

Sonia, an accomplished Jewish artist and principal of a small afternoon Hebrew school, echoed Marie’s ideas. She had entered the Institute concerned about feeling isolated as a result of her status as a “lay teacher” without formal training in education, but with years of hands-on experience. Her concerns were allayed early on because she found the group “supportive.” Sonia explained this experience:

It was an incredibly supportive group. I think we all got the concept of exposing yourself and trusting and being able to be challenged but understanding that the challenge was for growth, not for knocking you down. So we were good at that. Which made it a pretty fertile environment in which to learn (l. 649-652).

Like Marie, Sonia tied the “supportive group” to the process of challenging, which created a “fertile” learning environment. Later in her interview Sonia described the group as “very supportive of each other. It was a very safe environment” (l. 676). It is important to highlight Sonia’s idea of safety—it was safety that allowed challenging for growth. We hear Sonia’s statement of “exposing yourself and trusting and being able to be challenged” as akin to Kegan’s (1994) notion of the holding environment which “provides both welcoming acknowledgement to exactly who person is right now as he or she is *and* [italics added] fosters the person’s psychological evolution” (p. 43).

Marie underscored this idea in her final paper for the course. When reflecting on her own practice as a teacher, she recounted:

While I have always been a strong proponent of collaborative learning, I have never encouraged active challenges within a small group setting.

The rationale for this came from a belief that good “team players” do not create discontent within their group. By encouraging—even requiring—group consensus, I often times discouraged the challenging of teammates in the false promise of group harmony. I now see it differently. Students are *obligated* to challenge each other, so that in considering the other’s point of view, both are strengthened (Post-Institute essay, p. 2).

In her poetic description of the idea of “false promise of group harmony,” Marie described a common notion of safety—where group consensus is desired or required, eliminating discontent. She now saw the learning community as one in which students are required to challenge rather than agree. In both participants’ statements we hear their understanding of the purposes of the RLC; it was not to create superficial connections, harmony, or consensus. Rather, the RLC, functioning as a “holding environment” essential to adult development (Kegan, 1994), provided grounding for the practice of challenging for growth—that is, of challenging for more meaningful learning.

Role-Sanctioned Challenge: Uncertainty and Growth

For many participants, challenging one another was unfamiliar ground—it took them out of the dominant cultural patterns for interaction. However, because challenging was a requirement at the Institute, and there was an explicit understanding that all would explore these new forms of interaction, participants’ hesitations were eased as they questioned their partners’ ideas, interpretations, and associations. Additionally, as demonstrated in the section above, the relational learning community provided participants a safe space within which they could challenge and be challenged without feeling personally attacked. Essentially, the RLC supported the learners’ explorations of roles in which challenging practices were sanctioned, expected, and fostered. It is important to recognize that even given this “role-sanctioned” permission within the RLC, challenging practices created a degree of uncertainty for the participants. In the findings to follow, we highlight the places in which the participants narrate this unfamiliar ground, highlighting these moments as destabilizations and then describing subsequent growth. We view this process as transformative learning, as it aligns with Mezirow’s (2000) phases of growth as previously described.

To understand the dynamics of this transformation, we return to Marie, who helped us identify the ways she enacted role-sanctioned challenge in her various life roles. From within her “big safety net,” Marie had the opportunity to explore these practices and develop comfort with them. The faculty and curriculum compelled Marie to “try this out, but you know, [the faculty are] here if it doesn’t, if you get, frustrated. And I didn’t feel frustrated with it.” The safety net she perceived in the Institute seemed to function to facilitate her growth as she became comfortable engaging in challenging practices

under the right blend of circumstances. She located challenging as something that was “new learning for me. . . . And now it feels second nature.”

Marie’s newfound comfort with challenging led her to experiment with these practices in non-Institute relationships:

With my friends, or family or whatever, I, I feel like if they say something to me, or even with my husband, I need to ask them, well, where is that coming from? Or what evidence do you have of that, or why are you bringing that up now?. . . Which, I probably would have been much more hesitant to do before. Or just not do at all (l. 391-395).

Perhaps the most compelling phrase in this narrative for our inquiry is Marie’s assertion of her new stance: “if they say. . . I need to ask them.” In her account of this discourse outside of the classroom she told us she “probably” would not previously have asked for “evidence” or cause (i.e. “why are you bringing that up now?”). Her account suggests that the shift she experienced as a teacher reached into other relationships as well. Having seen the nuances of text that could be uncovered, recast, reinterpreted, and modified via the processes of challenging, Marie’s response suggests that there might be underlying factors or different interpretations waiting to be discovered, even in the most mundane conversations. In revisiting her relational stance in her roles as a friend, wife, and teacher we can also see Marie work at Mezirow’s (2000) phase of “reintegration” of this new perspective into her life, or in Kegan’s (1994) perspective, knowing in a new way.

The practices of challenging seemed to function as new lenses through which Marie was able to view the world and her understandings of truths, realities, and assumptions. Marie acknowledged that even in her own faith she was “questioning more now”—an admission that was made with observable tension during her interview. Marie did not discuss the Jewish dimension of the challenging practices she had learned and chose not to focus on this questions of her own faith.⁷ Rather, she redirected the conversation toward her shifting classroom practices. She spoke of a moral obligation to arrange her classroom to function as a space within which challenging practices were welcomed: “I mean, if it has changed me somewhat, then it is valuable and I need to pass on that to [my students], too.” Marie’s use of imperative phrases (“I need to. . . I have to”) emphasized that because the practices of *bevruta* were meaningful for her, “I feel like then I *have to* find a way to use it with the kids.” In Mezirow’s (2000) terms, she was “planning a course of action” (p. 22), a plan that was ethically bound to help her students explore the

⁷While this cohort of participants did not focus on the Jewish nature of the challenging practices, the cohort from our 2010 seminar attended to this more directly. See Raider-Roth (2013) for this discussion. The reasons for the difference in cohort responses is important to investigate in future studies.

discovery, collaboration, and critical thinking that can be achieved through challenging processes.

As we discussed above, Marie described her pedagogical shift from one who favored consensus and accord to one who promoted challenging, questioning, and reinterpretation in her post-Institute assignment:

Students are obligated to challenge each other, so that in considering the other's point of view, both are strengthened. Because each voicing of an idea involves the risk of challenge from their partner, students are required to provide more powerful evidence for their stance (Post-Institute essay, p. 2).

In this reflective narrative, Marie demonstrated how her learning at the Institute led her to revisit her notions of teaching and her ideas about what it means to be a contributing member of a group. By reporting that her students are “obligated to challenge each other,” she informed us that she has replicated an Institute-like environment in her classroom where the roles of students became sanctioned and where challenging practices are promoted and appreciated. We view this transformation in light of [Mezirow's phases \(2000\)](#) where she revisits her own assumptions about teaching, plans a new approach to the study of literature in her classroom, requires her students to try on new roles, and considers the impact of these changes on her life as a teacher and learner.

Role-Sanctioned Challenge: A Counterstory

As we suggested at the outset of this section, the expectations of role-sanctioned challenging stand in marked contrast with some participants' personal histories. For some, the challenging and questioning embedded in the *hevruta* practices was a marked departure from their familial, religious, and cultural expectations for discourse and text study. In this sense it offered a counterstory or “a story that illustrated new opportunities and ways of thinking about teaching and learning” ([Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009](#), p. 222). Derived from [Nelson's \(1995\)](#) conception of counterstory, these are stories that challenge the narratives of the dominant culture. In this case, we hear the teachers talk about the ways that engaging the challenging practices confronted and constrained their roles either in classrooms or in other domains of their lives. We hear a whisper of this idea from Marie who suggests, if only briefly, that there are aspects of her life that may not accommodate challenge. Recall our mention above that she begins to reference challenging her own religion's ideas and then quickly changes the direction of her narrative.

From Kate, we heard another view of this type of critical reflection on her Institute experiences in relation to her upbringing. In her

post-Institute interview, Kate, a non-Jewish doctoral student in education, described how questioning and challenging were not practices common to her working-class household. The language practices of her family, described as “reporting, not discussing,” contrasted with those of the Institute and academia where she hopes to create a career as a professor. As she noted, “My dad was a steel worker, I grew up in a very working class family and it was a pretty quiet way of life.” In reflection, she explained how the demands of the Institute were not aligned with the ways she grew up communicating with her family:

I have trouble asking questions when I already understand something. And when I think I get [my *bevruta* partner], then it’s hard for me to contrive—sometimes it feels like I would be contriving something to ask her. Just to make her talk more and to be participating this way that I feel like I need to participate (l. 101-104).

Kate acknowledged that *bevruta* practices could uncover hidden ideas, stating “Even though it seemed pretty straightforward, I didn’t get the whole picture the first time around,” and “I see why we need to question it and can’t just. . . assume that our first conclusions were the fullest ones we could get” (l. 257-259). However, it was also evident in her interview that she saw the challenging practices of the Institute as culturally embedded. She noted “how this *bevruta* structure might be more representative of some people’s ways of interacting than others. And how it wouldn’t be necessarily easy for all people to just come together and share interpretations” (l. 192-194).

By experimenting with these particular culturally embedded and sanctioned practices as a counterstory, Kate had opportunities to voice and challenge in ways that were not comfortable for her; however, she notes that her future success as a scholar would depend on the use of challenging practices similar to those of *bevruta*:

If I want to ask questions at conferences, or if I want to, say, be a dissertation advisor someday, it’s not okay to just say, “yeah, that was great.” You’ve got—even if it was great—you’ve got to be able to come up with some questions and be able to follow it up and extrapolate to go down different avenues. . . (l. 105-109).

When we listened to this passage for the “I voice” that she uses here, we heard her internal dialogue about this transition in which she sees herself engaged. As suggested by the Listening Guide (Gilligan et al., 2003), we extracted the pronominal voices that can represent “self.” Listening in this way, we heard a spare yet powerful dialogue, “If I want. . . if I want. . . you’ve got to. . . you’ve got to.” We heard her desire in the repeated “I want” phrases, and the replying obligation (“you’ve got to”) to enact these

challenging acts. We heard in Kate's internal dialogue that integrating these practices does not come easily or without struggle. Rather, it is a process embedded in professional growth.

She concluded by explaining that challenging is "something that I need to work on in all aspects of my scholarship." In her narrative, we understood her growing awareness that challenging practices are not only sanctioned within the roles of professors—they are required. Kate stated that even prior to the Institute, "I was trying to package up my thoughts about my ways of interacting or not interacting and how they do or don't go along with what I feel like a professor's role is supposed to be" (l. 125-127). In this way, Kate's Institute experience helped her bring these two worlds together.

Both Marie and Kate identified connections among the challenging practices of the *bevruta* sessions at the Institute and their personal and/or professional roles beyond the Institute. We draw direct connections to [Mezirow's \(2000\)](#) transformative learning phase of "provisional trying on of new roles" (p. 22) in these descriptions. Marie began to see applications of the questioning and challenging behaviors of *bevruta* in her role as a teacher. She stated her sense of obligation to create a sanctioned space in her classroom within which her students could participate in challenging practices. In addition, she found questioning and challenging to be useful tools for enhancing mutual understanding in her relationships as wife and friend. Though Kate felt that the practices of *bevruta* were not language practices used in all cultures—including her own family culture—she recognized that they were similar to those that she would be expected to demonstrate in her roles as a scholar and future professor. Both women saw the potential in *bevruta* practices to elicit more meaning from text than might be found on a first reading. To sanction these practices for particular roles was to create a safe space in which "challenging" would be considered a positive, meaning-making pursuit rather than an offensive, competitive endeavor. While we cannot say what might have happened for these teachers if their assumption of new roles in *bevruta* was optional rather than a requirement of the course, we can say that this requirement provided them an opportunity to try on new roles as a learning partner. In [Kegan's \(1994\)](#) framework, we can see the teachers' descriptions of challenging in their *bevruta* roles as integral parts of their personal and professional growth.

Role-Sanctioned Challenge and Identity Disequilibrium

As we reflected on Marie and Kate's descriptions of the shift in their different life roles, we became aware of the disequilibrium that challenging practices posed as well as possible shifts in aspects of the teachers' personal and professional identities. We define identity here as a dynamic process, as clearly described by [Rodgers and Scott \(2008\)](#): "[I]dentity (1) is always 'in the making,' rather than stable, (2) shifts according to context and relationships,

and (3) is therefore varied and multiple” (p. 736). Our descriptions of identity shift are thus not statements about the teachers’ entire set of identities, but rather those that they “brought to the table” or discussed with us in the Institute and research process.

Sonia introduced the image of “walls” as a metaphor for describing her identity disequilibrium:

Everyone has walls that protect them, and we did really work on breaking those walls down so that we could do the work we needed to do. But by doing so we leave the soft underside exposed and so things come out (l. 454-456).

For Sonia, “walls” and “barriers” became a way of naming both emotional and social protections as well as fears of what lies beyond them. “Work,” meanwhile, was the learning that took place through and with others and texts at the Institute. Sonia located the reason for her “wall” as protecting that personal “soft underside” that is “exposed” when walls and barriers are confronted, climbed, or broken through. Because she felt safely ensconced in the RLC, she could be vulnerable.

The walls of other participants were described with different language but in similar ways. Paul, a non-Jewish English teacher in a public high school and Sonia’s *bevruta* partner, reflected on how the “cooperative learning” practices of the Institute were “brand new to [him]” and something that pushed him:

I am typically a solo learner. . . . Even as a teacher, I haven’t really pushed myself outside of my comfort zone to even do that with my students. So, the whole idea of working, you know, with a partner, or a few occasions in small groups, that’s a challenge for me. . . . I tend to see things my way, and that is something that I fight against as a teacher. I sometimes work to welcome other perspectives. It was really good for me to be able to stretch in a way. To be forced to recognize, validate another perspective, and to welcome challenges (l. 22-34).

In this passage, Paul located both his learner and teacher identities, through his past experiences, and what is comfortable for him in these roles. Paul’s barriers concern his “comfort zone,” and like Sonia he recognized the need to “stretch” beyond the barriers that that zone imposes on him. We heard a description that paralleled Sonia’s use of “the underside” when Paul went on to admit that he can be “thin skinned sometimes, [and have] a little tunnel vision.” For Paul, challenging practices and reflection on those practices allowed him to come to terms with what hindered him as a relational learner and teacher. In Paul and Sonia’s descriptions we hear clear illustrations of Dewey’s (1933/1989) conception of a “felt difficulty”—the origin of reflective

thought or learning, Mezirow's (2000) "disorienting dilemma"—the origin of transformative learning, and Kegan's (1994) conception of destabilization—a necessary component of adult development.

By reflecting on his sense of self prior to the Institute in comparison to his learning during the Institute, Paul was able to locate his initial trepidation over collaborative text study. He then moved toward understanding his own assets as a collaborative learner as well as those of others. He explained this process:

. . . it's kind of challenging working with other adults especially other educators to kind of pull back a little bit and be more collaborative. I don't want to step on toes—I'm very sensitive too. I'm a pleaser. I don't want people upset with me and I don't want to be overbearing and dominating. So, it's always a challenge for me to balance that out, particularly when you are just getting familiar with people. Everybody is kind of figuring out the dynamics and what roles each person is going to play, and. . . I can play different roles. I don't have to be a leader, the spokesperson, whatever. But it is always kind of interesting to feel that out, and kind of figure out, what you're going to be (l. 325-332).

Reflecting here, Paul seemed to transcend his learner and teacher selves to reveal how he sees himself as a person beyond school and his profession. As he located himself as someone who was "sensitive," "a pleaser," and capable of "play[ing] different roles," he was showing that he went beyond reading the text and his academic self, and was now also reading others' needs, perspectives, and assets and realizing that he could respond accordingly. Seeing himself as part of a larger production where he played multiple roles speaks to what he has discovered by "stretch[ing]" beyond his comfort zone at the Institute through challenging practices. Most central to this discussion is his final comment—this kind of work propelled him to consider "what you're going to be."

Other participants described the way in which challenge was internalized at the beginning of the Institute. Marie struggled with the fear that she was "not going to keep up," while Shira, a rabbinical student whose teaching includes her role on the pulpit of a small synagogue, initially equated challenge with conflict, something she was averse to from her past experiences. Yet each of these participants also went on to explain how challenge in a trusting community provided a "safe space" (Shira), "big safety net" (Marie), or a place to "take risks" (Sonia)—and that allowed them to discover "fertile ground" for learning and teaching. In all of these cases, Sonia's image of confronting a wall as well as overcoming or breaking through it provided an important metaphor for describing the internal process of transformation that teachers experienced in the Institute. While the "walls" that each participant confronted were different, they each grappled with the concern that this "wall" presented an obstacle to engaging in meaningful work and learning.

Role-Sanctioned Challenge: Voicing and Authority

In the design of the Institute, challenging practices were developed hand-in-hand with those of supporting and voicing. As we listened closely to our participants' experiences of challenging, we heard that accompanying (or following) disequilibrium were references to the interlacing trilogy of practices (challenging, supporting, and voicing) and an articulation of "authority" in this empowering combination. We heard "authority" expressed as the sense that participants "had something to say," that they were the "authors" of their experiences, and that they constructed ownership of their evolving knowledge. Additionally, this kind of authoring facilitated their capacity to contribute to others' learning at the Institute. Finally, this sense of authority enhanced their confidence for supporting their students' learning following the Institute. In this section, we describe authority as a sense of authorship and agency.

It was Paul who first helped us understand this role of authority in relation to challenging and voicing. Early in his interview, Paul told us that he returned to his own classroom following the Institute feeling like "more of an authority." As we sought to unpack the sources for this learning, we saw a connection to the experiences he had in his *bevruta* partnership. In addition to this important relationship, Paul also helped us see how his learning at the Institute gave him the confidence to bring this experience to his own high school English classroom. In a sense, his narrative explained to us how he has come to see himself as an "author" of his own practice.

Although Paul began the week "expecting to kind of follow [Sonia's] lead" because of her vast background in Judaism, he remarked that "the tables kind of got turned" when she relied on his expertise in "analyzing text" and "finding deeper meanings." In Paul's discussion of his relationship with Sonia, he wove together voicing, authority, and challenge by showing how the *bevruta* partnership supported his work and learning. Paul explained:

We talked several times about how, how we complemented each other. There were times where her knowledge of, of Judaism really helped out, or of Hebrew. Where she had a perspective on, you know, translations or whatever, that there—that I had no idea, or I was kind of lost. When we got to that last project where we created the, we created the model. . . . Being the graphics design person she was, it was like, "I will be your, your gopher here. You tell me what materials to get." So she was, yea, she was the concept person. But then she expected me to kind of distill it into, to tweak it so that it had more meaning for the rest of the group (l. 112-120).

In this passage we saw the interplay of a role-sanctioned authority within the context of challenging, supporting, and voicing. Paul first introduced Sonia's areas of authority: "her knowledge of, of Judaism. . . or of Hebrew" and "being a graphic design person." Then he moved to the ways that he

supported Sonia's ideas, given her authority. However, he did not simply follow Sonia. He explained that she "was the concept person," however, "she expected me to kind of distill [their collaborative project] into, to tweak it so that it had more meaning for the rest of the group." As Paul "distilled" or "tweaked" the partnership's message, Sonia was asking him to add his voice, calling upon his expertise—as an English teacher and one who has an affinity for words—to share their learning with the larger group. In this relationship, Paul illustrated how each partner was challenged to both step forward and pull back, to give the other his or her "voice," and to "author" by virtue of their roles and their relationship. We hear echoes of Freire (1970) in Paul's description of his experiences with Sonya, particularly in the joint responsibility for learning that was enacted through the challenging practices. We can also hear the "ingenious blend of support and challenge" that Kegan (1994) sees as crucial to adult development.

Like Paul, whose explanation of authoring—or gaining authority—was based largely in his learning partnership with Sonia, Shira's experience of authority also had roots in her *bevruta* partnership with Kate. Elie's assertion that, "challenging is something that you want to practice, obviously when you disagree, but even when you agree" figured largely in Shira's story. Shira, however, also connected this authority to a sense of growth in relationship with self.

Shira, a rabbinical student who was drawn to the Institute because of her passion for teaching, did not anticipate her Institute experience to "challenge" her. Yet, as she shared her reflections on her Institute experience, she drew heavily on Elie's instruction about *bevruta* practice as being "most important" in her learning. Shira clearly articulated the way that her Institute experience had played into her life in a fascinating blend that speaks to multiple aspects of her personal and professional identities. Her narrative traced the ways she integrated the lessons she carried from the Institute into her roles as a learner, as a rabbinic intern and teacher in a small rural congregation, and as a mother.

Shira's insight into supportive challenge from the Institute breathed a sense of authority into her ideas of how she could interact in relationships following the Institute. She came to see the challenging practices at the Institute as opportunities to approach questioning behaviors of others and herself "in a way that I don't feel personally attacked. And try to ask them questions in a way that they feel is respectful." Rather than dwell on challenge as a source of personal attack, Shira embraced her sense that challenge could deepen her interactions with students in her educational role. She concluded that she had reframed challenge as a way to think about the teaching and learning relationship "not just in terms of the text, but to think like a student. How would someone unfamiliar with this text challenge it and challenge me? How should I challenge someone? How, how is this relevant to the world?" (l. 342-344). As we listened to Shira, we heard her expanding her

understanding of the interactions in this relationship between text, teacher, and student as one that is imbued with multiple perspectives. It is not limited to her prior understanding (“I think it means this. Oh, I agree”) but opened the relationship to “relevance” beyond the text to the “world.”

As Shira connected her understanding of challenge and voicing as having relevance to the “world,” she also linked a growing sense of self to the ideas of challenging and voicing. Her narrative expanded to the deeply personal and emotional tendrils of her experience as she referred to the ways in which learning about challenge spoke to her:

I’m not just talking about who I want to be, I’m always looking for ways of self-betterment. It’s my own personal challenge to become a better Rabbi, a better woman, a better wife, a mother. How do I interact in ways with my son that will encourage him to challenge and not be afraid of conflict? Because I was raised to be afraid of conflict. And how do I help him realize that it’s safe to ask questions? But also not to be too pushy. You know, what are ways in which you can frame things? (l. 829-834).

Essentially, in this narrative we heard the intermingling of challenge and voice, as she talked about the ways her learning played into her “authoring” of her different life roles. Shira moved from her earliest associations of “challenge” as conflict (hence something to be avoided), to a path of “self betterment” and “personal challenge.” Enumerating her own challenges, she included, “to become a better Rabbi, a better woman, a better wife, a mother.” As she questioned, “how do I interact in ways with my son that will encourage him to challenge and not to be afraid of conflict?” she moved beyond “conflict” to refer to the root of challenge. She desired to help him “realize that it’s safe to ask questions” in a way that suggests she desired for him to “have a say.” In connecting her reconceptualization of challenge in her multiple roles, Shira constructed her authority in these roles. By shifting her conception of “conflict” to “challenge,” her conception of teaching and learning is transformed. Shira’s narrative resonates with [Kegan’s \(1994\)](#) description of adult learning and development: that is, when a person realizes, learns, or otherwise comes to the conclusion that “how [she] knows” does not meet the demands that she is facing in her life, aspects of her old self are released and new aspects of self are constructed.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Through the challenging process described in this article, a relational learning community was formed and deepened. Participants uncovered and exchanged valuable ideas, gained confidence, and constructed greater insight

into and comfort with collaborative text study. They described the central place of challenge in deepening their learning at the Institute which supported their personal and professional growth by influencing their teaching, content knowledge, and relationships in and beyond school.

Our action research studies of teacher learning in our summer Institutes (see Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009; Raider-Roth et al., 2012; Stieha & Raider-Roth, 2011, 2012) have detailed the learning phenomena that we have observed and that the teachers have described. We have understood the transformative possibilities of this kind of learning (Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009), we have become alert to the moments of rupture and repair that occur in these settings (Raider-Roth et al., 2012), and discovered the centrality of the relational web of the teacher's school in supporting and thwarting her capacity to bring her learning back to her practice (Stieha, 2010; Stieha & Raider-Roth, 2012). In this study, we now understand more about the central factors in building a relational learning community—including the acts of challenging, supporting, and voicing—and the ways that community support adult learning and growth in this professional development experience.

While this Institute is one instance of teacher learning, we believe that larger lessons can be learned from it and directions for future research can be discerned. The findings from this study alert us to the opportunity for focused analysis of the conditions that foster teachers' learning in professional development. First, the "holding environment" of professional development settings must be a central aspect of the overall design for professional development. That is, paying close attention to how and why community is formed, is central to creating fertile ground for learning. Second, a community that embraces "challenge" is one that invites multiple perspectives and dissenting views, and lays the groundwork for voicing unpopular ideas, or ideas that an individual herself may be wary of expressing. Third, in creating such a learning setting, teacher educators must be alert to the challenges to identity and self that may be evoked, and create opportunities for interactive reflection and support. Because these challenges and the accompanying practice of reflection can be intense, it is necessary for the participants to keep a finger on their own affective pulse and understand what is being stirred up for them. In practice, this underscores the importance of regular opportunities for participants' reflection on learning experiences during professional development experiences. Multiple modalities for such reflection are crucial as well (e.g., solo writing, oral whole group reflections, private exchanges with instructors or facilitators). In so doing, participants and educators can continually shape the environment to provide an ample amount of support, and create optimal learning opportunities.

As action researchers, we are obligated to think about the action that we will take as a result of this research. From a practical perspective, this study shapes our curriculum design for our Institutes. We have learned that the challenging practices can evoke strong responses from our participants,

especially concerning their own histories regarding conflict and voicing disagreement. We are sure to both create opportunities for discussion of the connections that participants are making between the practices and their own lives and make sure that each day participants reflect on their learning. The act of reflecting on the confrontation of their “walls” can assist teachers to, in the words of Kegan, “make the subject object” (1994). That is, rather than being held back or paralyzed by meeting a wall, they have the time to see it, name it, and perhaps create strategies for traversing it.

As an action research investigation, this study propels us to continue understanding, implementing, and reflecting on transformational professional development practices and dispositions. By creating a relational learning community, providing permission to move beyond culturally received norms to challenge understandings and unsettling professional and personal identities in a professional development context, we begin to understand the kind of work that is necessary to support the teaching of culture and religion in the 21st century.

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