

Betsy Forester
Post Seminar Three Havruta Assignment
Journal

I invited a mentor/mentee pair to do this activity. One teaches grades 7 & 8 Science; one teaches grades 7 & 8 Social Studies. All of us are around the same age, and all are Jewish. One is Melton-educated and a leader in her Conservative congregation. The other can read Hebrew but has no text knowledge and is not observant. We decided to make it an outing and met off-campus, after school, on June 1, 2016.

I chose to teach a Talmud text from Sanhedrin 75a. It is a relatively short and strange sugya. On the surface, it's about whether extramarital sex should be regulated. It is engaging, surprising, historically interesting, of a manageable length, divisible into three distinct sections, relevant for adults today, and relevant to our school because of its implications for modesty and dress code, which is an issue for us.

Each participant was given a packet containing the following: the original Talmud page; my English version, broken into three parts, each with instructions and questions; and a related article for further reading.

I opened the conversation by sharing that through my MTEI work, I am exploring the question of whether Jewish text study practices could be utilized in mentoring conversations, collegial work, and PD, using our work (transcripts, videos, written artifacts) as the text.

I used this language:

- This can be a model for looking at teaching practices as a text and digging in to uncover what lies behind them and where they lead.
- "I'd like to work on a way to study text which is different from the way we usually talk. I want us to learn a language and a way of approaching the text that focuses on careful listening, challenging one another and supporting each other as we explore the meaning of the text. Learning to study together in this way is not only beneficial for text study. It can also help us develop ways of talking and thinking about our work that will help all of us improve our practices as teachers in a lot of different ways. And it also is an engaging pedagogy for our students."

I summarized the goals of this activity:

1. to explore the use of Jewish text study methods
2. to open a conversation about broader applications for our faculty
3. to learn an intriguing text with relevance to us and our students

Next, we looked at the Talmud page together. I gave a brief explanation of its main components. I told my colleagues that at the end of our time together, they would have studied the marked portion of the page. There was some explanation and discussion of what Talmud is and does, and where it stands in relation to Tanakh.

Next, I introduced the idea of supporting and challenging by describing the purpose (drawing out what the text may be trying to say) and then offering an opportunity for my colleagues to reflect on the differences between MTEI's boxed presentations of common conversational patterns and norms as compared to norms for "good" (text) learning.

I read the text out loud and asked my colleagues what they noticed as they followed along. They shared:

- It sounds conversational, or interactive.
- It has personality.
- The text is unvocalized and unpunctuated.

We looked at the English version I had created for them, in which I kept the English as raw and choppy as the Hebrew/Aramaic and did not punctuate it or capitalize the beginnings of sentences. It felt as much like the Hebrew/Aramaic text as possible.

I told them that their first task would be to read the text aloud together and decide together how to punctuate it. Then, they would discuss and answer the questions under the text (see below). They took a moment to look at the text and notice its choppy appearance. I gave each person three cue cards with supporting/challenging prompts that are fairly easy to use and asked that they try to use them as they worked through the text and to turn over a card after they had used it. They read over the cards before beginning.

I meant to say that it's ok to come up with a half-baked interpretation, but I didn't.

They jumped in and it was pretty awesome. They used the cue cards, occasionally with gentle prompting from me, but mostly on their own, quite naturally. They really explored different possible interpretations, and I helped them to articulate their different theories and clarify their questions about the text.

Occasionally, I joined in to raise their awareness about the possible meanings of words and to provide relevant background information as it became relevant.

After some discussion of the questions for the first section, I gave each person five, new supporting/challenging prompt cards. They were a bit deeper than the first set. Each took a moment to become familiar with the new cards before repeating the same activity with the second section of the text.

The pair really developed a flow and went much deeper into the text's possible meanings. They used many of the cue cards effectively and naturally pushed each other. At one point, I noticed that they were "parallel talking" and I redirected them by offering a prompt to articulate the different ideas that were on the table. That was enough of a re-focus for them to listen to one another again, with challenges and supports to bring forth the strongest possible articulations of possible meanings. A few times, one of them would direct their comments/ideas to me. I simply pointed to the other partner, which was effective in changing the eye contact, and the other partner jumped into respond. This happened in each direction.

In the interest of time, I read the third section out loud in English and asked them to punctuate it as I read. Then, I directed them to check their punctuation with each other and discuss the final questions.

At the end, I provided time for everyone to summarize their best understanding of what the text was about and the variety of issues it raised. Together, we drew connections to the related issues we face in our own lives and at school. We pondered together the question of whether and how the methodology they had practiced could be utilized with our colleagues, as queried above. They shared insightful thoughts about the benefits, as well as the challenges of integrating such a model.

Their feedback was positive. They shared that they were able to shift perspectives and focus more intellectually when they had to support their thinking from the text, rather than reading their own emotions or wishes into the text.

I also provided a related article on modesty that used our text as one of several key sources.

This went incredibly well. I had thought it would, but I noted the following:

1. I thought carefully about each detail as I constructed the activity and it helped that I had practiced how I wanted to present the different parts. I wanted it to feel smooth, natural, fresh, and real. It did, even for me!
2. My colleagues were receptive, respectful, eager participants. Each asked questions that grew their background knowledge about Jewish practices in antiquity (for the first colleague) and Jewish texts (for the other).
3. The cue cards were helpful, and my colleagues enjoyed the challenge of using them.
4. We really had fun. We met at a bar and really had looked forward to the outing.
5. I managed the time well. It took exactly an hour, plus about 10 minutes of social time.

I sent the following email afterwards:

*You two are rock stars! Thank you so much for spending time with me around a page of Talmud and related questions about text study and how human beings try to figure it out how to live in the world. I really do wonder about the applications for professional conversations around our practice, and your thoughts helped me begin to shape my thinking about that. Thank you SOOOOOOOO much for giving me your time today and engaging in what I love most--Talmud study around the big questions and tensions of being human. And Paul, thanks again for the milkshake!!
Have a great night.
Betsy*

The new teacher, for whom this had been his first exposure to Talmud, wrote:

*Not only happy to help you, but I really found the material to be fascinating. Plus I think the pairing concept was really interesting ... working with Suzy is always fun for me. You have an excellent handle on the process, and really know how to move discussions in a good direction without forcing it. That takes a certain kind of talent, which I suspect few people possess. But you do!
Thanks for asking me to do it!*

I have spent considerable professional time developing these practices for students. It was great fun to put them to use with peers and see how deep they could go. We had a rich discussion that brought us closer to each other and to our work as well. It was very, very rewarding!

I learned through our discussion and what I observed that in order to make this work for broader collegial conversations, we need to teach the methodologies very carefully and practice them. Text selection will be very important. We have colleagues who will find it very challenging to resist reacting based on their own assumptions and feelings rather than keeping the focus on the text and keeping the tone intellectual and curious.

PART ONE

Punctuate the text:

said Rav Yehudah said Rav there was a case in which a man gave his eyes in one woman and his heart raised up passion and they came and asked to the physicians and they said he has no cure until she is husbanded/sexed said sages he will die and she will not be sexed to him she will stand before him naked he will die and not she will stand before him naked she will tell stories with him from behind the fence he will die and not she will tell stories with him from behind the fence

- Can you narrate this passage coherently, sentence by sentence, in your own words?
- What is this text about?
- Who are the players?
- What are the issues/what is at stake?

Notes:

PART TWO

Punctuate the text:

divided in it Rabbi Yaacov son of Idi and Rabbi Shmuel son of Nachmani one
said wife of a man she was and one said available she was reasonable
according to the one who said the wife of a man she was it is well but
according to the one who said available what is all this

- Can you narrate this coherently, in your own words?
- What thought move occurs at this point?
- Any new thoughts on what this text is about?

Notes:

PART THREE

Punctuate the text:

Rav Pappa said due to disgrace family Rav Acha son of Rav Ika said in order that not there will be daughters of Israel bold/unrestrained/lawless in matters of intimacy but if he should just marry her not would be settled his mind as according to Rabbi Yitzchak from day that was destroyed the Holy Temple meaning/sense sex was taken and given to sinners as it is stated stolen waters are sweet and bread of secrecy is pleasant

- Now, what do you think the entire text is about?
- What are the rabbis trying to do here?
- How do you think this narrative might written today? What would be the issues? The stakes? The behaviors in question?

Notes: