

Sara Wolkenfeld

Video Observation

I did this assignment with Daniel Weinberg and Ilana Gleicher-Bloom. Our geographic proximity to one another was helpful, and we were interested in coming together for this video investigation as a group because we have all practiced this before, and thought it would be interesting to take turns facilitating this conversation. We used the script as a jumping off point, with Daniel reading it to us to frame our meeting. This was helpful, as it put us back into the MTEI headspace, and then we each added in occasional reminders of what we have learned, such as reiterating the desire to observe without judging, and reminding one another to pay attention to details and not make assumptions. We followed the plan pretty closely, but we did take turns being the facilitator – asking questions and guiding the conversation – so that was a change from the original assignment. We also chose a video just based on what looked interesting to us. It was a full-group discussion pre- and post-hevruta work, facilitated by Jenny Lewis. Our shared facilitation went well, as we each had a slightly different approach to what was most important to emphasize about the video observation experience.

The conversation definitely went more smoothly because we had a shared language and approach to the video. After the initial framing, our shared experiences made this a comfortable conversation. When one of us said something that seemed a little bit “off” or wasn’t totally in the realm of observation, another would step in and redirect. The activity felt familiar, and while it can sometime feel a little artificial to be so careful about suspending judgment and just observing, we are now familiar enough with this practice that it didn’t feel very difficult.

With a larger group, there certainly would have been more diversity of opinions. I think there would also be more people who would struggle to use the language of observation rather than evaluation, and there could be other differences in orientation as well. Because of our MTEI experience, nothing about the way the lesson we watched was conducted was surprising to us, but I think if someone had not been exposed to that they might have had different reactions.

We spent quite a bit of time talking about what we learned from the experience. For Daniel and Ilana, it was interesting to think about how this was different from observing a teacher in person (their consensus was that the ability to watch the video a second time is an important luxury!). I benefited from hearing their conversation about this, because it wasn’t something I had thought a lot about (as I don’t observe teachers in my work). I was focused on the challenge I find in separating watching the teacher/lesson from watching the students. I tend to feel differently about the lesson if I try to focus on the teacher, versus trying to focus on the students. I think this is because as a teacher, I’m hyperaware of student participation. So in the video, when the teacher talks for long stretches, I’m distracted by wondering what the students are doing and thinking. In the case of the video, there’s always the frustration of not being sure if you can see the whole room, and the fact that the videographer focuses your gaze for you. This year I trained students on Sefaria for a study being done by researchers at Stanford University, and they recorded both the teacher and the students. This experience made me really appreciate that move.