

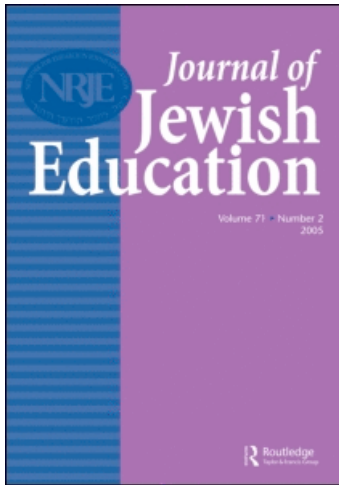
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On: 4 September 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 914458577]

Publisher Routledge

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Journal of Jewish Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t714578333>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2009

To cite this Article Raider-Roth, Miriam and Holzer, Elie(2009)'Learning to be Present: How Hevruta Learning Can Activate Teachers' Relationships to Self, Other and Text',Journal of Jewish Education,75:3,216 — 239

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/15244110903079045

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15244110903079045>

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Learning to be Present: How *Hevruta* Learning Can Activate Teachers' Relationships to Self, Other and Text

MIRIAM RAIDER-ROTH AND ELIE HOLZER

This article focuses on the ways hevruta learning can contribute to teachers' capacity to be present to self, other, subject matter and the cultural context in which the learning occurred. Hevruta learning, when conceptualized for the purposes of teachers' professional development, brings to the fore both the interpretive and relational aspects of the learning process. The theoretical frameworks of philosophical hermeneutics and relational psychology infuse our design of hevruta learning as well as our analysis of teachers' unfolding awareness of presence.

Drawing on qualitative data reflecting teachers' experiences in a week-long Summer Teachers Institute dedicated to text study and hevruta learning, this article describes the teachers' engagement with and exploration of each dimension of the relational triangle (i.e., teacher, student, and subject matter interactions; Hawkins, 2002). Data suggests that there was an activation or intensity in these dimensions, which was the result of the consistent and constant demands to engage with specific hevruta learning practices. This study's findings suggest that hevruta learning can be a powerful form of professional development because the intensity of experience with the relational dimensions of the learning process allows teachers to assume a new stance. The nature of this experience invited teachers to develop their capacity to be present to self, fellow learners and the text, thereby offering them the opportunity to consider how they

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The authors wish to thank Harriet Cuffaro, Mark Raider, Vicki Stieha, and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful questions and feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

would bring back and translate these lessons to their own classroom worlds.

. . . [O]ur being in the world is far more than just “being.” It is a “presence,” a “presence” that is relational to the world and to others. A “presence” that, in recognizing another presence as “not I,” recognizes its own self. A “presence” that can reflect upon itself, that knows itself as presence, that can intervene, can transform, can speak of what it does, but that can also take stock of, compare, evaluate, give value to, decide, break with, and dream. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998).¹

INTRODUCTION

This is a time of shrinking resources, when our focus on the survival of our institutions, jobs, enrollments, and budgets takes center stage in boardrooms, faculty meetings, and hallway conversations. In such a climate, how do we as educators, teacher educators, and researchers create and sustain a culture of learning and professional development, for ourselves and our teachers, that helps us remain connected to the core purposes of our work? When such stresses can pull our attention away from the essential phenomenon of learning in our classrooms, how can we learn to be present to our own learning and that of our students? Finally, what is the importance of this kind of stance—a stance of presence—for the continued learning and practice for teachers? This article explores how one professional development setting, a Summer Teachers Institute (STI), endeavored to create a learning environment conducive to the cultivation of presence for participating teachers. Through the use of text study, *hevruta* practices, as well as focused attention on teaching/learning relationships, we aimed to set the stage for the development of the dispositions and practices that could lead to a stance of presence.

This article is an effort to trace the theory, practices, and experiences of learning in the STI. In Part I, we begin by describing the curricular frame of the STI and the way it was constructed. We then describe the underlying theoretical ideas that shaped our teaching practices, including definitions of presence and relationship. We finish this section with a description of the setting and methodology that frame this study. In Part II, we describe the key findings of this study, suggest the implications for this work and pose questions for future study.

¹The authors wish to thank Kimberly Fulbright for sharing this passage with us.

PART I—THE SUMMER TEACHERS INSTITUTE: THE CURRICULUM, UNDERLYING BELIEFS, AND SETTING

The STI, held during the summer of 2007, was titled: “Understanding and Teaching Jewish Texts: Exploring Collaborative Text Study.”² Fifteen teachers participated—eight from one Jewish day school, six from a rabbinical college, and one from a local university. The STI was located at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, offering one-of-a-kind texts for study. The following excerpt from the syllabus reflects the basic beliefs of the seminar:

We posit that a close examination of American Jewish history and culture, the rich tapestry of Jewish texts, and the essential relationships of classroom life serve as a useful springboard for asking important questions about the place of Jewish study in the lives of our students and in our schools.

At the outset, the seminar was designed to serve three main goals. First, we wanted the teachers to explore the role played by texts in the learning experience. Specifically, we wanted to create a learning experience where teachers became especially attuned to the place of Jewish texts (rabbinic, contemporary, historical) in their own learning and in their classroom teaching practice. We asked ourselves the question: What are the ways by which the very nature of texts can shape, mold and activate the learner’s learning? Second, we wanted the teachers to experience and to explore the fundamental relational dimensions of teaching and learning. For this reason, we chose *bevruta* learning as a focus of the Institute. Third, we wanted to introduce teachers to American Jewish archival texts and materials with the goal of enriching their repertoire as general studies teachers who address issues of American Jewish identity through the teaching of history, literature, science, and the arts. (This third purpose will not be discussed in this article, but can be found in Raider, in progress).

The faculty deployed a variety of nonspecialized cultural and historical studies methods (modeled on historiographic inquiry practices used by scholars and researchers) and created a platform for investigating archival documents, films, works of art, artifacts, and other materials related to the American Jewish experience. Analyzed separately and in the aggregate, the materials were treated as distinctive albeit interrelated dimensions of the multifaceted, complex, and rich tapestry of American Jewish life, culture, and history. In addition, a series of learning activities around *bevruta* learning of

²The STI was sponsored by the Center for Studies in Jewish Education and Culture, University of Cincinnati, in partnership with Brandeis University’s Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education and the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives. The STI was supported by the University of Cincinnati, The Jewish Federation of Cincinnati, The Fisher Family Foundation, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

rabbinic texts were especially designed for the teachers' explorations of the role of text and of the relational dimension of teaching and learning. Those rabbinic texts were selected because they address topics related to teaching and learning, thus providing an opportunity to engage with insights on teaching and learning not only from partaking in the process of *bevruta* learning but also from the interaction with the ideas offered by the texts (Holzer, 2002).

The STI was taught by four university professors, including the authors of this study. We assumed a co-teaching model of instruction, planning collaboratively and reflecting and revising the curriculum during the week as a team. The study time in the Institute was allocated equally to *bevruta* study and group study of American Jewish archival texts. The institute closed with a number of sessions aimed to help participants make meaning of their experience, make their learning visible, and consider the ways they would want to implement their learning once they returned to their classrooms.

This institute's enacted curriculum was built on two different yet related theoretical frameworks: that of philosophical hermeneutics and a relational conception of teaching and learning. Those two frameworks are closely linked as they underscore the dialogical and relational nature of learning and understanding (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). In order to highlight the theoretical strands that help us see how presence became a central feature in the institute, we discuss these frameworks in this section.

Philosophical Hermeneutics as a Relational Epistemology

At its core, philosophical hermeneutics offers an epistemology that views humans as interpretive, meaning making, and relational beings. In other words, the essence of being human, according to philosophical hermeneutics, is making meaning of the world and of one's existence in the world. From this perspective, interpretation is not a method but a way of being, the fundamental way in which we are human. We are especially interested in the fact that philosophical hermeneutics assumes text study to be an activity in which the learner may experience and further cultivate what it means to be an interpretive, dialogical, and relational being through his interaction with other people, with cultural expressions (e.g., texts, arts) and even with unarticulated parts of one's own beliefs and knowledge (Gadamer, 1996; Holzer, 2006, in press; Ricoeur, 1976, 1981, 1991).

Understanding occurs in a questioning discussion between learners or between a learner and a text. Moreover, and in contrast to the rationalistic philosophical tradition, philosophical hermeneutics argues that self-awareness is not a precondition for interacting with others. Rather, it is an outcome of having entered into this kind of intense conversational relationship with an other (text or human). To quote Gadamer (1976), when one fully engages in a conversation with a text or with another person, "something different comes to be" (p. 58).

In studying the learning experiences of the STI participants, we draw on philosophical hermeneutics to conceptualize two important principles. First, when encounters with texts and other human beings are lived fully, learning from experience not only happens from the content that is encountered in the text but from the nature of the encounter itself between learners and between learners and text. In fact, what is learned by experience goes well beyond what formalized methods of teaching and learning can offer. For example, the value of receptiveness and attentiveness cannot be taught by a formal method. They can be nurtured in the very practice of these values that occur during the learning experience with text and partners (Holzer, 2006, 2007).

Second, this view of conversation invites the participants' personalities and strongly held opinions. Yet, it also aims for much more than just a clash of opinions or personalities. It requires from each participant a fundamental openness to involvement, self-discipline, and engaging in the sometimes uncomfortable aspects of a conversation such as encountering challenging opinions. For Gadamer (1989), this kind of person is characterized by a "continually recurring temptation to engage oneself in something or to become involved with someone" (p. 26). A hermeneutic conversation requires a kind of engagement that necessitates more than the acknowledgment of the presence of another person and/or text (which can represent views that are different from one's own). Rather, a hermeneutical conversation entails being immersed in new situations and being willing to challenge one's usual ways of knowing. According to Gadamer, the encounter with a text or with a person is first and foremost a mode of relation in which the learner and text interact and potentially transform one another. Knowing how to navigate oneself during a conversation with a text and/or with a learning partner involves the cultivation of a form of presence which Gadamer calls *tact*. This term captures the learner's self-awareness and his sensitivity to the dynamics of the learning conversation. It involves an ability to sense the flow and direction of the conversation. *Tact* is acquired over time, through practice, and by being immersed in and engaged in hermeneutic conversation.

Relational Paradigm of Teaching and Learning

The notion of presence also has its theoretical roots in a relational paradigm of teaching and learning. In an examination of educational philosophers and theorists as well as relational psychologists, Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) theorize a conception of presence that is embedded in relationship. Presence, they suggest is:

a state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step (p. 266).

Within this definition of presence, Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) describe four dimensions of presence: “presence as self-awareness or connection to the self; presence as connection to students; presence as connection to subject matter and pedagogical knowledge” and “the role that context plays in a teacher’s ability to be present and the force it exerts in shaping the dimensions of presence” (p. 267).

This conception of presence builds on the idea that learning happens in the midst of what David Hawkins (2002) has called the I–Thou–It relationship—that is, the relationship between the learner, teacher, and subject matter. In his seminal essay, Hawkins theorizes the central role of each of these corners in a relational triangle. He details his view of the role of the teacher as a “diagnostician of learning” and as one who provides the essential materials for learning. In this model, Hawkins argues for the active role of the subject matter (the “It”). He suggests that “the third corner of the triangle affects the relations between the other two corners, how the ‘It’ enters into the pattern of mutual interest and exchange between the teacher and the child” (p. 50). This model has been central in our understanding of the relational dynamics of the teaching–learning relationship, and the place that text and the interpretation of text as subject matter plays in mediating the relationships between teacher and learner and between learners.

In highlighting the “corners” of the relational triangle (self, student, and subject matter/pedagogical knowledge) Rodgers’ and Raider-Roth’s (2006) conception of presence builds upon Hawkins’ (2002) ideas, describing how becoming attuned to these relational dimensions allows a teacher to be intellectually and psychologically available to herself, students, and subject matter. Additionally, by attending to the context and its force on each relational dimension, teachers become alert to the external pressures that are exerted on their practice and relationships.

This relational notion of presence also suggests that a teaching/learning stance of presence helps cultivate healthy and trustworthy relationships, which in turn facilitate the construction of robust and enduring learning (Raider-Roth, 2005a, 2005b). While the prevailing cultural model of learning privileges solo and competitive learning practices, recent relational research has demonstrated that learning that is embedded in developing and ongoing healthy relationships allows the construction of reliable and deep understandings (Gilligan 1996, 2003; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Raider-Roth, 2005a, 2005b). In other words, robust learning occurs in the context of healthy, mutually responsive relationships (Raider-Roth, 2005a, 2005b). At the heart of these learning relationships is a deep attention, listening, wide-awakeness, or presence to learning—one’s own, as well as one’s learning partners (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). While the greater culture values the autonomous learner, this model values the relational dimension of learning and argues that learning embedded in such relationships is enduring. The cultivation of relational learning practices which invite dialogue, disagreement, challenging, and voicing of multiple perspectives is at the

heart of this paradigm (Debold, Tolman, & Brown, 1996; Holzer, 2006; Raider-Roth, 2005a, 2005b; Schultz 2003). To remain attuned, connected, and engaged with these dynamic learning relationships—that is, to remain present—teachers and students alike are likely to experience new kinds of challenges, responsibilities, and possibilities. Such a conception of presence in relationship offers the possibility of constructing a counterstory—a story that illustrates new opportunities and ways of thinking about teaching and learning.

DESIGNING *HEVRUTA* LEARNING

As mentioned earlier, *hevruta* learning held a central place in the STI for the cultivation and the exploration of the ideas of presence. *Hevruta* learning has often been perceived as a traditional and merely technical method which is conducive for an informal and personally engaging form of Jewish text study. At the STI, in contrast, we approached *hevruta* learning as a principled practice³—a practice that is not only a means to achieve certain goals but first and foremost a practice that invites participants to experience the connections between the role of text and relationships in teaching and learning. Drawing on and inspired by the research generated in the Beit Midrash Project at the Mandel Center, Brandeis University, we reconceptualized and designed the *hevruta* learning experiences to serve our purposes for the participants' professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2006; Holzer, 2002, 2006; Kent 2006, 2008).⁴

This conception of *hevruta* learning is consonant with John Dewey's most fundamental theory of learning: that in order for people to learn, they must engage in educative experiences that allow them to build knowledge (Dewey, 1963). Contrary to a "banking" form of education in which knowledge is deposited in or delivered to the student (Freire, 1993), this model argues that learners must be agents of their own learning and build on their own wealth of knowledge and new experiences in order to create a dynamic constantly changing body of knowledge (Dewey, 1933; Duckworth, 2006; Freire, 1993). Our curricular aim as teacher educators was to offer models of learning environments and experiences that we hoped the teachers would bring back to their classrooms and be able to translate into their own teaching practices.

We conceptualized *hevruta* learning as an instance where two participants have an opportunity to engage in a learning relationship and the dimensions of conversation we addressed earlier. We designed tasks for *hevruta* learning that required the engagement of participants' full personality and simultaneously engaged them in three conversations: with a learning

³We thank Sharon Feiman-Nemser for teaching us this concept of principled practice.

⁴The Beit Midrash Research Project investigates teaching and learning in a unique professional development experiment using text study and *hevruta* learning. It is co-directed by Elie Holzer and Orit Kent. See <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/beitmidrash.html>

partner, a text, and their own pre-knowledge and preconceptions (Holzer, in press). From a pedagogical perspective, this approach argues that practices of good *hevruta* learning have to be curricularized and taught.

During the STI, we also framed *hevruta* learning in a way that required the participants to take responsibility for each others' learning in practical terms, which we characterized as the ethical dimension of *hevruta* learning (Holzer, 2009). For example, *hevruta* learning tasks were designed so that participants were asked to probe and challenge their *hevruta* partner's interpretations, even in cases where they agreed with them. Thus, the need to challenge was framed as a venue to help one's partner's learning by having him further sustain, articulate, and arrive at a clearer and more developed understanding of his ideas. Other *hevruta* learning tasks were designed to have the participants engage in careful listening (to the text; to their *hevruta* partner) as a way of assisting them, as much as possible, in the development of their own views. When framed and designed in these ways, *hevruta* learning necessarily reduces the notion of competition in learning because in order to be successful, collaboration, mutual care, and assistance is necessary. Finally, the *hevruta* learning tasks also included the need to "take risks" and they encouraged participants to share unfolding interpretations, even if they were uncertain about these new ideas. Those tasks also addressed "voicing"—to bring to the fore their thoughts and perspectives, even when they suspected that their ideas would not be well received by their *hevruta* partner or when they were not sure of the clarity of their own thoughts.

The STI faculty also considered elements of the setting that could help foster the deep learning relationships described above. In order to experience the intertwinement of teaching and learning, we intentionally wanted the participants to occupy the *dual* role of learner and teacher as well as to experience being a teacher as a facilitator of someone else's learning—and not as a depositor of knowledge. We accomplished this by introducing unfamiliar texts that were evocative and open to multiple interpretations that the *hevruta* pairs needed to study, explore, and interpret. As a result, participants did not have the advantage of prior knowledge, which helped to reduce the power imbalance between the knower and the "not-knower." When occupying the teaching role in the *hevruta* pair, the expectation was not to provide information, but rather to uncover the meanings of the texts in a collaborative effort. By constructing the setting in this way, the participants switched roles of teacher and learner so fluidly that they often could not tell which role they were inhabiting. In this way, the two roles become one. In addition, the *hevruta* relationships existed over time—they studied with the same partner all week, so that multiple layers of understanding, mutual challenging, and full engagement in the learning of their partner could emerge. Participating in this experience, the teachers were offered a new paradigm of what it means to be a "teacher."

The *bevruta* pairs also studied in a public space together. Rather than splitting up into different rooms to study, everyone was engaged in one room, helping to create “the noise” of learning. While some might view noise as a distraction, in this setting the intention was that the sounds of multiple voices engaged in learning would invite more voices into the conversation. By consciously creating a setting with these characteristics, the opportunity was ripe for teachers to experience and become present to all facets of the relational triangle.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

The field of research on *bevruta* learning as a form of professional development is new territory, with evidence-based studies just beginning to emerge (Brawer, 2002; Brown & Malkus, 2008; Kent, 2006, 2008). As “discovery research” (Gilligan, 2003; Raider-Roth, 2005a, in press), our goal was to continue mapping the learning landscape that emerges when veteran teachers engage in this kind of professional development. This required us to track our insights and analyses as well as emerging questions for further research in both our own work and for the field as a whole.

In order to study the ways that the STI shaped, modified, challenged, or otherwise affected the participants’ ideas about teaching and learning, we conducted an action research study grounded in qualitative and relational methodologies. As researchers, we entered the setting as learners, attempting to understand what we could learn by watching, listening, and interviewing teachers who engaged with each other in this culturally specific setting. We were especially attuned to issues of relationship, as these were foundational to our curriculum design. We listened carefully to how participants spoke of self, other, and text in relationship as well as dynamics of relationship that they viewed as important in their experience of the STI (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch 2003; Raider-Roth, 2005a, in press).

As a classroom action research study, our goal was to understand the nature of learning that emerged from our practice as teacher educators, to reflect back on our practice, and to think carefully about changes in practice we would make as a result of our learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Falk & Blumenreich, 2005; Freeman, 1998). Our collective thinking as faculty, written reflections, emails, and casual conversations during breaks helped us track the learning happening in this setting.

The primary data collected included teachers’ written reflections during and after the STI, the teachers’ final papers, and video recordings of every learning session. In addition, we conducted two intensive open-ended interviews with each teacher, first in the month before the STI and then four months following the STI, after the teachers were back at work in their classrooms.

The data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach which allowed us to follow the thematic strands that emerged in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using a peer-based text study process that mirrored the *bevruta* practices implemented during the STI, we studied the narratives, articulating the meanings they derived and the interpretations that emerged. As researchers, we challenged one another to provide ample evidence for the interpretation, weighing each new idea in the context of what had previously been discovered. This analytic process was informed by both philosophical hermeneutic practices as well as qualitative relational practices (see Gilligan et al., 2003; Holzer, 2006; Raider-Roth, 2005a).

In an effort to understand the ways that the institute shaped the participants' thinking as learners and teachers, we focused this study on the day school teachers who participated in the STI. All of those teachers agreed to participate in the study. The teachers, all female, ranged in teaching experience from 8 to 32 years and in their tenure at the school from 1 year to 32 years. The teachers also reflected many of the disciplines and areas in the school—elementary general studies, middle school social studies, middle school science, middle school language arts, art, middle school Hebrew and Judaic studies, admissions director, and the head of school (who is also a language arts teacher).

This article focuses on three teachers who described significant insights into their stance as learners and teachers as a result of the STI.⁵ While all the teachers described some changes in their thinking and practice, these three were particularly instructive in helping us understand the ways that the STI practices shaped their thinking about themselves as teachers and learners. The first teacher, Hadassah,⁶ is a veteran science teacher, and at the time of the STI, had just completed her first year at the day school. Prior to this job, she had worked in inner-city charter schools both in the Midwest and on the East Coast. She completed her teacher education degree at a progressive institution that values constructivist learning practices for both teachers in training as well as for children. Hadassah described her desire to teach at the day school as part of her search to find the Jewish parts of herself and integrate them with her teaching world. Tamar, a veteran middle school language arts teacher, had been teaching at the school for a decade. Recently, she became interested in bringing writing workshop and process writing to her classroom. Tamar has also brought other innovations to her classroom in the recent past, such as computer based simulation projects, and integrating new technology into her classroom. Tamar identifies herself as Jewish and describes her Jewish education as based in Hebrew school and Conservative

⁵For an examination of teachers' experiences of feeling othered or marginalized during the STI (see Raider-Roth, Stieha, & Hensley, in progress). For an investigation of teachers' examination of multiple identities see Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009).

⁶All teachers were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Zionist summer camping. Amy, a veteran primary grade teacher had just completed her first year at the school but had taught for many years in the public school system. At the time of the STI, she was teaching both first and second grade general studies. Amy is not Jewish but wanted to participate in the STI in order to help her understand the cultural and religious context of her students and the school.

PART II—FINDINGS: LEARNING TO BE PRESENT TO SELF, OTHER AND TEXT

In our examination of the teachers' experiences, we found that the practices of the STI seemed to activate all segments of the relational triangle which in turn facilitated synergy and fluidity in the teachers' learning. This activation of the relationships between self, other, and text, together with the fluidity of roles—especially in occupying the dual role of teacher and learner—together contributed to the teachers' heightened experience of presence. In this section, we describe the teachers' thinking about each of these relationships. We will close by examining how these relationships lead to this sense of presence.

In order to begin this discussion, we turn to an excerpt from Hadassah's final paper for the Institute:

The *bevruta* experience for me was tremendous in that I felt something throughout the experience. My thinking was challenged. My thinking was affirmed. My thinking was voiced. I was able to approach text which I believed was going to be out of my reach. I was able to develop relationships which I never thought I could have. I was not allowed to sit quietly. I had to take responsibility. I had to be accountable. . . . I became more aware of the connections between my learning and my teaching. I became more aware of my voice as a learner. I became more aware of my presence as a teacher. I gained a greater understanding of the significance of learning with a partner, and what that relationship stands for. I got a glimpse of text as a living organism to be connected with. My disposition as a learner and a teacher was gleaned. Cultivating the relationships in *bevruta* was so intense for me because I was able to be present throughout. I had a sense of value.

In this narrative, Hadassah offers us a road map of presence in three different ways. First, and most simply, she recognizes the three dimensions of the I–Thou–It triangle—she locates herself as a learner (“. . . I *felt* something throughout the experience. My *thinking* was challenged. My *thinking* was affirmed. My *thinking* was voiced”). The connection to self is multidimensional as well, as both her emotional and intellectual selves were engaged. She also locates and connects to her learning partner (“I gained a

greater understanding of the significance of learning with a partner, and what that relationship stands for”). And she discovers the possibility of connecting to text (“I was able to approach text which I believed was going to be out of my reach. . . . I got a glimpse of text as a living organism to be connected with”).

Hadassah also shows us that presence is not merely the recognition of the self, other, and text, but presence also requires the *engagement in relationship* with all three learning partners (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). In highlighting the place of relationship in her connecting to self, other, and text, Hadassah brings out the idea that the I–Thou–It triangle, which has traditionally been labeled an instructional triangle—is more accurately a relational triangle, as it describes the dynamics of the teaching–learning relationship rather than a model of “instruction” that presents a one-way delivery of material from teacher to learner. The essence of this model is the power of the relationships between each corner of the triangle (or the “legs” of the triangle; see Figure 1). Hadassah teaches us that in activating each of these relational dimensions, she feels present throughout, and this presence leads to a sense of importance or value in her sense of self as a learner and teacher.

Finally, Hadassah teaches us that the curricular goals embedded in the *bevruta* learning practices we implemented were indeed incorporated into the teachers’ learning. We saw that not only did this experience awaken all dimensions of the relational triangle, it also asked the teachers to occupy the dual roles of teacher and learner—often simultaneously (“I became more aware of the connections between my learning and my teaching. I became more aware of my voice as a learner. I became more aware of my presence as a teacher”). We learn that this awakening and fluidity of roles contributed to the teachers’ sense of presence.

In order to understand the way that presence evolved in the STI, we look at how the teachers described each relational dyad that is key to presence. While we cannot ascribe cause to any one *bevruta* practice that they engaged in, we will examine carefully the experiences they believed led to the sense of connection, relationship, and presence.

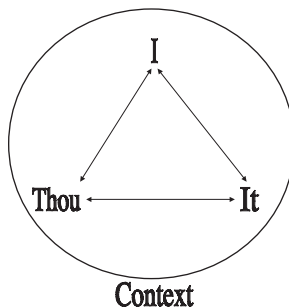


FIGURE 1. The relational triangle.

Relationship with Self

We begin with Hadassah, who describes the challenges to, affirmations of, and voicing of her own thinking during the STI. In her interview, she expands on this idea of the relationship with the self by using physical images to describe the increase in power and engaging presence she felt she had:

. . . you feel you kind of come away with a little bit more energy and a willingness to try something else and something new and something different and so there was that connectedness piece there was . . . the feeling of [very long pause] you know . . . I don't know, wanting to open my mouth a little more. . . . I don't know what that feeling is, but like, kind of like just not being, you know, really sort of not . . . wanting to just be quiet anymore.

Later in the interview she expands the physical metaphor by saying, "I felt like I had some power I had . . . I could take up space." While we can see in her first statement (above) that the integration of her emotion and intellect are key to presence, her second statement shows the centrality of her physical self. In describing that she came away with "a little bit more energy and a willingness to try something new" she echoes the notion of "zest" that is described by Miller (1986) as key to relational health in growth and learning.

Tamar, the middle school language arts teacher also describes a change in her relationship to herself as a learner. She feels that *bevruta* learning allows her to attend to what she did not know: "Well, in *bevruta*, it was ok . . . If you don't know, you can say you don't know." And she does not feel alone in that stance. She has a partner to share this sense of not knowing, or in her words "at least I had a partner in my dumbness. It was okay." While using a derogatory word like "dumb" to describe this not-knowing stance, Tamar uses the word lightly, with humor. She tells us that she did not mind: "I don't have to be sensitive" in her recognition of not knowing.

For Amy, the first and second grade general studies teacher, the change in her learning stance focuses squarely on her self-perception as a woman, not just as a learner. In the STI *bevruta* relationship, the partners were explicitly asked to challenge one another's thinking, not in an effort to criticize their partner, but rather to push their partner's thinking forward. This was part of the their relationship as partners—to both challenge and help their partners voice their ideas—and this practice was explicitly taught in the seminar, as described above. For Amy, this practice challenged deeply engrained notions of what it means to be "a nice girl."

I felt like, oh, I'm not being nice here. You know, I was brought up to be the nice girl—everybody would like. [whispers] all I want is for people to like you, [Amy]. [back to regular voice] . . . It is not natural for me to challenge anybody's thinking. Or if I do, I try to kinda go *around* the

bush about it, and then they don't get the get the point. So, I need more practice at that, but, yea, you know, I got started . . . a little bit.

For Amy, learning about her relationship with self focuses on unlearning certain cultural norms that were deeply engrained in her. It is “not natural” for her and yet she discovers a voice that she had not practiced using. In being challenged in *hevruta*, it set off a question of how she manages being challenged in the wider world. In challenging the other, we see a hint of her cultural identity as well, as she examines what it means to be a “nice girl” and the ways that this institute challenged her sense of self as a woman. This cultural examination is embedded in her sense of self as a learner and her temperamental dispositions. We are especially interested and surprised to see that this conceptualization of *hevruta* practices seem to challenge cultural norms. Specifically, Amy’s act of confronting her sense of self as a “nice girl” and needing to please others, allows her to resist what has been described in feminist literature as a patriarchal cultural constraint (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

By examining the ways that teachers explored, connected with, or otherwise became present to aspects of self, we can see the ways that their engagement in the STI learning experiences contributed to this self-study and understanding. This process echoes the theoretical stance articulated by Gadamer (1976) that self-awareness and understanding is often the result of the dialogic relationships that are part of the learning process: “The genuine reality of the hermeneutical process seems to me to encompass the self-understanding of the interpreter as well as what is interpreted” (p. 58). As for Ricoeur (1981), “[t]he interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself” (p. 158).

Relationship with *Hevruta* Partner

In addition to investigating their relationships with themselves, the teachers also spent much energy developing their relationships with their study partner and discovering the kind of learning that resulted from such relationships. Tamar is particularly articulate about this in her final paper, an eloquent essay that focused on her learning and on the practices that she brought from the STI back to her classroom. In writing about her learning relationships at the STI, Tamar attends to the sense of responsibility for the *hevruta* partner that is key to the success of this partnership.

There were several aspects to *hevruta* study that were valuable. First, the unaccustomed sense of responsibility for another student’s learning, which Elie emphasized in our first *hevruta* discussion, forced me to think simultaneously as a student and teacher. It caused me to slow

down, to pay attention to my partner, and to think metacognitively about how I was learning the material and whether there were other ways to approach it.

This notion of “the unaccustomed sense of responsibility for another student’s learning” is a key lesson that many participants took away from the institute. First, there is a moral stance in this partnership—she was responsible for her partner’s learning, rooting the collaborative relationship as something much more than a teaching technique. Tamar also teaches us that this stance causes her to think as a teacher *and* as a student simultaneously. She could not inhabit either role solely, and each role informed how she engaged her learning partner. Not only did she consider what moves she needed to take in order to push her partner’s thinking forward, she also needed to think “metacognitively” about her own learning and the various approaches that could be taken. In her post-institute interview, she reflects on being surprised by this stance: “So to stay with the same person and feel that responsibility towards what they know, isn’t something I was ever asked to do as a student . . . Actually getting something out of that was a surprise.”

As she integrates the stance of responsibility with the tasks of “voicing” and “challenging,” she finds herself thinking about her relationships with her students, another interpersonal relational dimension of her learning:

The concepts of voicing and challenging . . . struck me as important, as well, both for myself and for my students. I was struck by Elie’s remark that when we allow voicing without challenging our students, pushing them to clarify their ideas and take their thinking beyond where they currently are, we are simply “babysitting.” This prompted some soul-searching on my part, as I suspect that in the past I have been too gentle with some students, reluctant to push too hard for fear of undermining their self-confidence. In class, I was relieved to add some specific challenging phrases to my teacher lexicon: “Have you considered . . . ? What do you mean by x in this context? You said x, could you say more about this?”

For students, in the context of *bevruta* learning, the tools of voicing and challenging are both necessary. Voicing, defined in class as “saying exactly what you think or wonder about without worrying about it” gives those who are typically passive in class a greater opportunity to express themselves; with one consistent partner this becomes increasingly less intimidating than in a whole-class setting, another benefit to *bevruta* learning. Challenging, the act of asking questions to help your *bevruta* partner understand, clarify, and deepen his or her thinking, encourages passive students who are asked to challenge their partners to listen harder and push their own thinking forward, in the effort to help their partner clarify their thoughts. Conversely, more active learners

are encouraged to spend more time listening and take responsibility for helping less fluent or expressive students to develop and support their own ideas. Everybody benefits.

In “soul searching,” Tamar helps us see that the STI experience—one we hoped would be educative in the Deweyan sense and that would support teachers’ capacity to translate their work back to their classrooms—indeed provoked this kind of transfer.⁷ Tamar clearly translates the stance of responsibility, voicing, and the challenge to think about classroom practice and how she might change both her teaching stance and lexicon in order to deepen her students’ learning and to generate a more authentic relationship with them. Specifically, the notion of challenging her students shifts from one that could undermine their confidence to one that would support their learning. This is a fundamental shift.

Amy also recognizes the synergy that came from the partner relationship and the way it brought her into relationship both with Dorothy, her partner, but also with herself.

I found it fascinating because it really made a lot of sense and . . . not only do you bring your self but somebody else brings themselves and when the two of you try to—or brings themselves—and then when the two of you try to meet as partners you’ve got to take that into consideration and, and um, this interaction within a triangle, I just found it fascinating.

In this meeting of the partners, Amy knows she must bring herself and be ready to meet her partner. She believes this meeting is important because she was “just feeling like, um, somebody is in this with me. I am not trying to figure this out alone.” This statement reflects the nature of the partner learning, but also is a culturally resistant stance to the notion of autonomous learning. She expresses this feeling in her end-of-the course review, and also echoes Tamar’s comments about the notion of responsibility for another’s learning. She notes “. . . how powerful the [*bevruta*] experience can be. The purpose is not simply to perform a task but to help each other grow, learn and improve. The partners are responsible for one another’s learning as well as their own.”

Interestingly, Amy underscores the multiple ways that *bevruta* learning is culturally resistant to many dominant pressures on American teachers. Earlier, we saw her challenging the notion of what it means to be a “nice girl.” Next, we see her challenging the notion of autonomous learning. Finally, we see her question the notion of the nature of a learning relationship. In the STI she comes to see that a successful learning relationship is one where the

⁷This is not to imply that the STI curriculum assumed a simple transfer from teacher experience to practice. In fact, the issue of transfer in professional development is highly complex and is beyond the scope of this article (Borko & Putman, 1996; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998).

partners voice their ideas and push each others' learning. Accepting this kind of feedback is hard for her—just as hard as voicing her own ideas:

. . . I tend to take any kind of constructive criticism, even not negative in that I argue back, but it's like, "oh, my gosh, I should have known that." Sort of a self deprecating "Oh, man, you know, why did I . . ." So at first it was the same sort of little, um, prickly—oh, I should have . . . and then, I realized, now wait a minute, that's part of what she's supposed to do, we've been told to do this, or we have to get to that level. And that helped so I became less sensitive—that's the word, sensitive, as it went on . . . I think it's very . . . it was a big step for me to be able to accept it.

And yet, she comes to see that voicing and challenging are the essence of the learning relationship (they were *supposed to do that*) and the capacity to voice her ideas would not destroy her relationships but rather are essential to building healthy learning relationships. A learning relationship therefore is not one where everyone gets along, but rather one where the learners' voices are drawn out and heard.

Hadassah also writes about the place of responsibility, challenging, and mutuality in the *bevruta* relationship.

Hevruta learning allowed me to explore my voice. I was challenged to listen to another person in an active way. I not only had to listen, but I had to help them to articulate their thinking. By my being able to ask clarifying questions to help my partner express her thinking I became teacher as well as student.

Here Hadassah's voice resonates with Tamar and Amy in articulating the ways that listening and challenging her partner help her become learner and teacher. In this way, she "explored my voice" and "help[ed] my partner express her thinking." The teacher-learner role is *fluid* for Hadassah, a word she used repeatedly in her interview. Her thinking about these learning relationships continues in her paper:

I was also enabled to view the text from a multitude of perspectives. The dialogue that occurred was then more dynamic—my partner and I had to be self-motivated and forceful. The text had to be viewed as alive. The *bevruta* experience is intentional as you develop relationships. The relationships are deepened as we listen to each other and make the listening visible. This is done through challenging and voicing and learning to trust ourselves and each other.

While the participants' relationships with texts will be discussed in the next section, this excerpt also highlights the dynamics of the *bevruta* relationship. While grounded in text study, *bevruta* study is an intentional act that has

deliberate designated practices. The notion of intentionality is important—this relationship does not emerge just because two people study together. Rather, this particular relationship emerges because deliberate acts—challenging, voicing, and listening—were purposefully curricularized by the teacher educators and performed or enacted by the participants. As a result, the partners begin to experience what is practically involved in taking responsibility for one another and learn to trust themselves and each other.

Hadassah concludes this section of her essay writing:

Then we are able to reflect on what we are listening to, how the text is interpreted, and how that makes us feel. As we reflect upon ourselves as learners we then share with our partners what we need from them in the way of support—how can they help us to become more effective learners. We continue to challenge and ask for clarification and evidence to support thinking. This dialogue makes things more interesting and meaningful, for sure.

In these words, Hadassah echoes John Dewey's (1933) notion of the reflective cycle and the "continuous spiral of knowledge." According to Dewey, knowledge is not a static possession, but rather a process of construction, and process of reaching back into prior knowledge to make meaning of and understand present phenomena and experiences. Hadassah's description above reveals this kind of reaching back into herself, reaching out to her partner to build new ideas, to get the kind of help she needs to learn, and then to be able to challenge her partner as well. The reflective process, according to Dewey, requires being immersed in an educative experience, experiencing a "felt difficulty," observing the environment to understand the nature of the difficulty, hypothesizing possible solutions, analyzing and choosing the best course of action, and then taking "intelligent action," which in turn creates a new experience (Dewey, 1933, 1963; Rodgers, 2002). Listening to Hadassah and her description of the acts that occur in the *bevruta* partnership, we can hear echoes of each of these steps of reflection: "Reflect upon ourselves" (how that makes us feel); "share what we need"; "continue to challenge"; and "ask for clarification and evidence." She highlights the centrality of dialogue and relationship in creating an environment fertile for reflection. In these words, we can see that the stance of presence and the act of reflection have deep common roots.⁸

Relationship with Text

As we see in Hadassah's writing above, the relationship between the partners is mediated in large part by the text—just as her relationship with the text is mediated by her relationship with her partner. Tamar articulates a similar idea:

⁸For more on the connection between reflection and presence, see Raider-Roth, 2008, and Rodgers, 2002.

Another key idea I took from *bevruta* study was the “I–Thou–It” triangle composed of either the student, teacher, and text, or two *bevruta* partners and a text. The concept of the text being an equal partner, having a voice (although a fragile, easily overpowered one) was powerful for me. I very much wanted to give my students that sense of treating the text as a living voice, one to which they had to carefully and considerately listen.

As a middle school language arts teacher, Tamar thinks carefully about the place of narrative and text in her students’ learning. Her lessons about the text as a partner, as a vertex on the relational triangle, as an “other” with which a relationship could be developed, becomes quickly applied to her thinking as a teacher: “Encouraging students to see the text as a partner struggling to say some specific thing, if only they are listening, seemed likely to be a metaphor that would lead them in promising directions.”

The STI participants were introduced to a hermeneutic theory of narrative texts, which understands texts to be trying to say something but not necessarily something equivalent to the author’s original intention. Rather, meaning of texts are the outcome of a rich and dialectic interaction between the reader (who also uses methods of interpretation) and the polyvocal nature of (written) language (Ricoeur, 1976, 1991). Tamar is especially connected to the idea that “the text has its own voice and is vulnerable,” an idea expressed in philosophical hermeneutics and that, in our view, is an extrapolation of what it means to conceptualize (following Hawkins, 2002) the “it” as an active player in the learning relationship.

Much like Hadassah’s comment above that “the text had to be viewed as alive” both teachers see the text as a dynamic learning partner—one that has a voice that has to be listened to, that is vulnerable, and that can be violated. The text is not only in place to be a learning tool. It is also there to be engaged with, to understand, to mediate the relationship between the partners, and to create an ongoing relationship with the learner, a relationship which could alter the learner and the meaning of the text itself.

Tamar brought these *bevruta* practices to her classroom after the institute and writes articulately about the role that the text played in mediating her relationship with the students and that the students had with the text. In bringing a section of Genesis to her students to study in *bevruta*, she hoped to help students understand the biblical allusions in the novel they were reading. In reflecting on this teaching move, she recounts:

Before the Institute, I would not have felt confident bringing in Judaic text to study with my students. Using the *bevruta* approach, however, I felt that I was not really teaching the text, but rather teaching an approach to any text, which the students themselves could apply. By taking the “I–Thou–It” stance and trusting that the text would speak for itself, I was comfortable bringing this opportunity to my students. The

results demonstrated to me that this approach allowed my sixth graders to delve deeply into both the Torah text and the novel which they had read.

In seeing the *bevruta* practices as a pedagogy that could allow the text to carry its own voice and the students to take interpretive responsibility, Tamar took the risk of bringing Judaic texts to the classroom. Her own conception of the text as a teaching partner is both a liberating and new stance.

Amy offers a different perspective on her new thinking about the place of text study in her first grade general studies classroom. In reflecting on her teaching of reading, she sees that her thinking about making meaning out of text has taken greater prominence in her thinking: “[I] want to get them to a place where they’ll say, wow, I can read this, I can understand it and I have something to say about it. . . .” Amy credits the summer institute with allowing her to spend more time trying to help her students “get to this place:”

The summer institute . . . confirmed this, not suspicion, but sort of worry that, there is more to reading than I have been able to give the children. I try to give them enthusiasm when I read them stories and stuff. But I’ve always been so task oriented . . . and when you see the curriculum . . . all of the skills you are supposed to cover . . . I tend to hone in on, I want to make sure those skills are covered.

. . . The institute made me stop and think, “Wait a minute, what about the reading component? What are they getting out of the stories?” . . . The whole thing is based around these stories. We worry about that critical thinking skill, that’s such a big thing—well that’s where it comes from . . . connecting . . . well, at this level [now] we do a lot of visualizing, connecting, um, comparing and contrasting to other kinds of stories . . . it, it actually goes with part of their . . . something that has happened to them, and then in some you see that ah, ha moment—“ah, oh, I remember when . . .” and you say, got it.

Amy is describing her turn from teaching texts (stories) as a sequence of skills “to cover,” to teaching them for meaning with “visualizing, connecting, comparing, and contrasting” and ultimately making strong connections with experiences in their own lives; then she can see that they “got it” or understand. In essence, this is a shift to teaching reading as a process of students developing a relationship, a connection with the text. After experiencing the centrality of developing this relationship for herself in the STI, she has translated this practice back to her classroom. Even more significantly, as she describes this shift in pedagogy of text, she also shifts her relationship with the students where she is watching for signs of learning beyond the performance of a skill. She is looking for the moments of discovery, or the “ah-ha” moment when she can see their learning in their faces.

CONCLUSION

Hevruta learning in the Summer Teacher Institute was designed for the purpose of engaging the learners in an intensive inquiry stance, where the roles of teacher and learner are fluid and have important parts to play in creating a relationship with the text. Because each of these elements (teacher/learner/text) are so deeply intertwined and can have such profound impact on one another, the teachers not only became acutely aware of the role of the I, Thou, and It, but they also discovered the dynamics of relationship among these three key players in the learning process. Although our intention was to help teachers develop a stance of presence with themselves and their learning partners, we were surprised at the extent to which, in one short week, the teachers were able to elicit, study and reflect on the dynamics of these relationships. In activating the three dimensions of the relational triangle, we discovered that these lessons on *hevruta* learning could indeed become experiences of developing presence.

Developing presence is a fundamental moral stance, one which requires, as Tamar says, an “unaccustomed sense of responsibility” for the other, the self, and the subject matter that engages the teacher and learner. In allowing one’s self to come into relation with each part of the relational triangle, a teacher is creating a context in her classroom that requires responsibility, attentiveness, accountability, and trust. These same characteristics of presence are also moral dispositions that John Dewey would suggest are necessary for educating for democracy (Dewey, 1897); that is, these aspects of presence are ones that teach/remind us that the goal of education is more than the transmission of subject matter—it is “a coming to share in the social consciousness,” “the fundamental method of social progress and reform” (Dewey, 1897). In this way, the Summer Teachers Institute, at first conceptualized to be a learning experience centered on the place of text study in teaching and learning, became much more than that. It became a fertile zone for innovation, risk taking, and the cultivation of a moral stance in teaching and learning.

As “discovery research” (Gilligan, 2003; Raider-Roth, 2005a, in press), our findings help us articulate the following questions for further research. Our first question focuses on *hevruta* learning as a learning mode which potentiates facets of learning such as accountability, responsibility, challenging, and voicing. These facets are beyond simple criteria of learning effectiveness of text study. Rather, these learning facets can be considered learning dispositions (Holzer, 2006). We are eager to understand other possible dispositions, or learning stances that this traditional form of Jewish learning can help cultivate. Our second question focuses on our conceptualization of *hevruta* learning as one instance of teachers’ professional development that is meant to engage teachers with a counterstory of teaching and learning—one that suggests a stance of collaboration, of inviting disagreement, of risk taking. How can we track this shift in stance that we perceive occurring?

Third, we need to better understand the impact of both the cultural context where the professional development is taking place as well as the larger school context to which the teachers return. How do these contexts shape teachers' capacity to make the shifts in stance described above? Fourth, what might be the limitations and potential pitfalls in using *hevruta* practices as a form professional development of teachers?

Further research on *hevruta* learning will no doubt help us better understand how this rich and complex learning practice—one of engaging in learning conversations with texts and colleagues—can contribute to the cultivation of different forms of presence. Based on the transformative power described by the teachers in this study, we believe these forms of presence can help energize and nurture teachers' learning and teaching and support teachers' capacity to become more attuned to the essential relationships of classroom life.

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