

Architecture of a *Hevruta*-Based Text Lesson

There are often commonalities across the design of lessons of all sorts. No matter what teachers are teaching, they ask themselves a variety of questions, like: Who are my students? What do I hope these students will learn, and why? What do I have to do to help them learn?

It's also obvious that lessons have a beginning, a middle, and an end, much like plays or stories. In literature, mysteries and dramas have different internal architectures. So do lessons in different subject areas. For example, in mathematics, lessons often start with a review of homework from the previous day, then the teacher introduces a new skill, students practice the skill with the teacher's oversight, and students begin independent work using the new skill.

We have developed an architecture of a *hevruta*-based text lesson that professional developers can replicate with their teachers, and that teachers can replicate with their students. The *hevruta*-based session you see in this DVD includes the following steps:

1. Launch (*chapter 1 in DVD*)

Students are introduced to the topic and goals of the lesson and are engaged in a discussion that serves to activate prior knowledge, experience, and attitudes. There are three aspects to the launch in the lesson on this DVD:

- Connecting to prior experience
- Finding out what students already know (written pre-assessment)
- Linking their prior knowledge and experience to what they will encounter in the lesson

2. Setting up *Hevruta* work (*chapter 2 in DVD*)

Students are introduced to specific practices they are about to engage in during *hevruta* learning (e.g.: asking questions about the text or providing textual evidence for their interpretations). In this DVD, the teacher teaches a set of practices to help students engage in *hevruta* learning. In the documents in the "Lesson Materials" section of this DVD, there is one labeled "*Hevruta* practices." This document includes the *hevruta* practices that the teacher teaches the students.

3. Working in *Hevruta* (*chapter 3 in DVD*)

Students study the text in *hevruta* with the help of written guidelines. The specific tasks provide basic information and guidelines to help students as they read, unpack, and argue about the meaning of the text, creating opportunities for rich text study and discussions. In the Lesson Materials section, the documents labeled "Text-based worksheets" are the ones that students are using in their *hevruta* work. This section of the DVD includes two sections:

- Reading with a partner
- Arguing about the text

4. Whole-group discussion (*chapter 4 in DVD*)

Whole-group discussion is an important element of many lessons. In this section of the lesson, students share some of the fruits of their learning with the larger group. At times the teacher builds on these insights.

This section of the DVD is divided into three segments, so that viewers can make some fine-grain distinctions between the elements of this discussion. First, the teacher sets up the task so that the students' sharing can be productive. Only after the task is clear do students begin to share their work. Next the teacher opens up the conversation to comparing and contrasting alternative viewpoints. Finally, students "puzzle together" about what they are learning and what sense they are making of the information.

- Summarizing thinking and sharing it out
- Building a discussion with multiple viewpoints
- Learning to puzzle together

5. Closure: Taking it with you/Integrating (*chapter 5 in DVD*)

Students now have an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned and/or raise new questions they have about the ideas that were developed during the session. They also might reflect on the practices of *hevruta* and text study with which they have experimented, and connect their learning with their own lives.

In our lesson, the teacher asks students to personalize their learning and integrate their new ideas with the ideas they had when they came into the lesson. In addition, they are asked to do some writing so that their learning can be assessed. There are three distinct elements in this section of the lesson in this DVD:

- Personalizing: Taking a Stand
- Assessing: Writing about God's promise
- Taking it with you (integrating their learning)

Designing a lesson such as this requires a teacher to explore the following kinds of question with regard to the *hevruta* study itself:

- What is the text about? (*p'shat* = simple meaning)
- What else could it mean? How can it be interpreted and understood? (*d'rash* = interpretation)
- With what background knowledge/prior information should I provide students?
- What guiding questions for *hevruta* learning might help support students' development of compelling interpretations?
- What guiding questions for *hevruta* learning might help students personally engage with the ideas from the text and with each other?
- What are the goals of the time allocated to *hevruta* learning in the larger picture of the lesson? How are these goals reflected in the guidelines that accompany *hevruta* learning?

For example, in the lesson on this DVD, we see the teacher teaching students *hevruta* skills that they can use to unpack the text and help them derive meaning. Students are working on understanding the meaning of the Biblical texts from Genesis, Exodus, and Joshua related to God's promise of the Land of Israel to the Jewish people.

They are trying to hone their understandings by both sharing their ideas with a partner and listening to their partner's ideas. They do this by attentively listening to one another, by asking clarifying questions, by asking for textual evidence of their partner's opinions, by agreeing and disagreeing respectfully. Rather than the teacher telling them what the text means or asking them probing questions, these *hevruta* "moves" empower learners to become serious readers of the text, as well as peer-teachers.

Our architecture for a text-based lesson also includes attention to personal meaning and understanding. The teacher might ask: What does this text mean to me personally? What might it mean to the students in my class? What has this text meant to the Jewish people over time? What might it mean to learners of various ages, like school children or novice adults? What might this text mean to learners in other contexts? These are all questions of personalization and integration, which are at the core of learning that has staying power.

The inclusion of personal meaning in the lesson design reflects a particular view of learning—namely that enduring and worthwhile learning needs to be personally meaningful. Through a variety of tasks and formats, students are asked to connect the material they are studying to themselves and their life experiences. The designers of this lesson came up with several ideas intended to foster personal connections between the students and the subject matter—Biblical passages about the Jewish people's connection to the Land of Israel. Toward the beginning of the lesson, the teacher referenced the students' recent experience on the Walk for Israel, and gave each student a bit of Jerusalem stone. Toward the end of the lesson, students were asked to express their ideas about whether the Biblical verses they studied relates to them, and also to relate what they had learned to their personal experiences with or knowledge of Israel.

In this sense, learning takes place not only when students master new material, but also when this new material is incorporated into ideas that learners hold. The learning process entails coming to new understandings about the content *and* about oneself in relation to this content.