

Advancing the Learning Agenda in Jewish Education

Jon A. Levisohn and Jeffrey S. Kress, editors

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Reviewed By

S. Tamar Kamionkowski

*Reconstructionist
Rabbinical College*

Editors Levisohn and Kress begin their volume with an important assertion: while the variety of Jewish learning environments and pedagogies has increased over the past few decades, the field in general still lacks rigorous attention to the articulation and assessment of learning outcomes. The editors of this book seek to remediate this issue. This volume addresses a wide range of settings like Jewish day schools and summer camps, but it is important to note in this journal that none of the contributions explicitly address rabbinical education.

The essays in the book are organized into three sections, “Learning from the Learning Sciences,” “Learning from Jewish Education,” and “Conceptualizing Learning Outcomes.” In truth, the three sections are somewhat misleading since the essays overlap in multiple ways and do not fall clearly under the three main categories.

Readers of *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* may be especially interested in the essays that explore *hevrutah* (paired) study as a learning activity and as a tool for religious acculturation. Ari Kelman argues that Jewish learning modalities center on the social dimensions of learning and that teachers need to be as mindful of the social dimensions as the cognitive learning outcomes. Daniel P. Resnick and Lauren B. Resnick also explore the social dimensions of learning, but they focus specifically on the renewal of text study in *hevrutah* (pairs) in both traditional and liberal settings. Similarly, Baruch Schwarz explores some dimensions of traditional orthodox *hevrutah* learning that encourage attention to dialogism, collaboration, and dialecticity. The rise of student-driven learning, which centers text (not the instructor), will encourage instructors of religious and theological studies to adjust their teaching practices in order to focus more sharply on student-centered learning.

In the last section of the book, historian Sam Wineburg explores how and why Jews ought to study Jewish history in ways that both maintain intellectual integrity and also retain the power of the stories to instill values. Faculty who teach scripture in Christian seminaries will find this essay especially useful for better understanding how Jews and Christians read biblical texts in such radically different ways.

The final essay, an imaginative discussion between two fictional characters – one a proponent of subject specific education and the other a supporter of broader Jewish developmental goals – clearly highlights one of the reasons that Jewish education remains ambiguous on learning outcomes. In this final essay, the editors of the volume lay out one great debate in Jewish education: should Jewish educators focus on the mastery of Jewish subjects or on the building blocks of Jewish identity?

Most of the essays are informative, but as a collection, they do not achieve what the editors of the book hoped for: developing more professional articulations and assessments for learning outcomes in Jewish education. This shortcoming simply reifies one of the greatest challenges within Jewish education: the category “Jewish education” is so broad and expansive that it is near impossible to set standards that can be used across denominations and ages, let alone ethnicities and race. Liberal and traditional-orthodox Judaism differ vastly on why Jews should learn, what Jews should learn, which Jews should learn, and how Jews should learn. Articulating learning outcomes necessarily entails coming to terms with the disparities of Jewish identities; and coming to terms with difference is often challenging. The editors are to be commended for their recognition of the problem and for their efforts.