

Problem-Based Learning in Leadership Education

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There is a popular colloquialism around the University of Chicago, a kind of academic shibboleth that holds, "Well that's all good and well in practice. But how does it work in theory?" Following on the wise reminder that "practitioners lead theory because theories exist to inform practice," I will try to share some of the work we do with Problem Based Learning at Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago, where our practice includes a focus on those who hold or aspire to hold leadership positions as professionals (employees) or volunteers in contemporary Jewish communal organizations.

Though modified to reflect organizational realities, student needs, and institutional values, Problem-Based Learning at Spertus lies at the core of our approach to leadership education, from our accredited advanced degrees to our certificate programs, including one we sponsor jointly with NU. PBL is manifest in everything from our mentoring requirements to our final exams. It should be stated at the outset that while many in the Jewish world choose to conflate leadership training with Jewish literacy or skill set development we do not. To be sure, we appreciate the benefits that ensue when lay and professional leaders have a working knowledge of introductory Jewish Studies. But basic Jewish literacy does not a Jewish leader make. The same must be said about budgeting, agenda setting, or other administrative skillsets. While important to the efficacy of contemporary not-for-profits, skillset transmission is not, in our estimation, leadership education either.

In each of our leadership offerings, coursework focuses on effective leadership and problem solving, utilizing Jewish and general sources. Topics range from the role of followership to the difficulties of leading change. Classroom work is supplemented by a required mentoring component where students drive their own learning process, addressing issues they most need to work on that cannot be adequately covered during the regular course of study.

Beyond mentoring, even within the classroom environs, students tackle their real world leadership challenges in small groups, where the learning is often, "messy and ambiguous." Aided by faculty and classmates, students use case study analyses, *hevruta* text study, assessment vehicles and reflective exercises, to confront a variety of issues that "mirror professional practice;" issues ranging from gender in leadership, for example, the difficulties of heading an organization as a young woman with a male-dominated board - to how to represent an institution whose position on Israel or intermarriage is not fully aligned with their own.

Students learn about their individual leadership styles with the benefit of DISC assessments, and learn teambuilding with the Harvard Everest Leadership and Team Simulation. In *hevruta*, they study and contemplate the ramifications of biblical and rabbinic sources on issues of contemporary resonance for leaders: the use and abuse of power, leading with humility, and leaders as *dugmaot* - role models.

In between sessions and even after graduation, students maintain enduring connections with their cohort members. Individuals from across the religious and political spectrum bring their PBL communications training to the table of communal discourse long after they have left the program. Several years ago, the President of a classical Reform temple studied a *mishna* with a *haredi* youth educator as part of class. Unlikely as it seems, that relationship continues to this day, modeling a much needed approach to intra-faith dialogue. Similarly, students from diverse sectors of the community, from day schools to federations, forge long lasting relationships that nurture and support them for years to come. Particularly for professionals who often experience a profound sense of loneliness and isolation in their work, this extended network is an enduring benefit.

Guided by PBL theory, volunteer and professional leaders, who learned critical thinking and problem solving *under the same roof*, who share a vocabulary and mutuality of understanding, are subsequently able to set the standard for others as to how to navigate the often-tempestuous waters of lay-professional relationships.

Course evaluations and other appraisal vehicles leave little doubt that the Problem Based Learning approach is having a positive effect upon our students, and the organizations they serve. Overwhelmingly, participants note that the required mentoring component and the use of small groups in class for case study and problem solving are *the* most beneficial aspects of the learning.

Students also express appreciation for the insights they garner from written assignments and final exams. These call for students to bridge the gap between "content learning" and "self learning," requiring them to apply coursework to the particular leadership challenges they confront on a daily basis. So, for example, an eight-year veteran of the JCC system recently used classical and contemporary sources to reflect upon his tendency to hoard power, and the deleterious effect that is having on his career.

The positive impact of PBL is also apparent as we look at the rate of promotions our students have received since graduation. While several factors account for career growth, we are struck by the fact that fully 75% of a recent cohort of MA in Jewish Professional Studies students received internal or external promotions, within one year of their commencement. In a field in which certification and graduate studies are volitional at best, employers are coming to appreciate competent and confident candidates whose PBL training enables them to be better communicators, more

effective problem solvers, team builders and critical thinkers; individuals with broad networks, who possess the ability to generalize from their learning and apply their training to new and rapidly changing circumstances.

When students are able to bring their years of experiences to the classroom and when small group, student-centered problem solving is an essential part of the learning of leadership, those who participate are better prepared to grow their own skills, and more importantly, to help lead the Jewish world through times of enormous challenge.

I conclude, at Erica's request, with a question that emerges directly from our experiences with Problem Based Leadership Learning at Spertus.

With respect, I would ask if our current focus in leadership education in American Jewish life is responsible; that is, response-able for 21st century Jewish realities? In this era of flattened organizations, increased awareness of the role of gender in leadership, innovation and entrepreneurship, when people are joining less and cherry-picking more, how and what should we be teaching about leadership in order to best prepare a new generation of Jewish leaders? Does our traditional reliance on frontal classroom learning, and our insistence upon conflating Jewish literacy and skill set transmission with effective leadership really train today's leaders to solve the difficult problems facing our communities? Does an exclusivist approach, disproportionately focused on the 1%, empower those who toil in the vineyards of Jewish life every day, the "hewers of wood and drawers of water" who have the potential to transform the Jewish experience going forward?

I look forward to discussing this and much more as we learn from each other over the course of this exciting day. Thank you.