

## **Challenges in Group Experiences as a Source of Growth**

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"Youth cannot know how age thinks and feels. But old men are guilty if they forget what it was to be young..." (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*). There are certain lessons that can only be learned through experience and as an educator, I design experiences that will help youth gain knowledge and wisdom as well as strengthen their connection to our community. However, through my own experiences in Project InCiTE I realized I was guilty of forgetting certain aspects of what it is like to be young. Although I had kept in mind the types of experiences that many youth enjoy and the lessons that can be most effective for their developmental levels, I had forgotten how certain challenges can affect young people in varied ways. Through my experiences in Project InCiTE, I was reminded of what it is like to be a participant in a group experience. Although I have been a participant in many professional development sessions and have worked in groups within my own organization, it has been a long time since I have participated in an experience and spent a large amount of time with people I had never met before. Through a variety of discussions and activities, I had the opportunity to develop deeper connections with the fellows. As an educator, I constantly ask youth to be part of such experiences, but until participating in Project InCiTE, I had forgotten what challenges these experiences can pose.

My reactions to the challenges of participating in a group experience were expected in some ways, but surprising in others. From the very beginning of the process, I was extremely excited to work with people from different backgrounds and learn from each of our unique perspectives. I was looking forward to working

well together to help each other enhance our own programs and enhance the field of Jewish Education. Although this ability to work together and learn from each other was expected, I was surprised by the different ways I reacted to each individual group member. I found that I connected differently to each person and that there were certain people with whom it was easier to develop strong connections. Sometimes it was because we had similar jobs or similar interests and other times it was because our personalities matched well. There are many people with whom I continue with whom to interact on both personal and professional levels, including seeing each other in social situations, asking each other for professional advice, and continuing to collaborate with each other on projects. In my focus on building community among the youth at Temple Israel Center, I forgot that some people simply click better than others and that it is unrealistic to expect every member of a group to get along equally well with everyone else in the group. As I learned in Project InCiTE, it is an enormous success if everyone in the group learns from and works with each other while building connections of various levels.

Another surprising effect of the group experience was how far out of my comfort zone it made me feel. I was used to spending time with professionals and friends who I knew well, but during Project InCiTE I spent a lot of time with people I didn't know at all and for the first time in a long time, tried to develop new relationships during a group experience. It reminded me of all the Sabatini I attended as a teen, where I was nervous about not knowing anyone or feeling completely comfortable with anyone there. Although this anxiety was not nearly

as strong as when I was a teen, it was still there to some extent and reminded me how challenging it can be for both youth and adults to be a participant in a group experience.

I was not alone in feeling some discomfort. In a survey I conducted with my fellow Project InCiTE participants I asked a series of questions related to the group experience. When asked about how the group changed throughout the process, a majority of the fellows said they definitely got to know each other better, while a few said they did not. This indicates that at the very beginning, a majority of people were trying to build relationships with each other and while most of them did succeed to different extents, there were certain cases in which they were unable to build these relationships. At some point in the process, we all felt some level of discomfort - but despite this discomfort, a majority of the fellows said that other fellows provided useful guidance and feedback on their projects. In some cases this meant we were able to rise above any initial hesitation we felt and work together effectively. There were many times throughout the process when I internalized the phrase I use commonly in youth group experiences, "Team up with someone you do not know so well," and sought out people to work with whom I did not feel as comfortable with as others. I made an effort to build community and work with people with whom I felt varying levels of comfort, and believe that the result of this effort improved my overall experience.

Discomfort can serve as a catalyst for change. I was uncomfortable with the extent to which I was engaging teens and wanted to take steps to improve

my programs. Despite this desire to change, I was still slightly uncomfortable with the logistics of putting change into effect. However, by giving me the opportunity to be in an environment filled with new people, Project InCiTE gave me the push I needed to embrace change. By participating in a challenging group environment I became more comfortable with discomfort. Whereas I would have shot down many of our new programming ideas because the logistics were too difficult or uncomfortable to think about, in this case I was able to put that discomfort aside and focus more on the value of the program. If the idea matched some of the essential components my peers and I identified as keys to successful programs, I was better able to take a step back and think about how we could make the idea work. Although I did not expect the initial discomfort I felt as a result of being in the new environments I was exposed to through Project InCiTE, those feelings prompted me to remember that I often had similar feelings during group experiences when I was younger. It gave me a new appreciation for how participants can sometimes feel and the ways in which well-designed challenges can help them grow.

In addition to growth, participating in group experiences can strengthen participants' sense of community and lead to more successful collaboration. Besides where they worked and what they did there, I knew very little about most of the participants at the beginning of the fellowship. As time went on, I got to know more about the other participants' passions both within and outside of Jewish education. These connections we developed helped us work together more effectively. In the survey I conducted, when asked about their experiences,

most fellows said they increased connections with each other and the extent to which they worked together as time went on. A majority of them also indicated they are at least somewhat likely to continue connecting with each other for professional reasons, including networking, problem-solving, and collaborating. With the exception of several Fellows who bonded on a social level in a significant way, most fellows indicated that they are likely to see each other in a social, non-professional setting. We were extremely successful in building professional relationships with each other, but it seems that social connections have are generally more difficult to establish. This highlights the fact that a) social connections are much more difficult to build than work-related connections and b) that social connections can often depend more on geographic proximity than professional connections. However, as with social connections, work-related connections can also help build a sense of community. I have seen the effect of these work-related connections in the difficulty I have experienced in writing this paper. Until recently, I was not sure what was at the root of that difficulty, but in the final stages of writing, it has become apparent that I am feeling some reluctance towards sharing some of the more specific details of our experiences. I feel a certain responsibility to my peers in Project InCiTE and although we all developed different levels of relationships with each other, we shared something special. Part of me feels as though it would be breaking certain bonds within our group to share some of the specific anecdotes of our group experience. Even though the connections most of us made with each other were purely work-related, those connections were extremely useful in building relationships with

each other. This has reminded me in my own work with youth that project-based experiences are not only a building block for social relationships, but that they also have a lot of significance on their own. Whether it be making sandwiches for people who are homeless or designing games at our Purim Carnival, it is easier to build connections with each other that are based on specific tasks rather than trying to build relationships out of specifically social situations. However, as occurred in Project InCiTE, these project-based relationships can work in their own way to help build community. It is no secret to most educators that building community takes time and can have positive effects on how the group works together. However, experiencing this community-building first-hand reminded me what it is like to be a part of this process and that youth experiences can be successful when they focus on project-based connections as both an ends as well as a means for developing social connections.

Group experiences provide enormous opportunities for personal growth as well as community-building and project-development. There are certain challenges that are inherent in group experiences, which can have both positive and negative effects on participants. In my work with youth I will create experiences that challenge them both mentally and socially. I will ask them to interact more often with people they do not know well and with whom they may not have a great deal in common, provide them with the chance to participate in community service projects as well as social programs, and give them opportunities to problem-solve, brainstorm, and collaborate with new people. These activities will be challenging, but as I learned in Project InCiTE, successful

group experiences provide participants with a delicate balance between challenge and comfort. The key to overcoming challenges is to be cognizant of the positive and negative effects they can have on participants and to help participants turn any discomfort these challenges cause into opportunities for growth. As a result of the challenges I faced in Project InCiTE, I have been reminded of certain aspects of being a participant and am therefore better able to guide youth towards increased personal growth and a stronger connection to the Jewish community.