

# Learning Innovation... Immerse Yourself



BY REUVEN GREENVALD

*Technology, psychology, and philosophy/ideology provide innovative means for effective and sustainable renewal when combined with methods that focus on “subject matter,” “learner,” “teacher,” and “milieu.”*

**SOME DAYS** I wake up in the morning and I feel like I am channeling Kohelet (<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt3103.htm>). I read a newspaper article and I think I've read the same article ten years ago or more. News is recycled. Fashion is recycled, and it is called “retro”—what is really new under the sun? Much of the technology we use every day presents itself as an innovation, but when it comes down to it, technology provides new mechanisms for things we have been doing for millennia: communicating with one another verbally and in writing, in close proximity and from a distance, and to convey concrete or abstract thoughts.

In Jewish education we can take a closer look at what we desire to call “innovation.” New people enter the field and bring with them new energy. (This doesn't mean that veterans are incapable of generating new energy.) Often we see this new energy applied to modes of activity planning that have been around for decades, but they appear different because of renewed commitment and sometimes because of more “bells and whistles.” Instead of “innovation,” which sets the bar very high, I prefer the adjective, “innovative.” In that sense, educators are playing around with renewed solutions to the challenges they face. It seems to me that “innovative” in Jewish education comes from three domains: technology, psychology, and philosophy/ideology. The first two extend the reach of our educational efforts and continually challenge us to be more effective in our methods. The third has the capacity to reorganize and reconsider knowledge to answer the fundamental existential questions posed in every generation.

The Fellows in Project InCITE (<http://www.projectincite.blogspot.com>), a program that challenged them to create innovative programs in Israel education, were largely drawn to the development of innovative methods. The SIT (Systematic Inventive Thinking) (<http://www.sitsite.com>) approach was well suited to asking questions about method and for providing a systematic framework for the consideration of alternatives. The assumption is that innovative methods will bring about greater engagement with Israel. This assumption was

proven by some of the fine work done by the Fellows.

To a lesser extent in Project InCiTE did we see grappling with the third category, that is, a reconsideration of the big questions that Israel education is contending with today. If technology and psychology help the educator be more effective in terms of initial engagement, the domain of philosophy and ideas is what sustains that engagement over time. More time would have been needed in Project InCiTE to immerse the Fellows in the *what* and *why* of Israel education.

It seems to be that greater immersion in both the subject matter and pedagogy of Israel education is needed to really produce innovative Israel education. Without this immersion, Israel becomes substitutable for any other topic within Jewish education. Immersion doesn't necessarily require years of thinking; intensity of focus for shorter periods of time can also qualify as immersion. Greater immersion in the enduring understandings and essential questions of Israel education can create a communal laboratory for experimentation and deep conversation, which can result in a deeper sense of purpose and vision and something more deeply innovative educationally (see Scott Berkun, *The Myths of Innovation*, Ch. 1, <http://www.scottberkun.com/books/the-myths-of-innovation>).

In thinking about what this immersion would look like in order for the educator to come away with a vision for Israel education, I found a useful starting point in Schwab's four commonplaces (see Joseph Schwab, "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum" in *Science, Curriculum, and Liberal Education: Selected Essays*, University of

Chicago, 1978, <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo3634168.html>)

By privileging in this case the subject matter as a primary locus of the philosophical and pedagogic questions of Israel education, I would see the Israel educator asking these questions about the commonplaces:

1. Subject matter: What is the *it* of Israel education? What ideologies and philosophies influence organization of the subject matter?
2. Learner: Who is the learner (generally)? Who is the learner vis-à-vis the subject matter?
3. Teacher: Who am I as an educator (generally)? Who am I in relationship to the subject?

4. Milieu: What is my setting? What is my setting in relation to the subject?

Project InCiTE provided tools, fellowship, and mentorship that support the educator towards development of the innovative. Equipped with new tools and seeing the value of peer and mentor dialogue and feedback, this Project InCiTE cohort should be encouraged to go more profoundly into essential questions if they are serious about making profoundly innovative contributions to Israel education. ■



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