CHAPTER 7

What Is “Informal Jewish Education”?

Abstract The term “informal” or “experiential” education has become an important concept in the language of contemporary education. Eight defining characteristics of this term are presented in this chapter.

Keywords Informal education • Experiential education • Person-centered • Holistic educator

Education is an ever-changing field which combines cherished traditions and constant innovations about how, where, and why people learn. The discussion of “where, why, and how people learn” has preoccupied educators throughout the ages, and in contemporary times the phrase “informal education” has emerged as a significant term in the educational lexicon. Several alternative terms have emerged to denote this phenomenon, including: “out of school activities”, “recreational education”, “non-formal education”, “informal education”, and the currently popular “experiential education”.1

The frameworks of informal or experiential education join the mainstream educational institutional language of pre-schools, elementary schools, secondary schools, and universities, often as welcome partners, occasionally as doubtful artifacts. Once described as “supplementary” or

---

This chapter is based on my essay, “The philosophy of informal Jewish education” (pp. 13–23) in Bryfman, D. ed. (2014). Experience and Jewish education. Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions.

© The Author(s) 2022
B. Chazan, Principles and Pedagogies in Jewish Education, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83925-3_7
“extra-curricular”, this new kind of education has assumed a new and ever-expanding centrality in contemporary life.

THE CHALLENGE OF DEFINING “INFORMAL EDUCATION”

The interest in informal education raises the question of what this term means. The most common answer is that informal education is education outside of school. While this is a convenient explanation linguistically, it is not particularly helpful in describing the actual nature of the phenomenon. There are activities that physically take place in school, such as debating societies, language clubs, yearbook, and physical education, which somehow seem different from the nature of the standard school protocol of study and curriculum. Similarly, there are activities which take place outside of school, such as intensive language institutes or pre-college preparation programs that in many ways resemble the nature of school-based learning. In addition, negative descriptions are rarely useful or precise enough to clearly delineate the nature of a phenomenon. Thus, the distinction between “school” and “out-of-school” activities is not ultimately helpful because negative definitions do not clearly tell us what a phenomenon is so that we can learn “how to do it” in daily life. While descriptions of formal education abound, there have been surprisingly few linguistic or analytic attempts to delineate the nature of “informal education”.

This is our mission in this chapter. First, we shall briefly look at some examples of “informal education” in Jewish frameworks, then, on the basis of emergent shared characteristics, I shall propose what seems to be eight common characteristics of the phenomenon called “informal Jewish education”.

EXAMPLES OF “INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION”

The kaleidoscope of activities regarded as informal or experiential Jewish education is ever-growing. It includes Jewish youth movements and organizations, which refers to young people voluntarily participating in cultural, educational, ideological, and social activities within a peer group context. The phrase “youth movements” is generally used when the organization has ideological roots, and “youth organization” is typically used to denote general youth frameworks. The power of the peer group and culture is an important dimension of such youth frameworks, as young
people enjoy being together and spending time with friends. Youth movements and organizations are often led by charismatic and engaging counselors who have the ability to excite and inspire. As the counselors are close in age to the participants, it engenders a great sense of identification in their younger charges. These frameworks frequently address topics of immediate concern to young people. Programs include regular meetings, retreats, and summer camps. The experience of such frameworks is enveloped in an aura of enthusiasm and fun.

Jewish camps are immersive summer settings in which young people of diverse ages spend several weeks away from home within a community of young people, frequently located in rural settings. These frameworks are holistic totally self-contained communities in which the camp family lives, eats, and plays together in a diverse range of activities. (Joselit 1994; Sales and Saxe 2004). Camps and retreats are particularly effective in creating an intense and all-encompassing milieu or “total institution” (Goffman 1961). Perhaps most important, camp is a lot of fun! The experience of going to a camp or to a retreat has, like the youth movement, an aura of great engagement and enjoyment about it.

JCCs (Jewish community centers) were established at the beginning of the twentieth century to help Jewish immigrants become more American. By the end of the twentieth century, they had become multipurpose gathering places and venues, and had a mission which called for a diversity of recreational, cultural, social, athletic, Jewish, and general educational activities, as well as helping the now fully integrated American Jews to remember their Jewish links (“Jewish oxygen flows in this place and it is breathed by millions of Jews who enter its doors.”). JCCs have proven to be a new kind of Jewish neighborhood in which Jews of all ages pass through, and it is one of the few places where Jews of all kinds meet (Kaufman 1999).

Adult Jewish learning refers to voluntary frameworks established to enable adult Jews to enrich their Jewish knowledge and acquire Jewish skills in warm and non-threatening settings (Katz 2012). Jewish family education refers to educational programs developed for entire families with the purpose of strengthening the entire Jewish lifestyle of the entire family. (Alper 1987) These two kinds of informal education expanded significantly in late twentieth-century America, and while they had qualities similar to traditional educational models, they were voluntary and adjusted to meet the needs of adults thirsty to study diverse aspects of Judaism with
professionally knowledgeable and skilled educators able to teach texts in ways that relate to the lives and life settings of the participants.

As the phenomenon of travel became more accessible, Jewish or heritage travel became a growth industry in American Jewish life. This kind of education involves directly experiencing sites, events, and people. A trip to Prague or Venice provides an experience of the coexistence of Jewish and general culture. To travel to Poland is to experience the height of Jewish creativity and the depth of human depravity. Traveling to Israel is about seeing, feeling, and touching the Jewish past, present, and future. In this kind of education, much cognitive learning happens through seeing, visiting, touching, and participating in, rather than through lectures or “looking in from without.” (Saxe and Chazan 2008; Kellner 2012), At the end of the twentieth century with the advent of Taglit-Birthright Israel, travel to Israel for post teens and emerging adults became a central educational framework in contemporary Jewish life.

One cannot talk about informal education without referring to the revolution that has taken place in technology, communications, and cyber-space. As the pandemic era showed us, even when confined to home, people are able to study specific topics; have group learning sessions; visit far off places; and listen to podcasts and hear the voices of great teachers and personalities. Indeed the opening of an entirely new platform in which one can choose a topic or an activity at the touch of a button or create a group through a video-conference invitation constitutes a major new arena which extends education far beyond the walls of Hebrew school or the university.

These are just a few examples of the diverse frameworks and formats that have emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century which point to a heretofore unknown, and now only beginning to blossom, campus of Jewish learning and experience.

**The Defining Characteristics of “Informal Jewish Education”**

These diverse examples enable the development of a paradigm for “informal Jewish education” based on eight formal attributes or characteristics. The uniqueness of the practice of informal Jewish education lies in the configuration and synergy of these eight characteristics.
**Person-centered Jewish Education**

The central focus of informal education is the individual and his/her growth. Underlying this focus is the belief that human beings are dynamic individual organisms that grow and are shaped by their own engagement in learning. Hence, this kind of education places a primacy on the person’s own involvement and progress, and he/she is considered an active partner in the educational dynamic. Educationally, this implies what is often called “a child-centered pedagogy”. It focuses on individuals and their personal interests, listening as much as telling, asking questions rather than giving answers, and collaborating rather than coercing. In terms of informal Jewish education, the person-centered principle means helping each individual grow and find meaning as a person and as a Jew. The emphasis is on personal Jewish development rather than on the transmission of Jewish culture, and the individual is actively engaged in his/her own journey of Jewish growth.

The preoccupation with the individual in informal Jewish education also implies concern with affecting the learner’s total being. While selected activities may focus on a specific Jewish skill or Jewish topic (such as learning to speak Hebrew or build a *sukkah*), the ultimate aim of informal Jewish education is to build the person’s overall Jewish character. Thus, informal Jewish education does not see “Jewish growth” as exclusively intellectual, but rather as a synthesis of aesthetic, affective, moral, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions.

**The Centrality of Experience**

Informal Jewish education is rooted in a belief that experience is central to the individual’s Jewish development. The notion of experience in education derives from the idea that participating in an event or a moment through the senses and the mind enables one to understand a concept, fact, or belief in a direct and unmediated way. “Experience” in education refers to learning that happens through participation in events by actually seeing, doing, touching, hearing, and engaging. John Dewey focused on the centrality of the learner in the educational process because of his belief that people learn best when there is a dynamic interactivity between them, thoughts, ideas, and knowledge (Dewey 1938). Such experiencing enables ideas and events to occur in real time and in genuine venues, rather than their being talked about with the learner.³
In terms of informal Jewish education, learning occurs through enabling people to undergo key Jewish experiences and values. For example, an experiential approach to Shabbat focuses on enabling people to participate in it in real time—lighting candles at sunset, hearing kiddush before the meal, and eating challah. This approach does not deny the value of learning about Shabbat in classes and from texts, but it does suggest that learning about an experience is not the same as participating in it.

It is important to note that the experience of study and the learning of ideas can in themselves be very engaging and powerful. The unmediated confrontation with text, either individually, with a study partner or a class with an exceptional teacher, are powerful examples of the central Jewish value of Talmud Torah. Thus, the emphasis on experience is not a rejection of the experience of study, rather it is a refocusing on the active engagement of a person with all his/her senses so that the learning comes from within rather than being imposed from without.

**A Curriculum of Jewish Experiences and Values**

Curriculum has generally been seen as characteristic of formal rather than informal education and is typically understood as a set or course of studies with lists of subjects to be covered, books to be read, ideas to be learned, and tests to be given. However, the more generic meaning of the concept of “curriculum”—an overall blueprint or plan of action rooted in vision—is very much part of informal Jewish education. Curriculum can be rooted in a well-defined body of Jewish experiences and values while at the same time be experienced flexibly and related to the lives of people at significant moments.

There is a diversity of views regarding what comprises the core experiences and values of Jewish tradition or culture. Some approaches are likely to emphasize prayer, study, holidays, and rituals. Other approaches are likely to emphasize Hebrew, holidays, music, morals, and customs. Still other approaches are likely to emphasize the Land of Israel, travel to Israel, Hebrew, and Jewish history. Because of this diversity, it is difficult to arrive at one agreed-upon core Jewish curriculum. At the same time, there are some Jewish experiences that seem to be shared by the majority of informal Jewish educational systems, for example, holidays, life-cycle experiences, cultural and peoplehood experiences, text study, Israel, and core Jewish values.
A central dimension of an informal Jewish education curriculum is its flexibility and dynamism. The methods of teaching “core contents” and the sequence in which they are taught are open to change and adjustment. These core experiences and values may be “taught” in a variety of ways, depending upon time, place, and the individual pace of each learner.

**An Interactive Process**

The unfolding of the curriculum in informal education is determined by the interaction of people with each other and with core experiences. Informal Jewish education is rooted in the belief that active human interchange, dialogue, and discussion are critical dimensions of learning. Interaction refers to a reciprocal effect or influence between two or more people. The thinking and behavior of one, it is assumed, acts as a stimulus for the thinking and behavior of the other. People learn and grow through active social interaction, which stimulates ideas, causes us to think and rethink views, and helps us to re-conceptualize our beliefs and ideologies. The active discussion involving back and forth with others is not simply pedagogically useful, it is, in a more basic sense, a pivotal factor in shaping our ideas, beliefs, and behaviors. The principle of interactivity implies a pedagogy of asking questions, stimulating discussion, and engaging the learner. To encourage interactivity, educators must create an environment which invites learners to listen to each other and to react with dignity and decency. The pedagogy of informal Jewish education is rooted in techniques that empower openness, encourage engagement, instigate creative dialectic, and ensure comfort in diversity and disagreement.

Informal Jewish education is as concerned with igniting dialogue with the learner as it is with transmitting a cultural legacy. The efforts of the informal Jewish educators are very much connected to the dynamic interactive process between student and educator, student and student, student and text, and student and Jewish tradition. Neither ingenuous nor instrumental, this interaction is an inherent element of informal Jewish education’s theory of learning.

**The Group Experience**

The group is an integral component of the learning experience in informal education. Indeed, groups are an *a priori* force that shapes human life rather than technical structures that are superimposed upon us. The
groups of which we are part shape our minds, language, and selves in very central ways. Therefore, education is not simply about transmitting knowledge to all the individuals gathered in one room. It is very much about the dynamic role of the collective in expressing and reinforcing values that are part of the culture of the society that created the group. Groups are not simply aggregates of people learning individually in parallel fashion, they are social networks that teach ideas and values through the essence of the group process. The skilled informal Jewish educator does not just teach about Jewish history or holidays, he/she also shapes a community that exemplifies the concept of *kehillah* (community). The group is central in informal Jewish education in that the key values of *klal Yisrael* (the totality of Israel), *am Yisrael* (Jewish people), *kehillat kodesh* (holy community), and *chesed* (care for the other) are experienced within group contexts.

**A “Culture” of Jewish Education**

Informal Jewish education is rooted in the belief that education is fundamentally about “creating culture” rather than transmitting knowledge. This form of education attains its goals most effectively by treating the entire educational setting as a comprehensive culture. Here, “culture” refers to the totality of components that make up educational contexts: architecture, styles of dress, codes and norms of behavior, seating patterns, physical and aesthetic decor, norms of human interaction, language patterns, and many others. The cultural milieu as a whole teaches by presenting, creating, and reinforcing values, ideas, experiences, norms, and, ultimately, a worldview.

Hence, informal Jewish education emphasizes the importance of orchestrating settings to reflect and model values and behaviors deemed important. It focuses on all aspects of an environment in order to educate for “Jewishness”. It does not emphasize only cognitive or discursive content, but also the many diverse aspects of the setting as a whole: what the room looks like; what food is served; and how staff members interact with each other. With such an approach, logistical and organizational considerations are neither incidental nor secondary to the educational program—they are themselves inherently educational issues. On an Israel experience, for example, it is the educator, rather than the bus driver or administrator, who should determine routes and room allocation. The dinner menu on the first night of a Jewish summer camp is as much an issue for the camp educator as it is for the business manager and dietitian. The latter two are
rightly focused on finance and nutrition, while the former, zeroing in on the transition of the campers and possible “newness panic”, seeks to create a warm “Jewish home” atmosphere. Indeed, issues of food, travel, bedtime and waking-up time, personal hygiene, and economics are core issues of education and mental health, and not only issues of logistics and administration. The notion of an “educational culture” also implies that education is not limited to specific locales, such as classrooms or school buildings; it can occur anywhere. As we learn in the most concise and most powerful text on informal Jewish education ever written, Jewish education takes place “when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:7).

The notion of a culture of education also suggests that no single agency has a monopoly on Jewish education. Such a culture can be created wherever Jews may be found—in community centers; Jewish family service offices; sports activities; retreats and conferences; at meals; and on bus rides. Indeed, some of these places may well be ideal venues for Jewish education because they are real settings where Jewish experiences can be lived rather than talked about. The task of the educator is to adapt all settings to serve the larger educational vision.

An Education That Engages

Informal Jewish education engages and co-opts participants to make them feel positive about being involved. Because of its focus on the individual and on issues that are real to him/her, informal Jewish education is often described as “fun,” “joyful,” or “enjoyable.” This should not be taken as a sign of frivolity or lack of seriousness. As Erikson and others have indicated, identity is, in part, a sense of positive feelings about a group or a frame of reference, thus positive feelings about a Jewish experience play an important role in the development of Jewish identities. (Cole 1996).

In this context, informal Jewish education may be compared to play and sports. The literature on play and sports emphasizes the involvement and engagement of the learner, the joy in the moment, the immediacy of it all, the positive memory, and the warm associations. What seems mundane may be sublime. The late Bart Giamatti—Renaissance scholar, university president, and one-time commissioner of Major League Baseball—described an end-of-season baseball game as a life event reminiscent of erev Rosh Hashanah:
In the seventh, the Yankees lead off with two singles from Chambliss and White … I am going to board a plane in a mere five minutes and my heroes and I, after a long spring and summer and hectic fall, are going home … I now remember it is Rosh Hashanah, and I recall that renewal has rhythms as old as decline. (Giamatti 1989, p. 165)

One small game is an echo of eternity and paradise.

**The Holistic Educator**

Informal Jewish educators are total personalities who educate by words deeds, and by shaping a culture of Jewish values and experiences. They are person-centered educators whose focus is on learners and whose role it is to create opportunities for engaging experiences and to facilitate the learner’s entry into such moments. The informal Jewish educator promotes interaction and interchange. One of the major tasks is to create an environment that enables this interactivity to flourish. This requires proficiency in the skills of asking questions, listening, and activating the engagement of others.

The informal Jewish educator is a creator of community and kehillah by shaping the aggregate into a group and utilizing the group setting to teach core Jewish values. They are creators of culture, sensitive to all the elements contained within an educational setting so that they reflect the values and experiences the educator wishes to convey. The task in this instance is to make every decision—big or little—an educational decision. Informal Jewish educators must be able to engage those with whom they work and make their learning experience enjoyable, stimulating, and yield positive associations. Finally, the informal Jewish educator needs to be an educated and committed Jew. This educator must be knowledgeable since one of the values he/she comes to teach is Talmud Torah—study. He/she must be an accessible model of ways of thinking, knowing, questioning, and behaving that reflect the best of Jewish civilization.

**INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION DEFINED**

Having identified these eight characteristics, informal Jewish education can be defined as follows:
Informal Jewish education is aimed at the personal growth of Jews of all ages. It happens through the individual’s hands-on experience with a diversity of Jewish moments and values that are regarded as worthwhile. It works by creating venues, by developing a total educational culture, and by co-opting the social context. It is based on a “curriculum” of Jewish values and experiences that is presented in a dynamic and flexible manner. It does not call for any one venue but may happen in a variety of settings. It evokes pleasurable feelings and memories. It requires Jewishly literate educators with a teaching style that is highly interactive and participatory, and who are willing to make maximal use of self and personal lifestyle in their educational work.

**INFORMAL EDUCATION AND INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION**

Jewish and general informal education share seven of the eight defining characteristics: both are person-centered, experience-oriented, and interactive, and they promote a learning and experiencing community, a culture of education, and content that engages. Both, ideally, are shaped by especially thoughtful and engaging educators.

Informal Jewish educators differ from general informal education in terms of the nature and goals of the curriculum that defines their work. Informal Jewish education is focused on shaping the overall personality of its charges as Jews and as human beings. General informal education may be related to linkage and lineage with a specific ethnic group or with alternative educational or cultural contents. General and Jewish informal education have different content and curricular orientations but, beyond that, they share the same general assumptions about the essence of an educational approach.

All forms of informal Jewish education are ultimately concerned with Jewish character or lifestyle. It is true that there are specific examples of informal Jewish education that seem to be about distinct content topics. The adult learning class on “The Rhythm of Jewish Life” helps participants acquire knowledge about the Jewish calendar. The trip to Poland enables a better understanding of the role of the Holocaust in Jewish life as well as presenting the former grandeur of major Jewish communities. However, in both cases, the larger, overall goal is Jewish character development. A person whose sole task is to take a group through the streets of Prague or Krakow is a tour guide. Only if the mission is to contribute to the lifelong journey of the traveler is the guide an “informal Jewish educator.”
Conclusion

The contemporary bifurcation of education into “formal” and “informal” can be artificial, and such a sharp distinction did not exist in many classical cultures. Indeed it is in modern school-centered societies that the need for new distinguishing categories emerged.

While the twenty-first century continues to use the terms “formal” and “informal” or “experiential” Jewish education, this state of affairs is not irreversible. In the decades, years, and centuries ahead, we may yet succeed in restoring the organic unity that once was. We should work hard to correct the notion that informal and formal Jewish education are unrelated entities. In fact, they should be seen as partners in the overall goal of developing knowledgeable and committed human beings. Each has much to learn from the other. We might well consider talking about the “de-formalization of the formal” and “re-formalization of the informal” rather than regarding these as opposing philosophies. Indeed, perhaps the time has come to unite these two critical words and worlds.

Notes

1. I will use the term “informal education” throughout this chapter.
2. Chazan, B. (1994). “Jewish Education in the JCC”. New York: JCC Association.
3. Over the years, the phrase “experiential education” has been linked to John Dewey, but such a usage is not found in his writings.

Bibliography

Alper, J. P., Ed. 1987. Learning Together: A Source Book on Jewish Family Education. (Alternatives in Religious Education).
Cole, M. 1996. Cultural Psychology. (Harvard University Press).
Dewey, J. 1938. Experience and Education. (Collier Books).
Giamatti, A. B. 1989. Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games. (Summit Books).
Goffman, I. 1961. Asylums. (Anchor Books).
Joselit, J. W. 1994. The Wonders of America: Reinventing American Culture 1880–1950. (Hill and Wang).
Katz, B. D. 2012. Re-inventing Adult Jewish Learning. (KTAV Publishing House).
Kellner, S. 2012. Tours that Bind: Diaspora Pilgrimage and Birthright Israel Tourism. (New York University Press).
Kaufman, D. 1999. *Shul with a Pool: The “Synagogue Center” in Jewish History*. (Brandeis University Press).
Sales, A. L. & Saxe, L. 2004. *How Goodly Are Thy Tents: Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences*. (Brandeis University Press).
Saxe, L. & Chazan, B. 2008. *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity*. (Brandeis University Press).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.