THE INSTITUTE FOR EXPERIENTIAL JEWISH EDUCATION

M² Circles: Relational Learning

CONCEPT PAPERS

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[1] Overview and Program Arc

[A] Introduction

Relationships are at the heart of what it means to be human. The 'other' in a relationship can become, in the words of the Israeli poet Leah Goldberg[1], "a glance, a window, a mirror", ultimately supporting and challenging our capacities for self-discovery and our self-conceptions of authenticity and significance[2]. Relationships are also significant in cultivating, nurturing and sustaining communities through the development of personal connections, often spanning entire lifetimes and lasting generations[3].

Relationships between and within generations are foundational to Jewish vibrancy. Tractate Avot, a compilation of teachings dealing with Jewish ethical and moral principles, is relational at its core. In addition to providing guidance for how we must relate to others, ourselves, our communities and to God, many of the teachings in this tractate are presented through the prism of relationships (teacher to student, student with student, groups of students among themselves). The teaching is whole when shared in context of the relationship that bred it.

The Talmud provides another example of the critical role real-life and virtual relationships play, most significantly when describing the atmosphere of the Bet Midrash, a Torah study hall fueled by vibrant and demanding relationships among its students. Learning in a Bet Midrash is not just an act of transition where knowledge is transferred from person to person or generation to generation. It is an act of creative disruption, always leading to newness. The educator claims no authority over the Torah — she demands of her students to teach her! The relationship between educator and learner within the Jewish context is a sacred encounter, contributing to the ongoing and never-ending perfection of Torah[4].

In recent times, relationships have been viewed as a key strategy for connecting unaffiliated Jews to Jewish community and Jewish activities[5]. To this end, an approach called "Relationship Based Engagement" came into practice close to two decades ago. This approach focused on the development of one-on-one relationships between an 'engager' and a 'student' (i.e. the subject of the outreach) with the purpose of inviting these students to explore Jewish value propositions. This approach has garnered

[1] Goldberg, L. (1939) Green-Eyed Spike

[2] Taylor, C. (1991), The Ethics of Authenticity.

[3] Wolfson, R. (2013), Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community

[4] Silman, Y. (1999), The Voice Heard at Sinai: Once or Ongoing?

[5] Uram, M. (2016), Next Generation Judaism

success and currently many institutions employ professionals with ranging degrees of seniority to perform this type of work. This initiative sees the development of relationships as a professional strategy with fixed goals and outcomes.

This approach to relationship building has raised interesting questions about the nature of relationships in Jewish education. More specifically, the viewpoint of engagement as a strategy has surfaced challenges of quality versus quantity, particularly when quantitative outcomes are significant.

Following the footsteps of Pirkei Avot, Leah Goldberg, the energy and vibrancy of the Bet Midrash and the teachings of Charles Taylor, M^2's Relational Engagement Circle will explore what it means to view relationships as a pedagogy rather than a strategy. As such it will primarily focus on qualitative implications of relationships and explore how they can yield deeper and more profound impact on personal and communal conceptions and experiences of meaning.

Designed for educators immersed in relational work, M^2's Relational Engagement Circle is a year-long space designed to create, through learning and experimentation, a richer paradigm of relationship building within Jewish educational frameworks. The program includes three in-person gatherings. In between gatherings, participants will be engaged in application labs, action-based research, and mentoring. Additionally, participants will contribute to a special publication about new experiments in relational learning that will be published upon completion of the program.

[B] Principal Directions

M^2 Relational Engagement Circle will explore the educational value of relational learning through three prisms:

- **Character**: the qualities, traits and virtues of the educator in relational contexts;
- **Self and the Other**: the dynamic and complex orientations of self in relation to the other, and the role both play in the co-construction of meaning;
- **Thirdness**: the contexts and purposes that frame relationships and that are created within and by them.

The ways in which these three prisms interact, at times harmonious, at times conflictual, and at times as a dance, is crucial in expanding notions of relationships and their potential in educational contexts. These interactions will be the primary subject of exploration throughout the program. Two additional components will contribute to the programs arc:

- Social network theory will allow participants to examine the assumptions they have about the richness of individual relationships within the complex milieu of community and social life and provide a frame for expanding impact beyond one-on-one relationships.

- Action Based Research will challenge participants to formulate and test hypotheses about relational work through the course of the year. The results of personal research projects and their integration into educational practice will enable participants to experiment with their learnings, as well as yield a shared publication of findings to contribute to the field of relational work.

A short articulation of the program's three primary prisms will now be elucidated.

Character Development

Character relates to the mental and moral qualities, traits and virtues distinctive to an individual and how they work in service of or inhibit our abilities. While character is personal and subjective, it is observable and can be described, reflected upon and be a source of learning and inspiration for others[6].

Exploring elements of character, specifically those complicit with relational work, will provide participants with language to explore their sense of self and ways of being and doing in the world. It will invite participants to recognize their limits, gifts, capacities, motivations and blind spots. It will help participants recognize when they (and their learners) are open to learning and change, and where they get stuck or find change too challenging.

By exploring topics such as calling, power, servitude, hubris, bewilderment and compassion - key elements that are ever present in the role of Jewish educators - participants will recognize how confrontation with the other in its many forms produces choices, often conflictual, and how our character is borne out of the decisions made by negotiating the choices and conflicts that are inherent in these interactions. Ultimately, participants will explore how authenticity is rooted in these decisions and that character reflects the congruency of decision-making with one's own sense of self and purpose.

Self and Other

While people can be connected to each other or be in service of each other in a myriad of ways, relationships between a 'self' and an 'other' represents a connection of equal, authentic subjects which takes a dynamic that is intrinsically different to other forms of connection, notably ones that are transactional and that possess outcomes that are more deliberate[7]. Within an educational context, this form of connection eradicates the titles of 'educator' and 'student' and eliminates the distance formed by these titles. A relationship developed between Self and Other required a mutuality and equality, in which both subjects are educators and learners simultaneously. The educational opportunities within this context allow for a joint exploration and co-construction of meaning, to which both subjects contribute as equally desirable partners.

[6] Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004), Character, Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification. This handbook gives a comprehensive overview of character strengths, how to distinguish them from virtues and the routes to display character strengths.
[7] Buber, M. (1937), I and Thou

To develop authentic interactions participants will be challenged to cultivate environments of presence, rich with purpose and intention; to develop capacities for full and mutual visibility (seeing and being seen); to raise the other and allow themselves to be raised through the processes of 'challenge and support', and to engage in all aspects of such a relationship 'Lishma' – for its own sake, with no external motivations. The presence of these key elements will afford participants with opportunities to cultivate environments ripe for a co-construction of meaning in its most authentic sense.

Exploring relationships through this framework will enable participants to recognize its intrinsic value and will pave the way to develop concepts such as differentiation, self-states, interpersonal dynamics, dialogue and interpretation.

Thirdness[8]

What most challenges the prisms of Character and Self and Other is the concept of "Thirdness". Thirdness posits that every relationship has additional entities that are present within it, both defining and challenging it. For parents it might be their child and for partners it might be their professions. For learners and educators, it is broad range of contexts, ideas and purposes than enliven, frame and ground the relationship. These could include the title 'educator' or 'Rabbi', the visions and goals the educator has, the text they might be exploring, the organization they might be representing, or the outcomes either is driving towards. Thirdness also relates to the space and energy that is created between those in the relationship and the dynamic created between them.

Acknowledging and then cultivating Thirdness is essential in helping participants explore, navigate and negotiate meaning, growth and results in the educator-learner encounter, with profound implications personal and organizational visions, goals and outcomes.

Exploring the dynamic parameters of Thirdness will surface for participants the challenges and opportunities inherent to relational work that happens within environments advocating for vision-based change and measurable impact. It will provide participants with a conceptual frame and language to help them situate purpose, professional mandates and social structures within their relationships with their learners.

[C] Program Structure

M²'s Relational Engagement Circle is constructivist in its nature. By gaining exposure to the core principles of character development, self and other, and thirdness, and throughout a series of workshops that can help develop richer understandings of each, participants will be challenged to develop their

[8] This core concept is rooted in the field of psychoanalysis especially as it relates to the analytic third. Cultural thirdness has more relevance in this context as it relates to educational contexts. For more on this see:
Gerson, S. (2004). The Relational Unconscious: A Core Element of Intersubjectivity, Thirdness, and Clinical Process. Psychoanalytic Quarterly., 73:63-98.

The own approach to and practices for relational engagement and be provided with opportunities to test these out and subsequently refine them. What follows outlines how the above will be accomplished:

- This initiative is built on the assumption that this is not about building an expertise in relational engagement but understanding its elements and its potential in each relationship. Co-construction of meaning requires that each act of meaning is built through the intentional act of experiencing together;

- As such, in order to best embrace the constructivist nature of the program, no staff, faculty or mentors should present as an expert in the space of relational engagement. Rather, we are offering perspectives and frames that can help participants form their own approaches and expertise.

- M² core faculty will introduce the core principles and facilitate daily reflections and introspections to help participants form their own understanding of these principles, and the ways by which they can begin putting them to practice. These sessions are called **'construction zones'.**

- Guest faculty will facilitate workshops on a range of topics related to relational learning. Specifically, in seminar one, these include workshops on the philosophy of Havruta, relational psychology and character traits. While these workshops should engage with the core principles, they should not explicitly attempt to align themselves with one specific principle. Further, the nature and interplay of each element will be elucidated through the construction zone time and other processing time. These workshops are called **'workout spaces'.**

- This initiative is about gaining increased ownership of the core principles and the ways in which they can then be modeled for others. The core principles are at times harmonious and at times conflictual. The conflicts that they may raise will be demanding of the participants and the program will not provide them with simple answers. It will ask participants to wrestle through forming their own. The role of the mentors is to partner with each participant and jointly wrestle with their meaning making process, particularly as it relates to participants' relationships with themselves, their students and their organizations. In that vein, mentors are quintessential models of relationships that promote co-construction of meaning. This element is called **'personal training'.**

- Over the course of each seminar, participants will be challenged to form new approaches to relational engagement that they can then test out in between seminars. M² core faculty will help participants form 'research questions' and provide them with protocols and systems for how to collect data and findings. Over the course of the program, participants will be provided with opportunities to share their findings, solicit feedback, and subsequently reapply their research. Towards the end of the programs participants will be encouraged to write about their research. These findings will be publicly shared in a dedicated publication. This element of the program is called **'action-based research'.**

[D] Program Overview

Seminar 1

Essential Question:
How can we shift from viewing relationships as a strategy to relationships as a pedagogy?

Goals:

- Understanding the core principles of character, self and other, and thirdness
- Developing the ability to navigate these principles
- Understanding our own inclinations and areas of conflict
- Determining action-based research

Seminar 2

Essential Question:
How do I deepen Relational Engagement pedagogy and better navigate it?

Goals:

- Raising stakes within each principle and situating it within social network theory
- Conceptualizing action-based research to form a pedagogic statement
- Articulating a clearer understanding of self within the core principles
- Determining stage two of action-based research

Seminar 3

Essential Question:
How do I make Relational Engagement my own and infuse it into my vision and identity?

Goals:

- Develop refined understanding of Relational Engagement based on research analysis
- Develop and articulate a Relational Engagement based vision for each principle
- Develop outcomes for vision and strategies to reach goals

[2] Seminar 2 Concept: Pedagogic Implications

[A] Relational Engagement: Pedagogic Implications

Thus far we have explored three elements central to relational engagement. These include: Character, Self-Other and Thirdness

We're now positing these elements make up the commonplaces of relational engagement. By understanding their particular nature and how they overlap and converge, we believe that they can guide us in the cultivation of a cohesive pedagogy for relational work.

What exactly are commonplaces? How does this frame help us?

[B] Commonplaces

A commonplace is a practical method, not guaranteed to be perfect, that can examine and propose solutions on issues set in front of it[1]. Commonplaces were made famous by Joseph Schwab[2] as a framework for understanding curriculum development. He introduced four commonplaces: subject matter, learner, educator, milieu. A fifth commonplace of self-study was later added.

Commonplaces can be understood in the following ways[3]:

1. Commonplaces are indispensable in the consideration of the topic
2. Each commonplace is of equal rank. There is no hierarchical structuring of the commonplaces and each must always be kept in the foreground and on an even plane
3. Between commonplaces there has to be coordination and never super-ordination or sub-ordination
4. Each one needs to be understood individually as well as in relation to the other commonplaces
5. Commonplaces provide a non-rigorous method of achieving solutions to problems. This is contrary to a rigorous approach that follows a step by step method with clear outcomes

[1] St. Maurice, H. (1991). *J. Curriculum Studies 23:1, 41 – 53*. A guide to commonplaces: On the use of loci in educators' discourse.
[2] Schwab, J. J. (1978). *Science, Curriculum and Liberal Education*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
[3] Helms, J. V. & Carlone, H. B. (1999). *Science Education 83*: 233 – 245. Science Education and the commonplaces of science. John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

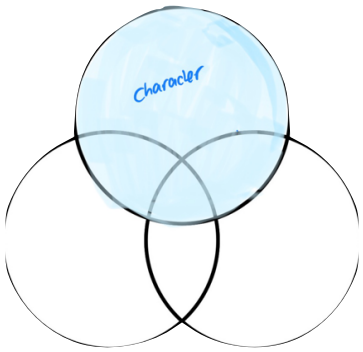
6. Multiple definitions or interpretations may exist for each commonplace and it has the capacity to hold multiple dimensions of that element
7. What gives a commonplace its power and utility is that it allows for multiple interpretations and can be meaningful across a range of situations
8. One of the biggest questions when introducing commonplaces within a specific scope of work is whether there are other commonplaces that are crucial to the scope but are not present. This is an open question that we are still exploring

[C] Core Definitions

In relational engagement there are three commonplaces: commonplaces of character, self-other and thirdness. We propose that the pedagogy of relational engagement emerges by holding and exploring the tension between these commonplaces, specifically when working towards their alignment. Before exploring the interactions between these commonplaces, we will first describe them individually.

Character

We use the metaphor of a 'well' to indicate the need of the educator to look within and bring out more and deeper aspects of herself.



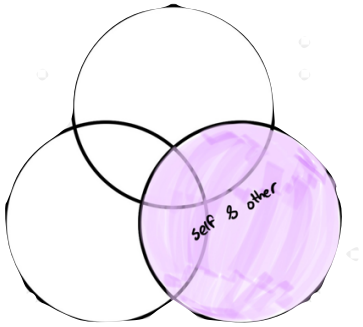
There are many words associated with character such as traits[4], attitudes[5], dispositions[6] and virtues[7]. In Jewish terms, the word "Middah"[8] probably comes the closest to defining what we mean by character, namely because it is a behavioral expression of attitude that can be nurtured through habituation. The most important aspect of this definition is its link to identity. The person becomes known through particular moral and mental qualities, and the ways that they are exhibited.

[4] A distinguishing quality or characteristic
[5] A settled way of feeling or thinking about someone or something
[6] A person's inherent qualities of mind and character
[7] Behavior showing high moral standards
[8] Intentional habits that are the marriage of skills and attitudes. Can be nurtured and become a stable trait of character through habituation

It also indicates that while character is not something that changes very easily, it is always noticeable and distinct, and can be developed over time. The lexicon that relates to and enriches character includes individual capacities, limitations, gifts and motivations.

Self-Other

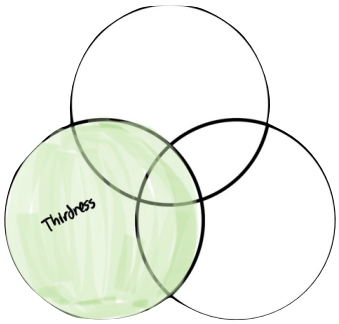
We use the metaphor of 'mirror' to indicate that educators and learners hold up reflections (rather than projections) to one another.



This commonplace explores the dynamic and complex orientations of self in relation to the other and assumes that humans are essentially relational. The experience of the self with the other facilitates collective aspirations for the co-construction of meaning. Relational moments happen when the self interacts with the other, and the space between them develops its own distinctive qualitative properties. The quality of this space is dependent on the equality, mutuality and reciprocity between the subjects and the flexibility and interchangeability of a self who is present both as a learner and as an educator. It is predicated on factors such as visibility and presence, challenge and support and a common language of expectations.

Thirdness

We use the metaphor of 'window' to indicate that many outer forces impact the relationship



Thirdness is an additional entity that is present in every relational moment. Acknowledging, understanding and then cultivating thirdness is essential in navigating, exploring and negotiating all relationships. Thirdness provides a conceptual commonplace that situates purpose, professional mandates and other external factors within relational moments.

It is a multidimensional concept and for the purposes of this initiative it is being explored as it relates to culture.[9] It includes the contexts, ideologies, professional mandates, social structures, cultural references and language that permit and prohibit as they ascribe responsibilities and set parameters for the relationship.

[D] Defining Relational Engagement

At the outset of this initiative we asked what relationships would look like as a pedagogy rather than as a strategy. In adopting the commonplace frame, we are now in a position to introduce a definition for relational engagement. We propose that the pedagogy of relational engagement exists through holding and exploring the tension between the commonplaces of character, self-other and thirdness, and ultimately working towards their alignment. Our definition of relational engagement can thus be articulated as follows:

Relational engagement is the contextualized, co-construction of meaning guided by the intentional expression of Middot.

The core elements of relational engagement appear in this definition in the following way:

Contextualized = Thirdness; Co-construction = Self-Other; Middot = Character.

Meaning emerges out of the ongoing attempts to resolve the tensions inherent in the interaction of the commonplaces. Intentionally working within a flexible alignment between the commonplaces is the desired outcome of relational engagement.

By integrating commonplaces into this definition, we are able to view relational engagement as the ongoing attempt to reach full integration between the commonplaces, so that what the self of the educator, his mutual relationships with his learner, and the thirds that define and influence him, work in full alignment and enable educational impact.

We further posit that the ultimate aim of relational engagement is in the cultivation of thought communities (social experiences that transcend subjectivity). This is the subject of Seminar 3.

[E] Points of Overlap: Sparks and Conflicts

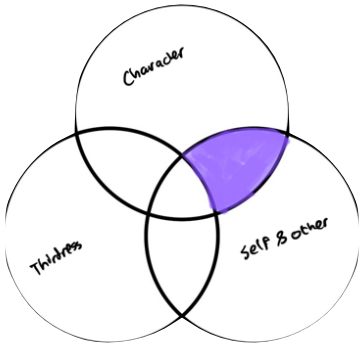
Up until this point, definitions of each commonplace have been articulated as a precursor to a definition of relational engagement. In this section we will investigate the sparks (opportunities) and conflicts (threats) that exist in the overlapping spaces between pairs of commonplaces, as well as the subsequent

[9] Other dimensions are psychoanalytical/relational thirdness and developmental thirdness.

mediating role that the third commonplace can play in this interaction[10]. Delving into the overlapping spaces between pairs of commonplaces allows for a richer exploration of our paradigm.

Between Character & Self-Other

When our relationships hold up a mirror against our well, what do we find?



The space in which character and self-other overlap can be defined by the choices made when the educator confronts, or is confronted by, her learner. This overlap brings about possibilities and associations for growth as well as opportunities for reflection, learning and change. It can also be threatening, bringing about conflicts that surface the seeds of exploitation, narcissism, and self-absorption.

Among others, this confrontation brings about the following questions:

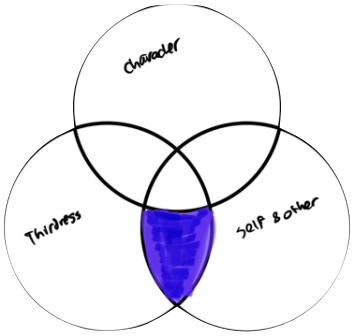
- How do the relationships we have, and are in, allow us to better understand ourselves, and better ourselves in general?
- How do the choices we make when in confrontation with the other build or clarify our character?
- As we bring out the many aspects of our character, including our 'shadows,' how does our authenticity stand to the test of the other?
- How do we navigate the challenges inherent to this overlap, namely the threats related to projection; power and hubris? Similarly, how to we enhance our capacities for compassion, openness and curiosity?

The commonplace of thirdness can be a mediating factor in its capacity to introduce external norms, value systems and belief systems that balance the overlap between the commonplaces of character and self-other.

[10] In reality, it is not really possible to isolate pairs to the exclusion of the third commonplace

Between Self-Other & Thirdness

When external windows being shining onto the mirrors we hold up, what changes?



The space in which thirdness and self-other overlap can be defined by the parameters that external forces pose on unmediated relationships. Thirdness grounds self-other with purpose and orientation, creating the right environment for the emergence of meaning. However, in a maximalist presence it can overwhelm the relationship (through domination), and in its minimalist presence it enables apathy and indifference.

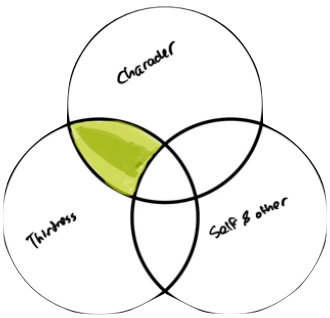
Among others, this overlap brings about the following questions:

- To what extent do external purposes and goals impose on the natural development of relationships?
- Is it possible to develop decontextualized relationships when educators are ultimately fueled by contexts?
- How do educators ensure that thirdness elevates relationships by creating a sense of belonging, while ensuring that ideological aspirations don't overpower the authenticity of a particular relationship?

When working through these questions, the commonplace of character can serve as a mediating factor by raising differentiation and cultivating a flexible solid sense of self, and self-validated intimacy.

Between Character & Thirdness

What do outside windows bring in and out of our internal wells?



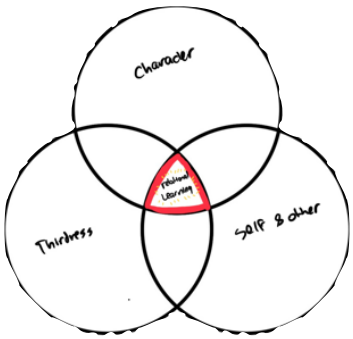
The spaces in which character and thirdness overlap can be defined by the extent to which cultural, social and religious systems permit and prohibit full aspects of self to emerge. In a maximalist presence, thirdness threatens to shut character down, bringing about a sense of bewilderment. In a minimalist presence, thirdness threatens to leave character without context, ultimately bringing about a sense of anxiety. Similarly, character might threaten to shut down all thirdness, with the aspiration for the emergence of a 'true self'.

Among others, this overlap brings about the following questions:

- How might an educator ensure that thirdness (ideologies, purposes) ground and elevate character instead of challenging its inclinations?
- As we bring out various aspects of our character, including our 'shadow sides' how do we negotiate these with the cultural systems we hold dear?
- How does an educator ensure that convictions bred by ideological, religious or cultural thirdness do not deny the emergence of character?
- Similarly, how might an educator ensure that thirdness breeds a measured sense of passion, servitude and agency?

The commonplace of self-other can serve as a mediating factor by ensuring that the educator and learner constantly hold mirrors up against one another, preventing a sense of isolation and prompting a measure of inextricability.

[F] A Working Model of the Three Commonplaces



In relational engagement (as in life) all three commonplaces are always present. When each commonplace is equally nurtured and is held accountable to the other two commonplaces, the dynamic brings all three closer together, and they become better aligned and more integrated. It is important to note that at times, and based on necessity, there will be scenarios in which one commonplace will take priority over the others. This will result in an asymmetrical tension in which, under the right conditions (including authenticity, integrity and primarily humility), it is possible to navigate these emerging tensions.

[G] The Emergence of Thought Communities

When the three commonplaces are aligned, and the dimensions of relational engagement are fully integrated, what is expected to develop is the emergence of a Thought Community: When an educator makes impact through multiple relationships that all focus on the contextualized co-construction of meaning, these relationships begin to form a community bound by a deep connection that transcends each individual's subjectivity.

In our final seminar we will explore this final and most impactful dimension of relational engagement.

[3] Principles in the Formation of Thought Communities

[A] Introduction

M²'s Circle on Relational Learning has developed an approach to relational learning that has explored what it means to view relationships as a pedagogy rather than a strategy[11]. Our first step in exploring relational learning was to describe its core elements and how they interact with each other as a prelude to a definition of relational learning. This exploration surfaced, what has been termed, the three commonplaces of relational learning, namely 'character', 'self-other' and 'thirdness'. Their role in relational learning and how they interact with each other was shown through the Relational Learning Venn Diagram as described in concept paper #2. It also yielded a working definition of relational learning that is articulated as follows:

"Relational learning is the contextualized, co-construction of meaning guided by the intentional expression of Middot".

Until now we have focused primarily on the qualitative implications of relationships and explored the manner in which it can have a deeper and more profound impact on personal conceptions and experiences of meaning. We are now at the stage of exploring its communal implications and how the relational learning model facilitates the development and maintenance of what is termed 'thought communities'.Thus far we have explored three elements central to relational engagement. These include: Character, Self-Other and Thirdness.

[B] What we talk about when we talk about meaning

The field of semiotics is dedicated to the study of signs and their meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and one of the founders of semiotics, theorized that all signs can be broken down into two parts: signifier and signified. The signifier is the concrete form that the sign takes and the signified is the meaning that is associated with that form or image.

For example, a red light (signifier) is able to convey to drivers that they must press the break as they approach the intersection and ensure that their car comes to a complete stop (signified). If the green light had been lit, this would have signaled to the driver

[11] There is a distinction between a model that describes how relationships create meaning (pedagogy) and one the describes the strategic outcomes that relationships produce or that are desired (strategy).

that it was proper for them to continue on through the intersection. In other contexts, a red light or green light, might indicate something else, but as part of a traffic light, they convey clear and discernible meanings. To turn to a Jewish example, *Kippot* (signifiers) can also be understood as signs. Different styles or colors can signal different meanings (signified) to the wearer and to others.

In the context of relational learning, when we talk about the 'co-construction of meaning,' we are essentially positing that through social relationships we can jointly assign meanings to signs. For example, in a certain relationship or set of relationships a certain word (i.e. belonging) or experience (i.e. a salon) signifies how we (i.e. a 30-something Jew living in a liberal environment which prizes professional accomplishment and status) can jointly overcome a sense of existential loneliness that is void of soul and spirit. These then are the 'signified'.

In other contexts, the words 'belonging' and 'salon' will signify completely different experiences, but in the context of our relationship they mean something very specific. Thus, the co-construction of meaning is the way in which we access all three commonplaces to create particular signifier-signified relationships. The more aware we are of the meanings we are co-constructing, the more likely we are to go deeper into the work of meaning-making.

[C] What is a Thought Community?

Community formation is based on the premise that, as social beings, individuals have a richer experience of life through social interactions[12].

This premise posits that, although the collective consists of individuals, it is not simply the aggregate sum of them. The stimulating interactions (signifiers) within a community of individuals will produce shared understandings (signified) that no individual could have produced by themselves. These shared understandings are particular to the collective that created and shares them and is what is referred to as a 'thought community'.

The conceptual frame for 'thought communities' is derived from the field of cognitive sociology[13] and addresses the question: What defines our community and makes it distinct from other communities?

A thought community is a social construct that understands our way of being in the world as an integration between individuality (a highly personalized view of one's experience in the world) and universality (a highly common view of the human experience in the world). We are, in this construct, 'social beings,' both similar to as well as different from others.

[12] Fleck. L. (1979). Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact. University of Chicago Press: Chicago

[13] Zerubavel, E. (1997). Social Mindscapes. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts

What makes us different to others is our individuality. What makes us similar is our universality. What, then, brings us together?

Thought communities are essentially meetings of minds. We can also extend this to meetings of hearts, of souls, of values, and of many more. In brief, we can suggest that a thought community collectively orients itself around a contextualized view of language and meaning[14]. Based on how we defined the word 'meaning' above, in a thought community, particular signifiers signify similar things.

Thus, thought communities are not necessarily geographically based but rather based in conceptions and norms that orient the ways that its members experience the world. This can be seen in the way we ascribe words to colors that we agree upon in certain societies and not in others.

A more intimate thought community is one in which language and meanings are more particular. For example, the word 'Zionism' might mean something very different to liberal Jews living in the Bay Area than it would to another community in America. These Bay Area Jews have a thick and particular thought community.

As shared meanings emerge, the thought community becomes greater than the sum of each individual's contribution and can express itself in thicker and more particular ways. The emergent community creates limits of participation to those members who implicitly or explicitly agree to these shared meanings. It is these emergent outcomes that are significant to the individuals who catalyzed it or were catalyzed to it that creates a platform for other people to join. This co-constructed meaning is the platform on which the thought community is built. As the thought community continues to flourish its shared understandings are continually evolving and developing through the many interactions and contributions that shape it.

[D] What then is the role of a 'Relational Educator'?

One way of thinking about the role of a relational educator is in 'finding and gathering' individuals who share language and meanings and bringing them together. Another is in agitating an existing community to help them unearth their shared language and meaning. One way or another, the work of the relational educator is to make this shared language and meaning visible, so that it can continue to evolve and emerge. That it can continue to be co-constructed..

This work is critical, especially in the Jewish communities we work in. When individuals do not find themselves in a thought community, they are likely to experience the living in the anguish of being in between existential loneliness and universal thin ideas.

[14] For the sake of intellectual honesty, it is important to note that in order to apply the principles of thought communities to relational learning we have expanded the definition of thought communities beyond the realm of cognition to include other elements such as emotions and dispositions. The shared understandings that then emerge out of the intentional interactions between two individuals are not just cognitive, they are holistic.

[E] How are thought communities created?

We will now demonstrate how thought communities help address the communal implications of relational learning. In the definition of relational learning, the term co-construction of meaning is found. Co-construction is accomplished through interactions that can create, amplify and evolve the shared understandings of thought communities.

For thought communities to emerge, these interactions need to include value-based interactions (thirdness as a permitting entity) formed through the relationships between members of the group (self-other) and spotlight expression of character (the middot of the individual).

These are interactions and experiences which enable individual members – as well as the thought community as a whole – become better differentiated.[15] We will term these 'differentiating experiences,' which can occur between individuals or as part of a group. A particular Chevruta experience, around a particular text, is an example of a discrete differentiating experience between individuals. A particular Yom Kippur experience can be a good example of a discrete differentiating experience as a community, in which individuals find meaning in the structure of a collective experience. The experience and the meaning can be both personal and shared. It's 'knowings' are not only cognitive but holistic, shared by those that participated in it even though each individual experience within it might be different and personal.

Thought communities are not just about moments of discrete differentiating experiences between individuals or as a group. To promote its expansion and its vibrancy, it requires the presence of a structural thirdness, necessitating the thought community's participants to identify with the community's purpose, and commit to its vibrancy. This structural thirdness addresses the following questions:

1. What is the articulated statement of purpose that reflects the goal of this community?
2. To what are people committing?
3. What are the expectations and responsibilities of its members?

The answers to these questions allow individuals to be explicitly aware of the significance of their participation in this thought community. It makes it known that the primary reason for participation is to expand the consciousness, awareness and intentionality of its participants resulting in personal and collective impact. It acknowledges the sanctity and exclusivity of the thought community's communal space.

[15] Differentiation is the process of formulating individual positions towards values and ideologies in a variety of domains (cognitive, emotional, spiritual, behavioral) while in relation to differing or similar positions

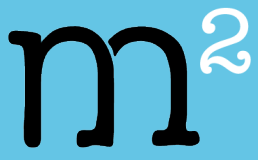
On the part of the relational educator, making the structural thirdness known does not necessitate making 'announcements' at gatherings. A large part of this work can be accomplished through one-on-one conversations that are happening before, during or after the collective experiences.

[F] Conclusion

The conceptual framework developed throughout the course of this initiative worked off the premise that it was possible to think of relational work pedagogically and not just strategically.

Participants were able to understand relational learning through the commonplaces as articulated in the relational learning Venn Diagram. The ways that the commonplaces interacted and its opportunities and limitations were explored. This led to an articulated definition of relational learning. The application of this definition to relational work allows for the exploration of relationships both diagnostically and as a praxis.

The introduction of thought communities enhanced by a structure that facilitates commitment and purpose and contains rich differentiated experiences provides a frame for expanding impact beyond one-on-one relationships to the realm of a dynamic communal and social life.



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