

Creating Spaces for Alternate Learning Styles: Lessons from my Son the Rock Star

Beverly Gribetz

Beverly Gribetz got a surprise lesson in pedagogy from her musical son and his friends. Here she shares the experience.

My husband Ed tells people that I built our house like I build schools.

When we were building our house, I discovered that there was an extra space in the basement that was going to be self-contained and windowless. I thought this would be the music room. My son, Avi, then age 14, was already playing the drums and guitar, so I decided to move the drums down there where they wouldn't make as much noise. That's where he would play with his band. Of course, at the time, his band existed only in my mind.

A year passed and the room lay dormant. Then, while we weren't looking, right under our noses, something changed. Our son began coming home on Wednesdays with three other boys and escaping to the basement to play music. With quiet determination and uncharacteristic regularity – after all, these are boys who rarely did homework or anything else consistently – four boys began to come inside every Wednesday at 2:45, descend straight downstairs and play. They did not walk into the kitchen and take cookies and milk; they did not *schmooze* first for a while. No, they went straight downstairs where they played through a set, experimenting, exploring and helping each other until 5:00 or 5:30 when they came up for air. What they didn't do with math or Gemara or anything else, they did every Wednesday with music.

Interestingly, they always hewed to the same routine. They played punk and heavy metal music, grating to my middle-aged ears, but at the end they always got to the Jewish stuff (just in case Bnei Akiva ever invited them to play at an event). Once my parents were visiting and listened to the headbanging sounds for a while. Suddenly my father said, "Oh, I recognize this, what are they playing?" It was of course *Siman tov u'mazel tov!* The combination of heavy metal and klezmer was surprisingly charming.

Then one day, Avi started talking about how he had written a song. He wrote it on the computer with a program he found and downloaded. While Ed wrote songs in his youth with the aid of piano, guitar and music score, our son made use of the available technology. He scored his song electronically and

then sang it to the accompaniment of his throbbing guitar.

Another surprise came when Avi told us that he and his friends were recording his song. As the weeks went by, the group would go downstairs with bits of equipment – microphones, headsets and computer gear. They wanted to go to a recording studio, but when they discovered how much it cost, they decided to do it themselves. They figured out how to record it on the computer. One week it turned up recorded, and suddenly we could listen to our son's recorded song on a CD! On their own they had learned so much about computers that we didn't know – how to use specialized software, how to arrange music, how to isolate each track and then 'mix' it on the computer. It was quite impressive.

But for me, what was most striking was how beautifully the boys cooperated. They all got together around their music, and they each took their part. Even when one was the "star", the others provided auxiliary support using their own skills and talents. It was clear that what would (and did) happen next is that another of the boys would write a song. To me, this was the most amazing part of the endeavor. To have created a group in which four boys are caring, supportive, sharing, and kind to one another—this is where their "art" met their values. The project, which demanded a combination of music and technology, provided a scene of collaboration and friendship.

This is what real education is about. I've read hundreds of articles about constructing meaning in education and about setting meaningful tasks, and I feel that my son and his friends have taught me more through their dedication to making music than all the articles combined. It's about music, it's about computers, it's about learning, it's about *middot*, it's about having a product that you're proud of, it's about working in a group in which each person gets to do things one's own way and to build something beautiful in ensemble.

Significantly, during this process, which was just a few hours a week for three months – less than a school semester – they also absorbed an enormous amount of knowledge. They learned computer skills that can be extrapolated to other tasks, they sat with Ed and learned about classic rock and other forms of music, they improved their individual skills on their different instruments, they appreciated the need for practice.

And as an astonishing byproduct that really makes my heart sing, my son also mastered poetry.

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Avi wrote words to his song. A few weeks earlier I had used the word "sophomoric" in commenting on a political conversation he had reported on from school, and he asked me what it meant. He was in tenth grade, which corresponds, of course, to the sense of the word. Students in the second year of high school or college, sophomores, think they know about life – the literal origin of the term – and so sophomoric denotes a sort of adolescent kind of thinking, somewhat pejorative. Using a bit of classic rock-rebellion, what did Avi call his ironic and playful Hebrew song? *Sophomori*. Thus he's learned rhythm in language and irony – and of course the three friends learned a sophisticated word, enough to gladden the heart of the vocabulary-building English teacher.

Each boy brings his own skills and talents. They never argue, they discuss and problem-solve, without competition. The atmosphere is different from that of a traditional school.

Although the young musicians I have described took on their extended project spontaneously and were clearly self-motivated, I believe that this model of learning can and should be applied as far as possible in both primary and secondary schools, in subjects ranging from art to Talmud. We need teachers in our schools who can create spaces in which students can find their own strengths and styles, teachers who can construct tasks that use many different talents, energies and skills, and who can facilitate group learning in which each student makes his or her own unique contribution. Students must be empowered and motivated to tap their own curiosity and natural tendency to self-initiate while being encouraged to push forward into realms and disciplines that encompass the traditional curriculum and move beyond it.

How can schools capitalize on the energies of a fifteen year old?

First, it requires thinking about what our curricular goals are, what children can produce to show that they have achieved them, and then about how different children are going to attain those achievements. It requires creating broad, loosely defined experiences and projects and allowing the students to find their places within them. In this case a teacher who had noticed his students' interest in heavy metal music might have said, I want you to get into groups of four to compose, perform and record a song that meets certain criteria (language, theme, genre), and somehow display some knowledge of computers. That's a multi-task, complex project.

The teacher's job is to think about her subjects in terms of *products and processes*. Certain components must be present in order to construct a very powerful type of variegated group product-based learning (see sidebar). Thus, for example, in Talmud, if we want our students to understand what an end product of Jewish learning might be, perhaps a legal ruling - *pesikat halakha*, we should set a task in which we give just the bare bones for it, and have them create a Jewish court - a *bet*

Components of a variegated product-based group project

- ▶ *Make sure they have good spaces that include all the physical tools, equipment, books and technologies that they need (or make acquiring these part of the project).*
- ▶ *Offer a variety of different tasks so that each student can find where s/he belongs, and enable students to choose their groups, tasks, and spaces. (The fifth boy in my son's group was not a musician, but rather their manager. He gave critical assistance during the recording phase and arranged for them to be interviewed on a youth news site on the Internet.)*
- ▶ *Keep adults nearby, but not too close, for facilitation and consultation when the students need help.*
- ▶ *Make sure they are learning something classical about the subject, i.e., make sure they learn something that relates back to the classics, so that they acquire knowledge and information as they pursue their current interest.*
- ▶ *Include the parents, because every parent has something to offer. Find out what expertise and resources reside in the parent body and get parents on board.*
- ▶ *Concentrate on interpersonal behavior – middot – so that students focus on respecting one another's styles and appreciating different types of contributions.*
- ▶ *Make logistics part of the process. Encourage them to investigate details, such as budget.*

din. Set them on a path to figure out what type of problem might necessitate applying to a *bet din*, and then let them figure out all the parts: judges (what number), claimants, advocates, witnesses, researchers, etc. The teacher's job would be to make sure that they are thinking and writing and doing research, to focus on the cooperative product and to guide them to notice different aspects of the task that require different skills so that each student can find the task that most suits him/her, that is most meaningful and interesting to her or him.

Constructing meaningful learning is difficult and time-consuming, and assumes a teacher who has enough self-confidence to give up some control and be willing to change course to keep pace with his/her students. It requires a teacher who can take a long look at curricular goals even while they may be "mapped" into a plan with scope and sequence and who can chart a new, individual map for each of his/her students that focuses on the individual life journey and not on the day-to-day. In the end, we are aiming at producing a well-educated adult who will not be called upon to "pass tests" but rather to "pass life", that is to live a meaningful life that is interdisciplinary by its very nature and who is called upon to solve complex problems, together with others, in out-of-the-ordinary ways every single day.

Postscript: My son and his group entered a "battle of the bands" and performed in front of a lively crowd, *kippot* and all. The fact that they didn't win made absolutely no difference to them. He and his friends were very proud, and so was I. ☑