Youth Workers Are Not Crazy!
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Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. Here is a snapshot of what Jewish educators (and those who care about Jewish education) have been saying about youth engagement for the past fifty years:

1961: Agencies need to move from numbers-orientation to relationship-orientation and commit themselves to giving full service to every young person who steps through the door.¹

1975: When we allow teenagers to become involved at their own level, with full capacity for decision making, a plethora of successful programs is possible.²

1982: A youth leader constantly searches for ways to involve young people. The demand is great for programming that allows teenagers to learn by doing.³

1998: It is critical to the future of Judaism to offer young people opportunities that enhance their involvement in Jewish life as well as meet their social, intellectual, physical, and spiritual needs.⁴

2001: Cohorts of teens vary, as do interests of individual teens and groups of teens. Therefore, it is important that program providers know their participants, and accommodate students' varying preferences.⁵

2011: Teachers should aim to unleash the creative, moral spirit of their students, giving them the vocabulary of our tradition while encouraging them to find their own voices.⁶

Have we lost our minds?

For over fifty years Jewish educators and Jewish communal professionals have been saying the same thing: the way to get young people involved in synagogue life and keep them past their B’ni Mitzvah celebrations is to reach them where they are and connect with them on their terms and in ways that they want. It is all about relationships. Calls for differentiation and relationship building echo in the halls of our Jewish educational institutions and gathering places. Moreover, nobody has ever disagreed with this need. The bottom line is educators, youth workers, Rabbis, parents, we all know what we need to do in order to engage our youth; we just don’t seem to be doing it. The challenges educators face and the attempts made to address these challenges have become cyclical. The feedback educators receive is not translating into actual solutions to the problems.

In addition to the recurring challenges educators and youth workers have been facing over the years, synagogues and Jewish institutions worry about the “lost” generation - Jews between 20 and 40 years old - and the effects of an open society on the continuity of Judaism. Leading sociologist of American Jewry, Steven Cohen, discusses the fear that Jews are literally vanishing due to intermarriage and low birth rates. In response, Mordecai Holtz, a blogger and regular contributor to EJewishPhilanthropy.com suggests that the Jewish community needs to re-imagine and devise a more appropriate and relevant strategy by which to engage our youth. He claims that new strategies should focus on maintaining the basic Jewish principles which we all hold dear; namely Israel, Tikkun olam, goodwill, social action and awareness, and the Torah. These novel precepts will, however, require a much broader, more inclusive and unique

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definition and interdisciplinary approach thus ensuring that the fundamental values remain relevant and congruent with our youth's vision and perceptions of Judaism.⁹

Again there is the call for differentiation and relationship building.

Obviously, engaging the youth is one clear way to help ensure Jewish continuity and affiliated Jewish adults. And yet, each decade or so we attempt to recreate the wheel and roll out a "new and improved" method of engagement. This year's model is the Campaign for Youth Engagement (CYE), a program of the Union for Reform Judaism. The CYE's mission states that it is committed to expanding existing immersive experiences and creating new ones.¹⁰ And if it is successful, there is hope for the future of Jewish affiliation and engagement. Unfortunately, "youth engagement" has become synonymous with "informal education." The focus of youth engagement work has come to mean social programming, primarily for NFTY groups and residential summer camps. In fact, according to Burton Cohen and Miriam Schmida, sociologists comparing North American and Israeli informal Jewish education styles, "the American Jewish community of the 21st century needs to embrace the evidence which suggests that the informal setting is primarily responsible for the establishment of positive Jewish identity and commitment."¹¹ From the outside, it appears that informal education is the only method responsible for creating positive Jewish experiences and helping to facilitate Jewish identity formation. While it is no doubt true that NFTY and Jewish camping are successful in enhancing and supporting Jewish identity formation, these are not the only ways to reach our teens. In 2002, sociologists Arnold Dashefky and Cory Lebson noted that more research should be

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⁹ ibid.
focused on the most effective and efficient ways to strengthen the positive relationship between Jewish schooling and identification and to determine the optimal mix of appropriate formal education and informal experiential learning.\textsuperscript{12} Unless we are truly crazy and content with continuing to live in this vicious cycle of reinventing the wheel every decade or so, more research is not the solution. We have the answer and it lies in relationships. But knowing the answer only gets us halfway there. Finding the most effective ways of actually building and maintaining relationships with the individuals who we serve is the challenge. And there are already some models out there to which we can look.

By attempting to reach the most people possible, many synagogues are employing a model of community engagement called Synaplex.\textsuperscript{13} It is often used as a way to celebrate holidays. For example, a Tu B'Shevat Synaplex might include a food tasting station, a story telling station, a drumming circle or alternative service, a community Tu B'Shevat seder, and a lecture series - all happening at the same time. The Synaplex theory is based on a view of the synagogue as not only Beit Tefilah – a house of prayer – but also Beit Midrash – a house of learning, and Beit Knesset – a house of gathering. By emphasizing all three of the synagogue’s roles, more people will be drawn in and identify with the synagogue and with Judaism. Instead of incessant harping on the need to build relationships with teens, Synaplex models can be used to do precisely this, with teens. Rather than limit the model to Jewish adults, this multi-pronged


\textsuperscript{13} Synaplex, an initiative of STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) was a project designed to help temples cope with changing trends in society, maintain professional growth among their leaders and Rabbis, and to help boost membership and attendance. It was active in the early 2000s as a funded program initiative with a professional staff and resources for synagogues. Synaplex the initiative (as well as STAR as a whole) no longer exists and has now become simply a model of engagement. Synaplex as an initiative failed; but synaplex as a model of engagement is still valuable and effective.
strategy needs to be adapted for teens, who are, after all, people too, with various interests and talents. We need to offer multiple types of programs that will appeal to all types of learners. They need to be both social and educational. Not one or the other. The truth is, Youth Engagement should simply be considered Youth Programming and it should include equal parts formal and informal learning environments.

It is time to stop trying to define teens in simple, stereotyped terms. When we offer adult programming we do so on multiple planes. We offer cooking and yoga and Torah Study and drumming circles and Introduction to Judaism courses. We take into account that every adult is different and wants different things. It is time to do the same with teens. Our teens are diverse. Some want "Hot Topics." Some want Jewish music. Some want Torah Study. Some want cooking or yoga. In order to reach the most youth in the most meaningful ways, Jewish youth need real-time, lived opportunities to practice and participate in Jewish life and in the Jewish community. They need to see a community in action and they need to see their Jewish identity formation realized meaningfully in religious settings, in cultural settings, and in secular settings.

We are not insane. We can escape this loop we have been stuck in for fifty years. But, we need to look at this same problem with new eyes and from a new direction. We need to look at why we keep doing the same things, why we keep inventing the same programs, and why it all keeps failing. Instead of addressing the same problem in the same ways, it is time to radically change the way we think about engagement. In truth, this is more than a youth engagement issue; it is a Jewish engagement issue. And it is begging for innovation - innovation in content and innovation in process. As it turns out, the problem is not actually one of attendance, flashy programs or catchy titles. It is
ultimately about people. Communities and individuals deserve to be heard and understood and reached, as human beings, in all their gorgeous diversity.
Works Cited


