

The Kohelet Prize for Differentiated Instruction

Rabbi Eliezer Kessler

As a teacher, I have always believed that one of the best gifts we can give our students is the ability and confidence to learn on their own. When a child sees that they have the capacity to open a Chumash and learn, they will feel empowered and grow to love learning. It is with this in mind that I have created a curriculum that takes into account individual learning styles, differentiated instruction, higher level thinking, empowering students to learn on their own and, most important of all, is enjoyable.

The curriculum that I have created is for my fourth grade class in Sefer Yehoshua, the book of Joshua, but could be easily made appropriate for any grade level. The curriculum has three parts: 1) learning the pesukim or verses, 2) the student workbook and 3) the “Navi News” videos. The climax of the unit is a reenactment of the dramatic battle of Ai about which they have learned.

It is in the learning of the verses where the differentiated instruction takes place. The goal is multi-faceted. On the most simplistic level, the students should be active learners, both working through the material independently as well as teaching what they learned to their peers. On a deeper level, the goal is to give the child the skills to be an independent learner. By utilizing the decoding skills of breaking apart a word into its shresh, prefix and suffix, that they have learned and practiced for Chumash since first grade, and adding a few new skills, the students realize that they have the tools and skills to learn on their own. Buoyed by several positive experiences of working through the material to the degree that they can then teach it others, the students transform their attitude to “cracking open” a sefer to learn on their own. Coupled with the teacher’s positive affirmation regarding the student’s efforts and genuine achievements, what more important gift can a Judaics teacher give a student? A close association between self-confidence and mastering the material is born.

The students are divided into heterogeneous groups in which the students with better translating ability are matched with students who still need a boost. There are four or five students in each group; the material to be learned is then divided into manageable portions to be prepared by the students who then teach their portion to the rest of the class. In truth, Navi in general and Sefer Yehoshua, in particular, is well suited for this type of learning as the verses and the vocabulary is easier than the Chumash that they are accustomed to. As the groups begin to learn, their faces light up in discovery that what they thought was impossible is actually an attainable goal. At this time, I move from my role as a transmitter of material to being a group facilitator. I circulate among the groups helping students to either decode hard words using the familiar skills from Chumash or find their meaning in the commentaries. As time goes on, the students need less and less help and begin to taste the sweet taste of learning Torah on their own. Students are drawn together by peer interaction and there is palpable excitement in the room.

While simplistic in nature, this is a system that produces results. Parents have told me that

when learning with their child, the child will volunteer to read and translate and then be successful at it. I have witnessed students who have just completed fourth grade, learning on their own in chavrusa or learning partner during summer vacation only consulting an English translation when they do not know a word. The fact that they have the confidence to try to learn is tremendous; the fact that they are successful and feel that success can be life changing.

The second aspect of the curriculum is the student workbook that I have created. It was created with many modalities of learning in mind and with the larger goal to promote higher level thinking skills. The visual learner has scenes to draw and maps to plot. Where the storyline becomes more complicated there are fill in the blank sections to concretize the storyline. In order to stretch the students thinking, there are questions that require the student to learn selected pieces in the commentaries and to use higher level thinking to answer.

The third component of the curriculum is multi-media. I am cognizant of the most enticing formats by which my students gain information, namely through computer use and mass media. If we are to make an impact on the lifelong learning of young minds, the material they see in the classroom must be fresh and exciting and share the rhythm of what they most enjoy during their leisure time. The presentation must also to be accessible to every kind of learner, whether they are visual or auditory learners. The goal is to make each lesson as stimulating, compelling and appealing as possible. To accomplish these goals, I have created two series of cartoon animations called Navi News and Traveling Toons. The “Navi News” series concentrates on the historical background that is needed to learn the material as well as provides summaries of different points in the storyline. There are additional animations of key points to illustrate how certain events took place, as well as animated maps to visualize traveling. Of course, the key to success is to add some humor to add to the fun. In order to concretize what the students viewed, there are questions pertaining to the videos in the student workbook. The students love this adorable extra addition to the curriculum and look forward to the next one. The second series of videos called Traveling Toons are animations layered on top of real video footage of Eretz Yisrael taken during a visit I made with my family. The students take a tour of the land visiting the places where the events of the Navi took place. Throughout the video, I point out the beauty of Eretz Yisrael and the wonderful miracles and blessings that Hashem bestowed upon His people and His land. I am in the middle of a second video on Sefer Yehoshua to add to the very popular videos about the Kotel and Kever Rachel. As I am a firm believer in making my materials open source, I have placed this whole curriculum on chinuch.org. To date, all my materials have been downloaded over 60,000 times by teachers who use them in their classrooms.

The grand finale of this curriculum is the reenactment of the battle of Ai, something the students have heard about from my previous students and look forward to throughout the semester. The text is first studied “inside,” using the classical commentaries (Rashi and Metzudas Dovid) as a guide. Next the students, with the assistance of the teacher, will use the text and their knowledge of the story to map out the battle on a Smartboard and a Google Earth map of the area showing the topographic features of the region. The reenactment battle is then mapped out to recreate it on the

playground. Using swords (foam pipe wrapping covered in aluminum foil) and torches (foam pipe wrapping with red paper on the end) the students reenact the battle as it actually happened. The students finish the unit having learned the text, visually seeing the area, mapping the battle via Google Earth, and physically “playing out” the battle. These three things leave the students with a deeper knowledge of the material, an understanding of how the strategy of the battle was played out, as well as the enjoyment of feeling intimately involved in the story, enhancing the deep personal association as this having happened in "my history."

Rabbi Eliezer Kessler has been passionately teaching third and fourth grade Judaic Studies for 13 years in Houston, Texas. He received semicha from Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim in Queens, New York where he learned that one of the most important skills that one can give his students is the ability to think on their own. A person who is encouraged to think will become a lifelong learner and innovator, looking to understand and enhance the world around him or her. He has been the recipient of the national AviChai Educational Technology Experiment Grant, the Irving L. Samuels Outstanding Teacher Award for Judaic Studies in Houston, Texas and was a North American winner of the 2015 Grinspoon Award for Excellence in Jewish Education. He is dedicated to making his materials available to as many students as possible by making them open source and available to the greater teaching community. As a regular contributor to chinuch.org, his materials have been downloaded by teachers over 60,000 times. He has worked closely with Rabbi Jonathan Rietti to develop curriculum and materials for his worldwide organization of Chinuch Breakthrough and as well as Rabbi Dan Roth of torahlive.com. In addition to designing creative and well-crafted learning materials, he strives to make sure all his students feel affirmed in their feelings of self-worth, a critical component of creating a love of learning and Jewish life.