

Empowerment and Self-reliance: Building a Sustainable Congregational Learning Community

Knowledge Communities worked with Congregation Beth Israel (Charlottesville, VA) to build the grassroots-lead community learning program called Shabbat Connections.

Naava Frank of Knowledge Communities collaborated with Congregation Beth Israel (CBI), the only congregation in Charlottesville (VA), to build their award-winning Shabbat Connections Program (SC). The collaboration reaped numerous insights, new ways of working and a program that exceeded everyone's expectations, supported for two years by funding from the Legacy Heritage Foundation.

A. Shabbat Connections is the answer to the following congregational questions:

1. How can members spend more of their time learning?
2. How can families make Judaism more a part of their lives?
3. How can Jewish families and individuals share a Shabbat experience that nurtures friendship and connection to each other and connection to the synagogue at the same time?
4. How can the synagogue help people who feel alone to feel a part of the community? People are lonely in our society. It is challenging to make connections with others—we are too busy, too programmed, too transient, too spread out geographically.
5. How can people open themselves up to positive ways to look at, experience and experiment with ritual?
6. How can people overcome whatever their personal barriers are and leap over them to feel more self-reliant and self-confident?
7. How we help people understand the obligations of community and realize it is a blessing as well as obligation?
8. How can people make Shabbat special?
9. How can we create an environment where people can share positive experiences?

The Shabbat Connections program invited congregants who were interested in exploring their connection to Shabbat to enroll. The program then created small groups of congregants with similar life cycle phases (empty nesters, families with young children, singles). Each group was asked to commit to meeting once a month for Shabbat dinner for one year at the home of one of its members. The group would decide together how they wanted to explore Shabbat in the context of those monthly dinner meetings.

Knowledge Communities facilitated monthly phone calls with congregational staff, Rabbi Dan Alexander, Ms. Ellen Dietrick and Rabbi Tom Gutherz. Their words attest to the effectiveness of Knowledge Communities' role in the program.

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B. Lessons Learned

“We began to understand the power of grass roots energy. After wrestling with the role of congregational staff in the SC program, our conversations with our consultant, Naava Frank, helped us come to an understanding that we needed to step back and allow the desires, energy, and intelligence of members to shape their group’s evolution. We struggled over such issues as control and inclusivity, and revised our thinking. What we discovered, to our delight, was that the freedom from externally imposed demands “handed the program over” to its participants, allowing them to innovate and enhance their connections to one another and to Shabbat observance in ways we could not have anticipated. We have seen how small group cohesion and the freedom from traditional top-down leadership has imbued Shabbat Connections members with growing authority and motivation to explore Judaism’s capacity for bettering the self and the world, and for finding meaning and joy in daily existence.”

After a series of discussions with our consultant, staff came up with a model that provided two forms of support for SC groups: The first, one member of each SC group was asked to be the coordinator, to oversee the logistics. The second, one congregational staff person provided Judaic resources to each SC group on an as-needed basis.

“Opting In: By inviting families to “opt-in” and articulate their dreams, visions, concerns, and struggles, Shabbat Connections helps families acknowledge their own obstacles so they can face them more honestly. Once a family recognizes the obstacles it faces, the synagogue educators and the family’s own peer group can help it create strategies for overcoming those barriers.”

“Critical Incidents: The incident that affected us most profoundly was our struggle with the issue of whether to include a member who has previously been disruptive in groups. Together with our consultant, we explored the question of what it means to be *in community*: Where are the boundaries and who articulates them? What norms and values underlie those boundaries? We came to agree that the process of struggling with such issues is the vehicle through which groups form and strengthen their identity. Our new confidence in the power of group dynamics was validated in this instance and in many others. The participant we were concerned about has become a contributing member of her group.”

“Role of Consultant: The staff has collaborated and reflected at monthly leadership meetings, centered on conference calls with our consultant. It would be difficult to overestimate the value of these calls in pushing us to articulate agreements and disagreements, buried assumptions, and half-formulated ideas. Naava’s insightful prodding made it possible for us to view specific conundrums within a broader framework of communal relations and responsibilities.” The relationship between staff and consultant was a partnership where each brought the best of what they had and together their **collective intelligence** produced the best outcomes.

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Ripple Effects

- **“Lay and Professional Collaboration:** The Shabbat Connections model has launched us on a new phase of collaboration between professional staff and lay leadership and has transformed our thinking about breaking down the barriers between our diverse constituencies. {Work with our consultant} has helped us to develop and deepen our thinking and creatively resolve our differences.
- **Systemic Thinking:** When we created Shabbat Connections, we were not interested in adding a program but in changing our way of thinking, to think systemically about engagement rooted in the real life of the community. We continually reflected as we moved from programmatic thinking to systemic thinking. Shabbat Connections continually reminds us that there is another way to think about our community and improve it.
- **A Template:** We plan to use the kind of thinking that has gone into the SC initiative as a template for developing more effective synagogue-wide educational offerings for both children and adults and for helping committees, service groups, and synagogue staff to be more purposeful.
- **Changed Thinking:** We have come to appreciate how changed ways of thinking require careful and slow nurturing, allowing them to develop organically within the synagogue structure.
- **Shared Language:** We are conscious that our President and Executive Director have recently (within the past month) begun to use the vocabulary of this thinking in other areas of synagogue management. We have also seen an increased readiness on their parts to explore this way of thinking in greater depth.
- **Viral Dissemination:** Participants are all eager to perpetuate their groups and they have spread the word to other congregants who have expressed the desire to join next year. “

C. Outcomes from Shabbat Connections:

“Members initiated a host of innovative activities. They revived the custom of Shabbat visits, set up group blogs, sang and studied together, and supported one another in myriad other ways. One of our groups has begun making challah covers for each member family. Others are searching out a group niggun to learn together. One group has developed a blog so that they can troubleshoot, create and grow together. They are, in a sense, “inventing” Shabbat for themselves. These groups create relationships that are similar to familial relationships. With surprising speed, our groups have become one another’s Shabbat and holiday families and support network. Shabbat Connections groups have allowed new ideas and practices to be introduced slowly and without pressure and become integrated into the home and family rather than just “residing” in the synagogue.”

“Shabbat Connections has been transformational for my family and our engagement with this community {because of} the grassroots formation of small groups within the synagogue which are interested in greater depth, study, observance, etc. Thank you -- it has made a strong and important impact on my life, and the value of belonging to this community.” (Evaluation survey respondent)

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Vignettes

1. The program engaged preschoolers and their families. The preschool director, Ellen Dietrick often heard kids speaking with each other about Shabbat Connections? “I am going to have challah at your house tonight.”
2. Children start preschool or Hebrew school and already know each other from being in a Shabbat Connections group together.
3. The mother of children in an interfaith family that is participating in Shabbat Connections mentioned that her children now insist the family does Shabbat. If the family needs to go out – they do Shabbat beforehand.
4. While preparing the meal for Shabbat Connections guests, one woman described how she finally understood the Friday night prayer text about welcoming the Sabbath bride. Older participants described using ritual objects with a rich family history that they had not used before.
5. A retiree couple was new in town and did not know anyone. The Shabbat Connections group found out the husband was sick, and took the couple in as family. On the first day of Passover, the husband planned a do-over bar mitzvah. Their Shabbat Connection group hosted the Kiddush luncheon, participated in the Passover morning service and led the Kiddush.
6. One group was planning to attend the synagogues service at 6:15 in the evening. They decided to meet at 5:30 for a pre-party including cocktails and snacks, ensuring the children were not hungry and the adults felt ready for Shabbat. They then went to synagogue as a group.
7. One Shabbat Connections group started Shabbat campouts for families and word spread to include others beyond the original Shabbat Connections group.
8. The youngest individual described the way she hosted her group of single friends for Shabbat Connections at her apartment. Though she had no furniture, everyone pitched in and it was fun.

Learning from Failure

- In the group that did not coalesce; the people were quirky and CBI staff did not follow up. When the group is not coalescing, they need more help from staff. “The group I was placed in was not appropriate for my family needs.”
- Sometimes it’s okay to let things not work or to help people find other groups, such as Mussar learning with the Rabbi

D. Structural Elements:

- In watching the growing cohesion of the groups and their initiatives, we learned that *community-building is a bridge to Jewish learning*, not the other way around, as we had previously believed. This insight has far-reaching implications for education synagogue wide.
- **Motivation:** We have learned that the assumption of responsibility by congregants for their own Jewish education is a powerful **motivating factor** to engage in Jewish study. Another crucial dynamic is the reinforcement provided by friendship groups.

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- **Structure and Flexibility:** We attribute success to the fact that we are tapping into widespread and deeply felt needs among congregants and that our program has the requisite **structure and flexibility** to allow those needs to be met.

Connection to Design Principles

Shabbat Connections follows the design principles articulated in the paper: “Redesigning Jewish Education for the 21st Century” by Woocher, Jonathan, Ross, Renee Rubin, and Woocher, Meredith¹.

Design Principles

1. Empowering the learner as an active agent in fashioning his/her own learning experience.
2. The centrality of relationships and the social experience of learning as dynamic forces that shape an evolving identity and build commitment and community in a fragmented world.
3. Jewish learning as “life-centered,” addressing the totality of our aspirations, concerns, and experiences

E. Conclusions:

Shabbat Connection Groups continue to meet and new groups are forming based on word of mouth. Shabbat Connections has become institutionalized as a regular feature of the congregation. The congregation is working on building a mentoring program that will leverage the internal leadership of each Shabbat connections group and connect the groups to the congregation. The Shabbat Connections groups can be kept going with, as Rabbi Dan Alexander says, “just the right light touch.”

¹ <http://jesna.org/sosland/resources/Future-of-Jewish-Education/Redesigning-Jewish-Education-for-the-21st-Century/details>