

Using Partnership Learning for the Study of Historical Objects

BY ORIT KENT

This guide is a supplement to the National Curriculum on American Jewish History. It is based on the work of the Pedagogy of Partnership (PoP) directed by Orit Kent and Allison Cook. The first half of the guide is background explanation about partnership learning, and the second half provides some ideas for how to use this approach in your classroom.

“I think that the text is telling you something, so that makes it a partner, but you have to listen to what it’s telling you, and just like you can’t ... judge a person by their looks, you can’t do that with the text either just by scanning it. You’ve really got to go in to find what you’re looking for. The same with any person.”¹

“It’s important to learn with and from others so as to widen your perspective and think about things in new ways... It’s also good to be able to ask questions of another person and also to be able to voice your ideas out loud in order to clarify them for yourself.”²

— Reflections from students using partnership learning

BACKGROUND

What is *havruta* (partnership learning)?³

The Aramaic term *havruta* refers to a form of learning in which two people study a text together. While *havruta* was traditionally used for Talmud study, today it has been reimagined for use in many different contexts to study many different subjects.⁴ It can be a highly engaging and interactive way to learn that affords opportunities not just for intellectual learning but also for social, ethical, and spiritual learning.⁵

Through close study and teaching of this form of learning, we developed a teaching approach called the “Pedagogy of Partnership.”⁶ This approach puts relationship at the very center of the educational process, relationships between people and relationships between people and the texts or artifacts that they study. It is rooted in the idea that when one studies in *havruta*, meaning emerges from the mutual encounter between not just two partners but three, two people and the text. All three partners have a voice and all three partners must be listened to in order to fulfill the potential of the learning encounter. While the text’s voice is not the same as a human voice (and it needs to be activated by the human partners), it too requires our close attention. This principle of listening to all the partners, the text and other learners, applies whether one learns in pairs or in other groupings with many people.

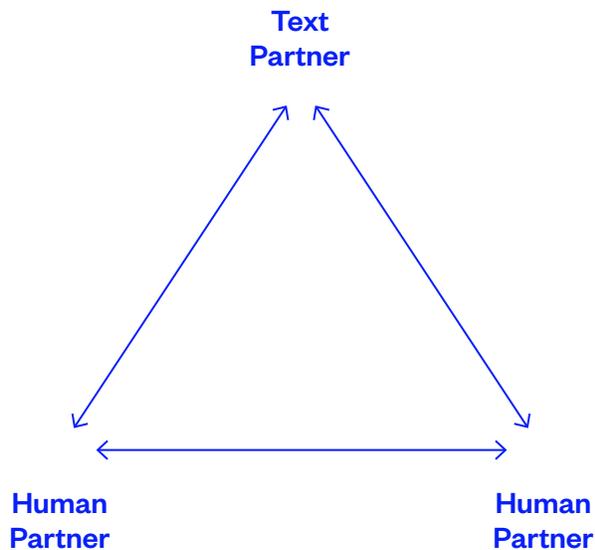


Figure A: Three partners of *havruta*⁷

The diagram above represents this partnership of three in its ideal, balanced form.

Each point represents one of the three partners, the two human partners and the text. These points are connected to one another in the shape of an equilateral triangle. This diagram suggests that each partner is essential to the learning relationship and that each partner brings something particular to it. It also suggests that the partners are responsible for attending to one another, as well as for the work they set out to do together. Through attending to and engaging with one another, there is potential for the partners to learn and grow.

How does this learning process unfold? The partners—the people and the text—are supported by the teachers’ design of the lesson and scaffolding to be active participants of the interpretation process. Students are given time to actively and productively engage with each other through reading the text, noticing details, asking questions, exploring what is seen and

heard and what is not seen and heard. Details in the text provide boundaries for the meanings that can be attributed to it, creating a structure within which interpretation can take place. At the same time, the text’s “gaps” are there to engage the readers and provide them with an opportunity to draw on their experience and knowledge – their schema – to make sense of what is being said and not said. In part, it is this aspect of texts, their gaps and the requirement that the gaps need to be filled by us, that creates the possibility of there being multiple interpretations of the same text. The text has the potential to be multivocal.⁸

The human partners must learn to pay as close attention to each other’s words and the gaps therein, as they do to the text. To do so, *havruta* learners must balance their own voice with humility toward others, being open to what the others have to offer and taking responsibility for helping both the text and one’s human partner to fully express themselves.

Through this mutual encounter between people and between people and the text, our horizons—a philosophical term referring to our experiences and knowledge—interact with those of the text and our human partner. “The learner projects onto the text from his horizon and the text offers to the interpreting something whose meaning may differ from what he, the interpreter, initially thought the text to mean and to say....This movement continues until some consensus, a ‘fusion of horizons,’ is achieved in the mind of the interpreter and understanding is attained.”⁹ This process can literally stretch and expand our horizons in order to encompass a new insight or idea brought to light from the encounter with the other partners. (In psychological terms, this means

accommodating one's mental schema and developing new frameworks for understanding.) In this way, we can be affected by our partners and transformed through the study experience, developing greater understanding of both ourselves and our partners.

Learners do not magically know how to engage in this kind of partnership work. There is much that teachers can do to support learners' efforts and make the partnership come alive. We will discuss some of these particulars below. For now, it should be noted that our research identified six core practices or skills that learners can use to engage in partnership learning and the work of interpretation: listening and articulating; wondering and focusing; and supporting and challenging.¹⁰

The practices need to be explicitly taught to students. How the students are taught and guided to use these new skills will look different for students of different ages. For the purpose of this introductory guide, we will focus primarily on the fundamentals of listening and articulating. When we work with schools over time, we help them develop a scope and sequence for teaching all six practices to students of different ages.

As students draw on these practices to develop ideas about the texts they study, the goal is to develop interpretations grounded in the text and to notice the similarities and differences between their own interpretations and those of their peers and work to understand alternative ideas. This means two very important things: Students cannot simply develop any idea that comes to mind. They need to be reminded and remind each other that interpretations must be grounded in evidence. Furthermore, students should not be told that they must reach

agreement about the meaning of the text. Rather, they should help each other develop real ideas that may be similar or different from those of their peers. Ultimately, the goal is for students to begin to appreciate that the text can have many different interpretations.

USING PARTNERSHIP LEARNING TO STUDY HISTORICAL OBJECTS

While *havruta* or partnership learning was traditionally used to study Jewish texts, the approach is no less valuable to the study of historical objects such as artifacts (material objects, made or modified by humans), images, and documents. Before we explain more about using partnership learning to study historical objects, let's back up for a minute and consider why we might use historical objects to study history.

WHY USE OBJECTS TO STUDY HISTORY?

This might sound fairly straightforward—who wouldn't want to get hands-on experience with an authentic object from 150 years ago? On the other hand, why bother looking at objects, which can be hard to understand, when there are so many documents around that seem easier to access? John Hennigar-Shuh, a museum educator in Nova Scotia, highlights some of those advantages in a 1982 article titled "Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects":

"Objects are fascinating":¹² Once people's attention is drawn to a specific object, they often want to know more about it. The best way to fascinate a student with an object is to present it with focusing questions: "What do

you notice?” and “What do you think this is?” It is important to acknowledge that objects might hold diverse meanings for different people. When students are focused on an object in this way, they are motivated to start asking questions, even without prompting.

“Objects aren’t age-specific”:¹³ Text-based information sources can be challenging for younger readers. Objects, on the other hand, can be discussed without needing a certain level of reading comprehension. At the same time, adults can share in the sense of wonder that comes with seeing and handling objects.

Objects tell the stories of everyday people:¹⁴ One of the biggest challenges in getting students interested in history is helping them to realize that there’s more to the past than names, dates, and battles. Textbooks tend to focus on famous people and events. Objects, on the other hand, tell the stories of everyday people who lived, worked, went to school, ate, wrote, thought, and had feelings—in other words, people just like us today.

Using objects helps students develop the skill of critical observation:¹⁵ This is an important academic skill that becomes increasingly important as students get older. It is also an important life skill that enables students to step back and notice details about the world around them and ask probing questions.

Using objects as teaching devices is a powerful way to connect students with history. It gives students a focus for their own questions about the past and helps them think more critically about the world around them.

WHY USE PARTNERSHIP LEARNING TO STUDY HISTORICAL OBJECTS?

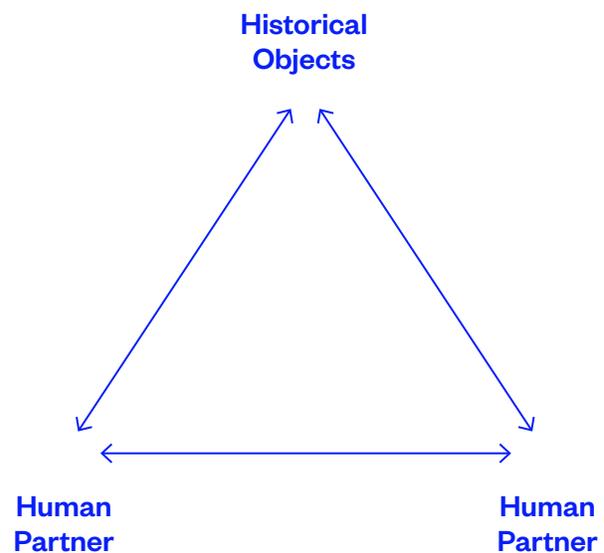


Figure B: Partnership learning as applied to historical objects and documents

In the triangle diagram above, we have substituted historical objects for Jewish text. Similar to texts, historical objects need to be “read,” i.e., interpreted, to be understood. The partnership learning approach highlights the idea that to interpret these objects requires looking at them closely and thinking about them in their full integrity, as partners with something unique to contribute—truly probing what we see and don’t see and the meaning behind them. Similar to interpreting texts, when we interpret objects, we first take time to ask ourselves, “What do we notice?” and then take time to notice as many details about the object as possible. After we have taken time to explore the details of the object, we can step back to consider what these details might mean

as a whole and what this object conveys about a particular moment in history. When we do this, we are interpreting the meaning of the object, simultaneously drawing on details or evidence and filling in gaps with our own knowledge and experience, in order to form a larger idea or argument. Objects, like texts, hold many meanings, which means that people may interpret them differently.

A common pitfall of reading and interpreting texts that is even more likely to occur when interpreting seemingly familiar objects is that learners will simply collapse what they see into what they already know and fail to notice what is different or outside of their experience. When we do this, we undermine the integrity of the object. For this reason, it is important for teachers to cue students to notice what is different or unfamiliar about the objects, in addition to noticing what looks familiar.

As with Jewish text study, exploring objects with peers can help us navigate this tricky terrain. When we explore historical objects with peers, they can help us notice details we may skip over, explore meanings we do not think about, and consider shortcomings in our interpretations. Our human partner(s) can also help us self-reflect and consider the questions: “Why do you think that?” and “How has the study of this object or text changed my own thinking about the subject at hand?” Through the support of our human partner(s), we can build the lines of connection among the three learning partners, engaging fully with all three to develop new insights.

The partnership learning process also highlights particular habits of engagement that are beneficial to studying historical objects, such as wondering about and questioning what we see in front of us. Furthermore, it highlights the habit of paying close attention to others and being open to learning from others, whether these others are our peers or historical objects.

The partnership learning process shifts the locus of control from the teacher to the students. Instead of students having to rely on the teacher to tell them why historical objects are important, partnership learning creates contexts for students to explore the meaning of history with peers as part of well-scaffolded learning experiences. We know that simply asserting something does not automatically mean that it is so. Like all high quality collaborative learning experiences, direct engagement with peers and materials can be both personally motivating and also give students opportunities to own the materials and the process and make them truly meaningful. Through the process of learning with a peer, students practice important twenty-first century capacities, such as collaboration and critical thinking, as they engage in thoughtful discussion about historical artifacts.

USING PARTNERSHIP LEARNING WITH STUDENTS

HOW CAN I USE THIS APPROACH WITH THESE LESSONS?

I. Framing for students

A. We have set up the lessons so that you can either study the objects together as a full class or spend some time having students study objects with a peer partner.

Whichever structure you choose, it will be important to share the following ideas for your students from the Pedagogy of Partnership at the beginning of the lesson:

1. We are engaging in an open-ended exploration of historical objects. There will be multiple interpretations and ideas about these objects and what they can help us understand.
2. In partnership work, each person's idea is important and will potentially open up greater understanding. It is therefore important to listen to the ideas that others are generating and notice how they are similar or different from your own.
3. The object is also a partner and requires our close attention so that we not rush to assume its meaning or misjudge what it is trying to convey.
4. We suggest highlighting for your students the importance of grounding their ideas and interpretations in the object itself, even though we know that interpretations are generated through a combination of the details in the object and outside knowledge and experience. (It is very easy for students

to be distracted from or simply ignore the object and try to base interpretations solely on their outside knowledge and impressions, which are not always accurate.)

5. As we study with other people and objects, we should try to be open to the new ideas that they convey, even when (or especially when) they are very different from how we think about things.
6. If you plan to give your students time to study in pairs, let them know that later in the lesson they will have a chance to practice these ideas in pairs and for now, they will practice them as a full class.

B. With multiple lessons over a period of time, you could work with students on getting better at specific partnership habits.

However, given that these lessons are designed for single class sessions, it will be most effective to focus on cuing students to engage in listening and articulating.

Explain to your students that their job is to listen really, really well to the historical objects and their human partners in order to really understand both and that their human partners will be doing the same thing. It's also important that students take responsibility for contributing ideas and trying to express their ideas as clearly as possible so that they can contribute to the learning process. By so doing, students also help the object "speak."

Write the questions below on the board, and encourage your students to use the questions to help them listen more deeply. Teachers should demonstrate how to use these questions and encourage students to use them when they

are having full-class discussions and later when they study in pairs:

- (To the object) What do I notice about you? Why is this detail here? What could it mean?
- (To your peers) Can you tell me more about what you mean?

C. Additional ideas for helping students “listen” to their third partner, the historical object:

We can support our students in taking on three important habits that will help them make the object a partner and really listen to what it has to offer:

1. Paying close attention to the object (e.g., What details do you notice? Why is it here? What could it mean?)
2. Looking for evidence in the object to support your ideas
3. Not rushing to judge the meaning of the object and taking time to consider different possibilities

These habits are also important for how we engage with our human partners in order to understand their ideas and learn from them. Teachers can decide if they want to explicitly introduce these to students. If they do, they should demonstrate them as part of what they do with the full class and cue them to the students.

II. Sequence of a lesson

A. Whole class work at the beginning of a lesson

After you have framed your lesson using the guidelines above and introduced students to the idea of listening and articulating, it is useful to start off by asking students questions to help them look closely at the object and notice its details. Start by asking them, “What do you notice?” (Note: This question helps students engage in the “I see” part of the lesson described in the curricular materials.)

After students have spent time noticing what is in front of them, you can guide them to respond to “meaning,” or interpretive, questions—what do you think this means and why? (This is the “I think” part of the lesson.) You will need to help them focus on developing interpretations and continuing to revisit the documents or images to notice more details and expand or refine their ideas.¹⁶

After they have spent some time exploring the object and have had a chance to discuss it together, you can then ask them to make personal connections. If you spend too much time asking them to make personal connections before they have had time to study the object or document and develop some ideas about it, the personal connections are not grounded in the artifact. This is okay as a way to “hook” students’ interest in the lesson at the beginning, but if it becomes the central focus of the lesson, students will not have a chance to really engage with the historical object and learn from it.

Share with students that they will explore additional images or texts together in pairs and follow the same kind of sequence, first taking time to notice the details of the image or text and then sharing with each other what they think the image or text means or what it comes to teach.

B. Working with a peer partner

1. Match students

Working with a peer partner can be interesting and motivating for students. However, productive peer work also does not come naturally, and it is important for teachers to help their students work together as effectively as possible. This starts by putting students in pairs that work well together. You may already put students in pairs and choose to use the pairings you use in other lessons. If you pair students specifically for these lessons, consider the following:

- Do they respect each other’s ideas?
- Do they work well together?
- Do they work at a similar pace?
- Do their skills complement each other?

Due to time constraints, you might simply suggest that students turn to the person next to them and work with that person on the peer part of the lesson. In this kind of more incidental pairing, it will be especially important for you to monitor what is going on during the peer work and intervene when necessary.

2. Decide on the amount of time for learning with peer partners

Before students start studying in pairs, teachers should make sure to let them know how long they will have and what they are expected to share by the end of the time. For younger students who are not used to working with a peer partner, twenty minutes focused on one or two objects or texts is a good amount of time to start doing this work. Older students or students with more experience working with peers can spend longer with their peer partners.

3. Review the following guidelines with your students to frame their peer learning:

- Take turns sharing your ideas of what you see or read and what you think the images or documents mean.
- Ask each other for clarification to make sure you really understand one another.
- Ask each other to elaborate to help each other flesh out your ideas. Say, “Can you tell me more about what you mean?” in order to encourage each other to elaborate.
- Help make sure that each other’s ideas are grounded in evidence.
- Take some time considering how your ideas are similar and different.
- Ask each other for help with understanding or further developing your idea when needed.

It will be important that peers understand that while they should learn from each other, help each other notice details in the object, and point out contradictions or ideas they have left out, peers do not need to agree on the meaning of the object.

Older students can spend more time helping each other support and challenge each other's ideas. That is, they can help each other further develop their ideas by finding more supporting evidence or they can challenge an idea by pointing out contradictory evidence. They should support and challenge in the spirit of helping each other develop the best ideas possible, rather than in the spirit of undermining the other person's ideas.¹⁷

4. Teacher's role while students are in pairs

While students are studying in pairs, teachers should monitor the pairs. There may be some pairs that cannot work together for an unforeseen reason. Teachers should make changes to pairings as they see fit. Teachers should not make students stay in pairs in which one student is repeatedly undermining the other student. Pairs need to be mutually beneficial.

If a teacher sees that a pair is getting nowhere in their learning process, he or she should intervene, making sure they understand what they are supposed to be doing and finding out what is getting in their way. Sometimes students may simply need to be cued to reread the discussion guide or be reminded of the peer learning guidelines in #3 above. Other times students may need to be cued to return to look at (or read) the artifact and share what they see out loud with one another as a way to ground and fuel their conversation.

If you see one student in a pair doing all the talking, point this out to them and challenge them to make space for the other person to also share.

When students finish too quickly, teachers may want to intervene to push students' thinking further and challenge them to either further develop their ideas or come up with new ones.

C. Working as a full class again/ Lesson wrap-up

Once students have completed their learning in pairs, call your class back together for a wrap-up discussion. During this time you may want to gather students' interpretations to a few of the questions from the Teacher Guide.

There may be some reluctance from the students if they hear opinions that are different from their own. Guide students so that they feel comfortable offering many different interpretations.

Write students' responses on a whiteboard or piece of flipchart paper so that they can see all the different ideas they have generated. Give them an opportunity to stop and take in this student-generated collection of ideas. By physically seeing the multiple interpretations, students also experience the idea of multivocality in a concrete way.¹⁸

As your class studies more objects, you can help students make connections between objects and also point out similarities and differences in the ideas they generate.

Before you conclude the lesson, give students a few minutes to reflect on their partnership learning and what they learned from their partners. They can do this orally, in writing in class, or as an exit ticket.

Some wrap-up questions that help students reflect include:

- 1) What's one thing you learned from your human partner?
- 2) What's one thing you learned from the historical object?
- 3) What, if anything, has changed about how you think about this topic based on your partnership work?

CONCLUSION

There are many ways that students can benefit by using partnership learning in the study of historical objects. Students often report increased motivation when they work with their peers, in addition to learning new ideas, gaining insights, and having an opportunity to practice important communication and interpretive skills.

Even if you don't put students in pairs, you can still help them focus on each other and the historical objects as partners in learning by taking a few minutes in class to encourage all your students to listen deeply to each other and the historical objects in order to expand their learning. And you yourself as the teacher can model this kind of deep listening and attentiveness. As educational scholar Kathy Schultz reminds us: "Listening closely ... implies becoming deeply engaged in understanding what a person has to say through words, gesture, and action. Listening is fundamentally about being in relationship to another and through this relationship supporting change or transformation. By listening to others, the listener is called to respond."