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***Havruta* Inspired Pedagogy: Fostering An Ecology of Learning for Closely Studying Texts with Others**

Orit Kent and Allison Cook

Abstract:

Reading texts closely and discussing and interpreting them with others is a core and complex practice for learners of many ages, in many contexts. In this article, we present a pedagogical framework for reading texts with others, "*havruta* inspired pedagogy." The framework is comprised of three overlapping domains: teaching structures, teaching stance and teaching and learning practices. We define each of these domains and illustrate through teachers' words and classroom practices how teachers in one context work within these domains to support rich student text-learning experiences. This conceptual framework grows out of a year-long program of design research at a Jewish supplementary school and our ongoing documentation and analysis of how teachers implemented their professional development learning in their K-7 classrooms. The pedagogical framework is a conceptual evolution of earlier work and is applicable not only to *havruta* dyads, but also to small group and whole group lessons and discussions.

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***Havruta*¹ Inspired Pedagogy: Fostering An Ecology of Learning for Closely Studying Texts with Others**

Orit Kent and Allison Cook

Part 1: Introduction

We (the authors) developed and implemented a pilot year-long professional development (pd) program at a Jewish afternoon school, the Gesher² school, in which the study of classical and modern Jewish texts is a central classroom activity.³ We met monthly with the whole faculty and taught the teachers frameworks and tools for improving their teaching of Jewish texts in small group and havruta settings. We also worked with select faculty directly in their classrooms. We documented the intervention and collected multiple forms of data from both the pd sessions and teacher's own classrooms, which we analyzed.⁴ We set up the pd program as a design experiment

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¹ The Aramaic term *havruta* traditionally refers to two people studying Talmud together. In this article, the term *havruta* refers to two people studying a Jewish text together for some period of time in order to interpret it. It also refers to a larger pedagogical approach, which is the subject of this article.

² This is a pseudonym.

³ Jewish afternoon schools are private programs that typically meet in the afternoon and/or weekend and supplement students' general education with a range of Jewish subjects, as well as social opportunities.

⁴ We collected videotapes or audiotapes of and material from all pd sessions, and videotapes, teaching material and student work from two different classrooms. We also collected observational notes in select classrooms, spoke regularly with the principal to gather his observations of teachers in their classrooms and collected written reflections from teachers of changes that they introduced in their classrooms during the course of the year. We conducted a mid-year self-assessment with teachers and year-end interviews with all faculty. Finally, we (the authors) held regular meetings and documented them in order to regularly assess the effectiveness of what we were doing.

(Cobb, et al, 2003) in order to learn from what we did and make useful improvements as we went along.⁵ This article focuses on the conceptual framework that grew out of the larger study.

The pd program or intervention, the Gesher Beit Midrash for Teachers (GBMT)⁶, was centered on *havruta* learning, a mode of learning in which two learners interpret a text collaboratively and independent of their teacher. We taught teachers six core practices of *havruta* learning- listening, articulating, wondering, focusing, challenging and supporting (Kent, 2010). The enactment of the *havruta* practices shape the quality of the interpretive talk of *havruta* learners and the use of the practices can impact the *havruta* learning experience (Kent, *ibid.*). We presented mini lessons on each of the practices and gave teachers opportunities to perform these practices together while studying texts in *havruta* at pd sessions. Teachers also had opportunities to analyze videotapes of teachers introducing *havruta* in the classroom and of their young students studying in *havruta*. These teachers were also given support in incorporating concepts and tools from the pd sessions into their classroom planning and teaching.⁷

Our approach to teacher professional development was informed by a body of

⁵ In this article, we do not report on the full study conducted at this site since the focus of the article is the pedagogical framework that grew out of the larger study. For a mid-year report on the larger study, see Orit Kent and Allison Cook (2010). "Interim Report: Text Study, Collaborative Learning and Meaning Making in a Jewish Supplementary School" at <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/pdfs/2011-6-bm-interim-report.pdf>.

⁶ The idea of designing a beit midrash specifically meant to meet the needs and learning goals of teachers draws from Orit Kent's collaboration with Elie Holzer and Sharon Feiman Nemser in designing a beit midrash for preservice teachers in the DeLeT/MAT (Day school Leadership through Teaching) program at Brandeis University. In the current context, Orit Kent and Allison Cook designed the Gesher beit midrash for in-service teachers.

⁷ See Feiman-Nemser (2006), Holzer (2006) and Kent (2008) for discussions of uses of *havruta* learning vis-a-vis teacher professional development. See also Kent (2009), unpublished paper, for a discussion of teaching teachers the practices of supporting and challenging through the use of *havruta*. These earlier studies focused on the use of *havruta* as a tool for inducting pre-service teachers into core aspects of teaching and helping them practice how to follow someone else's learning through pair work. The current article is based on our work with in-service teachers to help them create rich text-based learning experiences for their students.

literature on the importance of teacher learning communities (e.g. Little 2002, 2003, 2007); the different kinds of knowledge important for teaching (e.g. Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999); and useful "pedagogies of practice" (Grossman, et al, 2009). Our approach was also informed by research on how people learn (e.g. Bransford, et al, 2005, Bransford, et al, 1999, Lave and Wenger, 1991).

We hoped that the experiences and opportunities we created for the teachers would help them become better equipped to induct their own students into *havruta* based text study and its six core practices and thereby deepen students' text study experiences. While the focus of this work was Jewish teachers teaching mostly Biblical and Talmudic texts, *havruta* as a mode of learning and its pedagogy are applicable to other teaching and learning contexts in which the close study of texts with other people is a central activity.⁸

Our work with the teachers afforded us many opportunities to see what teachers were able to do in pd sessions and in their individual classrooms, with the overarching ideas, frameworks and experiences they encountered in the GBMT. By closely observing the variety of ways that teachers incorporated this learning into their classrooms, we were able to broaden our own understanding of *havruta* learning and teaching. The results of our observations and analyses led to a new framework for what we are calling *havruta* inspired pedagogy, a pedagogy for studying texts with others that is informed by some of the ideals of *havruta* learning.⁹ **This article focuses on illustrating the new framework**

⁸ While *havruta* is most generally used in Jewish contexts, it is sometimes used in other contexts as well, such as in language arts classrooms and even university classes. Teachers we have worked with in these contexts provide multiple reasons for using *havruta* such as "my students find it motivating," "it gives my students a forum for delving deeply into the text" or it "engages my students in forms of democratic/ethical discourse." *Havruta* is a form of textual learning that offers learners opportunities to foster interpretive, social and ethical engagement and thus has great potential for a range of people in different contexts with different learning goals.

⁹ In addition to this framework applying to what teachers do with their students and how students engage in text based learning, this framework also applies to teaching teachers, serving as a more comprehensive

of *havruta* inspired pedagogy through examples from the classroom practice of the teachers with whom we worked.

II. Framing *Havruta* as Structure, Stance and a Set of Practices

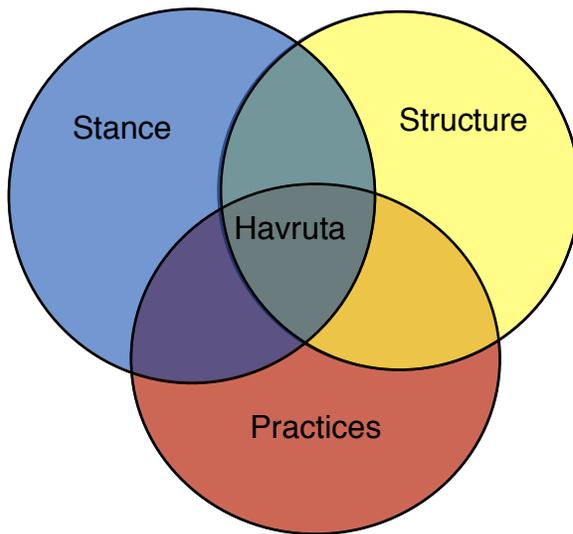


Diagram 1: *Havruta* Inspired Pedagogical Framework

Our framing is comprised of three domains: *havruta* design structures, a *havruta* stance toward teaching and learning, and a set of *havruta* learning practices.¹⁰ These domains can overlap with one another to create a venn diagram (see Diagram 1). People generally think of *havruta* as two people studying a text. Within our framing, *havruta* is not only a structure of two people studying a text. It also embodies a particular teaching and learning stance and set of practices that can be powerful resources for teachers and learners in different contexts. Furthermore, its basic structure, once probed, turns out to

framework for *havruta* based professional development with teachers.

¹⁰ We would like to thank Susan P. Fendrick for helping us clarify and solidify our thinking around this terminology.

include many more components than simply two people and a text.¹¹

Our goal in working with teachers (and their students) is to help them move to the middle space, in which all three domains overlap. However, in reality, we often see each domain develop separately from the two others. This diagram helps name each of these domains of *havruta* inspired pedagogy and account for it, both when it manifests individually and when it manifests along with the others. Each domain, when probed, offers multiple pedagogic (and learning) possibilities but also is more limiting than the overlapping spaces.

Havruta as structure refers to the technical components of the *havruta* set up and learning. This framing moves beyond the definition of *havruta* as simply two people and a text and helps us explore the many design details of the structure that can support and facilitate *havruta* learning.

Havruta as a teaching and learning stance refers to the attitudes and beliefs *havruta* practitioners bring to their teaching and their learning with one another and the text. These attitudes and beliefs can profoundly affect the nature of the relationships in an educational setting between teachers, learners and texts.

Havruta learning practices is how we characterize the nature of the conversation that occurs in *havruta*. The six *havruta* practices- listening, articulating, wondering, focusing, supporting and challenging -can help learners interpret texts together and can cultivate intellectual and relational skills in the process. These six practices can also

¹¹ The *havruta* inspired pedagogical framework bears some general resemblances to other pedagogical approaches, such as pedagogies of interpretive discussion.

serve as important teaching practices.¹²

In the following sections we illustrate each of the components of the *havruta* inspired pedagogical framework as they emerged in two Gesher classrooms.¹³ We do this by getting up close to the work of Gesher teachers and their students and making their voices a central part of our writing. Inspired by the work of scholar and educational leader, Patricia Carini, and her colleagues, we put the details of teaching and learning as they transpire in real classrooms at the center and "attend to the complexity and ambiguity of lived experience." (Schwartz with Martin and Woolf, 2000, p. 136-139).¹⁴ It is in the dialogue between us, the researchers-practitioners, and the Gesher teachers and their classrooms that the *havruta* inspired pedagogical framework emerged. And it is through sharing details of teachers' experiences and their classrooms that we hope to make aspects of *havruta* inspired pedagogy "emergent" and imaginable." (ibid)

Havruta as Structure

I've worked in *havruta* plenty of time[s] before I came to this program. So *havruta* for me, originally it meant having a piece of Talmud or Midrash or anything like that in front of you and discussing it with your partner. Now in high school, that was letting the other person translate the Talmud from Hebrew for me and then discussing it! Then, in college, it was trying to have a back and forth. And then, here [at Gesher], it was having a back and forth and it was a really meaningful conversation.

-Beth,¹⁵ a 3rd grade teacher at Gesher

As Beth teaches us through her reflections about her personal learning history in *havruta*, describing what *havruta* is requires both a structural explanation together with

¹² See, for example, Kathy Schultz's work (2003) on teacher listening. See also Patricia Carini and her colleague's work at the Prospect Center (2000). For them curiosity and wondering are at the heart of the learning process for both teachers and students.

¹³ We are choosing to focus on two classrooms in order to make the narrative clearer. These elements also arose in other Gesher classrooms.

¹⁴ This chapter is part of a collection of essays written by Patricia Carini and her colleagues. Patricia Carini has written extensively about her approach, "descriptive inquiry" in a monograph, "Observation and Description: An Alternative Methodology for the Investigation of Human Phenomena." (1975).

¹⁵ The teachers' names are pseudonyms.

qualifying information about what happens within that structure. At its most basic, one can describe *havruta* learning as a structure: having a text in front of you and discussing it with your partner. The structure of *havruta* holds the learner in a direct and accountable relationship with another person and the text for a period of time. (There is no room for anonymously "checking out" in this smallest of groupings.) While the actual activities and quality of the *havruta* experience may vary greatly, this basic pedagogical structure remains consistent across contexts.

However, structure, in this context, is not merely the physical presence of the *havruta* learners and the text but also includes a number of important design and real time teaching components. In our work with Gesher teachers, we observed and promoted experimentation with both set-up and real-time support along the following defining lines of *havruta* structure: 1) use of physical environment and space; 2) designation of time; 3) student grouping; 4) choice of text and *havruta* study guide/assignment; and additionally, 5) the work teachers must do to support students' ability to work independently from their teacher and interdependently with their *havruta* partner. While this latter category may not seem like a structural category in the same way we might think about how to use space or time, we have found that teachers' planning for and coaching toward students' interdependent work in *havruta* is fundamental to actualizing the structure of *havruta* and removing the teacher from the role of direct facilitator.

We will illustrate these components of structure through a closer look at Beth and Cindy's use of structure in their the 2nd- 3rd grade classroom. Beth and Cindy experienced classroom management struggles as a barrier to conducting the kind of meaningful discussions they wanted to have with their students. Since the pedagogical

domain of classroom management involves structural factors such as use of time, space, routine, etc. (e.g. Saphier and Gower, 1997), the structural components of *havruta* became powerful tools for meeting and transforming a significant classroom challenge. Emboldened by their own experience in the GBMT, Cindy and Beth began to plan for and implement the structural elements of *havruta* in their classrooms.

Use of Physical Environment and Space

Midyear, we asked the teachers to write reflections on the GBMT and to list what they thought they learned directly from the experience. Cindy wrote, “One thing I learned was the physical environment is highly important.”¹⁶ Cindy and Beth took this learning to heart as they began to implement *havruta* in their classroom. Beth describes how they began to divide the students into *havrutot*¹⁷ or small groups outside of the classroom so that students would enter the classroom as a space that would be dedicated to *havruta* learning:

When they stepped into the classroom they knew exactly what they were going to do. They went to the places where they would work, and we had already split them up so it gave them a chance to really focus...

As Beth mentions, she and Cindy not only thought about how to assign meaning to the classroom space as a whole, but they also preassigned the spaces inside the classroom where the different groups would work. While directing groups of students where to go inside the classroom is a basic move of management and organization, Beth and Cindy thought also about this designation of space as another source of student learning. In

¹⁶ The GBMT was an intentionally designed space. While the GBMT met in a regular school classroom, the room was always rearranged for the GBMT so that teachers could sit in a semi-circle with tables in front of them that had all materials that they might need for the session. The walls of the GBMT were full with teaching frameworks and concepts, the agenda for the particular day, and examples of the teachers' work.

¹⁷ This is the plural form of the word "*havruta*."

their planning notes, Beth and Cindy wrote:

We will be putting a circle of chairs near the sofa, a circle on the rug, and one group at the table. This is so that each group will not only come up with different answers, but have different types of reference[s] while they work.

Each space was proximate to different learning materials in the environment.

Beth and Cindy thought of those materials as another partner in learning- a partner that could influence learning without the teacher functioning as the direct facilitator, further fortifying the independent nature of the *havruta* structure.

Beyond the use of classroom space, Cindy and Beth developed an interest in the physicality of the three partners in *havruta*, the two human partners and the text. In her reflections, Beth noted that she, “really did emphasize this year the whole idea of having text [our emphasis]--not just having it on the wall [as a centerpiece of the classroom environment] but giving it to the kids and having them look at it.” Cindy reflected, “Just the fact that you’re working in pairs. Your working one [person] in front of the other...” For them, the direct physical relationship created by seating two students and a text together in *havruta* formation signified a kind of direct and intimate learning experience that other structures had not afforded them in their classroom. In viewing a video of a colleague’s classroom, Beth noted that the students in the video, “were using the text...their single page of text as an anchor.” Her observation and characterization of the physical text anchoring two learners to the text and to each other, added a structural dimension to our larger ongoing discussion about what it means for students to study text together.

Use and Designation of Time

Havruta is like quality time... I'm taking this time aside to do something specific that is *m'yuchad*. I don't want to say "special" because it's not really "special." *Yichudi* (a Hebrew term)... unique, that's it.
-Cindy

As Beth and Cindy began to introduce *havruta* structure into their classroom, they changed both how they assigned segments of instructional time as well as the order and flow of their lessons. They came to realize the importance of slowing down and protecting time for student exploration of ideas. During one GBMT in which the teachers viewed a video of 4th and 5th graders at Gesher learning in *havruta*, Beth suggested the following use of time:

[I would] give them [the students] a little more time to do it [*havruta* work]... give them a chance to sort of see if they didn't feel as hurried [so] that maybe they would spend some more time on the text and have a little more time to process what they were talking about.

The designation of protected *havruta* time as a focus of Beth and Cindy's lessons changed the quality and use of the rest of the classroom time. In their planning notes, they wrote:

We will also split them into their groups before they come in, allowing them maximum time to work together in their small groups instead of starting as a larger one and splitting up.

Beth and Cindy set apart the first period of their class time for *havruta* work to give their students an opportunity to closely engage with the material and one or two classmates rather than beginning the class with a teacher-facilitated introduction of material. They found that the move away from beginning class with the usual "big stage" of the full group discussion enabled students to focus on the text rather than being distracted by the social dynamics of the full group. Only after students had the learning time in *havruta* did they convene a larger group to gather the students' interpretations generated in *havruta* and connect those ideas to the larger curricular context. Cindy and Beth found that this structural time-change produced deeper learning among their

students, changed patterns of participation, and made full group gatherings more worthwhile. They also found that *havruta* time allowed them as teachers to know students better as individuals and learners.¹⁸ The time spent listening to their student's *havruta* work influenced yet another dimension of planning for *havruta* structure which is forming the *havruta* groupings themselves.

Student Grouping

As teachers of younger students, Beth and Cindy took liberties with the *havruta* structure by making different sized groupings, sometimes two students, sometimes three or even four. Beth explains,

...So we figured splitting the kids into groups, and having them work in pairs... really I think gave them a better chance to, not only have a better grasp of what we were studying in Nitzanim [the name of their class] this year but also really get to know some of the kids that they might not typically hang out with. And to a certain extent, I think it really affected how they interacted outside of the classroom as well.

When asked how they made their *havruta* groupings early in the year, Beth and Cindy wrote, “We grouped them according to who would work well together, and a few groups of friends, [and] a few who might become friends after this process.” Initially, Beth and Cindy focused on social considerations when assigning groups. Criteria for grouping grew more complex as Beth and Cindy were afforded opportunities, because of the intimate student-centered nature of the *havruta* structure, to observe and notice individual students working together. For example, in one GBMT session Cindy relayed such observations:

... we also noticed that there was one strong leader in that group who was a little bit more articulate and the other was a little bit less articulate... They were both into the task: one was able to be in the task by writing so beautifully, and the other student was able to also be in the task by writing and also by talking so enthusiastically.

¹⁸ Cindy and Beth both reported this, as did their principal. Their detailed student reports about their students' learning also reflect this development.

Beth and Cindy's careful attention to their students working together in *havrutot* fed into future decisions about grouping. This structural dimension of planning for *havruta* learning became a featured theme of progress reports that went home to parents. How students participated in *havruta* proved to be a focal point for describing and evaluating students' experience in the classroom. In the following excerpt from a progress report, Cindy and Beth briefly describe *havruta* study for the parents and comment on what they have noticed about an individual student's social growth and behavioral growth, as developing the practices to be a good partner in *havruta*, and in learning the content material.

Lately, we have been working on different texts in *havruta*, a form of study where the kids are paired up to look at a text more in depth. We found this is a helpful approach for Jim. It gives him an opportunity to verbalize his ideas and develop them without trying to make the class laugh. Each *havruta* session starts with the kids reading the text aloud together. Jim has had a chance to work with several different kids, each of whom enjoys working with him. This has really added to the conversation. While they occasionally disagree on a point of view, this gives Jim the opportunity to articulate why he thinks a particular way.

The structural dimension of grouping thus became a powerful instrument for knowing students as individuals and as learners and, for Beth and Cindy, had an iterative effect on the design of ongoing teaching and learning inside and outside the *havruta* structure. As Beth reflected, working with students in different *havruta* configurations, "...has really changed (I think) the way that we look at the kids and the way that we work with them."¹⁹

Choice of Text and Design of *Havruta* Task

¹⁹ In a sense, *havruta* time, enabled the teachers to see, in Patricia Carini's (2001) words, the "child in motion." Carini explains this phrase as follows: "I reasoned that it is when a teacher can see this process, the child in motion, the child engaged in activities meaningful to her, that it is possible for the teacher to gain the insights needed to adjust her or his own approaches to the child accordingly." (p. 9)

Gesher teachers work with a curriculum which includes selections of traditional Jewish texts from which teachers can choose. With the introduction of the *havruta* structure into their classroom, Cindy and Beth made the choice to put these texts directly into the hands of their students, rather than only referring to one copy of the text on the classroom wall. In their planning, Cindy and Beth spent time formatting texts into user-friendly fonts and sizes to make the text accessible to their students.

The text itself, however, would not be enough to support these young learners in *havruta*. Creating the scaffolding for *havruta* study--the *havruta* task or study guide--became an important feature of Beth and Cindy's collaborative process of planning as co-teachers. As Beth explains,

So what was fun is when we would take a piece of text we would actually sit down and say so what are the questions we can have the kids ask each other and then we would put those questions down on paper for the kids to ask, because it was really important for us to have them both understand what the text was, but also really address each other ...

When designing the *havruta* task, Beth and Cindy were constructing a guide that would help students both access meaning in the text and also help them to access the ideas of their peers. The *havruta* task was meant to address and activate all three partners in the *havruta* structure.

After some time, Beth and Cindy established a generalized routine to *havruta* study with their students: "You're working one in front of the other... First read it [the text] aloud. Then, one of you needs to ask a question; then another one of you asks a question." Thus, while Beth and Cindy did not go as far as to teach explicitly the *havruta* practices, through the design of the *havruta* tasks and with the help of real-time support, they did initiate their students into basic patterns of interaction that make *havruta* study possible.

Beyond routines of interaction, Beth and Cindy crafted *havruta* tasks and framed the purpose of *havruta* for their students in such a way as to promote interpretive discussions in the *havrutot*. Cindy spoke about her role as the framer of interpretive discussion²⁰ when she said, “If I give them a right frame to work with, they can come up with interesting answers, instead of working in a frame towards getting answers that I’m looking for.” Both Beth and Cindy separately commented about stressing with their students that often there are no right or wrong answers, as long as, “you have right justification,” or “as long as you were looking at the text.” Through the planning and design of *havruta* texts and tasks, Beth and Cindy inducted their students into the structure of *havruta* learning as re-imagined within the greater framework of *havruta* stance and practices. As Cindy commented at the end of the year, “I think there was a lot of set up that we prepared in the spirit of *havruta* that made the difference for us and for the kids.”

Beyond the design of *havruta* tasks, Cindy and Beth would need to further support their students to succeed in *havruta* by tending to another important feature of *havruta* structure: helping students to self-monitor and take responsibility for their work.

Supporting Students to Work Independently and Interdependently

Beth and Cindy understood that in order for their students to succeed in *havruta*, both teachers and students would need to develop new routines of interaction that enable

²⁰ Cindy and other Gesher teachers understood interpretive discussion to mean that students were engaged in a sustained conversation about the meaning of the text, in which they understood that there was not one right answer and that the interpretations were based on both what was in the text (textual evidence) and what students' brought to the text and that these interpretations would arise through actively working with the text and each other. See Haroutunian-Gordon (1991) for a related understanding of interpretive discussion.

students to work with increasing independence from their teacher and to work interdependently with their *havruta* partner. These new routines or semi-scripted patterns become structural features of classroom life. Cindy discusses one such routine:

I remember... a few times maybe in the beginning of the year. [Students would come up to me and say,] “I don’t get this.” And I would say, “Well did you try to figure this out with your partner first before coming to me?” And if the answer was no, so I would say, “Ok, so ask your partner. Try to figure out what they are saying.”

Cindy noticed that the request for help came from an individual student who would say, “I don’t get it.” Rather than detract from the structure of the *havruta* partnership, she would direct him/her back to his/her peer-partner, placing the responsibility for the work on the partnership. Cindy and Beth communicated an important message of the *havruta* stance to their students in order help the *havruta* structure take root. When their students were having difficulty in *havruta* work, they took the opportunity to explicitly help their students learn that, “the fact that you [the students] don’t understand does not mean you should give up- try to figure it out.”²¹

Cindy thought it a significant shift from the beginning of the year when, “at the end of the year... I got two partners coming up to me [saying], “We don’t get it.” The move from “I” to “we” signaled a change in how students viewed their role from one of individual learner to participants in a *havruta*.

Cindy and Beth further supported the *havruta* partnership as a structural entity when the class would come together as a full group. Changing their previous routines of the class discussion, Cindy reported establishing yet another new pattern: “We told them that we’re not going to have everyone say everything and that not everyone was going to get the floor, but we said that the groups were different, and we took one idea from each

²¹ From an interview with Cindy.

group and they had to present.” Supporting the students as participants in the *havruta* structure also means honoring the ideas that are born from these groupings. Both the partnerships and the ideas have influence beyond the designated time for *havruta* learning.

Havruta as Teaching and Learning Stance

I think one of the underlying themes for me was to make sure that they are at a certain point able to play with their own ideas around the text. I wanted them to know it enough so that they can start thinking about it, and then also start thinking about it in their own way, creatively. I wanted them to really experience this engagement with the text in a way that feels fun, and feels like they can make meaning of things for themselves, and that they can change their mind afterwards and make different meanings, and go back to it... And then I had my own reading of the text, which I was interested in, but I felt I was inviting them to explore this kind of reading, also. So, it's not so much that I wanted them to reach ABC conclusion at the end, but I wanted them to kind of join me into this exploration through this particular prism I had in my mind when I was reading it, and learning it.

-Diane, 6th grade Gesher teacher

A teaching and learning stance has to do with one's beliefs and attitudes towards one's students and the subject matter at hand. As Diane explains above, a *havruta* stance includes a belief in what students are capable of learning individually and from one another and a belief in the depth of the text and its multimeaningfulness.²² A *havruta* stance also includes a belief in the role of the teacher as knowledgeable guide who helps open space for interpretive discussions and a belief in the core practices of *havruta* learning as a mode for realizing the potential of the learners and the subject matter. The teacher's stance is enacted through creating a certain kind of learning environment and fostering relationships in the classroom among students, the teacher and the material that

²² Robert Fried (1995) and Parker Palmer (1997) eloquently highlight stance as the focus on students and subject matter. They understand stance to be about the "attitude you take that communicates who you think your students are and how much you believe they can produce" (Fried, p. 154), as well as about the attitude you have toward the subject matter. In the context of *havruta* learning, stance is not simply the general attitude toward the subject matter and its importance but is specifically about the multimeaningfulness of the particular subject matter.

they study. The teacher communicates this stance through how she designs and runs her classroom and its learning activities. She also supports her students to develop this stance toward each other, the texts and their learning.

Belief in Students as Individual and Group Learners

Over and over again, Diane communicates to her students that she believes they have valuable ideas and that she wants to hear them. As one sits in her class, it's easy to lose track of the number of times Diane says, "That's very interesting. I'd really like to understand that idea better. Can you tell me a little more?" And when she says these words, she gives the student her complete attention and continues to listen to and help clarify the ideas on the table.

Diane not only values each student's contribution, but she also spends a considerable amount of time noticing the individuals who are in her classroom and working to figure out how she can best support each student to grow along his/her own learning trajectory. She explains in an interview, " One of the interesting goals to set up for this kind of process [of *havruta* learning] is also to see particular challenges that each learner is facing, and then to be very open about it, and push everybody to go a little bit further out of your comfort zone."

In the excerpts below, Diane reflects on the students in her class and how they experienced a unit she taught which introduced students to *havruta* learning and also introduced them to the big idea of getting "under the skin" of characters in the Bible as a way for students to more fully realize the meaning of the narrative.

I think when I watched the video,²³ that one of the people that went through the most transformation was him [Zack]. That's how I saw it, because Zack has a little bit of a concrete way of thinking of things. Like naturally, it's how he is, and it was so interesting to see that in the last discussion of the second class, he was so struggling with opening up this idea that you can actually learn something about yourself through reading a text, or about your partner, that there's more to just understanding the plot, and the order. It was so hard for him, and I could feel his wheels, like really, it was harder for him than many of the other kids there, and then to see him jump into the circle, and [inaudible] discussion, and offering, and he didn't take it that far in terms of like going under the character's skin, really, but for himself it was very big push from this very concrete way of looking at things to something that was a lot more open, and that also was more personal, and that was more creative, and so I thought about him, in particular, really like this kid just made a stretch for himself.

In this reflection, we get a sense that Diane is thinking deeply about her students, and we get a sense of what she notices in her teaching and her communication with her students. We also see that Diane believes in her students' capacities and creates contexts for them to be challenged. The particular environment she created helped her student, Zack, move from reading for literal meaning in a text to beginning to infer ideas from the text.

Ultimately, Diane wants her students to be independent learners. This doesn't mean that students should be able at this point to simply go off on their own and master material, but that they come to believe that they don't always need to go to the teacher for "answers" and that they can find ideas and resources in the text, in themselves and their fellow classmates. Her stance leads directly to her choice of classroom activities. For example, Diane doesn't simply help her students learn in *havruta* because it's a new and interesting technique but because it can enable independent learning and thereby helps her actualize her deep beliefs in her students' capacities to grow. Diane describes this connection between *havruta*/group work and her stance:

²³ Here, Diane is referring to watching the video that was taken while she was teaching her class. Diane watched the video with the researchers and then with the full faculty at her school.

And I thought a very good way of doing that would be to have them work through it as small groups so that I'm not the only one resource to be throwing things at them, to be learning from me, but to also start realizing that they can learn from each other and use each other so that they can each bring ideas, they can each bounce off ideas off each other. I wanted to create this opportunity for them to be empowered to make use of all that they've been learning about, and how to make it their own kind of, and how to make it their own in a way that it's practical. So that was also in mind when I thought about the group settings, and I wanted to create groups that didn't include kids that did not naturally gravitate towards each other, to give them new interactions and to make them realize that somebody who I may not be attracted to socially may have something very valuable to offer.

We hear Diane explaining that she wants to use *havruta* to empower her students to use each other as resources instead of relying so much on the teacher. She understands that the process of *havruta* will enable her students to form relationships to the content and their learning and "make it their own" and form real learning relationships with other students. And through creating relationships between content and students and students and each other, Diane manifests part of her stance.

Belief in the Text

In addition to her belief in her students, Diane has a particular stance toward the text, which includes her belief in its value and that it has multiple interpretations. These beliefs have pedagogic consequences.

The excerpts below come from a class where Diane is introducing a new Biblical text to the class and making clear the students' role as active readers.²⁴ She tells the students that it is up to them to open up space in the text in order for new meaning to emerge. And that opening up space first requires that they read the text carefully in order to understand it.

And so what we're going to do now is that we are going to be the ones creating this space...By reading this text and beginning to understand it and beginning to break it down.

²⁴ This is a full group lesson, in which the entire class reads the text with the teacher. This is an example of a teacher using a *havruta* stance without necessarily also using the *havruta* structure.

So as we're going to go about it and read it together, you're going to have a marker...And you're going to get to color some words, some phrases, some verses...That jump out from the text to you...That may make some sense and maybe not. Maybe things you want to know more about, maybe things later on you want to come back to.... And we will begin and I'd like us to take turns in reading so that we all begin making sense of this text together, okay?

As students continue to read through the text at a slow pace, some become restless. Diane uses this as a teaching opportunity to remind them that they can't just read the words fast if they want to peel back the layers of the text. She is using this lesson as an opportunity for them all to practice slow reading together, which may be a different kind of reading than they are used to. She also uses this particular moment as a teaching opportunity to remind them that the text has many layers and meanings waiting to be uncovered by readers who want to listen to it.

So there's, you know, there's so much in every single word. And remember this triangle we spoke about at the beginning, Josh, of opening up a space? This is exactly what it means. Opening up a space is like opening up a window into this text. So yeah, you know, we can read it really, really fast and we can just go over it and we understand the words. But what we really want to be doing is we want to use our minds and our imaginations and we want to be able to really start thinking about it in a new way and in your way. Hold on one second. So in order for us to do that Josh, it's not enough to just read as many words as fast as we can, but we just really want to take the time and enjoy and start unfolding different layers that we find in the text, okay? So let's clarify a little bit what it says here in the last chunk. Right here.

A little further on in the lesson, she reiterates her last point, making clear that to really wrestle with the text and understand its different meanings requires students to first spend some time simply focused on what the text says instead of rushing off to imagine what it ought to say or could say.

We are verse 24. Now I urge you, even though it's tempting to rush. Even though it's hard to stay with the text, okay, stay with us. I promise you next class we will take as much time as you want to bring your imaginations to it, to bring your fierce questions, to bring your criticisms, to bring everything that you want. But before we jump into our own ideas, I want us to make sure that we understand the text, okay?

Diane shows great respect for the text; she structures her lessons so that her students first have an opportunity to listen to the text because she believes they must first

listen before doing something to the text. At this point in the learning process, she actively holds them back in order to preserve the voice of the text. We know from what we've already learned of Diane that she does not privilege the text over the students. Rather, she believes that all of their voices must have room and be brought into relationship in her classroom. (In her next lesson, she will create space for her students' voices in relationship to the text.)

Belief about the Teacher's Role and the Value of Interpretive Discussion to the Teaching Process

Diane's stance is also heavily informed by how she understands her role as teacher. Diane understands one of her main jobs as a teacher to be "creat(ing) an open space for exploration" among her students and the materials they study. (She also includes herself in the process of exploration and believes that she "come willing to learn as much as to teach and be really interested in hearing new ideas.") She talks about this role and writes about it in a number of ways.

I think, so one of the underlying themes for me was to make sure that they are at a certain point able to play with their own ideas around the text. So, I wanted them to know it enough so that they can start thinking about it, and then also start thinking about it in their own way, creatively. I wanted them to really experience this engagement with the text in a way that feels fun, and feels like they can make meaning of things for themselves, and that they can change their mind afterwards and make different meanings, and go back to it, and so that was kind of the underlying thing. And then I had my own reading of the text, which I was interested in, but I felt I was inviting them to explore, this kind of reading, also. So, it's not so much that I wanted them to reach ABC conclusion at the end, but I wanted them to kind of join me into this exploration through this particular prism I had in my mind when I was reading it, and learning it.

In reflecting on her teaching, Diane makes clear that she wants her students to have space to directly encounter the text. This does not mean that she takes herself out of the equation as a teacher guide. Rather, she identifies her role as helping students learn the material well enough that they can get to the point of making their own meaning of it,

coming to some meaning of the text through their own work and thinking. And while she brings her own ideas about the text to her class, ideas which come from intensive personal engagement with the text, she by no means sees her ideas as the end point for her students but rather as an invitation to explore further.

She writes further about this place of actively supporting her students' learning and movement to an interpretive space- a space in which they can take up interpretive questions in the text -while not getting in their way.

[T]hey they were struggling. I felt, this point, I was really trying to get them to cross over this place that was hard for-- that was really challenging for them. And I didn't want to-- I didn't want to put them there. I wanted to kind of wait to get them to get there on their own. So I was waiting, but I was also working really hard, so there was this feeling that I'm kind of doing both, somehow...

Here we see Diane talking about her role as a knowledgeable guide. She describes a threshold moment for her students, in which she worked hard to keep them at the threshold of what was challenging for them and not let them back away from taking the next step into interpretive discussion. She creates a space for her students' exploration and holds that space for them, supporting their growth through challenging them.

This is a very different stance than two popular notions of teaching: the "telling approach," in which the teacher holds all authority over the content and tells the students what it means, and the "child centered" approach, oftentimes depicted as meaning that the teacher has a hands-off policy and lets the students directly encounter the subject matter without any teacher intervention.²⁵ As a guide, Diane neither stands completely aside of her students' learning nor tells them what the content ought to mean to them. Instead, she

²⁵ See Barbara Rogoff's (1996) excellent explanation of the similarity between what she calls the "adult-run model" (our "telling model") and the children-run model (our "child centered" model): "We argue that the adult-run and children-run models are closely related, in that both involve a theoretical assumption that learning is a function of one-sided action (by adults or children, respectively, to the exclusion of the other). (p. 389)

offers ideas about the content and supports students to explore the content both together with her and in independent groups in order to develop their own meanings of it.

This role of creating space for deep exploration is directly tied to Diane's belief (and use of) interpretive discussion as a means to foster relationship between learners and text and foster opportunities for meaning making. It is through creating opportunities for interpretive discussion, discussions where students pay serious attention both to the text and to their own emerging ideas, that Diane believes exploration and meaning making can take place. And this ties directly back to her use of *havruta* as a means of creating a space "between learner and text where the encounter allows for creative exploration" and which "provides both support and also offers more challenging ways of looking at things in order to stretch one's thinking."²⁶

Belief in Core Havruta Learning Practices

Another key element of the *havruta* stance is the belief in the core *havruta* practices as essential to teaching and learning texts. Diane makes use of many of these practices in her teaching and also coaches her students to learn how to use them in their *havruta* work. The next section will discuss the use of the practices in more detail.

A Final Word About Stance

Diane's stance is something she draws upon in her teaching in general and not just something she or her students draw upon when they study in *havruta* specifically. It is this stance that in part enables her to create a context for successful *havruta* work in which her students can lead their own learning encounters with one another and the texts

²⁶ From Diane's teaching reflections.

in front of them. While Diane models this stance for all of her students, it is in the framing and teaching of *havruta* practices that a teacher can help her students make this stance manifest in their individual *havruta* work and other text-based discussions.

Havruta as Learning Practices

We also view *havruta* text study as comprised of six practices or skill clusters: listening and articulating, wondering and focusing, and supporting and challenging. These practices can be intentionally taught to learners, and *havruta* tasks can be designed that help students engage in these practices successfully. Teachers may also adopt these practices in their teaching repertoire for use in conducting larger group discussions. As teachers and students learn the practices and experiment with ways of putting them to use, they can cultivate not only intellectual skills but also relational skills (and in the case of teachers, pedagogic skills), potentially shifting how they understand the study of texts and their roles and relationships in the classroom context.

Modeling the Havruta Practices in One's Teaching

I found myself having the urge to “feed them with words” or to have them say out loud my teaching goals for the class. But I didn't. I sincerely tried to make space for new thoughts to be generated and allow new information to come into being within class discussion. I tried to ask interested questions instead of leading ones and I tried to ask clarifying questions when I felt that further clarification was needed for a thought in-process to become solidified.

-Diane commenting on how she put the practice of "listening" to use in her teaching

Most notably in the case of Diane's classroom is the way in which Diane herself adopts the *havruta* practices in her larger classroom teaching. In the Geshar Beit Midrash for Teachers, teachers experimented with each set of practices in their own adult *havruta* study in order to "try them on" and see how they affected the course of their own

learning. Teachers also experimented with each set of practices in their classroom teaching. In her teaching reflections, Diane discusses her focus on trying to more consciously take on the role of "listener," while allowing her students to be "articulators" as a means for new ideas to emerge and develop. She does this, not by standing to the side, but by being an "interested"²⁷ and active presence to her students' articulations. She asks "interested questions"- questions that reflect genuine interest in what students have to say and do not hint to them what they ought to say. And she asks clarifying questions to help students draw out their ideas or "thoughts in-process" so that they can take greater shape. As Diane knows, listening to students is not rocket science, but it is ongoing, hard work.

In the excerpt below, we see Diane practicing listening while conducting a group discussion in her classroom. Here, Diane invites a quiet student to articulate his thoughts. But she doesn't just create the space for him to share his ideas. She also probes his ideas and asks for further explanation of his idea based on what is in the text and/or based on his own experience.

Joshua: They were a bit more deep than last week's questions. Last week's questions were to get a basic understanding of the story. These were to go really deep into it.

Diane: What does it mean to go deep into the text?

Joshua: Find inner meaning that you don't find on your first read

Diane: Ahah. Are these meanings you find in the text?

Joshua: Sort of. It takes a couple of reads, reading and discussing about it for you to really find it so not really but kind of.

²⁷ The role of students' interests is widely discussed in the field of education (e.g. Dewey, 1956). While taking the students' interest into account is important, we are here talking about the teacher's interest in the student. Patricia Carini (1979) helps us understand this in her discussion of how one approaches student work: "To be open to the world, and to approach the object with interest, extends to the object the totality of its being." (p. 17) This kind of interest is no less applicable to the student him/herself. It is **both** the interests that the students express and the interest that the teacher pays to the student and his/her interests that are crucial to the learning process.

Diane: So are you saying it also requires some kind of discussion?

Joshua: Or at least some deep thought about it.

Diane: Some deep thought. Anyone else? I'm really interested in this point. Did you feel you could use each other to think deeply or deeper? Could you use each other as a resource to have some more ideas? How was that ...?

Diane picks up on her student's words and "revoices" (O'Connor and Michaels, 1996) them in order to probe them further and highlight their importance to other students. She doesn't simply leave their ideas at their first utterance, but through her questioning, challenges them to think further, both about the text they study and about the process of their work together. As a teacher, Diane tries to model and "embrace the learning process as collaborative" through her use of the *havruta* practices. She works to create a safe space for students to wonder out-loud and explore their ideas with each other and with her. She asks her students many questions about what they think and gives them time to work out answers out-loud. Many times during a lesson, she rephrases a student's comment and asks him/her if this is what s/he means and gives the student space to respond. Or, she often asks them to explain a little further. This kind of active listening and elaborated articulating²⁸ is an essential component of productive *havruta* work. Finally, she understands her role as a teacher as not simply supporting students where they are but helping them stretch their own thinking. She challenges each student in a way conducive to the individual student and tries to model and broadcast the idea that working hard together is an essential part of learning and can also be deeply rewarding. Diane's students came to their *havruta* work having experienced all of these things in their classroom. So when Diane explains to them that they need to actively

²⁸ See Barnes and Todd (1995) for a discussion of "elaborated talk."

listen to their *havruta* partners and challenge each other's ideas, they have an image of what this looks like and many had already practiced this as part of their ongoing participation in their classroom discussions.

Framing Havruta Time and the Havruta Task Based on the Havruta Practices

Teachers also can embed the *havruta* practices in the way that they design *havruta* time, both in terms of how they frame what students will do and the actual task that they give students to complete.

Before Diane sends her students off to study in *havruta*, she gives a rather lengthy introduction to what students will do during *havruta*:

That's what you guys are going to try on--you are going to get under the skin. Which means you won't just read in the text what a character did or said, but you are going to get a chance to imagine what it was like for them. How did they see the situation? What made them do what they did? What did they want to achieve? What was their motivation? What were they feeling? What were they thinking? It's really a chance for you to begin playing with these ideas. The first class we had, we made sure we understood the text. Right? We read it slowly, we got back to it, we asked questions. We made sure we understood the facts of the story. This time around, it's not so much understanding the facts or order; it's about your playing with different meanings and trying to come up with your own ideas and using your imagination and creativity in the process of doing it. So it's really not so much about rushing through the questions; it's taking time to enjoy and think [what] it was like for each one of these characters. We are going to begin with one of you being the focus. If you are a *havruta* pair and you are Yaakov²⁹, for example. [Diane lifts up the sheet to show them.] For the first ten minutes, both of you will be focused on Yaakov and you will read the story through Yaakov's eyes. And you will be asking questions about Yaakov so you can understand as much as you can about how he is, what made him do what he did and so forth. So please choose one of you who will begin and the other one will act as supportive partner--asking questions, listening, helping out, offering ideas but your role here is to support your partner in getting as much information and support your partner in bringing out as many ideas as possible around this character. Let me know if you have questions.

Diane designed the *havruta* text study task to help her students begin to think and feel like one of the characters in the Biblical narrative. To do this, Diane has students engage in "focused wondering" (Kent, 2010) about their character. This is wondering

²⁹ Here she is referring to the Biblical character, Jacob, known in Hebrew as Yaakov.

that is focused in a particular way and not merely wondering about all aspects of the story. She provides each *havruta* with a list of "role development" questions that guide them and sustain them in this wondering exercise, making sure that the students do not simply end their *havruta* right after they have come up with their first idea. (See Table 1)

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What part did you play in the story?• What did you want?• What were you feeling? Tell the story of your experience?• What were you thinking? Tell the story of your experience?• What do you feel about the outcome?• If you were to choose a word or phrase from the text to explain who you are, what would it be?

Table 1: Questions for role-development

In addition, Diane frames one of the roles that each students will play in *havruta* as being a "supportive partner" and provides examples of what that means: "asking questions, listening, helping out, offering ideas but your role here is to support your partner in getting as much information and support your partner in bringing out as many ideas as possible around this character." Here, she focuses their *havruta* role on the practice of supporting but suggests that in order to do this effectively, one also needs to engage in listening, articulating, wondering, and even challenging. The hand-out she gives students provides students with specific questions and steps that students can take to be a "supportive partner" and engage in the *havruta* practices together.

When helping your partner in thinking about their character:

1. Listen closely to what your *havruta* is saying
2. Help him/her think through her ideas by asking questions such as:

What do you think that part of the text means? Or

Why do you think that?

Feel free to add on to his/her ideas too or point to another idea.

If he or she gets stuck, you can say... "Can you tell me more about your idea?" or

"What does this word or line in the text make you think about your character?"

Table 2: How to act as a "supportive *havruta* partner"

By providing both oral and written guidelines, Diane creates a structure that supports students in enacting *havruta* practices and doing complex collaborative and interpretive work.³⁰

Explicitly Teaching the Havruta Practices

Rather than simply framing instructions and tasks based on the practices, some teachers explicitly teach students the practices and design class lessons with this as the goal. While most teachers at Gesher internalized the practices and drew on them in their own teaching and used the language of the practices in setting up their students in *havruta* and small groups, they didn't prioritize explicitly teaching the practices. Other teachers have done this³¹ and explicitly teaching the practices would have been a next

³⁰ When Diane watches the videotape of students engaged in the Jacob and Esau narrative, she notices that one student seems to understand his role as supportive *havruta* as making suggestions to his partner as opposed to listening to his partner and helping to draw out his partner's ideas. As follow up to this, she says that she would like to work with this student on listening more. Even though the framing of "supportive *havruta*" seems to have helped the pair take turns listening and articulating ideas and questions, to begin to really ask clarifying questions and probe ideas (to engage in active listening) will require further practice.

³¹ See Kent, 2008 and Kent, 2010 for an exploration of what it looks like when young adult students engage in these practices. See also, "Infusion: Integrating Jewish Values into A General Studies Classroom" for a look at how a teacher teaches 3rd graders the practice of listening and what it looks like when they do it while studying a text, and see "Teaching *Havruta* in Context" (2009) for an exploration of teaching the practices of supporting and challenging to teacher candidates.

step for some of the Gesher teachers.

Part III: Conclusion

In our new *havruta* framework, it becomes clear that *havruta* inspired pedagogy is comprised of "overlapping complexities."³² Thinking about it this way helps us pay attention to all of its interdependent pieces- such as, structure, stance, and practices - and not merely view it as a static affair in which two people sit with each other and translate and interpret the text.

We propose that in the ideal, it is in the overlap of these three domains of structure, stance and practices, that *havruta* inspired pedagogy and the work of the *havruta* learners can reach their potential (see Diagram 2 below). Teachers can learn, get better at, and induct their students into all three of these domains and help their students move their text study work into the overlapping space. Teachers may themselves start out with strengths in any of these areas or in any of the overlapping spaces.

³² In her book, *Teaching Problems and the Problems of Teaching* (2001), Magdalene Lampert highlights the idea that teaching consist of "overlapping complexities" (and her work identifies these overlapping complexities, names them and explores each in turn and their relationship to the whole of the classroom). We have certainly found this to be true in terms of *havruta* inspired pedagogy.

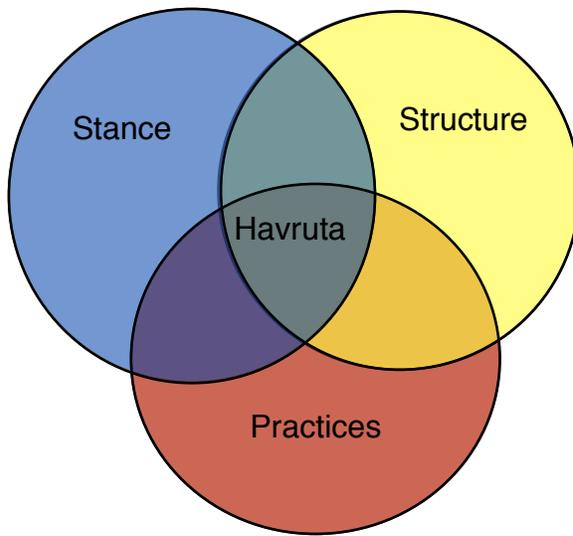


Diagram 2: Havruta Inspired Pedagogy and Learning Framework

We have seen in the work of the Gesher teachers that when teachers and students become adept at the mode of *havruta* as framed by structure, stance and practices, there is potential for the ecology of learning of the whole classroom to transform well beyond the time spent in actual *havruta* study. For example, the teacher and students may adapt a *havruta* stance and use the practices outside of the strict *havruta* structure, shifting roles, fostering a feeling of responsibility to participate and build knowledge together, and creating a respect for the text as another voice in the room.

In the work we did with Gesher teachers, we provided scaffolded experiences and coaching that gave teachers practice in each domain, prior to our own recognition of these three distinct but overlapping domains. Through subsequent analysis of teachers' classroom work, we were then able to identify and explore the three domains of *havruta* structure, stance and practices. Most importantly perhaps, the teachers adaptation of ideals, tools and practices of *havruta* learning into their classrooms demonstrated the possibility of a *havruta* inspired pedagogy that has the potential for creating a rich

classroom learning ecology (beyond the strict use of the *havruta* structure) for those interested in closely studying texts with others.³³

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³³ According to John Seely Brown, ecologies are open systems, which are dynamic, interdependent, diverse, partially self organizing, adaptive and fragile (Brown, 1990, p. 18). Each of these are features of a *havruta* learning partnership and calls attention to certain aspects of *havruta*. For example, this view helps us notice the fluidity of roles in a *havruta* learning partnership, in which learners function as teachers to one another, even as they themselves are involved in learning something new. The idea of a learning ecology also calls attention to the role of the teacher within this “partially self organizing” system—not as a primary partner but as a guide able to provide guidance with tasks and well framed questions. This kind of guidance is geared towards helping learners develop tools to help each other and become more independent learners. Each individual *havruta* serves as a micro learning ecology and cross linked *havrutot* in a single classroom can form a classroom learning ecology, which can impact the larger classroom culture (and vice versa). The power of a learning ecology derives from its interdependent, dynamic and at least partially self-organizing parts. In this vein, *havruta* as a learning ecology is not about a single person, or even two people sitting and translating a text. It’s about a whole host of tools and resources that enable a rich and potentially powerful learning context.

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