

Inger Bergom, Mary C. Wright, Marie Kendall Brown, and Michael Brooks describe an innovative academic approach to collaborative learning in a large lecture class.

By Inger Bergom, Mary C. Wright, Marie Kendall Brown, and Michael Brooks

Promoting College Student Development Through Collaborative Learning

*A Case Study of **Hevruta***

CONSIDER THESE EXCERPTS from three university mission statements. At Marshall University, a Carnegie-classified master's institution in West Virginia, the mission statement notes that the university's aim is to "improve instruction through the use of innovative teaching methods that require students to become actively involved in the learning process and develop the critical thinking skills necessary for life-long learning." The University of South Carolina-Beaufort, a small public institution, boldly claims that the university's "curriculum is designed to promote acquisition of knowledge and, through it, the intellectual dispositions and skills that encourage depth of understanding, tolerance of others, and individual accountability." And San Diego State University, a large research institution, lists the following as a key academic aim of the university: "To foster development of critical thinking, writing, reading, oral communication." These lofty and admirable goals are

typical of the stated aims of many colleges and universities, regardless of size or type of degrees offered. The mission statements include somewhat vague yet robust phrases like "critical thinking," "depth of understanding," and "tolerance of others." What are these phrases getting at? They all have to do with navigating or cultivating viewpoints, but *how* do students actually develop ideas about knowledge and knowing? And where does this student learning take place?

One approach to working toward these student learning goals that has been gaining steam in recent years is collaborative learning. Much has been written about the benefits of collaborative learning in terms of its impact on interpersonal skills and academic achievement. Many education studies suggest that students learn better when they work interactively with others and that retention of material is improved through collaborative learning. Others explain that the development of Boyer's higher-order cognitive tasks such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and problem solving are

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enhanced when students work with peers on assignments. Most colleges and universities seek to produce graduates who can be competent team members in an increasingly complex world. The engineering education accreditation agency ABET, for example, now includes teamwork in its list of professional skills essential for engineers to have in today's workforce.

What is it about collaborative learning that can be so powerful, and how does it help move students toward those lofty goals named in so many college and university mission statements? For answers, we looked at one method of collaborative learning called *hevruta* as it was used in a large lecture course at the University of Michigan. *Hevruta* is a method of learning rooted in the Judaic tradition in which students engage in sustained dialogue with a partner. Through our work at the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan, we conducted surveys and focus groups with students who learned through the *hevruta* method over a 15-week semester, and in this process we learned about students' reflections about how this pedagogical approach affected their learning.

We discovered that students' experiences as *hevruta* partners seemed to prompt them to evaluate their own epistemological assumptions and views about knowledge. Epistemic cognition has to do with one's view of knowledge—its limits, the certainty of knowledge, and the criteria for knowing. In other words, we found a connection between collaborative learning and epistemological development, a topic that has not been covered in depth in the extant teaching and learning literature. Although collaborative learning, and *hevruta*, might offer other benefits, such as improved interpersonal skills and increased retention of material, we focus here on how students' reports of *hevruta* helped them develop their understanding of knowledge and knowing.

As educators, we can benefit from clues and insights into the sometimes mysterious process of students' journeys toward becoming independent, contextual, and compassionate thinkers. To serve as their partners on this journey, we need to know teaching strategies that challenge and support them. We also need to know how to spot when students are moving

in the right direction. In this article, we try to move closer to understanding connections between collaborative learning through *hevruta* and the epistemological development of college students.

WHAT IS *HEVRUTA*?

H*EVruta* IS A METHOD OF LEARNING that has a long history of being used in *yeshivas* within the Judaic tradition. Students first do a close reading of a text on their own, and then they engage in sustained dialogue with a partner about the selected text. Dialogue between *hevruta* partners requires careful listening to another person's views and the ability to "hold multiple possibilities" and "adapt one's own line of thought," writes Orit Kent (p. 215). In other words, students must be open to others' ideas while, at the same time, formulating and being ready to make their own claims. Jeffrey Bernstein uses *hevruta* in his introductory American government class at Eastern Michigan University to help students understand scholarly activity as a social process in which knowledge is produced jointly with others. Moshe Halbertal and Tova Hartman Halbertal have described *hevruva* as "conversational give and take, [which] leads to a unique approach in analyzing texts, in the questions raised and in the whole creative thought process" (p. 460).

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One distinguishing feature of *hevruta* is that students remain with the same partner over the course of a term, which differentiates *hevruta* from a one-time collaborative discussion or debate. As a result of this prolonged partnership, students develop trust, which enables them to grapple more openly with the complexities they encounter in the text and in their discussions. The cooperative, trusting relationship between *hevruta* partners provides the framework within which students can evaluate their own epistemological assumptions and move to more advanced understandings about knowledge and knowing. Both partners are challenged to contend with and ultimately move to resolve the dilemmas they encounter, a key feature of epistemological development. Marjorie Lehman and Jeffrey Kress write that in *hevruta*, “grappling with a text’s ambiguities may ultimately lead students to feel more comfortable with the ‘gray areas’ that are an inevitable part of life” (p. 22). Because of the close relationship that is developed between *hevruta* partners, students can end up playing substantive roles in each other’s learning. Sharon Feiman-Nemser explains that in *hevruta*, “The tasks and assignments [instructors] design focus students’ attention on the texts, on their own ideas, and on the ideas of their partner and colleagues” (p. 164). In turn, this “requires people to listen closely to their own ideas, their partner’s ideas, and the ideas in the text, and to be open to revising their own interpretations.” (p. 168). In short, *hevruta* can be a powerful form of collaborative learning, and this is why we used it as a case study to understand how collaborative learning might promote epistemological development in college students.

Another important feature of *hevruta* is that the text and discussion force students to confront difficult problems that have no single solution and involve conflicting assumptions and evidence. Karen Strohm Kitchener calls these “ill-structured problems.” Examples of ill-structured problems that college students face today include health care, poverty, and the use of nuclear power. A well-structured problem, on the other hand, has a single, knowable, right or wrong answer, such as a math

problem. Kitchener posits that facing ill-structured problems is important for epistemological development. She writes that epistemic assumptions “provide a framework through which individuals understand the nature of [ill-structured] problems and define and choose acceptable strategies or solutions” (p. 230). This is an important point because the activities involved in *hevruta*—text study and dialogue with a partner—encourage students to wrestle openly with ill-structured problems. That is, students are often confronted with discrepancies between their beliefs and the text, and between their beliefs and their partner’s beliefs.

HEVRUTA IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

HEVVRUTA IS NOT A NEW APPROACH to learning but it *is* new to college classrooms, especially large lecture courses like the one we write about in this article. In winter 2009, Professor Ralph Williams and Michael Brooks incorporated *hevruta*-based instruction into a 15-week course taught at the University of Michigan, a flagship public research university. English 313, “Of Human Bonding: Family, Race, Nation, Religion, University,” was large (134 students), with six *hevruta*-based sections taught by teaching assistants (TAs). Lectures were given by Professor Williams or by guest lecturers, who addressed wide-ranging topics such as race in America, the historical development of the family, religiosity, and diversity at the university—all topics that suggest many ill-structured problems.

In small discussion sections with TAs, students chose their own *hevruta* partners at the beginning of the term. The primary assessments for the course were *communiqués*, short writings that students used to preview and review the discussions. Before their discussions, students sent a copy of their first *communiqué* to their *hevruta* partner and to the instructors. After the discussion, students sent a second *communiqué* to instructors and partners, noting unanswered questions and ideas learned. *Communiqués* were compiled into a reflective portfolio, which was turned in at the end of

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the term. For the final exam, groups of four to six students engaged in a two-hour oral assessment that was observed and graded by the TA.

To explore whether and how *hevruta* promotes students' epistemological development, we sent an online survey to all 134 students enrolled in English 313. The survey was adapted from one designed by Dr. Mary Piontek created for a 2004 offering of a small *hevruta*-based course. The instrument uses Likert-scale questions to measure students' perceptions about the overall impact of the course and the aspects of the course that students thought most enhanced their learning. Three open-ended questions were also included:

- 1 What most surprised you about this course?
- 2 What is the single most important thing that you learned in this course?
- 3 How has the *hevruta* method of learning impacted your perceptions of learning?

Ninety-nine students responded to the survey, most of whom were female (61 percent) and juniors/seniors (58 percent). To supplement the survey, we held a 90-minute focus group with ten students. In the discussion, students described what they felt they learned from *hevruta*, compared English 313 to other courses they had taken at the university, and suggested improvements to the way *hevruta* was incorporated into the course. We looked at survey results and the focus group discussion to try to understand whether students felt that *hevruta* facilitates growth in their understanding about the nature of knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, and their—and others'—roles in constructing it.

STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON *HEVRUTA*

WE WERE STRUCK BY THE THOUGHTFUL, insightful responses of students and how their reflections on their learning point to a connection between *hevruta* and shifts in students' thinking about

knowledge and knowing. We identified two epistemological themes in what they had to say: (1) reflections on how students view knowledge, knowing, and learning, and (2) reflections on how students view authority and the role of the teacher. We situate these themes in William Perry's Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development and Marcia Baxter Magolda's Epistemological Reflection Model, which offer lenses through which we can interpret students' comments about their *hevruta* experiences.

Students' Reflections on How They View Knowledge, Knowing, and Learning

Marcia Baxter Magolda writes that many students enter college at the absolute stage of knowing. That is, they see knowledge as black and white, or right or wrong. This is similar to how William Perry describes students in the early stage of epistemological development, which he calls "duality of knowledge." In contrast, students in more advanced stages of Baxter Magolda's and Perry's models describe their thinking in more relativistic terms and recognize knowledge as contextual, instead of fixed. Students at these positions start to see knowledge claims from different points of view and are better able to think analytically and evaluate their own ideas.

In feedback from students about their *hevruta* experiences, we can see signs pointing to this sense of relativism. One student wrote:

The assumption [in *hevruta* discussions] was never that confusion implied an ambiguity in the text, the 'there's no right way' approach, but rather we could argue about the proper interpretation. Often we failed to agree on the content of that interpretation but somehow it seemed to not matter all that much.

Although it is difficult to draw conclusions about the impact of *hevruta*, student comments suggested that they were moving away from viewing knowledge as concrete and certain to viewing it as contextual and relative. When asked what was the single most important thing learned in the course, one student replied:

The cooperative, trusting relationship between *hevruta* partners provides the framework within which students can evaluate their own epistemological assumptions and move to more advanced understandings about knowledge and knowing.

We were struck by the thoughtful, insightful responses of students and how their reflections on their learning point to a connection between *hevruta* and shifts in students' thinking about knowledge and knowing.

That things are not always what they seem—that is, diversity, race, religion are all relative terms. They are not black and white, they are complex and a lot of the times, imagined.

This comment suggests that the student has moved beyond thinking that knowledge is dualistic and certain to an understanding that knowledge is inherently uncertain and contextual. Another student said the following:

[Learning through hevruta] has shown me that knowledge can be constituted in vastly different ways and that to debate such diverse understandings can open up a world of educational exploration that is not accessible through traditional modes of teaching.

And a third said this:

The single most important thing I have learned in this course is how much I can benefit from one individual. We, as individuals, don't often take the time to really listen to another individual's viewpoints, and this class has given me the opportunity to take time each week to hear an entirely different take on important topics in American society.

These are powerful quotations, but how generalizable are the findings? Students' survey responses also suggested that they experienced a shift to being able to see multiple perspectives. We asked students to rate their levels of agreement with statements about the impact of English 313 on certain perceptions and behaviors. On the survey, the vast majority (84 percent) of students agreed that "I have a deeper appreciation for viewpoints that differ from my own after taking this course." One student in the focus group commented, "I can now think that while I have one perception, there are others that may perceive it differently. . . . This will affect me [in my career], the types of questions I might ask, the types of relationships [I form]." The following comment elaborates on how students tended to agree that their *hevruta* course helped them to identify and tolerate different perspectives:

I thought of the ways in which I interpreted the book, but was constantly aware that my partner could have read it in a completely different way. I think that, because I knew of the many different ways to interpret the text, I read with more openness to interpretations and readings that differed from mine.

This student articulates how merely *understanding* that multiple perspectives exist impacted the quality of his reading. Another student echoed this shift in how she approaches texts, explaining that as a result of the *hevruta* method, "I was able to re-examine passages after hearing different viewpoints."

According to Marcia Baxter Magolda's Epistemological Reflection Model, as adults advance to more sophisticated ways of thinking they become *independent knowers*, who start to see a variety of possible views about a particular problem and begin to develop their own perspectives. The following comment from a *hevruta* student seems to reflect this transition to independent knowing:

The single most important thing I learned in this course was to question texts instead of accepting them as concrete, resolute documents. I approached all the readings in terms of questioning instead of merely analyzing and it really challenged my mind to think in different ways.

This student's statement suggests that he is progressing from seeing knowledge as fixed and concrete to understanding knowledge as relative and contextual. His comment also implies that he is taking a more central role in his learning process and developing his own perspectives. We saw signs of this shift in students' survey responses, too, with 86 percent of respondents agreeing that "I had more responsibility for my own learning in this course than in similar courses."

Students' Reflections on How They View Peers, Authority, and the Role of Teacher

We analyzed many comments from students about the role of peers as co-constructors of knowledge, and their perceptions of the role of *hevruta* in showing them

the contributions that peers can make to their own learning processes. For example, one student wrote:

[Hevruta] reiterated the importance of hearing others' opinions (and sharing your own), and stressed the value that different ways of thinking and different cultural/social backgrounds bring to an educational experience.

This person clearly views her *hevruta* partner as able to provide active exchanges in the learning process, which suggests she has moved beyond the stage of absolute knowing in which peers are not seen as partners in the learning process. Similarly, when asked what is the single most important thing learned in this course, a student replied, "That everyone can form deep, meaningful thoughts and that we truly use each other to build our ideas." Again, this points to shifting assumptions—from viewing peers simply as people with whom to share knowledge learned from authorities to viewing them as coconstructors of knowledge. It also reflects the role that the students' individual experience as well as their larger group and communal experience—geographical, racial, ethnic, gender, religious—came to play in the ongoing triologue between themselves, their partners, and the text.

Both Baxter Magolda's and Perry's models point to moving away from reliance on authority as a sign of epistemological growth, and we saw this shift reflected in students' feedback. One student wrote, "[*Hevruta*] has shown me that relying on my peers for guidance is just as important as relying on the professor or the [TA]." This student is moving away from reliance on an instructor for knowledge, to looking to peers for help with understanding and developing ideas. In the survey, most (80 percent) students reported they felt that this course format made them rely more heavily on their peers than they did in other university courses. Here is one student's comment about learning from and with peers:

[Learning through hevruta] has completely transformed my learning. I have recognized that if an individual puts in the time to really get to know his or her partner and take their viewpoints to heart, the amount someone can learn from another person is endless. I have learned

so much from my partner, and I would have never learned this much without this method of learning.

Many students appeared to view the collaborative aspect of *hevruta* to be very influential on their learning. Collaborative learning experts argue that positive interdependence and individual accountability are key components of effective collaborative learning. *Hevruta* appeared to facilitate both interdependence and accountability by fostering sustained, trusting relationships in which students were expected to contribute their own viewpoints to discussions. Most students agreed that they "developed stronger relationships with peers in this course than in similar courses." In responses to an open-ended question about the most important thing learned in the course, peer relationships emerged as a theme. For example, a student answered, "Often more interesting ideas come when speaking with others than just thinking alone," and another student wrote, "It's given me some new focus on developing relationships in studying and relying upon others to help further my education." A second component of collaborative learning is individual accountability. This comment suggests that *hevruta* also seemed to foster this outcome:

I think the hevruta method works because it makes you responsible to another person. Left to my own devices, I would probably have skipped a lot of the readings and missed out on some material, but since I was responsible to my hevruta partner I had to keep up enough to be able to have a good discussion.

Similarly, one *hevruta* partner wrote, "I felt a sense of responsibility to my partner and classmates as well as the instructors." Students soon came to understand that their absence would have implications both for their *hevruta* partners and for the class as a community of learners. When students knew that they would not be able to attend class, they would often e-mail other members of their discussion section and ask if another *hevruta* pair would invite the stranded partner into their discussion.

Interestingly, one way in which we saw the shift away from a reliance on authority was in students' comments about grades. Marcia Baxter Magolda, Elisa Abes, and Vasti Torres explain that in earlier stages of develop-

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ment, college students often follow “formulas obtained from external sources” (p. 190). So rather than turn inward to evaluate themselves using internally defined beliefs, college students—especially at the beginning of their academic careers—often assign significant meaning to external evaluations of their work. Some students in English 313 reported that the *hevruta* method helped them to move away from viewing grades as the primary indication of their intelligence and affirmed their abilities to assess their own learning. A student wrote:

The hevruta method of learning has impacted my perceptions of learning because it affirmed my own personal viewpoint that essays and test scores do not determine one's intelligence. It is really based on your own willingness to learn and how you apply what you have learned in everyday situations.

A student in the focus group said that it was nice “just knowing that I can come to class and be able to discuss an issue without worrying about grades.” Of course, we cannot say with certainty whether *hevruta* caused the shifts in these assumptions and attitudes that we seem to see in their feedback, and students may have made epistemological gains in other courses as well. But students' comments suggest that the structure imposed by *hevruta* prompted them to reconsider their assumptions and attitudes about grades, knowledge, peers, and authority.

CONCLUSION

GIVEN THAT HEVRUTA ENCOURAGES STUDENTS to reason through ill-structured problems, be open to others' ideas, and cultivate their own viewpoints, it has the makings of an auspicious learning environment in which students can grow in their understanding of the nature of knowledge and knowing. In fact, we saw signs from student feedback that it is indeed serving this purpose. We want to also emphasize, though, that there are many methods and strategies for getting students to think more deeply and to challenge their own

beliefs and assumptions. And it is important for educators to remember that context does not have to necessarily limit the wide array of teaching strategies that exist. Professor Williams incorporated *hevruta* into a 134-student, lecture-based course at a large public university, challenging the traditional teaching model used in this type of setting. While *hevruta* introduced some challenges, it does show promise as an effective teaching tool that can help foster epistemological growth in college students. In other words, *hevruta* is one type of collaborative learning that may help cultivate critical thinking, life-long learning, tolerance of others, and individual accountability—just the types of skills reflected in the mission statements with which we opened this article.

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