Birthright Israel Fellows On-Line Learning

The iCenter and Gizra had the privilege of working together with Birthright Israel on the its Fellows program - an intensive professional development for experiential Jewish educators staffing Birthright Israel trips. Besides the opportunity of working with talented staff for one of the most impactful Jewish educational projects, an opening was created to rethink the way in which we develop informal educators.

Gathering fellows for a four-day intensive seminar -- modeled, in part, by the community training of the Canada Israel Experience -- gave us the ability to go deeper and broader in training than most Birthright Israel trip organizers could feasibly sustain. The challenge however was, how do we adequately prepare fellows for the seminar, provide a somewhat equal playing field among a cohort that has varying backgrounds and experiences, and follow up in a way that both continued their learning and prepared them for the staff experiences ahead?

The Birthright Israel Fellows On-Line Learning Modules were an experiment in leveling up professional development experience of the cohort.
Asynchronous over Synchronous Learning Opportunities

One of the early decisions in the project was on the basic modality of the learning. When many people think of online learning, they think of webinars and live lectures. Popularized by Massive Open Online Classrooms (MOOCs), synchronous learning opportunities - where learners learn and interact at the same time and their “classmates” - allow subject matter experts to be available to a large, geographically distributed student body.

For Birthright Israel Fellows however, we were less interested putting them in front of subject-matter experts (although there is no shortage), than we were in bringing them through a process that helped familiarize them with the body of knowledge on Birthright Israel and experiential education. For busy professionals and students, asynchronous learning - where each learner could move through “learning modules” at their own pace (with deadlines, of course) - seemed more fit to the task. As such, we developed three modules for fellows, an introduction to concepts in experiential education and Birthright Israel, content – through history, geography and personalities – that is common to the Birthright Israel experience, and best practices in in educational preparation.
Autodidactic Learning over Presentation of Information

In the module addressing content knowledge, we sought to provide opportunities for fellows to explore information that was relevant and interesting to them. From a set of people, sites, and event, fellows were encouraged to do research on their own and create narrative threads that tied pieces of content together. As such, Fellows aren’t become content knowledge experts in
the was that a tour educator is, but rather are deepening their knowledge in a way that can provide context and substance to the Birthright Israel Experience.

Autodidactic learning (where students create their own learning interactions) allows us both opportunities to go into depth on a particular subject and to model best practices in program preparation. By insisting the good experiential educators prepare themselves not only with tools and skills for managing a group experience, but also with more knowledge on the subjects that their participants will encounter, we are raising the level of educational practice on the Birthright Israel trip, and given American madrichim the opportunity to be share partners in the educational program.
Assessing Knowledge over Testing Knowledge

Allowing fellows to explore subject matter that is interesting and relevant does not preclude an effort to create a core competency. In each subject area, we provide an opportunity for fellows to assess their knowledge in an area, understand what they know, and look for ways to learn new content.

One of the more creative exercises is a drag and drop map activity which asks fellows to locate common Birthright Israel sites on a map, and pair those places with stories that they had developed in their previous work. In this way, fellows are literally encouraged to “map their Israel stories” so that they can create an inventory of the places they can provide context to the experience.
Blended Experience over Stand-Alone Modules

The online experience is designed to complement the in-person training. Several of the activities at the training draw from material produced by the online work. After the seminar, modules build on the in-person learning in ways that provide practical applications of the skills they learned.

Birthright Israel Fellows is allowing us new opportunities to explore methods of deepening the knowledge and sharpening the skills of experiential educators. As we confront a changing world of how people learn and interact with each other, some of the tools developed for Birthright Israel Fellows will have broad implications for how we continue to create professional development opportunities for experiential education.