The Place of Eisner’s Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism in Jewish Education

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Abstract

Jewish day schools take on a wide range of goals, often beyond the scope of traditional programs. Schools must have academically strong secular and Judaic studies programs, but they must also instill a sense of spirit and commitment to Jewish beliefs, values, and people. This article provides a concise and clear description of Elliot Eisner’s Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism qualitative research model and how its use can provide valuable information for Jewish day school researchers and educators as they try to understand these complex learning environments. Through the use of examples, the article outlines Eisner’s five dimensions of educational settings: intentional, curricular, pedagogical, structural, and evaluative. By exploring these dimensions of the educational landscape, researchers can see nuances and variables often missed by other quantitative and qualitative measures. A discussion of how to write an educational criticism follows, with examples that help inform and guide researchers.

Key words: Elliot Eisner, educational criticism, Jewish day schools, qualitative research
Introduction: Explaining the Rationale Behind the Model

Jewish day-school educators are charged with teaching general academic content, in addition to which they must also ensure student success in a wide range of Judaic courses and are entrusted with the development of their spiritual life. This breadth of responsibilities brings with it complex challenges, including everything from ensuring quality instruction across a broad spectrum of content, to managing course schedules that give teachers sufficient class time to ensure students learn the material, to developing curriculum that scaffolds learning. Quantitative data alone are insufficient to adequately inform administrators and teachers whether they are achieving their goals. Test results may indicate a level of academic success, but what about Judaic courses that have no nationally normed benchmarks? Surveys on Jewish identity development, spirituality, and continuation may yield numbers on which students feel connected to their Judaism, but fall short of painting a picture of how and why. Researchers studying Jewish day schools, their effectiveness, and impact may glean a great deal from quantitative measures, but the full picture, the nuances and subtleties of how and why schools measure success, or not, can elude them. A research methodology designed to attend to the intricate nature of the educational experiences would better facilitate understanding these nuances, and Elliot Eisner’s model of Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism (educational criticism) provides this methodology.

In today’s research climate, quantitative methods still reign, as evidenced by the number of quantitative versus qualitative sessions at the American Educational Research Association Conference. Eisner battled against this trend for most of his career, arguing that researchers could best understand the artistry of teaching through a method that itself was artistic in nature:

Perhaps the primary contribution of my earlier work is its effort to free inquiry from the restrictions of a scientific model, not in order to reject science but to make it possible for scholars to work with other assumptions about the nature of human understanding and the conditions that enlarge it (quoted in Uhrmacher & Matthews, 2005, p. 6).

Eisner pushed scholars to open their minds to the possibility of other ways of seeing, interpreting, and understanding information. In essence, Eisner held that researchers find what they seek.¹ If the nature

¹ For the purposes of this article, “researchers” refers to both researchers at universities
of inquiry is limited to numbers and short responses, the data will yield insights that do not capture the full scope of the environment under study. Kieran Egan from Simon Fraser University explained that Eisner “proposes to us that we see education as an art, not as an insecure social science, or rather, as he would prefer not to be exclusive in that way, he invites us to see education as an art that draws on all areas of human inquiry for its resources” (quoted in Uhrmacher & Matthews, 2005, p. 52). Eisner hoped that researchers could and would push for more in-depth inquiry and artistic forms of expression that honored the complexity of human experience, the artistry of masterful teachers, and the classroom experiences they fashion. He also believed that this form of inquiry helped remove the cloak of objectivity because in subjectivity lies the expertise to make meaning of experiences.

As Uhrmacher and Matthews (2005) captured in their book Intricate palate: Working the ideas of Elliot Eisner, Eisner’s desire for more complex and artistic forms of research in part stems from his own Jewish roots growing up in Chicago:

Elliot Goulb, Eisner’s cousin (and concertmaster of The Music of the Baroque orchestra in Chicago), believes that Eisner’s vigorous, almost adversarial approach to academic inquiry and debate ultimately grew from their families’ dynamics. As he put it, “From the beginning of time our families have debated things, rooted in the culture of Talmudic scholarship. Talmudic Scholars spend their whole lives debating arcane points. We have a cultural history of saying, ‘What does this mean? This may not be what it seems to obviously state.’” (Uhrmacher & Matthews, 2005, p. 9)

Eisner understood that simple answers often hide intricate underpinnings of behavior, instruction, and learning. Thus, to get at the details, one has to employ a richer, more complex methodology.

An additional difference between Eisner and the dominant school of quantitative thought is his belief in the power of openly expressing and drawing upon one’s experience when examining and interpreting a learning environment. Just as a critic of art, music, food, or fine wine can discuss and interpret the subtleties of the subject of their inquiry, so too can skilled educators act as connoisseurs and critics. Eisner explained that the word connoisseurship “comes from the Latin cognoscere, to know… anyone who is highly perceptive in some domain – a piano tuner, for example – is a connoisseur in that domain” (Eisner,
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1998, pp. 6-7). The connoisseur sees the subtle details and understands why they matter and have the effect they do. The critic takes the private observations made in their role as a connoisseur and makes them public.

Criticism is an art of saying useful things about complex and subtle objects and events so that others less sophisticated, or sophisticated in different ways, can see and understand what they did not see and understand before (Eisner, 1998, p. 3).

This type of thinking, as stated earlier, has special significance for understanding what happens in Jewish day schools. More so than in secular schools, the varied expectations, goals, and hopes for students in Jewish day schools requires artistry of exploration, and helping others to see what they might not have seen before.

Description of Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism

Eisner’s qualitative research methodology, Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism, serves as a guide on how to look deeply at schools and classrooms in a way that attends to a wide range of variables, while at the same time engaging researchers’ knowledge and artistry to interpret and express what was learned. The aim is to help researchers avoid the pitfall of dodging what may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar, in particular the spoken and unspoken curricula of a school. As Eisner described:

…each school offers children three curricula: the explicit curriculum that is public and advertised, the implicit curriculum that teaches because of the kind of culture that a school is, and the null curriculum those voids in educational programs that withhold from students ideas and skills they might otherwise use (2002, p. 380).

The method begins with an examination of the intentional, structural, curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative dimensions of the classroom and school as a whole. By attending to these five educational dimensions, Eisner hoped to broaden the lens through which researchers looked at the environment under study in order to see and interpret the three types of curricula in action and how they impact students. This broadened lens can serve as a valuable tool for Jewish day school researchers in their work, one that lets them learn from the environment versus imposing a controlled will or perspective upon it. I offer a brief description of each dimension here, but encourage interested colleagues to read about them in Eisner’s own words, as his eloquence and clarity...
are unmatched and inspiring.

Eisner’s first dimension is the *intentional dimension* and refers to explicit and non-explicit but actuated aims or goals. Explicit goals are those clearly articulated by educators, whether written as part of the curriculum, described in the school mission or discussed at staff meetings. Non-explicit goals are any other goals that are not written or formalized. For example, in Jewish day schools, educators may intend to develop learners who can work independently through a gemara, instill a love of Israel, expose students to modern-day halakhic issues about genetic testing, and serve as role models for righteous behavior and thinking. Identifying their intentions gives educators a chance to pause and reflect on their practice. Researchers, as connoisseurs, have the opportunity to probe further, perhaps drawing to the surface unarticulated intentions, whether when conducting an interview, examining artifacts, or observing the way in which teachers talk about the school. This information provides a touch point for subsequent inquiry as researchers determine if educators in fact realize them in the course of instruction, or if administrators see their importance in the day-to-day operations of the school. Secular educators have countless intentions they try to realize when working with students; adding a dual curriculum and responsibility for students’ spiritual growth makes the task more complex, with unique potentials as well as challenges.

After understanding intentions, researchers observe how educators put their ideas into action, which is where the *curricular and pedagogical* dimensions come into play. The *curricular dimension* consists of what is being taught, why, how, and how well. Sometimes teachers work from written curriculum guides that have specific goals, objectives, and/or big picture ideas that guide instruction. Sometimes the curriculum emerges more informally, following traditional forms of content passed down over the years yet never written down. In educational criticism, researchers have the task of searching out how the curriculum influences student experiences, and how it helps or hinders teachers’ realization of intentions, in whatever form it emerges.

The *pedagogical dimension* explores how a curriculum is operationalized, how a teacher mediates the curriculum bringing in his/her personality, passions, strengths, weaknesses, and intentions (Eisner, 1998). Whether working from a guide or passed-down traditions of curricula, the teacher and style of teaching matter. For example, a school chooses to teach Hebrew language and has a curriculum guide which identifies that students must learn certain vocabulary and grammar. How teachers deliver this curriculum can vary dramatically and affect
the ultimate outcomes and realization of intentions. Simply measuring performance does not tell the full story. Using the educational criticism model, researchers can understand the subtle impact of Teacher A, who delivers the curriculum using Hebrew immersion pedagogy, speaking to the students exclusively in Hebrew, but in a patient and creative way. Teacher B may be equally effective but teach in a completely different style, speaking frequently in English while using many visual cues around the room and supporting the students in different ways. Why are both teachers effective? What mechanisms come into play and how can the researcher communicate the information in a way that helps readers determine modalities that may work in their classrooms?

Eisner’s structural dimension deals with “how the organizational envelopes we have designed affect how education occurs” (Eisner, 1998, p. 75). It includes the use of time, space, external requirements, barriers, and support. Just calling upon researchers to examine the structural dimension opens up avenues of inquiry that can dramatically help educators understand challenges and successes in a Jewish educational setting. Time and space loom large in dual-curriculum schools. How long should the school day be, especially at the high school level? How much time do schools dedicate to general versus Judaic studies? Do teachers for Judaic and general studies subjects share classrooms? What external demands are placed upon the school and students, including location and transportation? The amount of time given to Judaic coursework and learning in religious schools may look drastically different from that in a community school.2 All of these variables impact student learning and school success, but often researchers focus on test scores and academic outcomes without fully investigating how the structural aspects have an impact. Eisner called upon researchers to honor the influence of variables within this dimension, and as a result, opens up whole avenues of investigation that strengthen our understanding of complex situations.

The evaluative dimension “concerns the making of value judgments about some object, situation, or process” (Eisner, 1998, p. 80). Evaluation pervades the classroom as teachers constantly assess student comments, work, interactions, and students do the same in relation to their teacher. Evaluation of student work and the quality of interpersonal relations and of responsibility assumed shape the teachers’ and students’ perceptions

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2 Jewish community schools serve a wider range of students from different levels of religious observance, while more religious schools serve a narrower population. Community schools in smaller Jewish communities tend to be larger than religious schools in the same community.
and form the overall feel and outcomes of the time teachers and students spend together. The very question of what educators choose to assess can help shine light on the nature and impact of a school. Does a rabbi present students with a new piece of *gemara*, ask them to read, and assess the student’s ability to understand the material? Do teachers in a particular school employ varied forms of assessment, using a range of projects, traditional tests, and oral examinations to determine student learning? Does a school have to prepare students for a state-mandated test, and, if so, how does that impact their work with children as compared to schools that do not have to meet this requirement? What does not having standardized tests mean in the realm of Judaic instruction and evaluation? Researchers can learn a great deal about the power differential in schools by looking at how teachers assess student learning.

**Writing the Educational Criticism**

After observations and data are collected, researchers then write the educational criticism; at this point they integrate the roles of connoisseur and critic:

*When we think about people we regard as expert in some field – a radiologist examining an x-ray, a gemologist inspecting a diamond, a conductor directing an orchestra, a clinical psychologist listening to a client – it is clear that they hear and see more than we do. They also know more about the history and background of the objects and people they attend to, but before they can deal with these matters they must be able to notice their qualities. The inability to experience these qualities leaves no ground for further reflection. We can only appraise and interpret what we have been able to experience. At the most sophisticated level we call these people ‘connoisseurs’*… (Eisner, 1998, p. 17).

Researchers as connoisseurs use their abilities to notice and interpret qualities of the classroom, which they then make knowable to others through their role as critics. Eisner described four dimensions through which critics transmit their observations. The first dimension, *description*, helps reveal the essential and subtle qualities of the experience through the use of narrative. The goal is to express “what it would feel like if we were there...and its aim is to help the reader know” (Eisner, 1998, p. 89). The critic cannot, and therefore does not, attend to everything in an educational setting, but rather renders those factors that help the reader participate vicariously in the experience and understand and critique the interpretations made based upon these observations.
Can the reader smell the musty, well-loved, and well-used Jewish texts in the *Beit Midrash*; or see the children waving Israeli flags while dressed in blue and white to celebrate Israel; or hear the students talking about what they learned in class when no adults are around? The artistry of the descriptive portion should invite readers in and leave them with a clear sense of the setting and experience.

The next three dimensions that comprise the educational criticism process are *interpretation*, *evaluation*, and *thematics*. Through interpretation, the critic explores the meanings and consequences of the educational setting observed. The goal is to illuminate “the potential consequences of practices observed and [provide] reasons that account for what’s been seen” (Eisner, 1998, p. 95). Theory, experience, and various viewpoints influence how the critic interprets the educational events described; accordingly, there is no one “right” interpretation. Rather, the interpretation facilitates interplay between the critic and the reader in order to develop a concept of reality that “resides neither within an objective external world nor within the subjective mind of the knower, but within dynamic transactions between the two” (Barone, 1992, p. 31). Researchers as critics can determine why the choice of cooking *latkes* for Chanukah strengthens how children in a particular school connect to their Judaism, or how an extra eight minutes for recess helps students focus during afternoon classes and *davening*.

The *evaluative* dimension appraises the educational significance of the description and interpretation. The aim of education “is not merely to change students, but to enhance their lives” (Eisner, 1998, p. 98), and evaluation helps discern if the educational experience observed has met this aim. As mentioned earlier, observation itself is evaluative in that researchers make choices as to what they pay attention to. The values that guide observation also inform the evaluative dimension and permeate what the critic writes, and much of Jewish education has the potential to go beyond mastery of content and aims directly for enhancing children’s lives, as advocated for by Eisner. This greater aspiration can often get lost in the day-to-day operations of teaching the basics. Attending to the evaluative dimension brings researchers back to the roots of what matters most, and is a critical and natural fit when conducting research on the effectiveness of Jewish education.

*Thematics* provide the reader with the larger lessons a criticism has to offer (Eisner, 2002). It is the sense that “every particular is also a sample of a larger class” (Eisner, 1998, p. 103). Through this dimension, researchers provide the reader with major themes that might guide
future observations of Jewish day school environments. These themes provide readers with novel theories or guides to help them understand and appraise educational settings and/or pedagogy. By studying the practices of teachers, researchers can develop a powerful understanding of what it means for the students in these settings. The vivid description, interpretation, and analysis of these environments, and student perceptions thereof, will guide teachers desiring to create affirming situations for their own students. The full educational criticism provides insights and inspiration to guide educators, versus a rigid road map that one must follow.

As with other qualitative methods, the researcher has to identify themes and present the findings, but unlike other methods, Eisner encourages an artistic representation of the information. Each word Eisner wrote mattered, and he often talked about the care with which he expressed his ideas in the same way he put care into his paintings: “… for feeling to be conveyed, the ‘language’ of the arts must be used, because it is through the form a symbol displays that feeling is given virtual life. The point, therefore, of exploiting language fully is to do justice to what has been seen; it is to help readers come to know” (1998, p. 4). The personal background and private understanding of the researcher becomes public in the final interpretation and presentation of the data, and that presentation should engage the readers to help them understand and know the experience. In Eisner’s own words, “Connoisseurship is a private act” (2002, p. 216) that does not require public sharing or disclosure of the connoisseur’s observations. Conversely, criticism makes public the observations of the connoisseur using language to create “a rendering of a situation, event, or object” (2002, p. 217). The ultimate goal is to provide “the opportunity to understand empathically and to communicate the quality of human experience” (Eisner, 1976, p. 138). Herein lies the greatest value of educational criticism for Jewish educators. Researchers can capture and communicate a picture that allows for the subtleties to emerge and inform dialogue and program development.

The following example serves as a demonstration of how an educational criticism might evolve and how it can yield meaningful insights and data for Jewish day schools. Imagine that administrators at a school worry that their students merely memorize content from their Halakha of kashrut course and do not know how to transfer learning from the classroom to real-life experiences, if they choose to do so. For example, they may learn why a microwave at a hotel needs to be kasherden before use but do not know how to do so. Using educational
criticism to better understand the situation, the researcher would first interview and meet with teachers and administrators to determine their intentions. What are their goals? Do teachers talk primarily about learning objectives and tests? Or do they mention the goal of larger life impacts? Do teachers believe administrators focus only on test results, or that administrators assess teachers on how they tie kashrut to the bigger picture of students’ lives during classroom evaluations? Additionally, the researcher looks at artifacts, such as the syllabus and student work, to see how teachers communicate their intentions to students. Here, the researcher is mindful about the three curricula – explicit, implicit, and null – and listens carefully for what is said and not said. As a reminder, the explicit curriculum consists of publicly stated goals, such as “teaching children to read and write, to figure, and to learn something about the history of the country” (Eisner, 2002, p. 87). In raising the idea of the implicit curriculum, Eisner asked, “But is this all that schools offer? Does this advertised menu exhaust what schools teach?” (p. 88). He argued that schools teach so much more, and offered the example of educators teaching children compliant behavior in which they learn to “provide the teacher with what the teacher wants or expects” (p. 89). Eisner further advised researchers to examine the null curriculum that consists of “what schools do not teach” (p. 97):

*It is my thesis that what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem (Eisner, 2002, p. 97).*

From an understanding of intentions, the researcher moves through the other dimensions in a fluid manner, attending to each while gathering data in a purposeful way so as to ensure his or her inquiry stays broad and inclusive. To understand the structural dimension of the school, the researcher may examine school schedules, how often Halakha is taught, how much time is given to each class, and whether there are any activities outside of the school day that allow the students to apply what they learn. How does this time relate to other Judaic and general studies courses? What type of classroom is available? What types of materials? Does the school have a kitchen in which students can practice what they learn? The use of a kitchen would tie to curricula and pedagogy. If the curriculum focuses on students learning the Jewish texts behind different items of Halakha, students might never experience the
pedagogical model of practicing skills in the kitchen. If the curriculum is more practical, or even problem based, the researcher may see students engage in research on various applied Halakhic issues, such as how to make a motel microwave kosher when traveling, with the teacher acting as a facilitator. Is there an inspiring teacher who motivates the students, while another makes them dislike the subject? Do teachers use varied methods to reach all learners? How and why is the teacher effective? The researcher would also look at how teachers evaluate student learning. Do the students take a paper and pencil test? Do they discuss the texts with a chevruta while the teacher observes? Do they have to do a hands-on demonstration? How does the teacher ask questions along the way to determine mastery and what students still need to learn?

Data come from detailed notes taken during observation of the classroom, interviews with teachers and students, an analysis of artifacts such as student work, school schedules, flyers, and the overall school environment. The strength of the method at this juncture is that the researcher works to capture the quality of the experience. What does the room look like? What is the tone of the teacher when speaking to the students, or the students to each other? The goal is to invite the readers into the experience in order to help them make connections between the data and the analysis. To facilitate the artistic and public expression of the learning environment, Eisner encouraged the use of varied forms of media:

*Photographs, video, and film have enormous potential to help us see a scene and can provide the raw materials for interpretation and analysis…. The neglect of such potentially powerful resources is due to habit, custom, old norms, and limited views of the nature of knowledge (Eisner, 1998, p.188).*

The goal is to help the researcher “see” and have rich experiences to describe, interpret, and analyze in order to best portray the complex, lived experience of students in the classroom and school.

When writing the descriptive portion of the educational criticism, researchers should give readers a sense of being in the Halakha classroom and “seeing” how the students are learning. Do they feel the intensity of discussion, or perhaps the boredom of students sitting the entire hour listening to their teacher? Do they see the kitchen and hear the clank of pots and pans as students laugh while they work? When reading the interpretation and evaluation, do readers understand the connections the researcher is making because the written narrative clearly supports
the findings? Is it clear why students in School A talk about *kashrut* at home with their parents because they are excited about what they learned in class, while students in School B say they do not really know what to share?

This attention to crafting the picture of students’ experiences by examination of the five dimensions opens up greater possibilities for understanding Jewish identity development, pro-Israel sentiments, and spirituality, in addition to and beyond skills and content mastery. What is it about the teacher personalities, methods, facilities, use of time, methods of assessment, etc. that contributes to students internalizing the less tangible and measurable lessons for which so many Jewish day schools strive? Is it the feel of a printed versus digital *gemara*, or the smell of *challah* baking in the elementary school ovens before Shabbat?

The written educational criticism itself informs and inspires. As Phillip Jackson from the University of Chicago noted, the value of educational criticism comes from looking carefully at setting to illuminate and make us aware:

> …the possibility that persons who inhabit particular worlds may be only partially aware of the worlds they daily inhabit. Indeed, they may even be totally blind to features of those worlds. Think of how one comes to overlook or totally ignore pictures or photographs that have hung too long in the same place. They may also lose sight of their world’s teleological features, especially its higher goals and purposes, in favor of concentrating exclusively on the immediate task at hand (quoted in Uhrmacher & Matthews, 2005, p. 149).

Not only does the school participating in the research benefit, but fellow researchers, administrators, and teachers can experience the schools and or classes under study and identify ways in which the experiences at these schools mirror or are different from their own, helping them evaluate and modify their own programs. Their wisdom and expertise is an essential part of the process as they become critics of the information and assess its strength and value. In the end, a Jewish day school education aims for the very highest goals of education, as expressed by Eisner himself:

> *Life is not like a scientific experiment or the operation of an assembly line. Schools that intend to prepare students for life mislead when they convey to them the idea that all problems have solutions and that all questions have answers. What is even worse, the message given to students is that not only are answers to all questions and solutions to all.*
problems available, but also that there is a correct one for each. When this occurs the aim of schools for students becomes converted from the expansion of consciousness and the exploration of the possibilities of the imagination to successful adaptation to a technocratic routine (1998, p. 78).

Jewish day-school programs aim to prepare students for life, by necessity a complex endeavor. Having a research methodology that helps examine, reflect, and value the artistry and intricacy of Jewish day school programs can help us get closer to achieving our goals and clearly seeing the ways in which we do so.

References