

The Impact of Asynchronous Learning for the Orthodox Jewish Student

Robert Lubin

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7325-3469>

Touro University Worldwide, USA

ABSTRACT

Although the asynchronous modality of online learning has gained popularity, little is known about its success among the Orthodox Jewish population. This qualitative research action research involved 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with students at a secular and non-sectarian university. Participants were all Orthodox Jewish males and all current students in an Orthodox Jewish learning environment (yeshiva) and simultaneously at an asynchronous secular learning environment. The following four themes were identified from the 10 participants: (1) flexibility of academic schedule, (2) more time for separate Jewish studies in a yeshiva setting, (3) time for outside friends, and (4) independence. Benefits of asynchronous learning supports outside learning activities and development of analytical skills. Challenges incorporating more personal interactions among students and instructors require further consideration.

KEYWORDS

Asynchronous Learning, Orthodox Jewish, Online Learning, Active Learning, Motivation, Cognitive Dissonance

INTRODUCTION

The traditional classroom setting has dominated education for centuries. However, the easy accessibility of technology has ushered in a new era of online education. This article explores the growing importance of online learning among Orthodox Jewish men.

One of the most significant advantages of online learning is its accessibility. Distance education can increase opportunities for diverse experiences, expose learners to new cultures, and foster the exchange of ideas and knowledge without the limitation of physical boundaries (Lagier, 2003). This is particularly beneficial for working professionals seeking to upskill or reskill, geographically isolated students in rural areas, and those with disabilities who may face challenges in traditional classrooms (Kim et al., 2005). Online learning platforms offer flexibility in scheduling, enabling students to learn at their own pace and convenience (Tareen & Haand, 2020). Online learning environments can be tailored to individual needs and learning styles. Asynchronous learning allows students to revisit lectures or course materials as needed, fostering a deeper understanding of concepts (Lin & Gao, 2020). Online learning is not simply a passive experience of consuming information. Interactive platforms foster active learning through discussion forums, collaborative projects, and real-time communication tools (Fadde & Vu, 2014). This fosters a sense of community and allows students to learn from each other's perspectives, enriching the learning experience (DeNoyelles et al., 2014; Tucker et al., 2014).

Literature highlights the importance of a supportive learning environment to develop a safe place for learners to excel (Margot et al., 2024; Ramani and Krackov, 2012). Jenkins and Kamal (2024)

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wrote about the benefits of a supportive learning environment for undergraduate nursing students. The study cited the educator as a learning guide and most important factor in student achievements. To assess the students' perception about their learning environment, the presence of a skilled and knowledgeable educator was highlighted as a factor in the transfer of learning. Deep learning was accomplished through effective teaching and role modeling behavior. The relationship built between the mentor and student is instrumental in the learning process. They documented that formal and informal support facilitated the learning process and promoted learning. The learning environment affects the students' perception of their educational experience and there is evidence that student perceptions of their learning environment differ between traditional and face to-face instruction and an e-learning environment (Mousavi et al., 2020).

Learning can be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience (Mezirow, 2003). We learn differently when we are learning to perform rather than learning for knowledge. Learning occurs in different ways and its development and externalization are accomplished through alternation of teacher and learner roles, observations, modeling, and cooperative learning (Khan et al., 2024). An effective environment enhances student learning and provides the opportunity for student-teacher interactions (Chen et al., 2012; Mousavi et al., 2020). Literature on the learning environment also points to the importance of critical reflection or the critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built; this transforms learning into a new experience (Mezirow, 2003). Reflection has been defined as intellectual and affective activities in which individuals explore their experiences in order to gain new understandings and appreciation (Mezirow, 2003). Some learners report that the asynchronous environment permitted students to write carefully about their thoughts, noting that discussion questions were not just for documenting the answers but required reflection (Charles, 2022). Educational institutions have a responsibility to provide learning environments that foster intellectual advancement while producing reflective practices.

From an institutional standpoint, online learning offers cost-effectiveness by reducing infrastructure needs and offers the potential for wider outreach to a larger student base (Almomin & Sobaih, 2023). This can be particularly beneficial for universities and colleges seeking to expand their reach and cater to a unique audience.

The Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU) Yeshiva Program is designed specifically for Orthodox Jewish men who are looking to earn a bachelor's degree, off campus, while continuing their religious studies in a separate traditional Orthodox environment (the yeshiva). A yeshiva is an educational setting that focuses on the study of Jewish texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, an ancient language. Orthodox Judaism is, in general, the most conservative of the Jewish religious movements, asserting that Jews have a divine obligation to follow the strict laws of the religion as understood by Jewish rabbinic tradition. The Orthodox Jew is instructed to apply religious practices and rituals to all areas of their lives, including interpersonal interactions, financial dealings, and other daily routines (Golker & Senior, 2021).

The recruitment of Orthodox Jewish men into frameworks of higher education and full-time employment has been noted as a challenge since the unique Jewish community encourages full-time religious study for males (Black et al., 2021). FDU, a secular and nonsectarian postsecondary institution, has developed the Yeshiva Program, which focuses its academic program for the Orthodox Jewish student on the promotion of multicultural understanding (Parra, 2018). The School of Professional Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University hosts and manages the program (Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2024).

The Jewish religious curriculum consists of traditional Jewish texts. The main topic of study is the Talmud—a text that deals primarily with the laws and behavioral code of Judaism. The Orthodox Jewish faith places significant religious value on studying and mastering religious Jewish texts since followers of the Orthodox Jewish faith view religious precedent and religious works written by rabbis of previous generations as very important (Moskowitz, 2021). According to the Orthodox Jewish

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