**Distance Teaching and Learning in Hartman Institute Programs: Executive Summary**

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The integration of distance teaching and learning into professional development programs for educators has been a matter of research for some years now, due to the technological progress that enables a large number of platforms and tools for distance learning. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extensive use of the Zoom platform at Hartman Institute programs, over the past several weeks we have carried out an evaluation process. The purpose of this evaluation was to examine the possibility of integrating distance learning into the programs offered by the Center for Israeli-Jewish Identity as a permanent component. The evaluation process included two focus groups (conducted via Zoom) consisting of program managers, Hartman Institute discussion leaders, and participants of a number of different Institute programs, as well as a questionnaire filled out by 217 participants in various programs run by the Institute, and a review of the relevant professional literature.

The results of the evaluation point to an extremely high degree of satisfaction with the integration of distance learning in the Hartman programs during the COVID-19 pandemic period, far exceeding our expectations. Most of the respondents (70%) very strongly agreed that the integration of distance learning techniques into the program during the Corona period was, in their estimation, excellent, and, accordingly, most of them consider themselves ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their programs during this time (67%). The participants in the *Hitkansut* program expressed a greater degree of satisfaction (to a statistically significant degree) than participants in the *Min Ha Be’erot* program, while the participants in the *Be’eri* program and the Bible Initiative program fell between these two ends of the spectrum.

Moreover, we found a wide consensus expressing that distance learning, in its various forms, should become an integral part of the programs at the Center for Jewish-Israeli Identity. The data from the questionnaires shows that most of the respondents (75%) disagree that distance learning should only be used when there is an external constraint (such as COVID-19); most think that integration of distance learning into the program could be helpful, provided it is done in proper proportions alongside the regular frontal program (67%).

The respondents recommend a proportion of 64% frontal meetings and 36% distance learning. Yet, as in the matter of overall satisfaction, here too there were statistically significant differences between the participants of different programs, which presumably reflect the differences in the nature of these programs: participants in the *Hitkansut* program (single-occurrence meetings, with an emphasis on ritual and experience, as opposed to process) recommend a proportion of 63% distance learning with only 37% frontal meetings. Participants in the *Min Ha Be’erot* and Bible Initiative programs (ongoing programs that include discourse on identity and a meaningful group process) recommend that distance learning only encompass about a quarter of the program, and that most of the meetings take place frontally. The *Be’eri* program participants recommend that 60% of the meetings should be frontal meetings, and 40% distance learning.

The participants’ support for the integration of distance learning in the Institute’s programs was expressed in their response to a number of questions posed in the questionnaire: most of the respondents (77%) consider distance learning to be appropriate also for lecture series, and not only for single-occurrence meetings. In addition, an overwhelming majority (95%) disagree that distance learning is particularly suited to younger people (ages 20 to 30). Moreover, most respondents (80%) do not agree that distance learning can make it difficult for them to concentrate on the program’s content due to distractions in their learning environment, and most of them (69%) do not agree that integrating distance learning lessens their sense of commitment and ability to devote themselves to the program.

According to the findings, the advantages of distance learning are many, both for the students and for the staff. These advantages may be classified in four categories:

1. *Enrichment and professional enhancement of the program*: integrating distance learning leads to more creative teaching, making use of diverse technological aids that enrich and diversify teaching and learning; it improves the professional practices of the teachers and discussion leaders, and helps strengthen teaching, making it more clear and organized; it gives the staff greater control over the meetings; it allow for the participation of speakers outside of Israel; and it constitutes an opportunity to create knowledge databases for both synchronous and asynchronous use.
2. *Meeting needs*: integrating distance learning allows for greater flexibility and adaptation to the needs of students and staff members; it enables busy people to access content more easily, and allows the bridging of geographic distance, saving time particularly for students and staff living in Israel’s periphery. Most respondents very strongly agree that integrating distance learning saves a lot of time spent commuting (67%), and more than half of them think it helps them combine the program with other obligations and a busy schedule (58%).
3. *Expanding the community*: integrating distance learning allows people from different groups within the same program, or in different programs, to connect; it increases the sense of belonging to a wider community (“something bigger”);it makes the programs and its contents accessible to a wider audience, expanding circles, and helps maintain contact with the program alumni. More than half of the respondents think that integrating distance learning is a recommended way to maintain contact between alumni and the Hartman Institute (54%), and about half think that it is suitable for marketing conferences and multiparticipant events (48%).
4. *Focus, efficiency, and economization*: distance learning facilitates staff meetings between staff-members located across the country; it focuses the learning environment and makes it more efficient; it constitutes an effective channel through which to market the programs, and saves on the costs of travel, accommodation, etc.

A review of the literature validates the findings of our evaluation, attributing many advantages to the blended learning model, both in meeting the personal needs of students – flexible means of instruction and meeting times, and easy access to the material, which is available both synchronously and asynchronously – and in building a professional community. Research finds that the blended learning model helps economize on the use of time and resources, making the teaching process more efficient. Using the virtual sphere for communication between participants increased the teachers’ ability to take an active part in the learning process, and created a consistent and continuous connection between them and their professional community. Teachers were given the opportunity to practice in their classes what they had learned, and to supply their professional community with immediate feedback. Another finding is that the transition from frontal meetings to distance learning platforms increased community cohesion, providing many opportunities for cooperation between the teachers. While the frontal meetings helped to establish the community and ties between its members, the virtual sphere enabled focused work, providing an open platform for all participants, including those who are less inclined to make their voice heard in the physical sphere. The virtual sphere enabled teachers to upload their own content, to view the content of others, to view videos, receive tips and methodological ideas, organize discussion, and more. Broadening and diversifying the ways in which the participants could communicate with each other, and combining formal meetings with ongoing informal contact created a strong and productive environment for the teachers.

Alongside the agreement about the many advantages of integrating distance learning into the program, there is wide agreement among the staff of the Institute and the participants of the various programs, that the blending model may also have disadvantages. In order to overcome these, and successfully integrate distance learning in the Institute’s program, the following necessary conditions must be met:

1. *Compatibility with the type of program and the nature and age of the participants* (for example, scheduling meetings at times suitable for parents of young children).
2. *Timing the transition to distance learning:* the integration of distance learninginto the program structure should be undertaken only after the initial stages of the program (early meetings should be primarily frontal meetings, allowing participants to get to know each other and create personal connections; distance learning should be introduced after the group has formed).
3. *In-depth training for the Institute’s staff*, in order to fully take advantage of the wide range of technological tools, and to minimize technical issues.
4. *Adaptation of the educational methods* to platforms of distance learning (pedagogically planning the lessons in advance, instead of relying on one’s charisma and prior experience in frontal meetings). We found that half of the respondents think that, to a very large extent, the success of the integration of distance learning in the program depends on the correct and varied use of the technological tools (58%), and about half thought that it depended on the charisma of the lecturer or discussion leader.
5. *An informed use of technology* in elements principally dealing with the acquisition of knowledge and skills (using and emphasizing internet-based tools that allow students to actively participate in the classes).
6. *Retaining the important function of frontal meetings*, which is important for the process of group formation, for identity discourse and for peer instruction, based on intimacy and good interpersonal relations between the participants. This recommendation is congruent with the opposition of the overwhelming majority of the respondents (89%) to integrating distance learning into parts of the program devoted to the creation of personal contact between the participants and group cohesion.

It should be noted that these findings are in keeping with research findings, according to which the physical sphere emphasized the social aspect of the educators’ community, contributing to group cohesion and stability. At the same time, the online discussions were more focused on professional content and helped to advance participants’ learning and professional development. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that more than half of the respondents think that the integration of distance learning in the program could inspire them to better take advantage of technological tools in teaching their own students (55%).