



# Nurturing an Online Community of Practice

Howard Blas

*Howard Blas describes the challenges, successes and benefits of an online Community of Practice.*

Camp Ramah has been serving campers with special needs for over forty years. These include Ramah camps in Massachusetts, Canada, Wisconsin, New York, Georgia, California, Pennsylvania and Illinois, which offer programs for campers with a range of special needs. Some offer overnight camping experiences for three, four or eight weeks; some are day camps; others offer a Camp Yofi family camp model for one week. Over the past 40 years, more than 2,000 campers have been served by Ramah special needs programs. Ramah's newest camp, Camp Ramah in the Rockies, is exploring possibilities for setting up a program to serve a special needs camper population.

While serving 200 campers with developmental disabilities each summer in eight Ramah overnight and day camps in the United States and Canada may sound like a tremendous challenge, it has actually been *more difficult* connecting special needs program directors.

Ramah special needs program directors spend a great deal of time in the winter months assessing and interviewing campers, hiring staff, planning programs, and helping the camp community better understand and work with campers with special needs. These directors, who work (more than) full time during the summer for their respective camps, are part time camp employees of their respective camps in the "off season." These directors live in four time zones, work full time as school social workers, school psychologists and teachers, and have family responsibilities. With the exception of a one-time face-to-face meeting several years ago at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America as part of the "Ramah at 60" celebration, the directors have not met in person, and they have

no built-in forums or opportunities to regularly share information, experiences, programs and other resources. Most directors have been hired since the JTS meeting and do not even know each other by sight or even name.

I have been associated with Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah in New England (CRNE) for nearly 17 years. In the 1980s, I worked for six years with Tikvah's founders (who served as directors for 29 years prior to moving to Israel) as both a counselor and division head. Over the years, I have observed, participated in, modified, and implemented such aspects of the Tikvah Program as the daily schedule, the educational program, Tikvah plays, various buddy and CIT Programs, the vocational and post-vocational training programs, Israel Trips, social skills groups, staff training and supervision,

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liaison work with other divisions, the building of the Tikvah Guest House, the creation of the inclusion program, and the increased use of computers for campers with special needs.

Over the years, I have spoken with my director colleagues from the other Ramah special needs programs. Two have visited, and several have inquired about our vocational training and Israel programs. We have also discussed referrals of campers which may be more appropriate for another Ramah special needs program.

Effective communication has not been ongoing or systematic. What has become clear from these contacts is that we have a great deal in common, and we have a lot to offer each other. Why not find a systematic way to share resources, support each other, and create a forum for discussing sensitive issues? This goal was shared by the National Ramah Director, Rabbi Mitch Cohen, who had long wanted to improve communication and sharing between Ramah special needs program directors. Thus, the seeds of the Ramah



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Special Needs Program Directors Community of Practice were sown! For nearly a year, the CoP has virtually and systematically brought together directors of the various special needs camping programs to speak and share with each other, learn with and from one another, and grow together.

According to Etienne Wenger (2009, p. 4), pioneer and leader in the field of communities of practice and social learning systems, “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” There are three elements which together comprise a CoP – domain, community and practice. More specifically, *domain* is the area of interest which members care about, their commitment to the domain and shared competence. *Community* refers to joint activities, discussions, sharing of

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information, building relationships and helping each other. *Practice* refers to practitioners who, through time and sustained interaction, have developed a shared repertoire of resources – experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems.

CoPs can exist in person or online. Given the realities of time and physical distance, the Ramah Special Needs Program Directors CoP is online, though we hope to hold a limited number of face-to-face meetings annually.

How does one start a CoP? What are critical factors in assuring the success of a CoP? What are some of the challenges?

## **Institutional support**

The Ramah Special Needs Program Directors CoP has benefited from both the support of the National Ramah Director, Rabbi Mitch Cohen, and the vision of Shalom Berger and Esther Feldman, directors of the Jim Joseph Foundation Fellows – Leading Educators Online training program (of the Lookstein Center at Bar-Ilan University), designed to train fellows to develop communities of practice in their various fields. Prior to the start of the fellowship program, Berger and Feldman met with Rabbi Cohen to discuss the fellowship program and to assure support. Cohen had long wanted to improve sharing throughout Ramah camps and between different educational arms of the Conservative movement. Such sharing would benefit the various Ramah special needs programs.

Toward that end, he had requested that a program associate start (in February, 2009) a Google group for special needs program directors. This initiative failed, perhaps due to a lack of readiness on the part of the directors to adapt a new technology, and to the associate not being a professional colleague with the directors.

When I was selected to be a Jim Joseph Fellow and met with Rabbi Cohen, he offered support and the technical and logistical

assistance of his office staff. A new program associate helped gather e-mail addresses and phone numbers of all Ramah special needs staff members (who had worked during the Summer of 2009). Rabbi Cohen sent an e-mail letter to the directors introducing me and the CoP and requesting their participation in the program.

## **First steps – assess group needs**

Once the directors received the aforementioned e-mail, and a follow up letter (co-signed by Rabbi Cohen and me) explaining in greater detail the idea of a CoP, I followed up with a thirty minute call to each director. I introduced myself and the idea of a CoP where directors can share, offer and receive support, learn, and have an ongoing forum with professional colleagues. Each director was asked to offer suggestions for the direction of the CoP. A follow

up letter requested that each director sign up for a Google account to facilitate access to Google groups. A date was set for an April, 2010 conference call.

## **Directors’ buy-in, support and appreciation of the benefits**

Given concerns of many directors about the use of technology, the CoP started fairly “low tech,” with each director dialing in to a ninety minute conference call through freeconferencecall.com. The National Ramah Director and program associate joined the call. Most directors had never “met,” and they enjoyed meeting their colleagues and learning about their programs. Topics discussed included staffing, sharing of best practices, a possible joint Israel trip, and an in-person directors meeting. Each director agreed to submit write-ups and photos for a new National Ramah special needs program brochure. The directors felt that Rabbi Cohen’s suggestion of connecting counselors and other staff in a CoP was premature, given that most directors had not yet worked with and trained their own staff.

The CoP felt that the time from the initial conference call until the summer was too busy a time for camp directors and suggested no further meetings until the summer, and suggested a mid-summer “checking in” conference call. All agreed that sharing resources and programs via the Google group would be useful. Various directors began posting staff week training schedules, updates from professional conferences, and news of a Birthright Israel Trip for young adults with Asperger Syndrome.

In our July conference call, each director shared a highlight and trouble spot from the current summer, learned of a donation of computers to one special needs program, and discussed the upcoming “Tikvah at 40” celebration. I introduced the idea of a possible video-conference and the use of Meeting Wizard to agree on a date for our next meeting. One director expressed some concerns about the shift to video; given our long term

relationship as Ramah colleagues, I was able to make a joke about “asking his teenage daughter for help.” This helped reassure other group members, who were also worried about adapting the new technology.

In anticipation of our October meeting, I sent Meeting Wizard to each director; this meeting scheduling program helped us agree on a meeting date and time (from the four offered). I began exploring and trying out various video conferencing options. Camp Ramah had recently purchased a two month trial of MegaMeeting. I tried it out twice with members of the National Ramah staff, contacted technical support and sent a detailed e-mail to each director, requesting they have both a video camera and a headset (to minimize feedback), and that they run the “wizard” before the meeting.

Imagine how everyone’s nervousness turned to excitement when, one by one, each director “appeared” on the screen – and we could hear each other! A guest, the National Ramah Development Director, joined briefly to share details of the Ramah Galil Bike Ride 2011, designed to benefit all of our programs. One director shared details of a very successful peer buddy program, we discussed the roles of the director and the division head, and we talked about an off-season pilot program to connect our campers via a weekly “Shabbos Is Calling” video chat. In this program, a group of campers and staff connect each Thursday evening to discuss the weekly Torah portion, sing Shabbat songs and “shmooze.” I invited the participation of three other Ramah special needs programs and have subsequently submitted a grant proposal; if the grant is received, the funds will be used by each participating camp and by National Ramah, who will be supporting the program.

### Challenges – technology issues

The CoP is up and running, and the directors are in the habit of posting questions to the group (on Google groups) and sharing resources. It is still difficult to pick a day and time which will work for directors living in different time zones, and with different off-season jobs and work hours. The group is slowly getting more comfortable with the new technology, but we all feel the technology can malfunction unexpectedly at any time. For example, one director and I had a successful trial session where his audio and video worked perfectly; at the CoP meeting, his audio didn’t work and was forced to write his responses to the group’s questions – this made it difficult to discuss an issue which he had put on the agenda prior to the meeting.

### Sustainability – the future

The directors have a sense that we are “all in the same boat” in so many ways and have much to offer each other. It is comforting to know that we are all dealing with similar issues – from funding and staffing issues to camper sexuality issues. The CoP will continue to meet by video conference every six weeks. The

National Ramah Director will work with each overall camp director to help fund an in-person meeting at one camp each summer – this will allow each director to observe a special needs program “in action” and meet with fellow directors.

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Given interest in the Jewish special needs world for additional and better coordinated services, including camp programs (this topic was discussed extensively at the October, 2010 Advance: Ruderman Jewish Funders Network conference, where I chaired a session on informal Jewish education), I would like to see the Ramah special needs program directors take the lead in connecting directors (and possibly staff members) of other special needs camping programs in other movements and communities.

In the words of Etienne Wenger (undated), “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” Creating and sustaining online CoPs are challenging, but they are worth the effort. There is tremendous potential for CoPs to connect Jewish educational professionals in many different settings.

### References

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