

The Power of Encounter

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How many of us have planned our lives to take a specific direction, only to find ourselves 10 years later in a totally different place? Seven years ago, a friend of mine introduced me to a group of people who were studying abroad and came to Jerusalem wanting to do something about the conflict. One of those people was a student at MIT who had taught computer science in an MIT program in Africa. He thought we might be able to do something similar for Israeli and Palestinian youths. As we all believed in education as a powerful tool to mobilize positive change, during the summer of 2004 we started the Middle East Education for Technology program, or MEET, based in Jerusalem.

Partnering with the Computer Science Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at MIT, we recruited three instructors and were provided with facilities by the Hebrew University. In our first class, 30 students, half Palestinians and half Israelis, took an intensive five-week course in computer science, teamwork and leadership. The students and their parents loved it. On the last day they all parted in tears and some gave emotional interviews to the press. During the next few years, driven by this success and our willingness to create something unique and to have a real impact, we worked very hard and with few resources to expand the program and bring in new students. We extended the duration of the program, created a yearlong component and added a business curriculum, outdoor training and entrepreneurial competitions. I believe that what really shaped the future of MEET was the fact that we were aware that when you work with social change of any sort, you need to question yourself all the time whether or not you are doing the right thing.

Creating Deeper Understanding

We developed a great educational model and wanted to stay away from the monster called “politics” so as never to cause any distress to our students. Through continuous dialogue with students we realized something was wrong. One Israeli student asked me why the bus from Bethlehem was always late, and it struck me that he had no idea what a Palestinian student

had to go through to be in the program. I realized that we were missing out on an opportunity to connect these talented students to reality and to break through the separation. We are separated not only physically but also virtually by the information we receive and perceive, which is mostly selective, outdated and superficial. As a result, our societies live in a closed system, and history has proven that closed systems do not survive. If we really wanted to develop proper leaders, we had to have the understanding that the goal of exercising leadership is to engage with reality, with what will affect our lives whether we like it or not.

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One example is how two years ago, during difficult events in Gaza, I was visiting one of the MEET school founders. Sitting in a mall, I noticed a group of children playing with a clown. I had just been watching images in the media of children in Gaza being killed, and I asked myself if it was legitimate to hold such meetings when there is such imbalance and suffering. Then I thought that if MEET ceased to exist there might not be individuals who would have the understanding and capabilities to change this reality. We concluded that we could not achieve this level of understanding if we only worked with students for a few weeks. We needed to work with students over a long period of time to allow them the chance to formulate their own questions, to recognise their responsibility and to develop the confidence to do something about it.

A Big Part of Learning Is Unlearning

Many other questions came up as we moved forward. We understood that a big part of learning is actually unlearning. We needed to be brave enough to differentiate between the perceived success of the initial period and what real success actually meant. This has become a real value in the way we look at the program. Today MEET is a successful not-for-profit organization based in Jerusalem that focuses on trying to identify potential young leaders from both sides of the divide and bring them together for a three-year, top-level educational program in computer science, business skills, entrepreneurial skills and leadership.

The model is based on providing those students with the skills and

tools for the 21st century through a professional and challenging platform of interaction and empowerment that is trying to break the closed system we live in. We are trying to develop a network of future leaders who are connected to the reality of the region within the perspective of today's global environment and who are able to think critically, question the status quo, and deal with, manage and influence change.

MEET Grows and Changes My Life

From working with just a few schools in Jerusalem, MEET has grown to work with 35 high schools in five Israeli-Palestinian cities, with 100 students and 15 MIT instructors each year. One of our major achievements is the high demand for the program; we receive 500 applicants competing for forty spaces each year. Interestingly, the biggest component is Palestinian girls. The retention rates have been incredibly high, reaching up to 85 percent from start to finish, which is quite a commitment for youth at age 15 to 17. Our alumni's achievements later in life and their willingness to come back and offer help is what is driving the future growth of MEET, along with our attempt to create a different type of platform to allow alumni to come back to their communities and be the drivers of change and prosperity.

Seven years ago, I was a chemistry graduate thinking of becoming a scientist, and that encounter with the group of people that founded MEET — and all the challenges that we faced along the way — changed my life. The commitment and the dedication of each and every member of the MEET family have been inspirational and have helped me realize my true potential. The experience has also made me understand and appreciate the power of those special encounters we have in our lives.

A Profound Educational Experience

I wanted to show pictures of students working in the lab or building a raft together or giving a presentation, but I have a different kind of picture in my mind's eye. I have pictures of concrete walls dividing neighborhoods, of checkpoints creating suffocating traffic and humiliating experiences, and an ugly metal gate closing an opening in the wall on the way to Bethlehem, preventing me from entering my home town. So I decided to wait maybe five or 10 years to show pictures of MEET alumni actually taking action in their communities and helping improve lives and bringing dignity and real justice. True success will only occur when these alumni take this special and profound educational experience and make this region a far better place.

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