Partners in a Human Enterprise: Harkness Teaching in the History Classroom

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**Imagine** a particular U.S. History class, occurring in October a few years ago. Morgan, an 11th grader, enters a few minutes early to find the teacher and one other student already at the oval table. They exchange greetings and then Morgan says, “So Madison is a little crazy here, huh? He really doesn’t trust the people.” Morgan is referring to “Federalist #10,” the assigned homework for the day’s class. The other student immediately suggests various reasons that Madison was rightly worried about factions. Their classmates fill in around the table and a couple ask, “What are you guys talking about?” Morgan fills them in and some new voices enter the discussion. “It wasn’t a matter of trust or distrust,” someone counters, “it’s simply a matter of self-interest and we all have it.” The class, becoming quite engaged by this, quickly opens to the document, and discussion ensues. Somewhere within this exchange, the class learning began, yet the teacher had said nothing.

Visitors to Phillips Exeter Academy (PEA) invariably stop outside classrooms and watch such classes in session while touring the campus. They see lively discussions taking place around large oval tables and, at first glance, it might well be difficult to tell which of the participants are the teachers because nobody stands out as directing or taking part more than anyone else. Teachers might be looking through the text and apparently not paying attention to the conversation, or they might be sitting quietly...
taking it all in, or perhaps they may even be sitting away from the table. It is a regular occurrence for visitors to ask about the teachers—it does not seem as though they do much in the way of teaching. What these visitors are observing is Harkness teaching, which is the pedagogy of all history classes and, indeed, of all classes in all disciplines at Exeter.

It can be somewhat difficult to arrive at an exact definition of “Harkness teaching.” In 1964, Supreme Court Associate Justice Potter Stewart famously said about pornography that, although it was hard to define, “I know it when I see it.” The same can be said about a Harkness teacher’s work. There are probably as many definitions of “Harkness teaching” as there are practitioners of this elusive art. Loosely speaking, Harkness teaching is leading student-centered discussions in class, finding ways to get students to make the discoveries for themselves, to get them to draw their own conclusions, to teach them how to consider all sides of an argument, and to make up their own minds based on analysis of the material at hand. Harkness teaching tries to develop in students their own sense of responsibility for their education. The teacher is the cultivator of that sense of responsibility, rather than the fount of information and analysis.

Harkness teaching dates back to the late 1920s, when philanthropist Edward Harkness approached Dr. Lewis Perry, PEA principal, with an offer to fund whatever program the faculty of Exeter could devise that would improve American education. The only condition placed on this gift was that the teaching had to be new and it had to be innovative. The faculty worked at this challenge for several years and eventually went back to Mr. Harkness in 1930 with a plan to change Exeter’s contemporary pedagogy of teacher-centered classes in which the students sat in rows and listened to the “experts” at the front of the class. Instead, the boys (Exeter was an all-boys school at the time) would sit around tables and discuss the material. In a letter to Mr. Harkness, Dr. Perry explained the vision of the new Harkness Plan: “The net result would be that the boy would become more grown-up, would think of his studies as something more real, and would have an interest, a compelling motive, which he would carry to college. The successful teacher in the conference plan would not be a drill master, but a partner in a human enterprise.”

While it might be hard to define exactly what Harkness teaching is, it is not terribly difficult to discern what it is not. It is not a lecture. It is not a series of Socratic questions. Harkness teaching puts the student, not the teacher, at the center of developing meaning from the readings. Whatever works to reinforce this is acceptable. There is no one way of doing this. Teachers must be themselves and find ways of teaching and leading the discussions that work with their own personalities and within the confines of their own schools.
There has been limited scholarly work in the field of pedagogy in the history classroom exclusively; the best work done would be Sam Wineburg’s *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts.* There is, however, much work on the benefits of discussion-based teaching in general, not history specific, with many authors of the practice available to read. Perhaps the staunchest argument advocating this pedagogy is in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms,* by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. In a chapter entitled “How Discussion Helps Learning and Enlivens Classrooms,” they present a list of Fifteen Benefits of Discussion. Among the many benefits the authors cite are: “It increases students’ awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity and complexity... It helps students recognize and investigate their assumptions... It encourages attentive, respectful living... It increases intellectual agility... It develops the capacity for the clear communication of ideas and meaning... It develops habits of collaborative learning.”

Considering all of these ideas, debates about the value of discussion have been going on at Exeter for several generations of teachers. It was not until recently, however, that Exeter decided to do anything more than practice the pedagogy of Harkness teaching. What we are trying to do in these few pages is to consider what we do here as Harkness history teachers, to offer our thinking about leading discussion in the history classroom from our perspectives as teachers at PEA, and to share what we have learned by working in the Exeter Humanities Institute.

**The Exeter Humanities Institute**

In June 2000, Exeter launched the Exeter Humanities Institute (EHI), a program developed and designed to consider, dissect, and learn more about the intricacies of leading student discussion around a table. Exeter is certainly not the only school to have as its pedagogy student-centered discussion, nor does it claim to be. The conference, led by five history and English instructors, brings together teachers practiced in leading discussion-based classes, teachers whose schools are considering adopting the pedagogy, and teachers who may be the renegade by trying a technique completely new at their schools. As a high school, we are not in the position to conduct research or analysis comparing this pedagogy to other equally valid and valuable ways of teaching, nor is that our interest.

Putting the student at the center of the discussion was what the founding members of the Exeter Humanities Institute tried to replicate in 2000. The conference was and still is structured to give maximum opportunity for each participant to be a student in Harkness classes. This is important since Harkness is experiential by definition. Consequently, the PEA fac-
ulty leaders develop reading selections from different disciplines around a central topic ("Taste" in 2009), which are then read as "homework" by the participants before each class during the week. Different pairs of participants practice as teachers for the class each day, guiding discussion around the assigned readings. In addition, all participants at some point have the opportunity to sit away from the table during class and act as observers of the actions and mechanics of the discussion. Moreover, in most classes, participants simply enjoy the opportunity to engage as students in a discussion-based class. Some observations of the lead teachers at EHI are that discussions of academic subjects are not terribly different between history and English, or between history and biology, or between history and any other subject. There are, for sure, some parts of teaching that are unique to each discipline, while at the same time there are many similarities in leading discussion.

Preparing for Discussion: Developing Readings and Questions

Much of the success of a class can be determined, or at least strongly influenced, by the students’ preparation before class. The teacher’s selection of the homework material goes a long way towards developing an interesting class discussion. Generally, homework with some “tension” makes for the best discussions: different viewpoints on the same event work well, such as readings from both British and colonial accounts of the Boston Massacre.

Contemporary and modern interpretations of the same event, or accounts that are biased in some way, give the students something to ponder and discuss. Most classes use a textbook of some kind, supplemented with primary source readings. Textbooks can be general and dry and hence it is important to offset this with interesting supplemental reading. In courses where we read monographs and/or do not have a primary text, the same general rule applies: find readings that will provoke discussion. Many of us put questions on our syllabi to encourage the students to annotate, think, and maybe even write about the material a bit before they come into class.

When a syllabus has been developed and preparation begins for a specific class, the teacher must next try to determine where the students might go with the information: what questions to ask? There are many different approaches to the individual classes, but all require the instructor to have a thorough understanding of the material, the ability to remain flexible, and a willingness to give up the idea of maintaining control over everything that may take place during a class. We usually think of preparing a class in terms of "What question are you going to ask?" and try to formulate a few questions beforehand to promote discussion. Sometimes these ques-
tions are fairly broad, while at other times they are quite specific. They are rarely, if ever, simple questions that can be answered in a few words: such “dead end” questions search for a specific answer, but will not promote discussion. Ken Bain writes in *What The Best College Teachers Do*, “In the learning literature and in the thinking of the best teachers, questions play an essential role in the process of learning... Some cognitive scientists think that questions are so important that we cannot learn until the right one has been asked.” He goes on to quote professors whom he had interviewed in his research. One of the most repeated sentiments was that “When we can successfully stimulate our students to ask their own questions, we are laying the foundation for learning.” Another professor said, “We define the questions that our course will help them to answer... but we want them, along the way, to develop their own set of rich and important questions about our discipline and our subject matter.”

In *The Joy of Teaching*, Peter Filene writes, “As thousands of studies have suggested... good teachers display five characteristics that depend less on scholarly expertise than on personal skills,” identifying enthusiasm, clarity, organization, the ability to stimulate students, and care. For discussion-based teaching, we would add to these five traits listening and the ability to frame the most effective kinds of question. The questions, however, regardless of how good they are, do not matter if the teacher is inflexible or unresponsive to the students’ comments and inquiries. Herman B. Leonard of the Harvard Business School, long known for its teaching using case studies, writes:

Active listening is a vital component of learning by the discussion method. If a class is a discussion, there must be an exchange of ideas, with messages received as well as sent. There can be great excitement in a classroom where ideas are merely presented—but there can be no discussion unless students are encouraged to absorb and reflect as well as to speak. The ideas can be expanded, criticized, and sharpened. For such discussion, the capacity to listen is a precious resource. At any given moment, after all, all members of the group but one are engaged in listening. Discussion leaders need to make it clear that attentive, critical listening is a fundamental part of the group’s work.

Consider the class on “Federalist #10” mentioned earlier. We could only wish that every class would start as naturally as that one; of course, when it does happen like that, we hope that we are astute enough just to let the students continue their own momentum. However, had it begun as a more typical class, the teacher was ready with an idea of how to get the discussion started. For a class with a difficult reading such as “Federalist #10,” we might have begun with a chance for students to work in pairs to identify Madison’s primary argument and to share their ideas as a class,
proceeding then into analysis. Maybe they would begin the analysis on their own, but if not, the teacher might have asked, “So is he right, that large republics are the best solution to majority factions?” Even with Morgan’s class, which started without prompting from the teacher, the teacher did ultimately intervene with just that question in order to get the class to reach a deeper level of analysis in a timely fashion.

There are various types of reading assignments that, in turn, require slightly different approaches. For instance, after reading ten pages in a standard college textbook about the U.S. entry into World War I, it is difficult to formulate a question that would cover all the variables and all the different perspectives and positions that went into making the decision to go to war. A possible approach to the class might be to put a list of ideas and/or events on the board from the homework reading, such as: “race riots, draft, labor problems, economic inequities, lack of preparedness of the military, anti-German sentiment, patriotism, diversity of U.S. population, Progressive crusaders, other?” We could spend the first few minutes of class talking about these specific subtopics—asking a student to explain the importance of one of these and remind us significant details—and then move on to a discussion question such as, “What seems to be the mindset of the country heading into World War I?” Or, “How do Progressivism, neutrality, and the march towards war all fit together?” A different way of doing this would be to ask the students if they have any questions about the ideas on the board, and if they do not, assume that they have the details under control and then go ahead with the discussion.

For another example of structuring a class, consider the typical textbook reading assignment on Andrew Jackson, which includes Indian removal, the Bank War, Nullification, and the tariff. A Harkness teacher would try to avoid marching through the events asking factual questions, as this would elicit one or two word answers. Instead, we might ask a more unifying question such as “To what extent did Andrew Jackson act with consistency throughout his term in office?” The teacher has chosen the unifying term of “consistency” and now the students need to consider their own evidence and ideas that could characterize or support that term. Another approach might be to write a statement on the board, such as a quotation from a well-known author or a participant in an event, or maybe even a statement the teacher developed just to spark some thought: “Andrew Jackson was a true and moral American, a champion of democracy, and an indispensible man of the people.” The class could then turn to consider this interpretation. Usually, this would develop into an energized class that would consider the nature of democracy rather than just a checklist of events. Additionally, because students need to know the details of the events to make their case in critiquing the quotation, they need to pay close attention to the text.
The Flow of Class: Working With Unpredictability

The first five minutes of class are perhaps the most difficult time in leading a discussion-based class. Teachers tend to start every class by asking if the students have questions on the homework, or if there is any issue from the homework that elicited a reaction they would like to share. Reasons for difficulty here could include that the students may want to talk about something completely different from whatever it was that the instructor had planned, or it may quickly become clear to the teacher that the students did not really understand the reading—and if the teacher were to forge ahead with the planned questions, the class would not be able to do justice to the topic. Worse, they might be completely lost, tuning out, or taking in misinformation or confusion and learning it as "fact."

In *Historical Thinking*, Sam Wineburg describes an "Invisible Teacher," Elizabeth Jensen, an 11th grade history teacher in an ethnically diverse school who has set up a debate on British taxation of the American colonies:

During these classes, Jensen did little that would conventionally be called "teaching." She did not lecture; she did not write on the board; she did not distribute a worksheet, quiz or test. One might think, initially, that it is Jensen's students who allow her to sit back and, in her words, "play God." Perhaps with such seemingly motivated adolescents, any teacher would sparkle. There is no denying that Jensen's students are motivated. As self-selected honors students they chose this class knowing that it required extra work. But Jensen's students, nearly a third from minority groups, are not dramatically different in background from other students in this and other large urban high schools. The comprehensive high school they attend even has the same look and feel as other urban schools—the usual cracked paint, exposed pipes, and scattered graffiti marking the stalls in the restroom. The impression that Jensen played only a small role in this event is a testimony to her artistry. For just as we don't see the choreographers of a Broadway musical standing on stage and directing a group of dancers, so we don't see the hand of Elizabeth Jensen as her students shape ideas and craft arguments in a debate on the legitimacy of taxation... What allows students to do so, in part, is knowing that the success of the activity is up to them; they know their teacher will not step in and save them if they flounder. Sometimes this means that Jensen has to restrain herself and let a wild goose chase go on longer than it should. But she knows she can't have it both ways. "If I enter with anything more than regulations to prevent it from becoming a shouting match... or [from] losing structure," she explains, "then they are going to look to me for all of it."

If you have ever read about switches in computers, braved the language in a Microsoft manual, or tried to decipher a "Help" page on the Internet,
you find that much of a computer's function and operation depends on a
series of switches. To present this in an overly simplistic image, the infor-
mation enters a computer and immediately comes to a switch. Depending
on the information and the computer settings, the information goes either
"left" or "right" (for lack of better terms) and then immediately comes
to a new switch, and will either go "left" or "right," after which comes
another switch, and will go "left" or "right," etcetera, etcetera, ad infini-
tum. Eventually, a nanosecond later, the computer completes processing
and outputs the resulting data, or solution. The next time the computer
handles information, even if the input is similar, it will probably not fol-
low the exact path of the previous sequence. Regardless of whether the
solutions are similar or different, the path that the information takes will
not be the same as it was before. This same concept works when trying to
imagine of the function of a Harkness teacher's brain. The teacher listens
to the discussion and has to make a decision: "Do I step in here?" or "Do
I let them go and see what develops?" If the teacher does step in, he/she
immediately has to decide, "Do I stop the conversation to fill in some
background?" or "Do I keep the conversation going and just give them
a quick reminder?" With the same homework material, and perhaps the
same discussion prompts, the path of the discussion is invariably going
to be different class to class, and teachers must accept and embrace these
differences if the discoveries and understanding of the material is going
to be left up to the students.

Teachers can prepare, to an extent, for these "unpredictabilities" in a
variety of ways. Some of our colleagues will write a list of critical events
or a quotation on the board before class and then cover it up prior to class
starting by pulling down a wall map. Should the need arise, the teacher
can go to the board, lift the map, and the information can then be included
in the discussion without interruption. Maybe students will be asked to
write or to work in pairs for the first few minutes of class to get "warmed
up" before coming together to discuss. Alternatively, handouts with a
quotation or a picture can be prepared before class to be distributed, or not,
depending on how the discussion goes. A question might be written on the
board that could be used to refocus a wavering discussion. Preparing for
possible eventualities with different approaches makes these seemingly
random transitions much easier.

Whatever the preparation for class is, it will probably not go exactly as
planned. This is where the need for the teacher to let go and have some
confidence arises. With a little patience, we find that often the students
will ask the right question, or develop questions along thoughtful and in-
teresting lines. These may not be the questions or topics that the teacher
had planned, but if the discussion is on topic and driven by the students, then they are getting something out of it and learning the material. In addition, the teacher has to let go. Silences, feared and dreaded by most teachers new to this pedagogy, are quite often nothing more than a moment in time when the students are all thinking, and if the teacher were to rush and fill the silence, the students will become dependent on this and effectively be “let off the hook.”

In a piece called “Getting From A to Z: Using the Harkness Method With Sixth Graders,” Hannah Jones of Shady Hill School wrote about this dilemma:

“A,” calls out one student.
“B,” calls out another.
“C!” declares another.

My 6th graders and I play this game often at the beginning of a class to settle ourselves and get into “group think.” Students call out letters of the alphabet. At some point each student has to participate at least once. We are trying to say the alphabet sequentially, but there can be no pattern to the participation. If two students say the letter to be announced simultaneously, then we start all over with A. My class has been playing this game since September and we have yet to get to Z. After playing it for about a month, I asked the students to write down four or five recommendations for the class that might help us to get to Z. They wrote things like:

Listen.
Relax.
Let the urge to speak pass sometimes.
Think of the group.
Say a letter loudly and clearly.

We had a class discussion about their suggestions, compiled them into a long list, and posted it in the classroom. Since then we have had eight “roundtable” discussions about novels and autobiographies that we have been reading. This method has helped me to shut up and let the kids take control of the class discussion. Inevitably, they take themselves where I had hoped to go.10

When silences happen, the Harkness teacher should try to determine why. Is this silence simply because the students are carefully considering the material? Is it because of my question? Is it because they have less understanding of the material than I had anticipated? Is it because they are exhausted at the end of the day? Whatever the reason, let the class sit for thirty seconds or so. If nothing happens, the teacher can ask “Why this silence?” rather than filling in the blanks of the discussion. As a class, everyone can talk about why nobody was talking.
Establishing Discussion Habits

To be able to have such conversations about class mechanics, a fair amount of training has to take place early in the term. Assuming responsibility for the success of the class does not come easily or naturally to most students; in academic situations to which they have earlier been exposed, the teacher possesses both the authority and responsibility to fill the students with knowledge. Most students do not naturally question the teacher, nor question the text, nor disagree with their peers on intellectual matters, and yet this is exactly what they need to do in order to have successful class discussions.

Early in the term, especially with students who are new to the concept, time has to be set aside on a regular basis to develop ground rules and common understandings for class mechanics. Asking them what makes a successful discussion and then trying to model their ideas the next day is an effective way to start. All students have to be taught, and then continually reminded, to go to the text during discussion to find evidence to support their generalizations. Most students have to be taught how to read body language, or at least made aware of the impact of body language on a discussion. Students have to be broken of the habit of directing all comments and conversation to the teacher. The practices of using eye contact with their peers and of using names in discussion are not natural to many young people. Discussions about the class discussions, for five minutes at the end of class, help to advance these behaviors and place the onus of successful class discussions more in the hands of the students, while also equipping them with the understanding and the tools to be able to do this successfully. Some teachers, particularly teachers of the lower grades here, create bookmarks for the class with rules of class expectations developed by the students. Other classes draw up class rules and post them somewhere in the room. It is a simple matter, then, on a regular basis early in the term to refer back to the rules on the bookmark or on the wall and ask the students how they are doing with their expectations.

Assigning a “point person” is another way, perhaps at the next level, for getting the students to take on the responsibility of running the class. On a rotating basis, individual students are assigned the task of coming up with three or four questions for the class based on the homework reading. At the start of class, this point person asks a question of the class, and hopefully, the discussion begins. The teacher still has to maintain a firm hand on the tiller, and guide the discussion in ways as subtly as possible, but this experience further requires that the students understand the factors that lead to effective and helpful discussion.

Another practice, more often used with younger rather than older stu-
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students, is to have brief reading quizzes on a regular basis. If the students are prepared for these, then they are prepared to discuss. Usually, we allow them to use any notes that they took on their homework when they take these quizzes, and it seems that this develops habits of careful and active reading and better understanding. It also encourages them to write down questions that they have while they are reading, and these questions often become the basis for class discussion that day. Having completed the reading is indeed essential for successful class discussion.

Not every class is a straight discussion where students sit around the table discussing the night’s homework, but all the classes are centered on the students being the driving force of discovery. In one Ancient Greek class, students were given plywood shields and closet poles as spears and had to figure out a phalanx based on their homework reading and pictures from pottery. An Ancient Rome class drew pictures last winter of Virgil’s underworld after reading Book VI in the *Aeneid*. Our economics classes use case studies to help them better understand economic theory and practice. Sometimes, classes will do a “Think Aloud,” an exercise refined by an EHI participant after her summer here, where students are paired up, given a document or image that they have never seen before, and sent off for a set period of time. One member of the pair reads the document aloud, injecting at any time whatever ideas or questions he/she might have. The partner is silent, taking notes, writing down any of his/her own questions, but not prompting or interrupting the person who is speaking. This tends to bring out ideas that might otherwise be vetted or edited in a regular class discussion. When all the pairs return to the classroom for discussion, there is usually a rich body of already-stated reactions and questions to help shape the conversation. DBQs assigned as homework provide varied opinions for class discussion, and generate recollections of outside knowledge that students can bring to the table.

**Observing and Evaluating Discussion**

When EHI started, we realized that we had to develop more tangible methods of explaining and monitoring a class discussion. To do this, over the course of the last ten years, we have created and modified several different ways of watching a discussion and keeping track of what actually transpired. Some of these were modified from existing works such as C. Roland Christensen’s *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*, or Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand*. Some of them were invented on the spot to try to capture specific behaviors. Among our various tracking devices are those to track types of comments, types of questions, types of interruptions, gender interaction, body language,
Figure 1: Sample discussion tracking device. A simple oval design records participation and interaction among students during a classroom discussion; further notations are added as desired.
number of comments, length of comments, text references, name usage, length of silences, and individual participation; it all depends on what it is that the observer or teacher wants to see. The most common of these devices is just an image of an oval, with the students' names written outside the shape placed in positions corresponding to their seats at the table (see Figure I for an example). The observer simply draws lines from name to name, across the "table" as the discussion moves from person to person in the classroom. With a few minutes left, the diagram can be shown to the students and the class itself can be discussed. Teachers can post these diagrams in the classroom and then compare discussions on different days as more classes are tracked through the term.

The point of tracking is not to evaluate the discussion, but rather to pick up specific behaviors and look for trends, either in one particular class or across several classes. It can be a startling realization to see a diagram of one of your classes where you thought you had stayed out of the discussion for the most part, but see that in fact, you talked about twice as many times as any of the students. It is also helpful to remind the teacher of individual students' natural proclivities: some students are habitually reticent, while some students need to be reigned in. Having a picture to which you can point makes discussions with these students much easier. Such pictures can also be helpful to remind teachers that they should not be the center of attention and to serve as not-so-subtle reminders to back off and let the students have room to think, to question, to learn.

Some kind of evaluation of the students work around the table inevitably has to take place at most schools, and the faculty at Exeter and the EHI participants have developed many different ways to do this. A general rule is that the more feedback a teacher can give the students, the better the discussions will develop. We conduct midterm evaluations in all of our classes, and the questions on these are centered primarily on the class discussions. "What has worked best for you so far?" "Are there specific exercises or types of questions that you would like to see more often? Why?" "What can we as a group do to better our class discussions?" "What can you, as an individual student, do to better our class discussions?" "What can Ms. Foley do to improve our class discussions?" As mentioned earlier, many of us take time at the end of class on a regular basis to talk about the class discussions. We also tend to give feedback to the students on a regular basis by writing notes on returned essays or quizzes: "Great question in yesterday's class!" "We haven't heard your voice in a few days—what's up?" "Please control your urge to speak every minute of the class. Maybe allow four other people to speak before you reenter the conversation?" "Listen to your classmates!"

Some teachers, from both Exeter and from EHI, have developed rubrics
for class participation so they can point out and discuss specific behaviors, mannerisms, and traits that different students have in discussion. Categories such as Participation, Critical Thinking, Text References, and Table Behavior can all be evaluated and discussed with the student. Many teachers give letter grades for class participation, usually between twenty and thirty percent of the final grade. Some teachers grade the quality of participation on a daily basis with a simple rubric, using notations such as plus (+), check (√), or minus (−) symbols for their work around the table during class. Whatever method a teacher chooses to use, the critical element is the clarity and regularity of the evaluation and feedback given to the students, ensuring that the students have both a clear understanding of the expectations for the class as well as a clear understanding of how they are meeting these expectations.

Writing and Technology in the Harkness Classroom

Another crucial area in the study of history for which student-centered discussion seems well suited is writing, and this is for two distinct and different reasons. First of all, class discussion teaches analysis of sources and ideas, and encourages students to develop the habit of questioning the accuracy and validity of sources. It also teaches students how to create an argument and support their generalizations with evidence from the text; they do this everyday around the table. Secondly, having critiques and discussions about student essays helps all students in the class, particularly the student whose work is under review, to better understand the mechanics of writing. Examining student writing, whether as a class, in small groups, or in pairs, is certainly one of the most effective ways of promoting peer review as well as conversations about the passive voice, verb tense, or stylistic approaches to explaining an issue. Students tend to be both observant and gentle with each other, and hearing corrections or suggestions from one’s peers often leaves a more lasting impression than repeated reminders from the teacher. As a class, we will often look at a student’s work by projecting it on the wall and then inviting critique from the class. It is sometimes hard to get volunteers at the start of the term, but students quickly learn that if they want their writing to improve, the best way to do it is to have as many people as possible look at and comment on their work. After doing this exercise a few times, it can be difficult to decide whose work to exhibit; they all want their own work to be the focus of the discussion. Such peer review is not only collaborative, but also it validates the students’ opinions and voices, reinforcing the concept that students’ writing can draw largely from class discussions around the table.
The concurrent use of both technology and Harkness teaching can be difficult. The very nature of a computer encourages isolation and individuality, which promotes behaviors contrary to participation in class discussion. For this reason, we tend not to use technology a great deal except for the above method of reviewing writing, and a few other less common practices. Teachers have designed web pages for different classes, but they all still tend to be centered on student participation. Students are able to continue their discussions from class, or begin new discussions about a homework assignment, on blogs or on the discussion board feature of Blackboard software. Some classes employ a “scribe” for the day to record what goes on in class discussion, and this scribe can write on the computer and file the notes in a common folder with remote access. This is just as easily done, however, in a paper notebook that can be left on the classroom table. We are always looking for ways to integrate technology and discussion, but so often the two are almost mutually exclusive from each other; a student cannot be working at a computer while at the same time discussing material with classmates.

Questions About Harkness at Home

When teachers attend EHI, they finish the week energized to try discussion-based teaching back home, maybe for the first time or perhaps with some modifications. However, they always wonder if what they have learned at Exeter from the sixty-odd teachers at the conference is truly transferable to whatever type of school, curriculum, or constraints await them at home. We have been able to look at some of these questions and while many of our solutions or answers are hearsay, they do seem to hold true in many different situations.

Perhaps the most common concern is how discussion-based teaching will work at a school other than Exeter. The biggest advantage that we have at PEA is that all the students know about Harkness teaching before they enroll, and while they may not really understand it, they are eager to take part and know that it is a core ethos of the entire school. Virtually every class they take here is taught through discussion and while seated around a table, so Exeter students are used to this; it is the norm to go from math class, to history class, to English class over the course of an average morning, having discussions in every single classroom. Teachers who have come through EHI say that being “pedagogically isolated” can be a difficult obstacle to overcome, but it is far from insurmountable. Students tend to like to take control over their education. Regular and continuous training by the teacher develops a sense in the students of what is expected. It can be difficult to buck the pedagogical norm in a school
that is wed to a different way of teaching, but it seems that if the teacher is committed to discussion, confident in his/her ability, and not afraid to take some chances, then successful discussions can be held in virtually any institution.

Another concern that we hear voiced quite often is that students at Exeter are all smart, but less able students from another school could not possibly carry on a discussion as well. In fact, Edward Harkness, in making his gift to Exeter, was specifically concerned not about the smartest boys, nor the weakest—each of whom he believed already garnered much attention from their teachers. Instead, he pushed the faculty to devise a system of teaching that would bolster the “middling sort,” the students who often go unnoticed in class. Based on what we hear from EHI participants—some of whom teach in inner city public schools, some of whom teach in middle schools, and some of whom teach in college—indeed all students can develop and become engaged by thoughtful discussions. Energy and imagination can develop intellectual curiosity at any level. Susan Pearson, another EHI “graduate,” wrote about instituting discussion-based teaching at the Apex Senior High School, in Apex, North Carolina:

My students are growing by leaps and bounds. Their writing has improved dramatically. They are reading the assigned material, they are asking questions, they are bringing ideas and opinions to the table. Classroom management has become virtually a non-issue... I have come to see that something as simple as placing my desks in a circle is a terrible violation of the hidden curriculum of our public schools... At its core, public education in this country was designed to create employees, and consumers... Round-table discussion shows students the loose threads in the education sweater they have come to accept as their only clothing option. Without student participation, nothing happens... Indeed, by keeping children dependent upon teachers as the sole source of knowledge, wisdom, and meaning, not to mention entertainment, information, and skill, we guarantee that they do not become competent, independent, critical and insightful adults.11

At Exeter, our classes are usually composed of twelve or thirteen students, thanks to the Harkness gift for salaries and classrooms. These numbers lead to another misperception; that discussions cannot be held in classes larger than this. EHI participants have tackled this problem with creativity and ingenuity. Some have arranged the chairs in their classrooms in two concentric circles, and rotate who sits on the inside “discussing” ring and who sits on the outside “listening” ring. Teachers who have done this feel that the students develop their listening, questioning, and analysis skills from observing their classmates’ discussion more than they do from simply listening to a lecture; it is a more active way of learning than the passivity of taking lecture notes. Other teachers have approached this
problem by breaking up their classes into two or three groups, circling the chairs in different parts of the classroom, and having two or three discussions going on at the same time. The teacher then moves from group to group, not taking part in any one discussion but trying to monitor them all. One of the added benefits of this approach is that it breaks students of the habit of relying on the teacher and requires that the students carry all the responsibility of making the discussion flow. Barklie Eliot, from the St. Edwards School in Vero Beach, Florida, told us:

Although my class is bigger than ideal (19), they are a congenial and enthusiastic group... My biggest challenge has been getting the quiet ones to speak. But one technique seems to have helped a great deal. I let them talk for about fifteen minutes and then stopped them. At that point I asked all the students who had not yet spoken to pull their desks forward about four feet (our room plan is desks in a large circle.) Then I told them that only they could speak for the next fifteen minutes. Since then I have noticed that the reserved students feel more comfortable speaking.12

History teachers at EHI always have one final question: how can we be sure to cover all of the content we need to for our history courses if the courses are structured around discussions? We ask ourselves this question all the time. What facts are crucial for students to know? How can we cover what we want to in such a short amount of time? Indeed, these questions come up even for history teachers of lecture-based classes. There just is never enough time to cover all of the history to which we want to expose our students. Furthermore, it is true that there is even less time in the discussion-based classroom because discussion is rarely as efficient as lecture, or even Socratic questioning, if the goal is dissemination of information. But, of course, our goal is not just dissemination of information, but to develop an interest in the “drama of ideas” within our students. We want students to be critically engaged by the material, to be empowered to speak their minds to each other, and to be knowledgeable enough to base their comments on a solid foundation of learned evidence. In a chapter entitled “The Function of Content” in Learner-Centered Teaching, Maryellen Weimer writes about the place of content in a student-centered classroom:

Strong allegiance to content blocks the road to more learner-centered teaching. Unlike power, where the influence is largely unrecognized, the content barrier explicitly impedes faculty. Most of us have no trouble acknowledging that the need to cover content strongly influences, if not dictates, most instructional decisions. Our thinking about content has long been dominated by one assumption: more is better. The time has come to challenge that assumption—not with content-free courses but with new thinking about the function of content. Learner-centered objectives allow us to do just that.
Our strong content orientation is reflected in the metaphor used to describe the action we take in respect to content: we “cover” it. But what exactly does that metaphor mean? We “cover” content—like the leaves cover the forest floor? Like a bedspread covering the bed? Is that the relationship that ought to exist between the teacher and the content when the goal is learning? I rather prefer one I have seen in a cartoon. A faculty person (usually male and round) is standing squarely in front of a blackboard with pieces of a problem appearing on either side of him. The caption proclaims: “Aim not to cover the content but to uncover part of it.”

This same thought is echoed in *Discussion As A Way Of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*, by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. In the preface to the first edition, these authors argue that:

The concern about having insufficient time to cover content is felt by teachers who believe that the material they want students to learn is too important to be left to chance. If they lecture, so the argument goes, at least this ensures that the material is aired in students’ presence. We share this same concern. We want our students to engage seriously with ideas and information we think important. In fact, it is precisely for this reason that we think discussion is worth considering... [B]uilding connections—personal and intellectual—is at the heart of discussion. Ideas that seem disconnected when heard in a lecture come alive when explored in speech. Arguments that seem wholly abstract when read in a homework assignment force themselves on our attention when spoken by a peer. There is no point in covering content for content’s sake—the point is to cover content in a way that ensures that students engage with it. It is because we take content so seriously and want students to understand certain key ideas accurately and thoroughly that we feel discussion is indispensable.

**Harkness Teachers: Partners in a Human Enterprise**

It is with these questions, and sometimes with a fair degree of skepticism, that teachers from around the country and from a wide spectrum of schools arrive here every summer to spend a week at the Humanities Institute talking about teaching. The Institute is as experiential as we can possibly make it, since it would somehow be antithetical to lecture to learning teachers about how to lead student-centered discussions. We try to take teachers out of their usual, comfortable seats of knowledge and power by spending time studying texts that are new to us all or acting as students in a math or science class, and we ask them to behave in a classroom setting in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable fashion: by giving up control. It takes a few days to figure it out and the EHI faculty provide no answers; participants learn by doing and from each other. Most participants try to
watch from the outside at first, and take a “wait and see” attitude as the subtleties of leading a discussion are not readily apparent for several days. They soon learn, however, that teaching a class by leading discussion is tremendously challenging, hugely rewarding, and intellectually stimulating. As Susan Pearson wrote, “We are no longer founts of knowledge, but rather participants in the learning process, human beings struggling to make meaning and work with equals who are attempting the same.” These thoughts echo Dr. Perry’s hope, written over seventy years before: “The successful teacher in the conference plan would not be a drill master, but a partner in a human enterprise.”

Notes

1. Dr. Lewis Perry, letter to Edward Harkness, Phillips Exeter Academy archives.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
15. Pearson.
Harkness Teaching roundtable discussion in action at Phillips Exeter Academy.
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