

The Harkness Approach Brings Student-Centered, Discussion-Based Learning to LRCA

Written by Dr. Justin Smith, Upper School Principal



If this beautiful large wooden, oval table could speak, it would tell of ideas being wrestled and wrangled, of passionate responses, of quiet reflection, of unique insights, of agreement and disagreement, of curiosity and problem-solving, of learning to communicate in a group. All this and more has flown across this beautiful table since school began as our LRCA students have engaged in Harkness discussions. A bit messy, these discussions always hold an element of unpredictability, but with training and practice, are something to which both teachers and students look forward. To prepare, students are asked to

read, annotate, and do their best to understand and interpret carefully selected texts. Students sit facing one another in some version of a circle and then discuss the text, looking for meaning and connections. The teacher acts as facilitator, guide, and coach and discussions typically ebb and flow: a question, a response, a pause, a connection outside the classroom, more questions and so on. Unlike teacher-centered instruction, this method of student-centered teaching invites students to participate in a way that makes it hard to resist “getting into the fray.” The Harkness table offers a neutral, safe place for students to test out ideas,

interpretations, and applications with peers and an expert teacher. Not only do students grow in their understanding of content, they also develop invaluable communication skills as they navigate discussions and learn to learn from others, digging deeper and using textual evidence to support their points. I think we all agree these skills transcend the classroom and will serve students well in life.

Finding Purpose in Discussion - Closely Read a Text, Then Talk About It

If ever there was a time and a place for education to be more meaningful, and for learning to be deep, this is it. Content in the 21st century is ubiquitous. At the swipe of a finger, click of a trackpad, or a question posed to Siri, students can access content in the information age faster than ever before. It has also changed the way educators curate lessons. Therefore, one must ask the question, how will students be challenged to think cogently, form questions thoughtfully, write precisely, and collaborate effectively?

A friend and colleague, Dr. Peter Vorkink of Phillips Exeter Academy, commented, "There is a difference between education as intellectual and spiritual formation, and education as information transmission. At its best or ideal, the Harkness method does the former, and not really the latter." When educators and parents consider the purpose of education, at its core we desire a program that fosters intellectual and spiritual formation, provokes

students to think and develop questions, and produces learners who seek to engage in meaningful ways with their community. In the following paragraphs I will expound upon the underpinnings of Harkness pedagogy to inform the families of Warriorville of the important work our humanities teachers are engaging.

Harkness in Warriorville

Educators at Little Rock Christian Academy are leaning forward into Harkness pedagogy like never before. Teachers spend extensive time carefully selecting readings and texts which will meet learning objectives and elicit robust academic dialogue. Selections include poetry, songs, artwork, math problems and more. Texts are skillfully chosen at levels of complexity which require deep individual thought and collaborative analysis. Through class discussion, students delve into content in ways which will form deeper understanding and produce higher retention levels. This phenomenon has been observed for many years on campuses in elite New England boarding schools and prestigious private schools across the country. When students engage with a text in meaningful ways, annotate with purpose, comment on the material, and listen to various perspectives, learning at the table is palpable. Author F. Scott Fitzgerald once eloquently stated, "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." The goal of a Harkness discussion is not solely consensus; rather, it is gained perspective.

"Harkness gives me a great opportunity to engage in classroom discussions. Hearing the thoughts and viewpoints of my classmates is interesting. I really enjoy Harkness, it keeps me engaged and active in my learning."

Lawson Howard, LRCA Junior

LRCA English teacher, Mr. Loren Rugen adds, "I desire to see how much students want to understand the text." He further explained, "the beauty of Harkness is that [a student] can display his or her effort through a variety of methods, depending on the strengths of individual students. Methods such as homework completion, annotating, talking, listening attentively, asking thoughtful questions, providing clarifying answers, and staying on topic by directing the group back to the text." Emphasis on growing students' desire to think and learn is an important tenet of Harkness learning. Mr. Rugen also values the way Harkness discussions help students understand different perspectives. "Anyone can talk, anyone can listen, and everyone benefits."

As LRCA English teacher, Mrs. Lauren Kopf proffers, "Harkness puts more pressure on students to be involved with the texts they're encountering, to practice critical thinking and reasoning, and to develop their public speaking skills. Those goals do not replace the content; they simply enhance it. I think the end game with Harkness is to transform our students into responsible citizens who are not only well-informed, but also articulate. There's no point in knowing what we know if we aren't able to communicate well with others!" Amen.

HARKNESS METHOD



As learners move throughout the educational program at LRCA, the learning continuum moves from grammar to logic to rhetoric. Evident in the upper school, we observe teachers committed to creating fascinating lessons designed to capture the imaginations of students, challenge them to grapple with complexity, and create a space where they can refine their thoughts on things ranging from literature, Scripture, historical documents and theology to scientific discoveries. Through intellectual discourse, students form the habits of mind that will not only prepare them best for university, but also for a life well-lived.

How We Learn

We often learn by listening to others' observations, but learning at deeper levels typically ensues when we combine listening respectfully and taking action in the process, functioning not solely as an audience but as explorers committed to thinking and learning. It is not to say that studying in isolation does not have advantages, but we often comprehend phenomena more fully when we engage with others in the learning process. At LRCA, our efforts target student learning through independent thinking, and then subjecting preliminary thoughts and arguments to critical review. LRCA's educational focus, then, is not on teaching what to think but on learning how to think.



In Philip Ryken's book, *Liberal Arts for the Christian Life*, Kenneth Chase comments that, "Good students are not pawns, following directions mindlessly; nor are they life-less sponges, merely absorbing information." Ryken, the president of Wheaton College, is an avid supporter of a broad and deep education that encourages students to think critically, communicate clearly, problem-solve effectively, and collaborate meaningfully. Students at LRCA are charged with the mission of active participation, fully immersed in learning, listening, and speaking. For it is in these acts that the student will become himself or herself - the person God has intended.

Uniquely Better

How, then, are we uniquely better? Few schools are adaptive enough to make pedagogical shifts to enhance student learning, yet at LRCA we have talented educators and motivated students who embrace active learning. Pursuing excellence in teaching and instruction is an expectation in Warriorville and Harkness pedagogy makes us uniquely better.



For more than 85 years, schools like Phillips Exeter Academy and The Lawrenceville School have situated students around oval, wooden Harkness tables in all disciplines. This student-centered, discussion-based learning has proved to be a timeless and meaningful way to educate secondary students. In recent years, private boarding and day schools from coast to coast have

HARKNESS METHOD

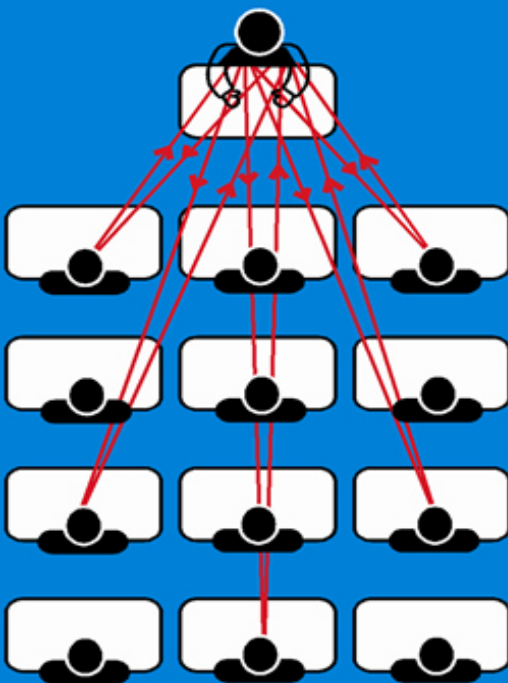
“Harkness puts more pressure on students to be involved with the texts they're encountering, to practice critical thinking and reasoning, and to develop their public speaking skills. Those goals do not replace the content; they simply enhance it. I think the end game with Harkness is to transform our students into responsible citizens who are not only well-informed, but also articulate. There's no point in knowing what we know if we aren't able to communicate well with others!”

- Mrs. Lauren Kopf, LRCA English Faculty

adopted a more active approach to learning. The stark contrast of the strictly passive learning environment where teachers lecture for the majority of the period, versus the forward thinking classroom where teachers leverage the students' abilities to think, problem-solve, and create is blatantly evident. Filed under the auspices of constructivist learning pedagogy, the Harkness approach to teaching and learning requires students to form

thoughts and ideas based on textual evidence, peer perspective, teacher questions, and prior knowledge. Students often come to the Harkness table with a limited understanding of a reading, but, through discussion, they leave class with a deeper, broader, and formed understanding. We learn in community. We grow through fellowship. The Harkness table provides a great venue to grow better thinkers and communicators for the glory of God.

Traditional Model



Harkness Model

