



LITTLE ROCK CHRISTIAN ACADEMY HARKNESS TRAINING

At the Intersection of Faith and Learning: The Harkness Approach *Justin Smith and Kim Fullerton*

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks the question, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer, “to glorify God, and enjoy him forever,” clarifies the driving purpose for believers distinctly made to reflect the image of God and be in joyful relationship with Him.

Similarly, the first question of the Christian educator should be, “What, then, is the chief end of Christian education?” At Little Rock Christian Academy (LRCA) in Little Rock, Arkansas, the answer is “forming students in knowledge, wisdom, and virtue.” If this is our chief end, then our next question should be what teaching and learning processes help us most strategically reach these ends. A key pedagogical approach at LRCA is the Harkness method.

The Harkness Approach

In 1930, Principal Lewis Perry of Phillips Exeter Academy and philanthropist Edward Harkness designed a form of student-driven pedagogy that deeply engaged students in their own learning. In a letter to Perry, Harkness wrote: What I have in mind is teaching boys in sections of eight . . . where boys could sit around a table with a teacher who would talk with them and instruct them by a sort of tutorial conference method, where the average or below average boy would feel encouraged to speak up, present his difficulties, and the teacher would know . . . what his difficulties were . . . This would be a real revolution in methods.

And indeed it was. Exeter is now one of many independent schools that use the Harkness method of teaching and learning to develop in students the habits of mind ripe for the 21st century: depth of knowledge, interpersonal skills, and the emotional intelligence

to read and respond to peers and instructors. At LRCA, Harkness is used as an approach to spiritual formation and biblical worldview development that gives students the opportunity to think deeply, gain wisdom, retain knowledge, form a measured mind, and care for one another.

LRCA has been practicing the Harkness method for six years in grades 7-12. While Harkness gives teachers great data about the learner, perhaps more importantly, it gives students insight into their own learning journey—socially, spiritually, and academically. LRCA faculty value Harkness as an instructional practice because it offers the opportunity for students to think deeply and dialogue with others about eternally significant things, whether that be in Math, French, English, or Biblical Worldview classes. Though other practices, such as the Socratic Method, offer similar advantages, the prominence of the student voice in Harkness distinguishes it:

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 [is] 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. (Smith 2018, 10-12)

Faculty at LRCA have found that through the Harkness table, students have grown in their abilities to connect new and previous learning and retain information learned in class. They also learn to disagree with others thoughtfully and respectfully. But most importantly, Harkness proves an immensely valuable pedagogical tool when it comes to the intersection of faith and learning.

Faith, Learning, and Harkness

By engaging students in dialogue and questioning with texts and one another, Harkness requires students to form, present, defend, and amend their thoughts, opinions, and convictions. Within the context of the Christian school, this process is harnessed to hone the biblical worldview of students, as well as develop their capacity for biblical thought and action.

At LRCA, we have identified four specific ways that Harkness practices amplify spiritual formation for our students. First, the emphasis on student voice reminds them of their value as image bearers designed to be in relationship with our Creator and with others. The table provides a great place for students to practice using their voice, to learn patience, forgiveness, repentance, and to build confidence and skill as speakers and listeners.

Second, Harkness reinforces the value of asking meaningful questions and seeking application outside the classroom—reminding students that their lives are purposeful, that they are destined to contribute good things to the post-Fall, broken world we inhabit. Third, it affirms students' roles as keepers and speakers of Truth to one another and to the lost. The table provides a safe place for students to test competing truth claims and bolster their own faith. And finally, it teaches students how to journey well as individuals and as part of a community.

Coming to The Table

At LRCA, we regularly host workshops for Christian school faculty who are interested in learning the Harkness approach and implementing it in their own schools. While this chapter is not a similitude, we do want to offer a glimpse of how Harkness works at LRCA through the eyes of our faculty. In the eight faculty narratives that follow, you will notice in more than one instance students practicing the “one anothers” of Scripture, along with gaining confidence as listeners and communicators.

Old Testament, Ethics and Culture, Fundamentals of the Faith
(Anthony D. Davis, Ph.D. Computer Information Sciences)

On the day of Christ's resurrection, Luke depicts two disciples on a journey. On the road to Emmaus, they struggle with events that took place over the past three years leading up to the ultimate event of Good Friday. Along the way, Jesus—albeit in hidden form—discusses Scripture with Cleopas and his friend until they reach their home. They finally come to the table where Jesus breaks bread with them, culminating in the “aha” moment of Christ's true identity.

In the Biblical Worldview classroom, Harkness discussions often parallel the journey of the disciples, at the daily level and over the course of the semester or year. As Luke's narrative suggests, Jesus saw merit in allowing the disciples to discuss and struggle with the events and information concerning Scripture. On the road, he

questioned them and allowed them to express their thoughts on the events, their thoughts on Scripture, and their interpretation of what happened. He then guided them through the Scriptures demonstrating the true purpose of the events and information they struggled to make sense of. This process continued until they came to the table to break bread. Then... the light bulb goes off and they both see the true identity of the Messiah! It is worth pointing out that only after the journey did they realize the true meaning of the events and who Christ is. They needed the journey.

As Christian educators, our students typically come to the table with knowledge of Scripture, but like the disciples, they too struggle with understanding events that took place in historical context and what they mean for the world today. Harkness provides a way for our students to experience a “Road to Emmaus” journey where they discuss and, many times, struggle with ideas. As educators, we are to walk alongside them on this journey, assign appropriate materials for discussions, and use the Word to guide them in the Truth. Harkness discussions provide a valuable tool to help students arrive at “aha” moments during individual classes, but the table also allows space for the Holy Spirit to open their eyes and, like the disciples on that journey, acquire a burning heart for Christ. Just like the disciples, they too need a place to journey toward Truth.

Inquiry in Worldview Frameworks, Apologetics, Old Testament
(Loren Rugen, B.A. Biblical Studies)

The tricky thing about worldview is that it isn't limited to strictly fact-based knowledge. Rather, it is an umbrella term for the complex interplay between knowledge we already have, our current assumptions about how the world works, and experiences that either confirm or disconfirm those assumptions. Therefore, the methodology to teach students about how to grow and self-reflect in worldview terms must be multifaceted. In essence, Harkness offers practice in skills requisite for such growth. As we know, it is only when students try a skill via independent practice that the content becomes their own. Specifically, there are two types of skills that immediately come to mind for most Harkness discussions: learning how to *ask* and learning how to *answer* meaningful questions.

It is rare for students to initially exhibit a growth mindset when encountering a difficulty they perceive as above their mental ‘pay grade.’ Instead, they default to what they already assume (this is especially true in worldview-oriented material). This is detrimental for growth as it tends to reinforce stereotypes, misconceptions, and ignorance. And this is where the art of asking quality questions comes in.

Many students assume that asking questions is a sign of stupidity. On the contrary—it cannot be stated enough that genuine, quality questions are a sign of intelligence! It may not be the kind of knowledge-based intelligence that already comprehends the ins and outs of the subject at hand. Rather, it is the curiosity-type of intelligence willing to wonder, seek, and find. The whole point of being a student is that one doesn't know the things that need to be learned. In short, questioning is a prerequisite to growth. And, as educators, we realize it is a skill which must be taught and practiced. Harkness discussions help students hone this skill.

Case in point: one day we were wrapping up a discussion and by reviewing questions the students had submitted for homework. One student commented that he felt stupid for asking his question since the answer seemed so obvious now after the discussion. After a moment of reflection, I replied that the answer only seemed obvious now because he had asked the question first. You see, the whole point of asking a question is not because you already understand, but because clarification is needed for deeper understanding. You won't be looking for the answer until you are willing to develop and ask a good question. Yes, the quality of the questions might improve over time, but that is the whole point. Students have to start somewhere before they can improve. The more questions they ask about other perspectives, and the more questions they encounter about what they believe, the better prepared they will be to go deeper into important worldview issues.

In summary, students need face-to-face interactions where they can learn the essential skill of asking and receiving questions. Whether it is to work collaboratively to understand a difficult concept or to hash it out over a controversial issue, the application of those skills in the context of Harkness discussions are invaluable for worldview growth.

9th Grade New Testament and Life of Christ (Suzanna Dudley, B.A. English and French)

Imagine a large round table, similar to a dining room table, that takes up the majority of a room and seats a close-knit group of thirteen teenagers. When my students walk into class on the first day, the Harkness table forces them to break the discomfort of looking at one another and begins creating a culture of vulnerability, where asking hard questions and listening to one another's viewpoints is a given. Using the three strategies below, I have been able to create this classroom culture, leading to great learning around the table.

Starting with circle questions. At the beginning of almost every class, I ask students a question that each is required to answer, including me. Circle questions range from silly questions like, "Do you put milk in your cereal first or cereal then milk?" to more thoughtful questions like, "What is a high from your week and what is a low?" Consistently having circle questions, especially at the beginning of the year, makes my students comfortable to speak and builds the foundation for future conversations on spiritual topics.

Getting out of the way. When I separate myself from the table, sit at my desk, and choose to listen for a designated amount of time, students do the heavy lifting. This is often when I experience the "magic" of Harkness where students become more professional in their communication and come away with deeper reflections on the content. I grade on a rubric and often have designated topics I require them to address in the discussion. But, I find that students are more willing to ask out-of-the-box questions and are more likely to grapple with challenging questions for longer periods of time when I "get out of the way." Even though the room is small, removing myself from the Harkness table prompts them to own the discussion more than when I am seated with them.

Curating challenging content and reflection. My classes do not shy away from challenging topics or content even in 9th grade. The Harkness

discussions on content from the book of Revelation and on topics about heaven, sexual sin, and why God created us male and female, have been the richest discussions with powerful learning moments. However, to get there, students must do pre-work to prepare for the discussion. I take a grade for their pre-work, and then I "get out of the way" and let students grapple. After the discussion, students reflect as a class with questions like, "How did we do on making sure 100 percent of voices were heard?" Afterwards, students independently write a reflection, which might include follow-up questions stemming from the discussion or a spiritual reflection on how the topic connects to them and their spiritual life.

Although I am often not at the table during the actual Harkness discussion and am instead tracking and making notes, I have found that creating a healthy class culture, using pre-Harkness work, curating challenging content, and incorporating a reflection after the discussion bring students to powerful learning moments.

8th Grade English and Creative Writing (Hope Winburn, M.Ed. Reading)

My first introduction to the illustrious Harkness table was as a student at Phillips Exeter Academy. I remember the fear and doubt that consumed me as I walked into my eleventh grade classroom. After much prompting, I finally summoned the courage to speak during a discussion. My teacher told the other students to write down what I had said, a moment I will never forget. What a gift, to make someone feel significant. When I reflect on why I became a teacher, it always comes back to this moment. I want students to know their voice matters, I want them to feel confident in their ability to express their ideas, and I want them to practice compassion by considering multiple perspectives. For me, the most effective instructional tool to accomplish these goals remains Harkness.

Many students have gone from intimidated to inspired while sitting around the oval Harkness table. Through practice, students become more comfortable and adept at testing theories, making claims, using evidence to support their ideas, making biblical and real-world connections, and asking insightful questions. The value of Harkness is that students have a safe environment to practice these skills before they will need to use these same skills in their future jobs and relationships. They have a chance to learn from their peers and Christian educators in order to solidify their beliefs before those very beliefs are challenged after they graduate.

Additionally, Harkness is an exercise in humility. Harkness encourages students to explore a variety of ideas and to try to see beyond their own thinking. It is important for students to acknowledge that their thoughts on a topic or text are not the only ideas that exist or are correct. My favorite question to ask students after a Harkness discussion is what insightful comment they heard a peer make, because it encourages them to reflect on what knowledge they gained from the discussion that they would not have captured on their own.

The productivity of a Harkness discussion is often determined before the discussion even begins. So much of the student's ability to meaningfully contribute depends on their level of preparation prior to discussion. Students can be better prepared for Harkness when

they are discussing a text they are familiar with, when they are given questions ahead of time, when they bring original questions to the discussion, and when they set personal goals based on feedback and rubrics from previous discussions. Students grow when they reflect on their performance from previous discussions and take ownership of the overall quality of the class Harkness. One of the most powerful moments is when students genuinely cheer on the contributions of their peers, rather than only focusing on the next comment they want to make. While learning how to share their ideas is important, the ability to truly listen to others is just as, if not more, important. As a student, Harkness offered me the gift of confidence. As a teacher, I hope Harkness offers students the gift of compassion.

AP Language, Senior English, JBU Communications
(Jennifer Byrd, M.A. English)

Planning, questioning, and frequency. Having practiced the Harkness method for five years, I am convinced these three factors are key for a successful Harkness experience with students. As an English teacher, our discussions always center around a text. So, pre-Harkness activities, such as having students develop questions, give them something specific to bring to the table. Additionally, I typically have them discuss the reading in small groups for five to ten minutes before our large group discussion. This allows them to learn from each other and also get over their nervousness. During this time, each group has an assigned outcome, such as writing at least three questions on the board. This bit of structure helps students feel more secure and willing to bring their ideas to the table with confidence.

Recently, after learning about Arthur Costa's levels of thinking and questioning, I have focused on helping students write higher quality questions. In Costa's model, Level I is inquiry, Level II is analysis, and Level III is application. In the past, I've noticed my upper-level students tend to spend too much time on application (sometimes to cover for the fact that they didn't do the reading!) This year, I've tracked the time that each class has spent on each level, with the goal of spending 60 percent of the conversation analyzing the text. We always begin with inquiry and usually end with application, but I stress that analysis is the most valuable aspect of the discussion. Learning about levels of questioning and how to apply them to discussion has been a rich experience for me as a teacher and is bearing fruit for the learners.

Finally, frequency is key to helping students gain confidence in Harkness. Some students are intimidated by large group discussions. My biggest mistake in the past was the infrequency of the practice. I would have one or two discussions per quarter, and they would each be worth a test grade. This year, I've tried to schedule a Harkness discussion every week, and they've been worth a quiz grade. This maximizes habituation and minimizes stress. If students do not score well on one discussion, they have six to eight more chances before the end of the quarter.

In my classes, we have a goal of 100 percent participation for each discussion. Another technique is to recruit students to help pull more reluctant contributors into the conversation. As a result of increased frequency and decreased weight of grades for each Harkness discussion, I've seen more participation and less stress in my students

this year over previous years. Planning well, teaching students to form quality questions, and helping them gain confidence lead to valuable outcomes in student learning around the Harkness table.

Introduction to Romance Languages, French I, Advanced French
(Tony Saegert, M.A. French)

My first experience with Harkness left me feeling conflicted. Philosophically, this method of learning, which facilitates student-to-student engagement, aligned with the communal environment I aspire to create in my classroom. However, Harkness discussions seemed to tackle such abstract ideas, that I couldn't envision what it might look like in my French classroom where students are learning basic vocabulary and grammar. Giving it more thought, I came up with more questions than answers and could have easily walked away to return to 'what worked.' Nevertheless, just as I would encourage my students to embrace the tension as part of the growth process, I chose to remain open to the method of Harkness.

Over the course of the next months, my understanding of Harkness was continually refined and expanded through readings, observations, and practice. "Do I have to use text? Who creates the questions? Can I contribute? How do I even begin to grade this?" Answers to these questions revealed that Harkness is not so much a science, but rather an art that can be tailored to each teacher's style and strengths. Regardless, it became evident that no matter how one executes the discussion, a commonality among all Harkness tables was the notion of learning through collective discovery. Personally, this realization unlocked how my premature understanding of Harkness as simply abstract discourse could be adapted to teach the skills of my French curriculum.

Prior to implementing Harkness, instruction in my class would have predominantly consisted of me, the teacher, presenting content to my students. Often I would write verb conjugations on the board that students would then memorize. In contrast, Harkness invites the learner into the process by drawing out their own wonderings. Using a short text, students are challenged to voice what they notice, such as a pattern of every word after "vous" ending in "-ez." Collectively, the class hypothesizes the grammar concept in play and then attempts to apply it in a new context. How rewarding to witness students assume ownership of their learning! In addition to this shift, Harkness in a different language has provided students with valuable opportunities to practice communication skills such as asking clarifying questions, actively listening, and maneuvering around breakdowns in comprehension. Though their knowledge of the French remains the primary focus, I am confident that the supplementary skills gained through Harkness will long outserve their ability to rattle off "je ne sais quoi."

UCA College Algebra, UCA Statistics, AP Statistics
(Cheryl Rowen, M.S. Statistics)

When high school leadership first shared their vision of using the Harkness method in each subject area, I could not reconcile adding to what seemed like an already full curriculum. Harkness in math? Immediately my mind went to "what would I have to give up to make room for the inefficiency of large group discussions?" Thus began my journey of trial and error in how to capture the learning

benefits of Harkness in a math classroom. Here is a snapshot of what you might see were you to walk into my math classroom these days.

To begin, let's note the environment. Students are sitting at tables in groups of two to three. These tables can be pushed together for larger or whole group discussions as well. The room has whiteboards on multiple walls to allow students to write out their ideas. Though I might teach a mini-lesson briefly setting up necessary skills to dive deeper into some real-world problem, I rarely lecture. Instead, I roam, stopping intermittently at each group, prompting students through a series of questions, challenging their answers or perhaps encouraging them to continue down a line of reasoning. When asked, "Is this correct?" I might say, "Would you put that solution on the board? Let's discuss it!"

At first, students are frustrated, hesitant even, wanting to be "right" before they show their work to their peers. But after two or three weeks together, I can see this beautiful transformation take place. They become owners of their learning. They find their "math voice," and with increasing confidence put up their work in what we call a "white board critique." They lean on each other, rather than on me as the "authority" for confirmation. While students might occasionally sit around a large table to discuss topics such as "is using a calculator considered cheating?" you'll more often see smaller groups of students working on problem sets or up at a white board discussing and presenting multiple methods of problem solving to their peers.

My deepest desire as an educator is to inspire students to apply questioning, research, and logic not only to defend their own faith in Jesus Christ, but also to share His love and redemptive story to the world around them! Of course, our student outcomes indicate that we desire that "LRCA graduates...are confident calculators, creative problem-solvers, and clear communicators in mathematical language," but using math to show our students the very nature of their Creator, His predictability, His precision and the order in which

He created all things, including math, is my utmost priority. Asking questions such as "Did you know that God was the first to carry out a census?" (Numbers 1:2), or using probability logic to test the likelihood of one man, Jesus Christ, fulfilling two or three prophecies just by chance (thus juxtaposing chance occurrence against logical evidence to show the intentional design of the Gospel Story), teaches our students to view all learning—even math—through a Biblical lens. The type of thinking, questioning, collaborating, listening, and risk-taking that Harkness learning requires prepares our students to move from just "doing" math to "applying math" in their world, in their own voice. Their math voices become powerful when tied to the heart of faith.

A Journey Worth Taking

As Christian adults, a short reflection on our own sanctification process reminds us of how we have grown: in knowledge, in understanding, and in practice. We are not who we were (Praise the Lord!). Harkness is an educational practice that takes into consideration what it means to be human. The skills practiced in Harkness discussions, crafted and scaffolded by intentional, loving Christian educators, help students live out their identity and their purpose.

Using Harkness as an instructional practice has been a worthy pursuit on our campus. We continue to see flourishing and good growth in our students, and it is an important tool in our mission to shape hearts and minds evermore into the image of Christ: in knowledge, wisdom, and virtue. Teachers and students would agree that, messy and unpredictable as it can be at times, applying Harkness as an instructional practice is a journey worth taking.

Reference

Justin Smith, "The Harkness Approach Brings Student-Centered, Discussion-Based Learning to LRCA," *The Warrior*, Winter 2018, 10-12.

