

The Conference Method, or Harkness Pedagogy: Listening for Discussion

Abstract

Harkness pedagogy celebrated its 80th birthday in 2011. Though the “pedagogy” (it is variously described as a mode, method, and style of teaching) is relatively old and widely used, little has been written about by those unaffiliated with its birthplace, Phillips-Exeter Academy. The present essay, then, has two aims. First, it aims to introduce Harkness pedagogy to academic audiences interested in pedagogies of listening and discussion. Drawing on archival documents, original manuals composed by Harkness teachers, and relevant philosophy the paper sketches the pedagogy’s history and practice. Second, the paper will establish that there is a mode of listening unique to Harkness pedagogy called *listening for discussion*.

Introduction

I first heard about Harkness pedagogy from a friend. He was listening to me complain about how my high school seniors would not listen to me. I was teaching Theory of Knowledge, part of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, at an American international school in Quito, Ecuador. My job, essentially, was to facilitate discussions with students about topics of interest. As a young ignorant gringo, only a few years older than them and with little experience of their culture, I was teaching a class of which very few of them understood the point—so they did not listen.

I was going to try something new, though. I had noticed that these seniors—waiting for graduation already in October—would discuss amongst themselves. They would have fruitful and interesting discussions despite me, listening and speaking to one another in turns as I was trying to get class started. My idea was this: I would take myself out of the center of attention. I would give them a topic to talk about or a text to read and let them discuss it. If I could get out of the way, then maybe they would discuss interesting things as part of the class instead of despite the class. But I was not sure about the details or how to get started.

I ended my rant with a sigh. My friend nodded and said something very heartening. He said he had a friend at another international school that taught in the way I had describe: letting students discuss. I listened intently. He said this friend had given him packets of information about the pedagogy, which were sitting in a drawer in his desk. My friend promised to drop the packets off at my classroom the next day. He did. The packet was on Harkness teaching. My friend’s friend got it from the Exeter Humanities Institute (EHI), a professional development seminar at Phillips-Exeter Academy in New Hampshire devoted to student-centered discussion. I read it and

put it to use. I became somewhat obsessed with it. A year later I studied the history and efficacy of Harkness teaching for my master's thesis, and two years later I attended the EHI just as I began researching the philosophy of discussion as a doctoral student.

I tell this story because “letting students discuss” defines Harkness teaching and the particular variety of listening it requires. Had I never felt the need to get out of the way I would not have approached my friend with my problem, nor would I have been ready to listen to what he had to say; nor would I have found and followed a research interest that, only very recently, has brought into focus what “getting out of the way” really means.

What it means, or what it points to at least, is a tension in teaching. The direct presence of a teacher's voice, the authority of it, can decrease the quality of the learning that occurs or even prevent learning from occurring at all. This is (nearly) a paradox¹, as learning is stereotypically what's supposed to happen from and around teachers. The fact that a teacher's voice, his or her authority as a teacher, could prevent quality learning from occurring tragically undermines the whole enterprise; which is what happened to me in Ecuador, I believe.

The purpose of this essay is first to show how Harkness teaching, or what was once called the Conference Method, is a response to this tension, and, second, to present the particular form of listening it requires. After a brief history of the pedagogy, I will situate the pedagogy into the wider field of research on teaching discussion. I will then propose three general rules for practicing Harkness pedagogy, with illustrative concepts and vignettes. My concluding thought will be that there is a kind of listening peculiar to Harkness, listening for *discussion*, which permits a group to address a question in common through an equal and various sequence of turns.

History of the Pedagogy

In the mid 1920s Edward Harkness and Lewis Perry met on a train and started chatting.² They discovered that they were both going to the same wedding, and that they were both interested in education. The former was the son of Stephen Harkness, second only to Rockefeller in 19th

¹ cf. Santoro (2008) “...the problem of pedagogical authority is ‘*the pedagogical paradox.*’ [Gert Biesta] explains that ‘child-centered pedagogy has tried to circumvent the paradox by excluding authority from education, arguing that the only road *to* freedom is *through* freedom. In its most extreme forms it has thereby eradicated pedagogy altogether.’”

² Conversation with Edouard DeRochers July 31 2012. Harkness's personal papers are notoriously sparse and only a few records are kept in the archives at Exeter. Thanks to Edouard for his guidance and help in the archival work done for this piece.

century oil wealth, and had decided to give away vast sums of his inherited fortune to elite educational institutions in the United States. The latter was the principal of one such institution: Phillips-Exeter Academy, perhaps the oldest and most prestigious of the New England boarding schools.

Having just received a huge gift from Exeter alumnus Colonel M. Thompson, Perry was on the lookout for more funding to build better dorms and facilities for his school. Harkness was known for giving vast sums to universities for pedagogical and curricular improvement, most notably Harvard and Yale, where he funded the reorganization of those colleges into house systems and expanded their campuses. (He also funded the construction of Columbia University's Butler Library.) The two men developed a correspondence. In 1928, Harkness hinted that he might be interested in giving to Exeter, but wanted a thorough proposal for how the money would be used. Perry made extensive preparations for a grant proposal, including a trip to England to research the boys schools there (a suggestion from Harkness) and the formation of a committee at Exeter devoted exclusively to pedagogical proposals. Perry sent the document later that year. Harkness, much to Perry's frustration, rejected it somewhat vehemently. It was this rejection, sent from a pseudonym to protect Harkness's identity, that would form the core of what is now called Harkness teaching.

Edward Harkness would not give Exeter money unless Perry accommodated his vision of students sitting in a circle around a single table, where a teacher taught by listening and talking to them, which more be understood as a desire to replace the traditional recitation method of teaching with a pedagogy of discussion. Perry rushed to assuage the billionaire. Reflecting on Harkness's strongly-worded letter, the principal stressed to his committees of teachers the importance of making proposals that would satisfy Harkness's adamant vision, underscoring one central requirement that Harkness would not drop: the conference method.

Perry gathered another faculty committee together to rewrite the proposal, emphasizing a section proposing to hire 25 new teachers, train them in a new method of teaching based on "conferring," and design classrooms for the purpose. In the fall of 1929, just before the infamous stock market crash that would yield a Great Depression, Harkness agreed to give Perry one of the single highest gifts ever handed to a secondary school: \$5.8 million (\$77, 981,424 in 2013 dollars).

Perry went on to build new buildings and order special Conference Method tables (for which there remains a company that specially constructs them). Teachers began training in a new method of teaching: sitting around the tables instead of standing and leading recitations. An English teacher named Frank Cushwa, who headed a team committed to integrating the conference method in classrooms, quoted in a personal letter the words of a teacher who had

adopted this new method in 1931³, which, to those who practice it, may still be true today:

Sitting in a group about a table instead of in formal rows of seats has abolished almost completely the stiff duality which used to obtain between instructor and class, when, I am afraid, his elevation on a platform tended to hedge him about with too much dignity and make him somewhat unapproachable...and which did tend to make the student still less articulate. The very naturalness of the new arrangement, besides being more comfortable, has in good part wiped out that class-consciousness.⁴ Now, there is a freedom of discussion, an eagerness to participate, that I never saw before, the value of which to both student and instructor is incalculable.

Eight decades later this conference method, on which the billionaire had so adamantly insisted, is still a “core ethos of the entire school.”⁵

Harkness Teaching in Context

Despite its relatively long history, little research has been published about Harkness teaching by academics outside Phillip-Exeter Academy. A high school teacher has written one short article mentioning its success in his American history classroom.⁶ Another high school teacher has praised the pedagogy for its potential in ESL classrooms.⁷ A legal scholar has written an essay speculating that Harkness could improve the law school experience.⁸ Beyond that, very little. One major essay does exist, but, like much of the writing about Harkness teaching, it was co-authored by Exeter employees--Lawrence Smith and Margaret Foley--and appeared only

³ Undated facsimile of letter signed by Cushwa from Philips-Exeter Archive, accessed July 31 2012.

⁴ Though he does not say it explicitly, there is a political quality to Cushwa’s phrasing that should be noted: “class-consciousness” sounds like a play on the Marxist concept of class consciousness. Harkness teaching does evoke radical formulations of democracy, which I mention later in the chapter.

⁵ Smith, Lawrence A., and Margaret Foley. "Partners in a Human Enterprise: Harkness Teaching in the History Classroom." *History Teacher* 42.4 (2009): 477-496.

⁶ Mullgardt, Brian (2008). “Introducing and Using the Discussion (aka Harkness) Table.” *Independent Teacher: The eJournal for Independent School Educator*, 6 (1). Retrieved from <http://www.independentteacher.org/vol6/6.1-5-Harkness-Table.html>

⁷ Sevigny, P. (2012). “Extreme Discussion Circles:Preparing ESL Students for ‘The Harkness Method’” *Polyglossia* (23).

⁸ Courchesne, C.G. (2005). “A Suggestion of a Fundamental Nature: Imagining a Legal Education of Solely Electives Taught as Discussions” [Electronic version]. *Rutgers Law Record*, 29, 21-64.

recently in 2009. By no means exhaustive, Smith and Foley's article appears, at this writing, to be one of the only peer-reviewed texts that deals explicitly with what the conference method looks like, how to do it, and what distinguishes it from other ways of teaching. What follows will knit this account together with the wider literature on discussion.

Stripped of its history and unique locale, Harkness teaching is another name what educators have for nearly a century identified as teaching discussion. The literature on this subject is huge. Below are a few key distinctions from that literature separating discussion-based teaching from other methods, each of which help to place Harkness in a wider research context.

Starting broadly, Harkness teaching is dialogical rather than monological. Though Burbules and Bruce warn against taking this dichotomy too seriously, it serves to locate pedagogies that emphasize "ongoing discursive involvement of participants, constituted in a relation of reciprocity and reflexivity."⁹ Discussion, along with conversation, debate, seminar, dialectic, bull session, etc., is located in this realm of teaching practices. Within this realm there are important differences between the kinds of dialogical practices just listed. James T. Dillon gives an exact account of how discussion differs from these other kinds of educational interaction, defining discussion as "group address of a question in common."¹⁰ Discussion is not wandering talk that jumps from topic to topic (conversation). It is not competitive talk between two positions (debate), nor a group rant (bull session). Importantly, like Harkness himself specified in his letter to Perry, discussion is not when a teacher asks a question, listens to a student response, vocally evaluates the response, and follows up with another question (recitation). While Walton makes the observation that back and forth talking (dialogue) can shift in and out of these modes, Dillon is clear that each mode is distinct from the others.¹¹ Discussion, in this essay anyway, is--following Dillon--when a group addresses a question in common. To avoid recitation, the whole group must come up with the question. Practically, this requires that the students talk with one another as much or more than they talk with the teacher during class time. In Dillon's terms, this requires an equality and variety in the sequence of turns taken during the interaction. No single participant (whether student or teacher) will speak after other participants more or less in this formulation.¹²

⁹ Burbules, Nicholas C., and Bertram C. Bruce. "Theory and Research on Teaching as Dialogue." in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. Ed. Virginia Richardson. 4th ed. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 2001. 1102-121. *Google Scholar*. Web. May 2012, p.18.

¹⁰ Dillon, James T. *Using Discussion in Classrooms*. Open UP, 1994, p.8.

¹¹ Walton, Donald N. *The Place of Emotion in Argument*. Penn State, 1992, p.56.

¹² Socrates, for instance, typically follows up each comment during a dialogue. An interlocutor will speak, then Socrates will speak, then another interlocutor will speak, after which Socrates

This last criterion indicates one last distinction which situates Harkness teaching in the discussion literature: student-centered vs. teacher-centered pedagogy. Student-centered pedagogies tend to follow models of Vygotskyian distributed cognition, Peircian community of inquiry, and/or the democratic-theoretical traditions of educational communication represented by John Dewey and later David Bridges. Each of these approaches de-center the teacher position in the classroom, differentiating discussion from Socratic dialogue, for example, where the teacher acts as a kind of gatekeeper with respect to student comments. In other words, teachers in student-centered pedagogy (as I discovered in Ecuador) permits students to interact with one another rather than compelling them to interact exclusively with the teacher.

Harkness is therefore a dialogical, student-centered style that prioritizes group address of a question in common in an equal and various sequence of turns. This formulation accords with Smith and Foley, who write that Harkness teaching means

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.¹³

Cultivating this sense of responsibility and practicing Harkness/discussion-based teaching requires a particular set of behaviors. The literature on discussion is replete with tips and tricks, and Harkness teachers are no different. Below is one general idea--“modulated authority”--present in the manuals on Harkness teaching distributed at the Exeter Humanities Institute. We can extrapolate three rules for practicing Harkness pedagogy from this general concept of modulated authority, which together converge on a unique kind of listening: listening for discussion.

Practice

responds. This is not an equal and various sequence of turns. See Dillon, James T. *The Practice of Questioning*. Taylor & Francis, 1990. Print. International Ser. on Communication Skills, p.14.

¹³ Smith, Lawrence A., and Margaret Foley. "Partners in a Human Enterprise: Harkness Teaching in the History Classroom." *History Teacher* 42.4 (2009): 477-496.

Near the beginning of the handbook given to teachers at the Exeter Humanities Institute, there is a section entitled “sample strategies for discussion.” The third sample strategy is “keeping quiet.”

Keeping Quiet: A major challenge in discussion-based teaching is modulating the authoritative voice of the teacher. These strategies may help you combat the natural tendency the students have to listen for, and to, your voice.

- Invite students to take responsibility, to be clear when they change subjects in the flow of discussion, rather than looking to you to clarify transitions.
- When the class has gained its own dynamic and degree of familiarity, sit away from the table on occasion, or outside the circle. Say to the students that you understand how demanding your absence may be but you think they are up to the challenge.
- Tell the students that you are the scribe/recorder of the day and will make every effort to be quiet and listen to their thoughts; leave time at the end of the class to summarize those thoughts and show them the diagram you make of the class. It's refreshing sometimes to free yourself from the content and record the statistical aspects of discussion, the patterns of address and response.
- Gesture to the rest of the table when a student seems to have eye contact only for you. Occasionally say something like: "Are you talking to Camilla who just spoke? Then look at her, not me." Though students address the teacher, they are, at times, addressing the class through you.¹⁴

Not all Harkness teachers would point to this as being an essential strategy for Harkness teaching. Many might even object to it. I exaggerate the importance of this sample strategy however because, from all those in the manual, it touches on the core principles of Harkness teaching that I have observed both as a researcher and teacher of Harkness.

Conceptually, the pedagogy hinges on this idea of "modulating the authoritative voice of the teacher," or “modulated authority.” Practically speaking, modulating authoritative voice entails shifting or changing the kind of thing a teacher is authoritative about during class. The Harkness teacher should modulate from being an authority about *content* to being an authority about the *process* of learning, guiding the way in which students go about learning as opposed to what it is they learn. There are a number of ways to guide the process rather than the content of learning, which Harkness teachers themselves describe later in the handbook. For example, Peter Greer, an English teacher at Exeter, does not “make eye contact with the students when they are talking.”

¹⁴ EHI Handbook, 2011, p.3.

I scan the room to judge the engagement of other students, I look down, I flip through the text, I look into the center of the table, but I rarely look at the student who is speaking because I know that he or she is then likely to look back at me.¹⁵

In this case, preventing eye contact is one way to modulate teacher authority. If students do not make eye contact with the teacher, s/he will be less likely to guide the content of learning during the interaction. Similarly, when asked “When did you first think of yourself as a Harkness teacher?” Becky Moore, an English teacher, responded, “The first time I sat quietly without getting nervous while students thought and then began the conversation again in a useful and detailed way--without my prompting...” Moore does not prompt the students, nor does she instill within them a “proper” way of thinking. Rather, without any reservation or “nervousness,” she allows the students to talk amongst themselves. Moore elaborates in another response that “the students’ ideas [in a Harkness discussion] are to structure the outcome...students eventually choose, steer, junk, embrace, and clarify ideas.” It is the students, not the teacher, who “structure” the outcome in a Harkness discussion. While the teacher may guide the way in which students talk (who has said what to whom), the students have direct purview over their own concepts during classtime.

Margaret Foley, the history teacher whom co-authored the 2009 essay with Smith, writes in the handbook that “how much and when I intervene is a constant issue for debate in my mind and one that I feel pretty insecure about...” By “intervention” Foley may mean both speaking about the content or process of student interaction, which would be a more radical modulation of teacher authority: complete non-intervention. Commenting on the theme of intervention, Kathy Brownback writes that she plays “a pretty significant role in a lot of discussions, less in others, but [I] try to make sure it’s not to interject my own point of view, as much as to open questions or ideas that no one has yet brought up yet...” Here is a less radical form of modulation: when the teacher interjects new avenues for students’ thinking. Despite this “significant role” Brownback claims to play during discussion, she admits that “the less the classroom is about me either personally or as the teacher the better off we seem to do.” In this case we still have modulated authority as a value or guiding ideal for the teachers’ behavior. Bruce Pruitt phrases the ideal in a different way, claiming that being a Harkness teacher requires “a sense of humor...sensitivity to group dynamics, individual needs. Humility.” Modulating authority, particularly when one already has authority, entails a humble sensitivity to individual needs. In this way, the teacher permits an equal and various sequence of turns, thereby helping a group to form and address a question.

¹⁵ The following series of quotations are taken from the EHI Handbook, 2011.

Each teacher, in different ways, describes how to work against the students' tendency to rely on a teacher's authority for content. Thus the power of "keeping quiet." Permitting student discussion therefore means "leaving it up to them" and "letting it go," two tropes which iterate throughout the EHI manual as well as Smith and Foley's essay on Harkness teaching. Tracking, another important tactic ("being the scribe of the day") is what a teacher can do to both express and modulate her authority. "Among our various tracking devices," Smith and Foley write,

are those to track types of comments, types of questions, types of interruptions, gender interaction, body language, 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.

During class, a Harkness teacher may be seen writing notes about any or all of these behaviors and referring to them every during class. Their role is to be a kind of mirror for the students, so that the group can think more clearly about where it is going and why it is going there.

Three principles of Harkness teaching

Reflecting on the ideas and observations above, these rules for Harkness teaching stand out.

(1) Let it go and leave it up to them: A Harkness teacher must, to some degree, relinquish control of classroom events, allowing the group as a whole to "share in the administration"¹⁶ of the educational outcome.

(2) Track: A Harkness teacher, like a sociologist of the classroom, must produce some account (or trace) of what occurred during class. This typically takes the form of detailed notes on the kind, frequency, and quality/substance of comments, as well as other paralinguistic behaviors.

(3) Learn through discussion: The Harkness teacher's goal is to create discussion, which is group address of a question in common through an equal and various sequence of turns taken. The aim

¹⁶ cf. Aristotle's *Politics*, 1261b. The implications for social justice in Harkness teaching have yet to be expressed fully. The types of behaviors required for a Harkness discussion at least prepare and at most enact behaviors sufficient for an Aristotelian formulation of constitutional democracy. When students are permitted to share in the educational outcome that will affect them, their process of interaction itself is democratic. Listening for discussion, on the part of the Harkness teacher, therefore, creates the conditions for this kind of democracy to emerge between students. Rather than merely talking about democracy, students enact democracy in the form of their interaction as they discuss the subject matter.

is for all participants to learn in this distinct way.

Listening for Discussion

There is a kind of listening unique to this pedagogy. Harkness listening, or what I will call listening for discussion, is a form of relational listening, as mentioned in the introduction, since it “improves” or changes the quality of relations among a group when the teacher listens in this way. The relational change listening for discussion creates however happens both between individual members of the discussion, like the teacher and student, and at the level of the group as a whole. Building on what has already been said, to teach Harkness one must listen for modulated authority. Smith and Foley give a complex but evocative metaphor to describe this kind of listening:

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 information 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 infinitum. 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 follow 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?" ...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 student.

In this metaphor, the teacher's brain must follow students as they make their way through a discussion, just as information passes through a computer. This will happen in unique ways from group to group, day to day, subject to subject. Listening, then, for the Harkness teacher, means listening for modulated authority. Using the rules mentioned earlier, this means listening in order to leave learning up to students. It means listening to track the ways in which they themselves

learn. Finally, as Smith and Foley imply above and as the third rule states, this means listening for *discussion*, in Dillon's sense. This isn't listening for recitation of facts or opinions, listening for debate between two competing positions, or listening for conversation that wanders from topic to topic. It means listening such that the group addresses a question in common. Listening for discussion is therefore a kind of relational listening: one that creates the conditions for a group to form between teachers and students.

Rather than expressing and maintaining his or her authority, when the teacher listens to discussion, s/he modulates authority to permit an equal and various sequence in the turns taken during the interaction. In this way listening for discussion contrasts to a traditional didactic pedagogy of listening. When students and teacher speak and listen in turn, as Aristotle writes of constitutional democracy, it will appear--though briefly--as though as they are "different persons." When a teacher modulates authority in the way that Harkness listening requires, s/he distributes the authority which the teacher accrues in such a way as to create a situation where students teach and teachers learn, recalling Freire's famous formulation of the "students/teachers and teachers/students."¹⁷ Though the teacher will remain in control of certain facets beyond the interaction, such as grading and curriculum, traditional didacticism permutes into a different relation in the moment of discussion--so long as s/he listens for it.

Conclusion

As a TOK teacher in Ecuador, I experienced first-hand the (near) paradox mentioned at the start of this essay. The more I talked, the more I tried to engage my students in discussion, the less engaged they became. When I got out of the way and let them talk about something without my direct presence, however, they came up with insightful questions they were able to discuss amongst themselves as I listened and took notes on what they said. It wasn't perfect of course, but I could sense that the "revolution in methods" Edward Harkness prescribed roughly 80 years ago occurred there in my classroom. This revolution, described by scholars and educators for more than a century, is that of teaching discussion--of which Harkness teaching is one style or mode. This style of teaching requires a particular kind of listening--listening for discussion--that permits students to share in the administration of an educational outcome, tracks specific behaviors, and ensures that learning occurs through group address of a question in common.

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