

“They Flipped” Example

Kerrigan Mahoney

Name: Harkness Discussion Method

Educational Levels: Primarily middle and high school, but there is evidence that the Harkness Method has been used K-16.

Curriculum/ discipline(s) address: This is a whole-school pedagogical approach as originally designed and implemented.

Learning goals:

The specific content learning goals in this instructional approach will vary from class to class because of the more global nature of the approach. However, two teachers at Phillips Exeter Academy offered the following as a definition of Harkness, which sheds some light on the purpose of the approach and its impact on students:

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 (Smith & Foley, 2009, p. 478).

In all of the examples located of this approach in practice, the goal is focused on student learning with students as the central actors in the classroom.

Learning processes (student and teacher participation particulars):

In some respects, the Harkness Method includes student activities that are used frequently and have been for a long time. For example, the primary work that students do outside of class is reading in history or English classes, and problems in math classes. However, what makes this method notable is the purpose for reading and the in-class learning activities that are tied to it. Harkness is not lecture and is also not Socratic Seminar, a discussion-based approach in which a leader asks open-ended questions to facilitate discussion (Smith & Foley, 2009). With Harkness, students must create the questions *and* discover the answers to them. The primary method of doing this is discussion. The students are expected to come to class ready to share ideas, base their ideas on evidence from the text, and respond to the ideas of other students in the class. The students need to apply what they learned outside of class to generate new understanding in class, whether this is through case studies, answers to a question from another student, or creating a formula to solve a problem.

During a class session, it may look like the teacher is not doing anything at all. There is some variation on this practice, but often, the teacher is an observer outside of the discussion. A common strategy the teacher employs is to track the discussion via a diagram of the class (the students should be sitting in an oval) with notations about the types of contributions they make (question, textual support, etc.). The teacher can look for patterns and provide feedback to the students, and also share the diagram with the class to help the students visualize their contributions and improve in their discussion skills. In order to get the students to the point of near-autonomy in discussion, there are many strategies that the teacher can employ as responsibility for discussion-leading is released gradually to the students.

For example, in the Harkness Method, there is a focus on asking the right kinds of questions that will solicit input and deepen learning, so teachers using the method may have a few of these questions ready to move the discussion forward if students are faltering. However, an approach particular to the Harkness method is in the idea that the teacher must guide reflection on the discussion itself, along with the content being studied. For example, if there is a lull in the discussion, instead of the teacher jumping in and prompting the students with a question about content, she should instead ask, “why this silence?” Then, “as a class, everyone can talk about why nobody was talking” (p. 485). At the end of the class, the teacher can ask the students to reflect on how the discussion went and their participation in it.

Of particular note in my research about the Harkness Method is its application in the math department at Philips Exeter Academy. Teachers and students there don’t use any math textbooks. The teachers have developed problem sets for each class, and the students have to figure out how to solve each problem using what they know from the problems that they have solved prior. So, for example, every year the students have to collaborate to derive the quadratic equation in order to solve related problems, rather than “plugging in” the numbers based on an example provided by teachers (Thomas & Hassan, 2012).

Digital tools and resources used:

The Harkness Method was first implemented in 1930, and so does not require the use of digital technology. Smith and Foley (2009) discuss using technology in Harkness with a great deal of wariness, saying: “the very nature of a computer encourages isolation and individuality, which promotes behaviors contrary to participation in class discussion.” They then go on to say, “we are always looking for ways to integrate technology and discussion, but so often the two are almost mutually exclusive to each other; a student cannot be working at a computer while at the same time discussing material with classmates” (p. 491). However, by 2012 Philips Exeter Academy had begun an iPad initiative. In their spring 2012 newsletter, they shared examples of teachers allowing students to use their phones to look up facts and definitions during class discussion and describe how they have used iPads to do their reading outside of class, participate in peer review of writing, and update class blogs and websites. The authors note that: “among other things, the pilot project demonstrated the importance of both context and subject matter in the application of this technology.”

How this example of flipping is similar to and different from what we have been reading and discussing about the phenomenon:

In October 2013, our class has identified four potential characteristics of a flipped classroom that fit many (but not all) of the examples we have studied. They are: 1. a teacher or school “flips” a classroom when they make a fundamental change in their approach to teaching (there is a before and an after) 2. the change in teaching deals with using time differently, especially with a focus on maximizing time for student learning and applying learning to new problems and contexts 3. the students are actively engaged in learning and 4. digital technology is used to support this change (or even make it possible) .

The Harkness Method fulfills the first three criteria of flipped instruction very well. The Harkness Method came about because the instructors at Philips Exeter wanted to make a fundamental change to the approach to teaching and learning in the classroom. Prior to the creation of the Harkness Method, all of the instruction at the school was done via lecture, and the students snapped their fingers to answer a question posed by a teacher. It was a teacher-centered, teacher-driven (and quite tense) learning environment. The change “flipped” the classes to a student-centered approach with a very different purpose for education in mind, as the description above illustrates.

Today, as new teachers and students enter Philips Exeter, they must change their approach to education to fit the Harkness Method. In the new approach, time was also used differently. The students do outside reading to prepare to apply their learning during in-class discussions. This is very much in line with the “traditional” flipped method described by Bergmann and Sams (2012), especially with their emphasis upon student-to-student interaction, rather than student-to-teacher. Bergmann and Sams explain the importance of creating a culture of learning, saying: “We think the key is for students to identify learning as their goal, instead of striving for the completion of assignments. We have purposely tried to make our classes a place where students carry out meaningful activities instead of completing busywork” (p. 27-8). This aligns well with the student-centered philosophy of the Harkness model. The Harkness Method fully embraces the concept of student-centered learning in which the students are actively engaged in learning in and outside of the classroom. The major difference between the Harkness Method and other versions of flipped classrooms is the absence of vs. focus on technology as a vehicle for change.

The Flipped Mastery approach, however, does not align as well with the Harkness Method. Flipped Mastery embodies a more individualized approach to instruction, with students working at very different paces inside and outside of class. In Harkness, everyone addresses the same content during class time to facilitate student collaboration. One particular place where the two do overlap is the focus on having the students ask the questions. Bergmann and Sams require their students to ask “interesting questions” by having them come to class prepared with a question about the video that was assigned for viewing prior to class. Harkness relies on students regularly asking insightful and in-depth questions that connect their learning with concepts and situations beyond the text or topic at hand.

The Harkness method aligns best with “So What” section of Gerstein’s model for the flipped classroom because they are both about learner-generated meaning-making. Gerstein’s model suggests a fairly different implementation for this aspect of learning than what we see in a Harkness classroom, but the similarity lies in the goal: learner

construction of understanding. The students must be able construct, reflect on, and articulate their understanding.

Finally, the Peer Instruction approach also offers some loose connections to the Harkness method. Both were developed without the requirement of digital technology for implementation, but have assimilated technology use in different ways to enhance the approach. Both also take a “traditional” approach to what students do outside of class: they read. The biggest difference is the activities that occur during in-class time, at least on the surface. This originates, to some extent, within the context in which the methods were developed. Peer Instruction was developed to address 200 students in a lecture hall; Harkness was developed for 12 students sitting around an oval table. However, both focus on the idea that students can and do learn from each other and offer time in class for them to do so.

Other relevant information:

The term Harkness is also used to refer to the table at which the students sit during class time at Philips Exeter Academy. There is more information available on the schematics and development of the table than might be expected. It is not directly relevant to the purposes of this document, so I did not include it earlier, but it comes up very frequently in information about Harkness. See the video on this page if you are interested in learning more about the Harkness table:

http://www.exeter.edu/admissions/109_1220_11688.aspx

Comments/ reflections upon this example of flipped/inverted learning/teaching:

Because the Harkness method is so rooted in the context and culture of Philips Exeter Academy, most of the information here is based in Philips Exeter’s development and application of the method. However, teachers in public schools, especially in AP classes, are also using the method. The biggest difference is that no public school (at least that I have seen) has taken this on as a whole-school approach, although other private schools have. Philips Exeter has even been running a summer institute for teachers since 2000 about how to use and adapt the method to different educational contexts. Teachers from across the U.S. have attended. There are also strategies and examples available for implementing the method with much larger classes. I think one of the motivating factors for using the method is that it can be done without digital technology, so that teachers who are in places without a lot of resources and are searching for a student-centered approach can implement the Harkness Method effectively.

I discovered this method during my last two years of teaching before I became a doctoral student at William & Mary. I tried it on a very limited basis with both my AP students and in an integrated 9th grade class, which included students with a variety of cognitive and behavioral learning needs working on and below grade level. I was very pleased with the results in both classes, and impressed with my students’ responses to the method. It was amazing to see them encourage each other, take initiative to be leaders, listen actively and attentively, and walk away from class feeling accomplished. I think combining this method with technology tools that facilitate engaged learning, collaboration, and discussion could

make Harkness even more accessible, especially for students with different abilities and learning needs.

URL(s) for more Information:

Overview of the Harkness Method and the history behind it from Philips Exeter Academy: http://www.exeter.edu/admissions/109_1220.aspx

A description of the Harkness Discussion Method in the Mathematics Department of Philips Exeter Academy: http://www.exeter.edu/academics/72_6532.aspx

A student explaining her experience at Philips Exeter Academy as compared to her experience in other schools: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIMIE52-Ago>

A video overview of the perspectives of students and teachers on the Harkness Method from the Rocky Hill School: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6sHSVX0_VM

Journal article written by two history teachers at Philips Exeter Academy that details the teaching strategies implemented in Harkness:
Smith, L. A., & Foley, M. (2009). Partners in a human enterprise: Harkness teaching in the history classroom. *The History Teacher*, 42(4), 477–496.

Spring 2012 Philips Exeter Academy Newsletter: “Technology and Harkness: An Experiment” http://www.exeter.edu/exeter_bulletin/12984_14241.aspx

An in-depth interview with the Principal of Philips Exeter Academy: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6uzO7FDft0>

I first learned about the Harkness Method from Jodi Rice, a high school English teacher from Canada, who posted a message about it to an Advanced Placement English email list, and I emailed her for more information. She has since posted her personal narrative about implementing the Harkness Method on her website: <https://sites.google.com/site/jodisschooldocs/harkness/implementing-harkness> She also keeps a Delicious page that shares resources regarding implementing the Harkness Method: <https://delicious.com/zinzinnia/Harkness>

References

Bergmann, J., & Sams, A. (2012). *Flip your classroom: Reach every student in every class every day*. Eugene, OR: International Society for Technology in Education.

Smith, L. A., & Foley, M. (2009). Partners in a human enterprise: Harkness teaching in the history classroom. *The History Teacher*, 42(4), 477–496.

Thomas, D. (Interviewer) & Hassan, T. (Interviewee). (2012). *21st Century Learning: Philips Exeter* [Video Interview]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6uzO7FDft0>