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ARTICLES

FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

NEWS OF THE ALUMNI

Cover: Principal Stephen G. Kurtz, now back at school after a well-deserved Academy Leave (July-October). During part of the time, he was on Hurricane Island (Outward Bound Program) and afterwards on a walking tour of Scotland. The interregnum heads of the school were John B. Heath, Dean of the Faculty; Lynda K. Beck, Assistant Principal; and Colin F. N. Irving '41, Treasurer.

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THE HARKNESS SYSTEM

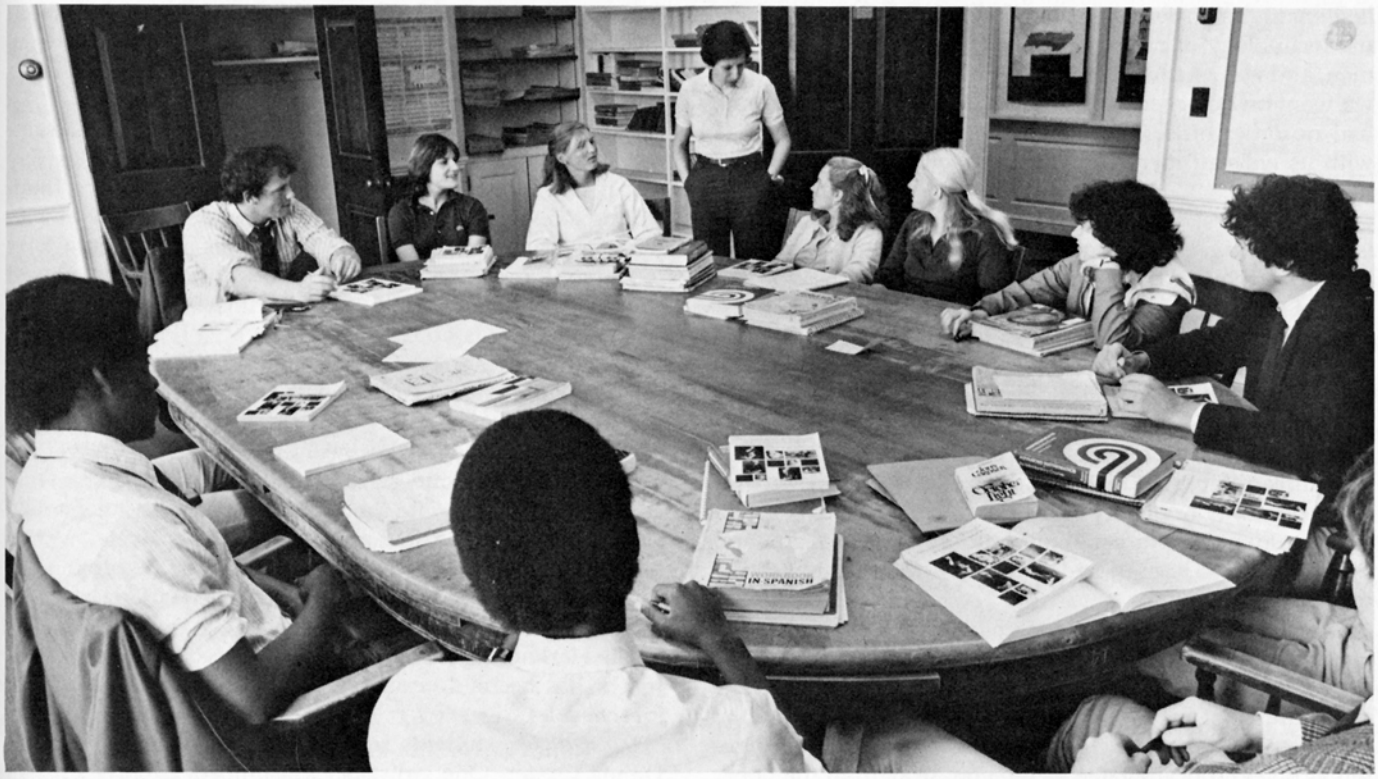
By John B. Heath

After taking the class roll, circa 1930, the teacher started to explain to the 25 students in the four rows of desks in front of him why Hamlet kept delaying his revenge. The students took notes. Occasionally one asked a question, or was formally called on by last name to recite. Often when the teacher asked the class a question there was a chorus of snapping fingers, some of them a bluff. In 55 minutes the teacher had fully covered Hamlet's procrastination, and the students had recorded *his* findings. . . .

At the beginning of another class, circa 1965, the teacher asked the 12 students sitting with him around the large oval table dominating the classroom what he considered to be an answerable question: "Why does Hamlet keep postponing his revenge?" There was no answer. Silence. By the time the bell rang fifty minutes later, there was still no answer. No one had said a word since the opening question. The class was dismissed. . . .

Those two classes dramatize the difference between a *Before* Harkness class at Phillips Exeter Academy, that is, before school year 1931-32, and an *After* Harkness class. Edward L. Harkness is famous for a tower at Yale, but in southeastern New Hampshire and west central New Jersey he is better known for a couple of large buildings full of oval tables at Exeter and at Lawrenceville. When he offered $6,000,000 to Exeter to come up with a big educational idea, the big idea it came up with was to double the faculty, cut class size in half, and construct classrooms each with a single large oval table with chairs around it rather than rows of desks facing the teacher. The big idea was simple, obvious, and daring. Imagine the hassle in *your* school district meeting today if the school board all of a sudden offered for voters' approval a budget to *double* the number of teachers!

The classrooms themselves were built to obviate inflation of class size. The magic number in 1931-32 was 12. That number 12 was one of those great intuitive leaps, like Abner Doubleday's 90 feet between bases on a baseball diamond. It is possible to squeeze 14 students around the table if they are not writing, and the average class size is now 13 rather than 12 — a total inflation of 8.3% in fifty years. Consider



Francesca Piana, Instructor in Modern Languages.

that among all the other inflations since 1932! In the present Harkness classroom, it is not physically feasible to expand class size much further, and although it must have been an economic temptation to do so anyway, it has not been attempted. The English teachers, who never agree on anything else, agree, when the size of any class exceeds 14, to impale themselves on their red Bic pens.

The Harkness class was the precursor of what came to be called group dynamics. Around the Harkness table 12 students and a teacher face each other, and do not have to talk to people's backs. There is no back row. Even listening to each other is easier, because students can see each other's faces, not just the teacher's. Each is physically close to two other people, almost touching. And the teacher is not up front facing the class, on a pedestal, but seated at the table, on the same level, symbolically equal. Lecture, formal recitation, even hand-raising, are obsolete. Lecturing to 12 students, or 13, is absurd.

That second class, the one with the long silence, was painful to the teacher, but more painful to the students. It was so tense and guilt-ridden that it could not be boring. Have you ever had absolutely nothing to do for 50 minutes, sitting upright in a wooden chair, without being in a position either physically or morally to sleep? It seems like fifty years. George Bennett, Class of 1923 and later a revered English teacher, used to say that the best questions in a Harkness class were the unanswerable ones — by which he meant questions not answerable "Yes" or "No" or by any other "right" answer.

In that sense the question on *Hamlet* was unanswerable. In the next meeting of that English class, and in all succeeding meetings with that teacher that year, you can bet that the students unfailingly answered the questions, even the unanswerable ones.

The class with the 50-minute silence actually happened at Exeter. It was certainly not typical, but it *was* symbolic. That Harkness teacher, faced with a quiet class, was serving notice that *he* was not going to lecture, do all the talking — that he was going to ask leading questions, but not answer them himself, not, like hostess at a dinner party, fill the silences. He was going to moderate, but the students were going to participate. They were not going to hide in the back row, because there *was* no back row, or in the crwod, because there *was* no crowd. He knew that people learn by doing — by reading, writing, thinking, talking, yes, and by listening — but not just by sitting there. The goal is to increase the 'student's power, rather than his knowledge of one particular book. The Harkness classroom is not a battlefield but a proving ground.

In a Harkness class the students will not debate, but discuss; the teacher will not pronounce, but question. In the words of Richard B. Sewall, Class of 1925, later Yale English professor and the best teacher I ever had, they will not compete, but cooperate. The essence is cooperative inquiry. If the class works well, students in their excitement will discuss the subject directly across and around the table every which way and bypass and almost forget the teacher.

Almost. The teacher is of course not the equal of the students. They cannot ignore him. He is not more intelligent, but older, more experienced, more knowledgeable. He keeps order, gives grades, and writes college recommendations.

I had a pleasant interlude in my military service in France and Germany in 1944 in a radio platoon on detached service. We were 40 enlisted men and one officer operating all by ourselves, moving around *officially* to wherever we could be of most strategic use, but *actually* to wherever we could find a good mess sergeant. When we had been physically attached to the battalion and to an Army corps headquarters, our

lieutenant was impressive. He had military bearing, knew the technology of radio, kept his distance from us enlisted men, and was a generally respected platoon officer. But when we went on detached service, Lieutenant Simpson, since he had no other officers for companionship, *had* to fraternize with us enlisted men. And then we found out how stupid he was.

That is the risk the Harkness teacher takes. When a teacher is not lecturing, and not calling on students formally to recite as in a catechism, he is exposed as the kind of person, the kind of mind, he really is. He cannot hide behind his notes. In the Harkness classroom he too has no place to hide.

And of course some students are more equal than others. Some are brighter, more sophisticated, more extroverted, more conscientious, more articulate, better prepared, more confident, and hence more talkative than others. It is therefore unreasonable to judge a student, that is, *grade* a student, on the quantity or quality of his classroom participation. But every student has an equal opportunity to participate, and an obligation to himself and to the class to try. It is a pity if he doesn't.

There is a certain gamesmanship to where people sit in the Harkness class. The seating around the table is random, that is, not by assigned seats. But the students like the teachers are creatures of habit; they tend after a few days to take the same seats automatically, just as the teacher establishes himself at one end of the table — the end away from the door.

There is usually an interpreter, that is, one who explains what the previous speaker has said; a buffoon; and at least one teacher's pet and one obstructionist. The teacher has to wonder most about the student at the opposite end of the table and the two students sitting right beside him.

The student at the opposite end may be some kind of obstructionist — a negative obstructionist, who gets his kicks out of cutting down everyone else including the teacher; or a benevolent obstructionist, the kind who questions the validity of what the teacher or the book or a fellow students says, but does so constructively, and precipitates the kind of lively discussion that the teacher yearns for but sometimes cannot precipitate himself. Just as the Harkness system has made the teacher a moderator rather than a tyrant, so the advent of coeducation has made the negative obstructionist unfashionable, in class and out.

The student at either side of the teacher may be a teacher's pet, but possibly he is sitting there only because in a Harkness classroom that seat is the nearest thing to a hiding place. If he pushes his chair back ten inches, he can look at his watch or make faces at his classmates with impunity; the teacher can't see him. Only a teacher who wears glasses can observe by reflection what is going on beside him.

There are bound to be silent partners in any class, and it is the responsibility of the teacher and indeed of other students early in the semester to encourage the silent partners to participate — at least to give them a chance.

It really does matter when one student is absent from a Harkness class, for the simple reason that a Harkness class is a team. It may be a weak team, with a coach giving too many signals and issuing too many orders, one player hogging the ball and dribbling too much, not enough communication between two outfielders, too many players content to sit on the bench and not even cheer. But it is a team, and everyone has a role — maybe different roles in different classes.

Sometimes a teacher despite his good intentions dominates, or is impatient. Sometimes he talks too much, answers his own questions; *he* would rather say it than wait for someone else. It took me some years to figure out why the 5:25 class always seemed my most successful: I had been screaming at soccer or baseball players all afternoon, had lost my voice, and *couldn't* talk in class. Sometimes even without talking too much the teacher just seems to fill the room with his presence — to intimidate. Sometimes one student talks too much, and others let him, though they resent it and complain privately about it. Sometimes the chemistry is wrong, or there is no chemistry.

But if the teacher subdues his ego, listens, and alerts himself to the non-verbal cues, and the dominant students subdue their egos and listen, and the class gels, there is no educational experience like it. All 13 get involved. Converting monologue to dialogue, starting dialogue but not dominating and hence finishing it, the Harkness teacher can happily acknowledge that he does not know all the answers, even to his own questions. Once he has started the discussion, he can even withdraw. The secret ideal of the Harkness teacher is to fall asleep in his own class.

The Harkness table has been at Exeter so long, fifty years, that it has become pervasive. Its influence is everywhere, inescapable:

Eight or ten students sit at one table at lunch in Elm St. Dining Center. One girl says, "Cucumbers are prettier than pumpkins."

"Expand on your statement," says a boy. The table may be square or rectangular, but somehow the corners seem to be losing their ninety-degreeness and gain a telltale roundness. . . . .

Six senior proctors and the three faculty members in their dormitory sit on couches in the common room in the evening discussing the academic difficulties of one of the preps.

"I don't think she knows how to study," says one of the girls.

"What do the rest of you think?" asks one of the men. A large apparition forms on the carpet in the middle of the room, dimly at first, but then, as the discussion develops, vividly oval and varnished. . . .

Between the halves at one corner of the field on Wednesday afternoon the coach and players gather, sitting or kneeling in a small circle.

"What can we do to stop number four from shooting?" asks the captain.

"Make him pass," says the sweeper back.

"His left foot is weak," says the coach.

"Let's overplay him to the outside," says one midfielder. As they discuss the problem, they find themselves instinctively extending their circle into an ellipse. . . .

With all due respect to the sports complex, the impressive library, the recently dedicated art gallery, the endowment, the diversified faculty, the two-hundred-year history, the fabulous student body, and the unsentimental but extraordinarily loyal alumni, it is the Harkness system that makes Exeter so special. □

John B. Heath, A. B., was appointed to the faculty in 1949. He is the Thomas S. and Elinor B. Lamont Professor of English and is beginning his first year as Dean of the Faculty.