Harkness Discussion and Self-Education

by Bryan Lynch, Veritas School

During a discussion with William Buckley on Buckley's *Firing Line* program in 1988, Mortimer Adler said, "When the great books are well taught in a seminar, they are not taught as antiquities, they are not taught as objects of art, they are taught as raising moral and political and human problems which are just as pressing today as when they were written." Adler, one of the founders of the Great Books movement in the United States and a promoter of the Paideia projects, was a tireless proponent of reading and discussing the great books of Western civilization. And while this search for meaning and understanding lacked a commitment to the foundational truth of the Christian faith, it has been an inspiration to many teachers whose own education, they have discovered, was woefully insufficient. Interestingly, at the same time Adler was helping to bring the great books seminar back to American universities in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the philanthropist Edward Harkness donated $5.9 million to Philips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire to fund a new seminar approach to teaching and learning at the secondary level. The Harkness method and the Harkness table, named for Mr. Harkness and the teaching method he promoted, has emphasized the discussion of books and ideas around specially designed tables in a growing number of schools ever since.

At Veritas School, Harkness discussions, used mainly (though not exclusively) in high school classes, are content focused and teacher led, but student centered. That is, the students carry the load of learning how to ask, and of discussing, the questions raised by the content they are studying, whether this is *Paradise Lost* or a topic in ancient history. We've been most successful in implementing Harkness discussions in high school humanities classes—Humane Letters, Rhetoric, Theology—but the principles are being applied in languages, math, and science classes as well. (Middle-school-level and elementary teachers have also successfully integrated beginning discussions using materials such as "Teaching the Classics."[1]) Student-driven but content-rich and teacher-led discussions of books and ideas are particularly well suited to classical and Christian schools, where the emphasis is on older students evaluating ideas and presenting their understanding to others clearly and persuasively, and, ultimately, taking responsibility for their own education.

Of course, there was nothing really new in either Adler's seminars or in the Harkness method of teaching. Excellent teachers have always discussed ideas with their students, requiring the students, as they are able, to increasingly do the heavy lifting, as the teacher questioned, encouraged, and led the discussion. Students in our discussions are all expected to be able to articulate their understanding, and to ask questions both of the text and of each other. There is no hiding in a good seminar discussion—careful preparation and a thoughtful search for truth are critical. Ideally, these discussions occur around an oval-shaped table where all students can see and interact with each other. Since the architecture of a place (and a classroom is no exception) significantly impacts what goes on in it, we are working to provide more of these tables for our classrooms.

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Having students in rows is more efficient for certain tasks—organization, individual work, teacher access to students, group instruction—but the arrangement of the classroom environment highly influences intellectual habits and routines. The furniture becomes the lesson. The teacher speaking in front becomes the focus and the learning tends to flow one way, and the message to students is that efficient organization and passive compliance are what is really important. An excellent teacher, of course, will find ways to engage students whatever the arrangement. And there are

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times when a teacher *needs* to be at the center of the intellectual and organizational action in the classroom. However, if the teacher (rather than the student working with the content) is always at the center, then what may be the most important lesson students learn is that learning is directed by someone else, that it is something done for them, or to them, depending on their enthusiasm for it. Once away from this classroom they may find that learning is something they're just not interested in or aren't sure how to do on their own.

It's important to note, however, that we don't approach discussions as a kind of free-for-all sharing time during which anything goes. Rather, teachers guide students to prepare thoroughly and then discuss carefully and thoughtfully, applying both their content knowledge and their biblical worldview to the problems raised. But the bulk of the work in the discussion is placed squarely where it should be—on the students. This requires consistent training, for students and for teachers, in learning how to ask effective questions, what kinds of responses are most likely to get to meaning, even how to conduct a civil discussion. But the payoff is rich, especially for those of us who teach older students. For example, in one of our last class periods of this school year, my 11th grade Humane Letters class (all 18 of them) sat around our lone (for now) Harkness table and conducted a forty-five-minute challenging and thoughtful summary discussion of Gene Edward Veith's *Postmodern Times*. They asked questions about the meaning of passages and the truth of the concepts, made connections to previous learning, and encouraged reluctant speakers to be more involved. My entire contribution amounted to two questions. Of course, it has taken three years of practice and training to get to this point, and it isn't necessarily the ideal that the teacher would be so minimally involved—sometimes the teacher participates significantly, correcting misperceptions, adding connections to previous learning, even turning the discussion into a presentation, as needed. The point is that the seminar discussions have helped students reach a point where their education is largely their own. All education is essentially self-education, and the Harkness method requires students to make significant steps in their learning.

This emphasis on student responsibility in the discussion, by the way, is where we think our discussions deviate from "Socratic" ones, at least as that term is often applied. In some versions of the Socratic discussion, the teacher, through a series of questions, leads the students inevitably to the truth; when it's all over the students may be justifiably impressed at the wisdom and ability of the teacher, but may have very little idea of how they arrived where they did. Certainly they would be frequently unable to recreate the journey. In a Harkness discussion, the students are not following; they are required to help lead. This active engagement means that the students take more ownership of their learning, the result being that understanding is more fixed in their minds. These discussions are an outstanding method of checking for understanding, and provide students with instant and descriptive feedback on their ideas, as other students either confirm or challenge them. And, of course, the teacher will offer corrective or encouraging comments, as needed. One of the unexpected benefits I have seen is that retention of understanding of the topics from our discussions is much better than when we used to merely "go over" or even "discuss" together in other ways. Harkness discussions require deep engagement and direct participation with the material in ways that lead to greater long-term retention. This helps most students make connections to previous learning very naturally, and others can be taught to do so.

Highly engaged student discussions, with students required to not only answer questions but ask them, not only respond to teacher leading but to lead, develop in students a capacity for thoughtful, careful understanding of the text or subject at hand. Students improve their skills in presenting ideas effectively, but also in interacting with the ideas of others in a way that is collegial and respectful. The rhetoric stage does not always have to be about confronting and defeating error. It can also be about working together in the search for, and application of, the truth of Scripture in all areas of life. Harkness discussions provide students with wonderful opportunities to do all of this.

Notes:

1. Information on "Teaching the Classics: Basic Seminar" can be found at http://www.centerforlit.com/Materials/TC.aspx.