

# The use of the Harkness method of teaching and learning

## Isaac Newton Academy

### Focus Area

*‘What I have in mind is [a classroom] where [students] could sit around a table with a teacher who would talk with them and instruct them by a sort of tutorial or conference method, where [each student] would feel encouraged to speak up. This would be a real revolution in methods.’*  
(Edward S. Harkness)

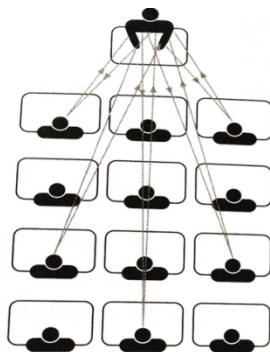
This study tracks the introduction of Harkness-style teaching and learning at Isaac Newton Academy.

### Background Context

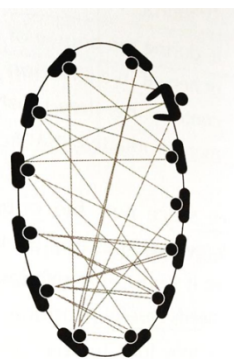
At Isaac Newton Academy our aim is to equip every student with the knowledge, learning power and character necessary for success at university and beyond. Learning is an active and exciting process in which everyone participates and at times leads and where teachers are facilitators of learning. We believe that excellent teaching is more about helping students to find information and figure things out, rather than telling them things. Harkness teaching and learning is central to this. The Harkness teaching method is an intrinsic part of our approach to teaching and learning. It links closely to our focus on developing learning power and character through our BRIDGES programme (which focuses on seven learning dispositions: Bravery, Resourcefulness, Integrity, Discovery, Grit, Emotional Intelligence and Self Discipline).

Philanthropist Edward S. Harkness established the Harkness method of teaching in the 1930s at Phillips Exeter Academy in Boston, USA, developing a style of teaching that encouraged student-led discussion and questioning. Learners sit around an oval table and engage in a seminar-style dialogue.

Traditional Teaching



Harkness Teaching



The principles underpinning the pedagogy of Harkness teaching are simply: teacher as facilitator; students as collaborative learners with ownership of the issues being discussed. Harkness places students at the centre of the learning process and encourages them to learn from one another. Under the guidance of the teacher, the instruction focuses on the ideas brought to the table by the students themselves – what happens in the class depends on what the students have done before the class begins. Thus Harkness comes with an obligation: the student has to be prepared and being prepared means having done the pre-reading/preparation and having thought about it too.

We believe that focused dialogue is a key component of learning and develops students' literacy skills. In planning their lessons, teachers are expected to create opportunities for more varied and dialogic interaction patterns to occur, including Harkness discussions and collaborative learning. The important skills and qualities necessary for students to be effective Harkness learners are also focused on in the school's BRIDGES programme.

The Harkness method creates a learning culture of enquiry and collaborative discussion, which goes way beyond the lesson. It requires self-motivation, a love of learning and a willingness to share your own ideas as well as being open to others'.

## **The Story**

*"It is not an exaggeration to suggest that classroom talk determines whether or not children learn, and their ultimate feelings of self-worth as students. Talk is how education happens!" Gibbons.*

Isaac Newton Academy opened in September 2012 with 180 Year 7 students. Creating a new school presents significant challenges, but with those challenges come great opportunities to implement a range of innovative practices and to create a place of learning where staff, parents and students are all aligned to the same ideals from day one. When she was setting up INA, the Principal visited Phillips Exeter Academy where Harkness began and saw the power of Harkness to encourage students to be active, independent learners. Writing the Teaching and Learning Policy from scratch gave her the opportunity to place Harkness teaching at its centre, as can be seen in this extract from the policy:

*'At Isaac Newton Academy all teachers are teachers of the Harkness Method. Harkness discussions are built into every Scheme of Learning. Two fundamental expectations of all Harkness teachers underpin our expectations at Isaac Newton Academy:*

- 1. that all students play an active part in all learning activities*

2. *that all students carry out the independent learning activities in preparation for the next lesson.'*

*(INA Teaching and Learning Policy)*

Training teachers in the Harkness method has been the key to its success. Prior to opening, in the summer of 2012, we ran three CPD weekends to induct new staff into the INA way. During one of these weekends, the Principal led a Harkness session where staff participated in a Harkness discussion and explored some of the principles behind Harkness and the role of the teacher as a facilitator. Heads of Department then went away over the summer to plan their first Schemes of Learning, building in a range of Harkness opportunities (at least one every half term). Further training for teachers took place during the first academic year and each subsequent year we have inducted new staff in Harkness and delivered further training for existing staff.

Each October, two members of staff have the opportunity to visit the Phillips Exeter Academy during the half term break to observe Harkness lessons, learn from Harkness experts and consider how the best practice observed can be replicated at INA. On return to school, they share their experiences, help lead Harkness CPD and contribute to its continued development. It is a great way of building capacity and securing buy-in from staff.

Since its introduction in September 2012, we have adapted the way that Harkness is delivered. The ideal number for a Harkness discussion is around 14 students. Originally, Harkness lessons at INA were taught in a 'Harkness Room' around our custom-built oval Harkness table or in our conference room which also has an oval table with seating for about 14 people. A teaching class would be divided into two groups for a Harkness lesson: a co-teacher or learning assistant would facilitate discussion with one group and the class teacher with the other. We still use this arrangement. However with the school growing and the desire to embed Harkness more fully into everyday learning, we have started to experiment with other practical arrangements for Harkness lessons so that multiple Harkness discussions can take place in various rooms around the school at the same time, and without relying on always having second adult with the group.

'Inner and outer circle' Harkness is one way of facilitating Harkness with a larger group. Half of the class move their tables and chairs to form an oval and have a Harkness discussion; the other half sit around the outside of the oval, observing. The students not participating in the Harkness discussion might be assigned a particular student whom they observe and feed back to on the quality of his or her Harkness contributions or they might listen to the discussion and make notes on it to further their understanding of the subject. Another way of facilitating Harkness with a larger group is to have two separate Harkness discussions running simultaneously within the classroom, with the teacher seated or moving between the two groups.

We have also used Harkness as an opportunity to develop a unique student leadership scheme at INA. Following a rigorous application and interview process involving the Principal, Chair of Governors and Pastoral Leader, six Year 8 students were selected to attend the Phillips Exeter Summer School in July/August 2014. Only thirteen years old at the time, the students spent five weeks away from their families on the Eastern seaboard of the USA. They learned alongside students from across the globe and were immersed in the Harkness style of learning, becoming experts in their own right. It was a highly significant learning experience for the students in numerous ways, as they explain below:

*'Exeter Academy was an excellent opportunity which has allowed us all to enhance our academic skills and acquire new friends. Risk-taking and independence were a vital part of Exeter. This entire opportunity has taught us all what it is like to be Harkness Champions as well as independent students. In our lessons at P.E.A.S.S we were taught using the Harkness method which means that the students take over their own learning, rather than the teacher giving all the information.'*

*'In my Forensic Science class we would read text and then discuss in class. Some people would ask questions and the discussion would carry on. The purpose of learning using the Harkness method is that it gives students an opportunity to learn from each other so that you can think for yourself. I think that it is a really good way of learning because we are taught to do our own research, and only we can determine how much we learn.'*

*'The cluster that I was in was the Creative Arts. The classes in this cluster were Creative Writing, Theatre, and Pottery. In each of these lessons Harkness was incorporated. For example in Creative Writing we had to study a chapter of the book we were reading beforehand and annotate and highlight bits we found interesting or wanted to talk about in class. Then in class we had to lead the Harkness discussion by ourselves about the book. Using this method, we got to control where the discussion went and what we talked about and it made it more fun because it was just like a regular discussion.'*

On return to school in September 2014, the six students became INA's first Harkness Champions. The role of the Harkness Champions is to promote Harkness learning, by supporting teachers in the delivery of Harkness and with the planning of Harkness lessons within Schemes of Learning. Each Harkness Champion is linked to a subject area. Heads of Department can call on them to discuss how to effectively build Harkness opportunities into Schemes of Learning or to take half a class to facilitate a Harkness session. The students have led assemblies for every year group on their experiences and what they learned. They also talk to visitors about Harkness teaching at INA and the impact of their summer school experiences. Applications for the next cohort of students to attend the 2015 Phillips Exeter

Summer School are underway. These students will also go on to become Harkness Champions on their return in the autumn of 2015 and so, hopefully, year on year we will have a growing bank of students skilled in Harkness at the highest level who can act as role models for other students and support teachers in creating and facilitating outstanding Harkness lessons.

The Pastoral Leader who accompanied the six Year 8 students to Phillips Exeter was given a TLR3 responsibility as INA's Harkness Ambassador, commencing in September 2014, for developing Harkness learning at INA. The role involves planning and facilitating Harkness CPD, leading the student Harkness Champions and further developing the Harkness method at INA. The Harkness Ambassador has led a practical CPD session where staff in subject teams conducted Harkness discussions facilitated by the Harkness Champions. She has built a bank of videos which include films of Exeter staff being interviewed by Harkness champions and videos of Harkness lessons at INA that can be used by staff for training purposes. Departments have completed a subject audit so that the Harkness Ambassador can map where and how Harkness is being used across a full range of subject areas. Staff are also using peer lesson observations as an opportunity to observe Harkness teaching in other subjects.

We appreciate the importance of parental engagement in pedagogical initiatives and keep parents informed about the development of Harkness through the school newsletter. A parent workshop on Harkness learning was held in March 2015 to enable parents and carers to learn more about the initiative in order to effectively support their sons and daughters in developing the skills needed to be great Harkness learners.

## **Impact**

*"The biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers." John Hattie*

Observations show that students engage keenly in Harkness lessons and participate confidently. Year 9 students reflecting on Harkness lessons made the following comments:

*"I have come to understand that silence in Harkness is not awkward. The silences are actually used to collect your thoughts, think or just take notes".*

*"I think that you should never feel too shy to contribute. You should respect everyone at the table, and if you have an idea that you think might be wrong, you should feel ok to say it as it might turn out not to be wrong".*

*“It is important to make notes during the discussions and you should be curious and ask your peers questions”.*

Students are transferring the skills they learn through Harkness to other activities at INA, as evidenced by them presenting confidently to their BRIDGES mentor at their BRIDGES mentoring session or leading the discussion at their options meeting with a member of SLT.

At INA, teachers already use lots of different strategies when it comes to arranging collaborative learning within the classroom. Most subject teachers acknowledge the value of Harkness learning and see that it works best when it is not a tokenistic lesson that students have once a term, but something that is strengthened with practice and frequency. As professionals we have already taken what we understand of Harkness pedagogy and adapted that for greater class sizes and different facilities.

A visiting Principal from another academy who observed Harkness learning in an English lesson commented: ‘I saw Year 9s leading a discussion around ISIS. If I hadn’t known that the students were Year 9, I would have thought they were Year 11. The scholars listened to each other and debated well. Students brought in wider ideas and knowledge; it was really impressive. They were able to express their views and showed more restraint than the MPs in the House of Commons!’

## **Next Steps**

As a new and expanding school with a sizeable additional cohort of teachers every year, we have to ensure that every new member of staff understands the fundamental principles of Harkness learning and feels confident in facilitating Harkness lessons. We know that our founding teachers are confident Harkness facilitators, at ease with having visitors in their Harkness lessons or being peer observed to share great practice. We also know that each time we have a new cohort of teachers they invariably feel less confident leading Harkness initially. It is our challenge to ensure that all teachers are able to facilitate great Harkness lessons. Going forwards for the Academy, it will be important that the knowledge and understanding gained from the experiences of teaching and learning in the style of Harkness continues to be cascaded through effective CPD and coaching.

It is important to reflect on how well the students are prepared to take on their role as a Harkness Champion, how they can best be deployed to assist teachers, and how they will develop the knowledge and understanding of Harkness for the new cohorts joining the school. We also need to consider how the role is contributing to developing students as leaders at INA.

We have developed strong links with Ethan Shapiro, Director of Phillips Exeter Academy's Summer School. Ethan visited INA in the summer of 2014. He had an opportunity to see some Harkness teaching in action and gave us some feedback. Another colleague from PEA is coming to INA June 2015 to jointly deliver CPD with our Harkness Ambassador to our existing staff and staff starting in September 2015. We will continue to build on this connection through the summer school programme and the annual visits to PEA by INA staff. Another link which we hope will support the school in developing Harkness further is with the public school, Wellington College, which has also adopted the Harkness method. A week of Harkness workshops for maths teachers hosted by Wellington College and led by colleagues from Phillips Exeter is planned for summer 2015 and several members of our maths department will attend. We also plan to create links with other UK schools who have adopted Harkness to learn from best practice and to share our experiences.

As an initiative in its infancy, there is huge scope to develop Harkness teaching as our school grows. Next year, our founding cohort will commence their GCSE courses. We need to ensure that Harkness is integral to teaching and learning at Key Stage 4 so that the key skills students are developing through Harkness are further strengthened to help us realise our aim of preparing students for success at university and beyond.

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