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If you are like me, you are always trying to find new and innovative ways to get your students engaged in your lesson...or at least to buy into what you are teaching. The daily "sit and get" or the constant shuffling of stations can grow tiresome. One new learning style I recently discovered is called a Harkness Discussion. Some might argue this is just another variation of the Socratic Seminar of Shared Inquiry teaching. While they all do share some similarities, Harkness differs in that the teacher plays more of a moderator and less of the ‘person in charge' role. Misconceptions About the Harkness Discussion Method Those of you who are familiar with the loose and tight method of teaching and classroom management might be rolling your eyes right about now. But, let me ease your concerns. The Harkness Discussion isn't just another fancy term for a class discussion. It goes beyond just talking about a subject or topic. When we try to have class discussions, the conversation is typically dominated by a few students, or the conversation can quickly turn into an argument. This is not effective or helpful. With the Harkness Discussion, students sit in a circle or oval shape. The conversation will begin with one student, but by the end of the discussion, every student has to pose a question and answer at least one question in order to receive a grade. Since the teacher is merely an observer, this allows him or her to watch and record interactions and summarize which students effectively understood the standards taught. A Harkness Discussion Example In my Harkness discussion, I sit behind the group and check off each student's name on my roster as they talk. Once I see that one or a few students have answered more than others, I will announce that they have to ‘sit out' a round while others get an opportunity to share. I also include a visual PowerPoint with each discussion and lesson that lists the rules of the Harkness Discussion and how they receive points (posing the question and answering questions) and how they lose points (by dominating the discussion or not talking at all). The Truth About the Harkness Discussion The Harkness Discussion method is more of an active, discussion-based learning style that requires students to take the lead and manage the lesson and discussions that follow. This method actually teaches students how to learn in a way in which they are not just simply sitting and taking in instruction, but rather, they are required to: Listen Observe Analyze Verbalize Provide visual descriptions Since all students learn differently, this method allows you to differentiate the lesson to fit all of your students' needs while helping each one develop new methods to help them learn in a way that makes sense to them. Don't get me wrong, this doesn't mean the teacher gets to hang out and search Pinterest all class period. Instead, the teacher will have to provide the students with resources (texts to read) and question-starters to guide them as they prepare for their discussion. How Does the Harkness Discussion Work? Now, you might be thinking, ‘this sounds wonderful, but how does it work?' First, the Harkness Discussion method can be adapted to fit any classroom and any curriculum. The teacher will assign a reading to their students. Students will analyze the material and develop a set of questions that they will ask their peers during the discussion. We all know those students who sit in the back of the class, hiding, and just praying the teacher never calls on them. They distrust their own ideas and answers and seek others for ‘right' answers for an assignment. The Harkness will eliminate that and give this specific student the pride and encouragement they need to believe in their own opinions and ability to succeed. In terms of assessment, think of the reading as the formative aspect as students have to find information that pertains to the unit of study and standards given and the discussion is the summative aspect as it requires students to display their learned knowledge verbally. Next, as students begin to ask their peers their created set of questions, discussion will begin. Students will raise their hands to answer, just like they would in a normal classroom setting. However, the student who posed the question will direct the conversation. Now, this will be messy and difficult at first. So, I advise you model this with your students before jumping into a full Harkness discussion. I have even shown my students videos on YouTube of other classrooms performing this so they can see just how easy it is to carry on a natural conversation without the teacher directing everyone. Finally, as students begin answering the posed questions, the originator of the question (student who originally posed the question) will write down the correct answer given. This part of the process requires several levels of understanding for the student. Students have to create a high-level question from the understood material given. They then have to listen during the discussion and know the answer they are seeking. This process allows the teacher to assess reading, writing, and speaking standards in one interactive and fun lesson. How to Effectively Use the Harkness Teaching Method in Your Classroom Since all teachers' styles are different, one of the main reasons I love the Harkness Discussion so much is you can easily adapt it to your own style, curriculum, or reading. If you teach a poetry unit, you can have the students read the text, analyze, and create questions in one class period. The next day, students will enter the class prepared to begin their discussion. Social Studies: Students could read and analyze a chapter about the Fall of the Roman Empire. As students read, they could create questions like these: What caused the fall of the Empire? Who were the main players? When did this happen? Why do you think this event is important in history? Are there still any relevant themes from the lesson of the Romans to today's societies? Again, you will have to coach your students through the development of question phases, but once they understand, the process will run smoothly. Language Arts and English: Students could read a chapter from a given novel in class. They could analyze the text and create questions like these: Why did the main character… Infer, do you think… Compare one theme from this novel to another text read in class. Identify one example of a simile or… Art: Students could view and analyze a specific painting. Their questions could consist of: What does this painting remind you of? What other artists share the same style? Why do you think this painting is important? Science: Students could complete a unit on the ecosystem. The discussion could lead as followed: Which aspect of our ecosystem is most important? Infer… Identify… Create an example of… Questions for a Harkness Discussion - Types of Questions to Teach Students to Ask As a pre-lesson for this activity, you must teach students how to ask the questions you want them to pose to their peers. Best practices suggest using question-cues and prompts. Factual: According to the textbook...As stated by… Based on the events… Remembering: List examples of…. Identify how._____ was used… Define the term___ found in the story… Name one character who… Understanding: Summarize… Explain… Interpret… Infer...Restate in your own words...paraphrase what happened when...compare and contrast_____ in the story… Applying: Apply one theme or lesson in this story to… Analyzing: Compare and Contrast...Organize events by… Evaluating: Defend a characters actions by… Justify the statement...Evaluate the effectiveness of... The possibilities are truly endless. The above examples are only a few of the many ways teachers can use this method in their classroom. I hope you take a leap and try a Harkness Discussion in your classroom. RELATED - How to Become a Teacher Should I Become a Teacher Michelle Areaux was born in Nicholasville, KY where she currently resides with her husband Anthony, and sons Connor and Cooper. She attended the University of Kentucky where she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Education and Asbury University where she earned her Master of Arts. Currently, Michelle is a middle school language arts teacher at Edythe Jones Hayes Middle School in Lexington, Kentucky and an avid reader. Her first novel, Wicked Cries, motivated her to continue writing and publishing novels for both young adult and new adult audiences. In the Harkness method, a small number of students (usually 12 to 15) sit around an oval table, where they initiate and lead discussions about assigned texts, learning with and from one another. In a Harkness classroom, students are the protagonists of their learning: they question, comment, explain, cite, agree and disagree as they attempt to make sense of new content. Faculty, meanwhile, are primarily planners and facilitators, carefully assigning texts and discussion-provoking activities in view of course objectives and then working to ensure balance and focus during student discussions. Developed at Phillips Exeter Academy - a private secondary school in New Hampshire - the Harkness method owes its name to Edward Harkness, who conditioned a large donation to the school on the creation and implementation of a more inclusive, discussion-based pedagogy. It is worth noting that the University of Miami is the first institution of higher education to adopt this method at scale as part of a formal pedagogical initiative. Modern education has undergone a lot of transformation and has shifted from a more than just a lecture. It involves newer methods like discussions, debates, presentations and other activities. Discussions form an important part of the classroom. They help in developing cognitive skills in the students. teacher centric learning to a student centric learning. The present-day education isDiscussion as a classroom activity has been around for quite some time but has gained popularity only in the recent years. The concept relates to a term called ‘Harkness Method’, developed by Edward Harkness in 1930s. Edward was born on 22 January 1874, in Cleveland. He was often known as a philanthropist who made gifts to Yale, Harvard, Cornwell and numerous other colleges. His experiences at St. Paul’s and Yale shaped his thinking about education and encouraged him to come up with a new approach to education which shaped the learning methodologies in the classroom.The Harkness method is a form of learning/teaching that does not involve any lecture. This method was developed to kindle curiosity, encourage learning and develop respect and acceptance. In the method, students are encouraged to develop ideas around a topic, ask questions and share their knowledge.Harkness method, a form of round-table discussion, has many features which makes it an effective learning tool. Some of the features are:Maximum student participation Harkness method ensures maximum student participation as this method encourages students to share their thoughts and ask question on the topic.Discussion based learning This method involves classroom discussions where students share their thoughts on a topic.Platform for sharing ideas Harkness method acts like a brainstorming session where each student shares their thoughts or questions on a topic.Requires individual preparation This method works most effectively when the students come prepared for the class. Teachers explain the topic and give students time to peruse and question based on which the discussion takes place.A two-way learning The Harkness method is a two-way learning approach where students not only learn from the teacher, but also from each other.Enhancement of skills and personal development are some of the benefits of introducing the Harkness method in the classroom. The other advantages of this method are:Provides an opportunity for students to think and question The very idea behind the Harkness method is to provide an opportunity to each student, to share their thoughts and ideas.Aids in the development of various other skills Discussion-based learning helps in the development of various other skills like confidence, public speaking, respect for the ideas shared by others and listening skillsStudent-centric Harkness method focuses on the students and the learning is typically student-centric. This comes as a development over the traditional methods that were teacher-centric.Boosts confidence Discussions in class boosts confidence in the students and develops public speaking skills.Encourages the students to think Questions posed by teachers and peers encourages the students to think and not resort to rote learning. Thinking develops the cognitive skills.Despite offering various benefits, the method, like many other has certain drawbacks. They are:Time consuming The procession of discussion is time consuming. Each student has to be given a chance to talk and share his/her thoughts.Classroom setup needs to be modified to suit the requirement of Harkness method works well for a roundtable set-up. The classroom set up in most of the schools does not prove effective for this method. Harkness methodBecomes difficult when the group is large This method works great when the number of student is lesser than 20. A class with more number of students makes it difficult to hear out all the students.Few students may find it difficult Few students may find it difficult to understand the concept of Harkness method, and this may make the method ineffective. Sometimes, students may find it difficult to talk in the presence of many other students, for the fear of being wrong.Can lead to arguments among students A discussion often involves different views on a given topic. Contradictor views may lead to arguments among the students.Roles students play in a Harkness setting:Being a student centric approach, the Harkness method has the students playing various roles like – A moderator can be a teacher or a student who introduces the topics, organises the flow of conversation and asks inputs from other persons. The students taking part in the discussion are called as participants. An observer is a student/teacher who monitors the discussion. A student usually plays the role of a note-taker by writing down points discussed during the discussion.Guidelines for Harkness method:Harkness method has some rules, to make it effective in the classroom –Listening to each speaker Students should listen to each other. When a participant is sharing his/her ideas, it is best for others to listen without interrupting the flow of thought.Sticking to the context Often, a discussion may take the topic to a different context. It should be taken care that the discussion sticks to the topic.Taking turns to speak Students should be asked to take turns while talking, to allow other students to talk.Cooperation and coordination Discussions work best when there is cooperation among the participants.Sticking to polite disagreements Any discussion is bound to have disagreements. Students should stick to polite disagreements rather than an aggressive disagreement.Edward Harkness laid the foundation for the modern-day group discussion. The Harkness method is not only used in classroom but in various areas of discussion like meetings and conferences. Despite having its share of drawbacks, this method is effective for idea generation and sharing opinions. Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. If you are like me, you are always trying to find new and innovative ways to get your students engaged in your lesson...or at least to buy into what you are teaching. The daily "sit and get" or the constant shuffling of stations can grow tiresome. One new learning style I recently discovered is called a Harkness Discussion. Some might argue this is just another variation of the Socratic Seminar of Shared Inquiry teaching. 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However, the student who posed the question will direct the conversation. Now, this will be messy and difficult at first. So, I advise you model this with your students before jumping into a full Harkness discussion. I have even shown my students videos on YouTube of other classrooms performing this so they can see just how easy it is to carry on a natural conversation without the teacher directing everyone. Finally, as students begin answering the posed questions, the originator of the question (student who originally posed the question) will write down the correct answer given. This part of the process requires several levels of understanding for the student. Students have to create a high-level question from the understood material given. They then have to listen during the discussion and know the answer they are seeking. This process allows the teacher to assess reading, writing, and speaking standards in one interactive and fun lesson. 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Factual: According to the textbook...As stated by… Based on the events… Remembering: List examples of…. Identify how._____ was used… Define the term___ found in the story… Name one character who… Understanding: Summarize… Explain… Interpret… Infer...Restate in your own words...paraphrase what happened when...compare and contrast_____ in the story… Applying: Apply one theme or lesson in this story to… Analyzing: Compare and Contrast...Organize events by… Evaluating: Defend a characters actions by… Justify the statement...Evaluate the effectiveness of... The possibilities are truly endless. The above examples are only a few of the many ways teachers can use this method in their classroom. I hope you take a leap and try a Harkness Discussion in your classroom. RELATED - How to Become a Teacher Should I Become a Teacher Michelle Areaux was born in Nicholasville, KY where she currently resides with her husband Anthony, and sons Connor and Cooper. She attended the University of Kentucky where she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Education and Asbury University where she earned her Master of Arts. Currently, Michelle is a middle school language arts teacher at Edythe Jones Hayes Middle School in Lexington, Kentucky and an avid reader. Her first novel, Wicked Cries, motivated her to continue writing and publishing novels for both young adult and new adult audiences. What is the Harkness method? There is a plethora of different approaches to teaching and learning, and the Harkness method is one of the approaches used in teaching at EF Academy. Perhaps you’ve already heard of the Socratic method, where teachers ask questions to their students, rather than instruct them. The Harkness method differs from the Socratic in that students are even more engaged in their learning process and in the formation of questions to answer collectively. They are responsible for asking questions to their peers, which then initiates the Harkness discussion. The Harkness table During a Harkness discussion, the teacher’s role becomes less of a leader and more of an encouraging co-learner. These discussions typically take place around an oval table where students and the teacher all face each other. The seating arrangement might seem like a minor detail; however, it has great impact on the conversation that is held around the table. By facing each other and sitting around an oval table, an open and more relaxed environment is created where discussion and conversation is encouraged and facilitated. Students lead the discussion At the heart of the Harkness method are the students. They are given a focus for their discussion which could be, for example, a written text. The students are then encouraged to form questions about the text they’ve read and engage in discussion around those questions. The teacher stays outside of the discussion while the students pay attention to what their peers are saying. Usually, a student starts with asking a question, which then initiates the discussion, which opens up to more questions, and so on. Independent learners and confident speakers Participating in student-led discussions is a great way of becoming a more independent learner. Students learn how to formulate questions in a way that encourages their peers to join the conversation, and answering questions develops their critical thinking. These kinds of discussions also boost student’s collaborative skills, as being attentive and listening to other students’ opinions is just as important as asking engaging questions. Another benefit of the Harkness method is that it supports students who perhaps would feel shy or insecure asking questions or engaging in discussions in a more traditional set-up. When students all face each other and the discussion is conversational and open rather than lecturing, they can feel confident in exploring their ideas and opinions. EF Academy Oxford alumna Anastasiya from Russia describes her experience with the Harkness method: In class, we don’t just sit, watch, nod and take notes. My English teacher uses ‘Harkness discussions’, which is when students talk to each other and exchange ideas. . . This method of teaching really highlights what makes our school so unique: its students. Everyone interacts and she grades every student based on how they interact with the other students: everyone is engaged, and it creates this environment in the classroom where we all feel comfortable saying things and sharing our ideas. . . Her teaching methods represent the spirit of EF Academy in the best way. At EF Academy, students are encouraged to become critical thinkers who find joy in learning new skills and asking questions to deepen their understanding. Emphasis is put on students developing a global mindset, which includes considering different viewpoints and discussing conflicting perspectives respectfully. Harkness refers to a method of teaching that was developed in the 1930s at the Phillips Exeter School in New Hampshire. The philanthropist Edward Harkness challenged Exeter with an offer: he would make a sizable donation of money to the school if they could originate and implement a radically student-centered method of teaching, and then use this method in all classes. After having their first proposal rejected by Mr. Harkness as “not radical enough,” Exeter eventually committed to moving away from the traditional model of teaching in which the teacher lectures information to students, the students copy the information onto paper, and later, the “regurgitate” the previously instructor-fed information back onto tests and essays. In a Harkness class learning takes place through discussions held around a circular “Harkness Table.” Sitting at the table, all members of the class must question, contribute, and contemplate in order to learn and succeed. Today all classes at Exeter, from English Literature to Algebra, from African History to Chemistry, are held around Harkness tables and use the Harkness method of learning. Why Harkness? Of the many different arguments in favor of the method, the most important may be that it goes beyond the mechanistic transmitting of information, and experientially teaches students how to learn. It is false to assume that students know how to learn. Academic learning requires a series of complex skills, such as the ability to analyze texts, verbal and written articulation of questions and ideas, listening, critical thinking, dialogue and research, to name a few. If students only learn in the traditional way, receiving information from their instructors in bite-sized chunks, and then later repeating the information onto tests, the skills they will have learned from this experience can be called little more than “parroting”: a parrot can be trained to repeat what it hears, but it holds little, if any, understanding of the meanings of the words it says. Likewise, students can learn to repeat what they are told without having to actually understand what they are repeating. Furthermore, the implicit message of lecture instruction is one that ultimately disempowers students. As “unbiased” as teachers try to be, educating is, based on the content and pedagogical approach to the curriculum chosen, a political endeavor. By maintaining their place at center stage—their classrooms filling stations for the empty-vesseled students, and they the Guardians of Truth—teacher-centered teachers convey the lesson that their students’ ideas and questions have no explicit worth outside of how well they relate to the teacher’s own ideas and questions. Additionally, teacher-centered classes reinforce the state of intellectual powerlessness common to most students and adults: only “qualified” authorities possess truth, and their opinions we must seek: truth is had by only “qualified” authorities, and we must seek their opinions. While the results of the teacher-centered method may be a pleasant boost to the teacher’s own sense of intellectual superiority, the students are taught to distrust their individual ideas, and to rely too heavily upon the opinions of others; they learn not to trust in their own capacities to discern truth. The Harkness class lessens students’ ability to simply “parrot” information. As members of the learning group, students must engage with the class by asking questions and contributing their own thoughts. In general, Harkness teachers will minimize the amount of information and answers they give directly to their students. Instead, they will give their students’ resources in which the information and ideas can be found, or at the very least, they will help their students locate the necessary resources. Because of this approach, students will experience the complex process of learning. This is a process in which they must involve themselves to a much greater degree than they may normally be required: students may not simply write down what teachers say. They must search for the ideas and information and then wrestle with that which they find. Students who engage themselves with the Harkness class will finish with a greater sense of autonomy and empowerment, knowing that they know how to learn. They will also finish the class with an increased ability to verbally articulate their questions and opinions in discussions. Additionally, Harkness students will come away with the important understanding of the power and necessity of listening, as well as the skills needed in order to be effective listeners. What Harkness is Not Harkness is not the Socratic method of teaching. As it is generally understood, Socratic teaching involves asking students questions about their ideas, continually pointing out weaknesses in the ideas until students “realize” the correct conclusions. The conclusions, however, are predetermined by the teacher, and the students only qualify as having realized if they agree with, or surrender to, the teacher’s ideas. This type of teaching is teacher centered: the teacher is the sage on the stage, throwing forth pearls of wisdom to the flock of befuddled and bewildered minds below. Socratic teaching is excellent in terms of providing students with the experience of intensive critical thinking, of seeing an intelligent and intellectually engaged adult in action. The downside, however, is that the method focuses too much on the personality and interests of the teachers, perhaps leaving them feeling masterful and smart, but imparting feelings of subordination, stupidity, and even harassment onto their students. The Harkness class will generally have, nonetheless, a Socratic feel, in that students’ ideas are questioned and commented upon. For the most part though, these questions and comments will come from the students’ peers rather than the teacher. Harkness is not just “teaching through discussion.” While many teachers use class discussions in their courses, the discussions still tend to be very teacher driven: the teacher asks the questions, keeps the class focused, decides when to move on, and for the most part, still sits in the dominant role as expert holder of Truth. Conversely, some class discussions become very loose “blow-off-steam” forums in which members of the class (usually the dominant ones) shout out their opinions and argue back and forth. Unfortunately, these quasi-debate style classes almost always contain more hot air than substance—they lack the structure necessary for the type of critical inquiry that leads to substantive conclusions upon which a class may build in the future. Furthermore, these types of discussions give students a bad model of intellectual dialogue: combativeness, blind position-taking, and immaturity are the lessons learned. Teaching a Harkness Class Different teachers have different approaches, and many will change their techniques based on the chemistry of their particular class. For the most part, the following description accurately portrays how I run my Harkness classes. With the nightly reading is assigned, I try to include specific and overarching questions on which the students should focus as they read; they are told to make margin notes about these specified topics and questions, and sometimes to write prepared notes on separate paper. When they come to class, I’ll appoint some or all of the following roles to students: moderator, participant, observer, and note-taker. Occasionally I will notify students the day before that they will moderate the following day’s Harkness. I tend to do this if I know the topic will be difficult, and thus I want the moderator to be very well prepared. The role of moderator is the most crucial. The moderator, and I must stress this often, is not the de facto teacher. Rather, their job is to introduce topics, organize the flow of the conversation, ask participants to specify and/or provide textual references, and generally set an intellectually engaged and stimulating tone; I let the moderator decide if they want participants to raise hands, or to just speak as they wish. The participant is the student (For a good sense of the expectations of participants, see the next section in this packet on evaluating Harkness students.) The observer’s role is to silently monitor the discussion. They may take notes on what works well, and what does not. They might also draw a Harkness discussion diagram: they draw a circle, put down the names of each person around the circle such that the drawing mirrors the arrangement of the people at the table, and then draw lines to and from each person as they speak. In the end this diagram offers a powerful visual reflection of how the conversation flowed. If one area is dark with lines, while others are blank, it becomes clear that the discussion was unbalanced. The note-taker’s job is to take notes from the discussion about information and ideas that might be useful for future test or essay preparation; the notes are written in the communal class journal. I will start class by clarifying any issues or questions left over from my last time with the class, and then I’ll announce the moderator and the focus questions for the day’s discussion. I try to pose questions and ideas that are broad enough to allow fluidity of discourse, but not so broad that students don’t know what their focus should be. For very difficult readings, I will, however, often narrow my questions, being very specific so students don’t feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the piece or topic. Ultimately, I’m still very much in the development stage of learning this art form of setting up Harkness discussions. During the discussion I intentionally sit removed from the circle. This is symbolic as well as practical: symbolically, it demonstrates that the students and their ideas are central. Practically, it weans students off of their tendencies to look and speak to me; even with sitting outside the circle, I still notice some students always looking at me when they speak. I do not remain completely silent during the discussions. Sometimes I offer an opinion, but often when I speak it will be to clarify or pose a question, assert an opinion different from the group’s consensus, or provide the class with some necessary piece of historical background on the topic. I generally end the discussion five to ten minutes before the class time finishes. The rest of our time together is spent evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the conversation—this makes explicit the lessons about academic discussion dynamics—and making plans for how to improve future discussions. I might also use this time to summarize what I heard, or to offer feedback and clarification on the content of the conversation. Sam Shapiro, Exeter Humanities Institute Participant 2001 The Harkness Method is a radically democratic teaching method premised on equality, collaboration, and open-ended discussion. Here are a few things I've learned about Harkness Discussions in my 20+ years of teaching.... I. What is the Harkness Method? In a traditional classroom, the teacher stands at a podium in the front of the room and disseminates knowledge to students who sit at desks organized in rows. The teacher delivers lectures full of information that students are expected to internalize and then reproduce in tests or writing assignments. Students are framed as passive recipients of such knowledge; and they quickly learn that their role is to memorize and faithfully regurgitate the information deemed important by the teacher. But in a Harkness classroom, the podium and desks are replaced by a circular table where teacher and students can sit together. How did a seemingly simple change in architecture end up revolutionizing the dynamics in the classroom? How did it transform the student learning experience? At a Harkness table, the students sit at a common table — signaling that they share a common purpose. The chairs are arranged in a circle, making it possible for all students to see, speak to, and learn from one another. As a result, students learn to become active agents in knowledge production; and they experience learning as participatory and student-centered. They begin to realize that the success of every class session depends upon the thoughtful contributions of every person at the table. Moreover, the vertical hierarchy of the classroom is radically overturned. The students are no longer oriented toward a single source of authority; nor are they sorted into front-row seats and back-row seats. Instead, every seat at the table is of equal importance. As a result, every student is affirmed as having a voice at the table — and all voices are equal. The experience of learning becomes radically democratic and deeply collaborative. II. Harkness Discussions vs. Socratic Seminars How does a Harkness Discussion differ from a Socratic Seminar? Although the two terms are often used as synonyms, there are important differences between these two teaching methods. In a Socratic Seminar, the teacher poses a series of questions and then calls upon certain students to answer those questions. Ideally, the teacher’s questions help students to think critically and to continually revise their ideas and beliefs. However, the teacher maintains complete control over which questions and topics get addressed; and the correct answers to the questions are determined in advance by the teacher, whose line of questioning runs the risk of making students feel dumb or inferior. In a Harkness Discussion, it is the students who bring many of the questions to the table, who respond to one another's questions thoughtfully, and who determine what topics end up getting addressed in class. To be sure, the teacher plays a vital role in the proceedings — but she no longer determines the direction that any given class session will take. Instead, the teacher's role is to help students think more deeply about the topics and passages that are most interesting to them! Far from having all the answers, the teacher gets to join the students in being a learner engaged in the project of shared knowledge production. And the students get to witness the teacher having “a-ha” moments as she embraces the opportunity to learn alongside them! III. The Benefits of Harkness Discussions What, then, are the benefits of adopting the Harkness Method? Here are some of the ways in which I've seen Harkness Discussions transform the dynamics in my own classroom: • Responsibility: The Harkness Method helps to collectivize responsibility in the classroom. Students become responsible to one another for arriving prepared and contributing actively. They're not completing their homework to impress the teacher; rather, they're doing it out of a shared sense of responsibility to one another. • Collaboration: Students no longer perceive the teacher as the primary source of knowledge in the classroom. Instead, they approach their classmates as vital resources for their own learning! • Inquiry: Instead of trying to impress the teacher with what they already know, students become curious about what they don’t yet know, and they begin to embrace the interrogative mode as the royal road to new knowledge. They enter the classroom eager to explore what remains puzzling or challenging about the course content; they formulate interpretive questions that open up new avenues for shared inquiry; and they learn to tolerate ambiguity while ideas are being sorted and refined. Thus, the Harkness Method prevents students from arriving at premature certainties, replacing closure with breadth and depth. That's why I view it as the highest form of inquiry-based instruction! • Higher-order thinking: The opportunity to think collaboratively pushes students to refine their thinking in ways that would be hard for any individual participant to accomplish alone. Students begin to build constructively on one another's ideas, adding nuance, introducing qualifications, and arriving at more complex understandings of the topics at hand. • Cognitive flexibility: Students become attached to the thrill of having their minds stretched and changed by a thought-provoking discussion. If their minds haven’t changed by the end of a class session, what was the point? That's a lot of benefits! IV. The Drawbacks of Using Harkness Any honest practitioner will acknowledge that embracing the Harkness Method does force teachers to give up certain things. Here's my sense of what a Harkness teacher risks losing or giving up: • Control: The teacher is not the sole authority to whom all students defer. The teacher does not steer the direction of the class or determine who speaks. • Efficiency: The class may not move through the content in the most logical or efficient manner. Instead, the sequencing of the topics that get addressed is determined largely by the students' interests. • Rigor: The person with specialized expertise about the content is no longer disseminating knowledge and ensuring that the most important points receive the most attention. When I was a young teacher, I'll admit that I spent a lot of time worrying about the first of these issues. It felt scary to give up some of my control in the classroom. But now I find the loss of control to be nothing short of thrilling! The fact that I never know what we'll end up talking about in a given class is incredibly exciting — for it means that every class offers a new opportunity for me to engage with a new topic or approach to the content. What I do still worry about is rigor. How can teachers facilitate discussions that are open-ended and student-driven without compromising on intellectual rigor? This is a question that I think about all the time! My own personal strategy for maintaining a high level of rigor in the classroom has been to develop high-order discussion questions for every book that I teach. As some of you may know, I've devoted the last ten years to developing discussion questions that foster skills in close reading, critical thinking, and constructive collaboration. My discussion questions for books like Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Frankenstein, The Crucible, The Great Gatsby, Their Eyes Were Watching God, A Raisin in the Sun, Maus, and Persepolis can be found in my TPT shop. V. How to Get There: Strategies for Shifting to Harkness If you're interested in transitioning to the Harkness Method, here are a few tips for getting started. Begin by telling students that your next class session will be an open-ended discussion driven by what the student find interesting about the text. Require every student to prepare by reading and annotating the next chapter of their book — and by writing down two interpretive questions that they'd be willing share with the class. Before the students arrive in the classroom, make sure that you've arranged the desks in a circle. Then ask one student to get the discussion started by reading their question in a loud, clear voice. Try to let the students’ interests drive the content and shape of the discussion: where to begin, where to go next, etc. Because you're accustomed to conducting this orchestra, you'll inevitably be tempted to jump in after almost every student comment. But force yourself to practice "strategic withholding." Instead of supplying students with answers, allow students to grapple with one another's questions and to experience a degree of confusion. In fact, you might even want to remove yourself from the circle: to stand back and watch from the wall, or to be the scribe who tracks the discussion in silence. Once students perceive that you're not going to help them when they're confused, they'll begin to embrace the opportunity to collaborate with one another and become active learners. During your first Harkness Discussion, you might tell students that they're allowed to keep raising their hands. But they should do so not as a request to be called upon by the teacher but rather as a signal to their peers that they have something to say. Then, in your second or third discussion, you could announce, “Let’s do this hands-down…” If your students are totally new to this mode of engagement, you might need to circulate behind students' desks in order to ensure that everyone stays focused and on task. But instead of interrupting the discussion itself, try to use non-invasive techniques like hand signals or eye contact to re-direct anyone who's disengaged. VI. Virtuosic Teacher Moves If a teacher is no longer leading the class, what are they doing? Good question! When I facilitate a Harkness Discussion, I try to participate in the same way that my student do: asking two or three interpretive questions, building on the insights of other participants, making sure that the contributions of quieter students don't get dropped, and occasionally modeling respectful ways to disagree or puncture groupthink. But here are a few other things that a Harkness teacher might do…. In moments of silence, the teacher might ask the students whether they'd like some more time to think. Whenever I do this, I try to use the collective pronoun "we," like this: "Are we still wrestling with the passage just mentioned, or are we ready to take up a new passage or question?" Or else: “Did we take that topic as far as it could go? Are we ready to move on? Who'd like to put a new question on the table?” Another thing that a Harkness teacher can do is pause the discussion to praise a student who has exhibited an especially impressive participation behaviors. For example: "Alex just did a great job of responding to Rhonda by name, affirming what was helpful about her comment, and then building on her comment by supporting it with additional textual evidence. Bravo!" Or: "Julia just made a connection between two different passages in the text, then used the connection to formulate an original question about why the author might establish a parallel between those two scenes. Impressive work! Now, who wants to take a shot at answering her question?" Not only do such comments help to codify certain participation behaviors for the entire class, but they incentivize other students to experiment with contributing in similar ways. Here are a few more things that a Harkness teacher can do: • Offer intermittent summaries of the content of a discussion. • Ask clarifying questions; or probe for more nuance. • Identify contradictions or subtle disagreements. • Create space for quiet students. • Correct any factual errors. VII. Looking Ahead This blog post is derived from a presentation that I delivered to a group of faculty at a high school in New York City. I plan to write another post with strategies for how to assess student participation in Harkness Discussions. In the meantime, I'd be thrilled to hear your thoughts about the Harkness Method! What strategies have you used to generate rigorous and engaging discussions? How have you modified the Harkness Method to make it effective for the student population at your school? What's the best discussion you've ever had? If you are like me, you are always trying to find new and innovative ways to get your students engaged in your lesson...or at least to buy into what you are teaching. The daily "sit and get" or the constant shuffling of stations can grow tiresome. One new learning style I recently discovered is called a Harkness Discussion. Some might argue this is just another variation of the Socratic Seminar of Shared Inquiry teaching. While they all do share some similarities, Harkness differs in that the teacher plays more of a moderator and less of the ‘person in charge' role. Misconceptions About the Harkness Discussion Method Those of you who are familiar with the loose and tight method of teaching and classroom management might be rolling your eyes right about now. But, let me ease your concerns. The Harkness Discussion isn't just another fancy term for a class discussion. It goes beyond just talking about a subject or topic. When we try to have class discussions, the conversation is typically dominated by a few students, or the conversation can quickly turn into an argument. This is not effective or helpful. With the Harkness Discussion, students sit in a circle or oval shape. The conversation will begin with one student, but by the end of the discussion, every student has to pose a question and answer at least one question in order to receive a grade. Since the teacher is merely an observer, this allows him or her to watch and record interactions and summarize which students effectively understood the standards taught. A Harkness Discussion Example In my Harkness discussion, I sit behind the group and check off each student's name on my roster as they talk. Once I see that one or a few students have answered more than others, I will announce that they have to ‘sit out' a round while others get an opportunity to share. I also include a visual PowerPoint with each discussion and lesson that lists the rules of the Harkness Discussion and how they receive points (posing the question and answering questions) and how they lose points (by dominating the discussion or not talking at all). The Truth About the Harkness Discussion The Harkness Discussion method is more of an active, discussion-based learning style that requires students to take the lead and manage the lesson and discussions that follow. This method actually teaches students how to learn in a way in which they are not just simply sitting and taking in instruction, but rather, they are required to: Listen Observe Analyze Verbalize Provide visual descriptions Since all students learn differently, this method allows you to differentiate the lesson to fit all of your students' needs while helping each one develop new methods to help them learn in a way that makes sense to them. Don't get me wrong, this doesn't mean the teacher gets to hang out and search Pinterest all class period. Instead, the teacher will have to provide the students with resources (texts to read) and question-starters to guide them as they prepare for their discussion. How Does the Harkness Discussion Work? Now, you might be thinking, ‘this sounds wonderful, but how does