

THE "HARKNESS" DISCUSSION

It is called the "Harkness" discussion method because it was developed at Phillips Exeter Academy with funds donated in the thirties by Edward L. Harkness. It involves students seated in a circle, motivating and controlling their own discussion.

The teacher acts as little as possible. Perhaps the teacher's only function is to observe, although he/she might begin or shift or even direct a discussion. The students get it rolling, direct it, focus it. They act as a team, cooperatively, to make it work. They all participate, but not in a competitive way. Rather, they all share in the responsibility and the goals, much as any members share in any team sport.

Although the goals of any discussion will change depending upon what's under discussion, some goals will always be the same: to illuminate the subject, to unravel its mysteries, to interpret and share and learn from other points of view, to piece together the puzzle using everyone's contribution.

Discussions skills are important. Everyone must be aware of how to get this discussion rolling, keep it rolling and interesting. Just as in any sport, a number of skills are necessary to work on and use at appropriate times. Everyone is expected to contribute by using these skills. Here are a few of the categories of contributions any one person can make. A comment in a discussion could be any of these (although there are more).

- organizing, leading
- summarizing, restating or clarifying the text
- citing specific quotations, passages or pages from the text
- asking a question about the text
- commenting on the text, giving an opinion or reaction
- making a suggestion about text or discussion
- summarizing discussion up to that point
- analyzing text or comment or whole discussion
- reacting to comments
- answering comments
- restarting discussions
- filling in a gap
- arguing a point
- asking for new information
- asking for other comments, reactions
- comparing to other works

Don't forget: this is a team effort. Not only does everyone have to do his/her bit, but everyone has to look out for each other: don't hog! Encourage those members who are holding back-- direct questions to them. Keep the conversation alive. Preparation is key! Make sure you come to class ready to discuss a work--have some ideas and questions before we start. Don't forget the focus of your discussion, the text! Cite quotations and examples generously, analyze it in detail and consider different interpretations. Those are the keys to great discussion.

GRADED "HARKNESS" DISCUSSION

Since this is a team effort, there will be a team grade. The whole class, more or less, will get the same grade. The exceptions are those students who distract or detract from the discussion or resist efforts to get them involved (they will score lower grades). It is also conceivable that persons could score higher grades by performing truly exceptional group-beneficial feats such as "saving" or immensely uplifting a discussion in a way that benefits everyone. But, with few exceptions, everyone gets the same grade, so think as a team, act as a team.

This is what you need to earn an A:

A truly hard-working, analytical discussion in which

- EVERYONE has participated significantly and, more or less, equally.
- the pace allows for clarity and thoughtfulness -- but not boredom.
- there is a sense of balance and order, focus is on one speaker at a time and one idea ("on the floor") at a time.
- there is an attempt to resolve questions and issues before moving on to new ones.
- there is a clear sense of what the group has covered and how.
- comments are not lost, the loud do not dominate, the shy are encouraged.
- students are animated, sincere and helpful.
- the discussion is lively without being "hyper" or superficial.
- everyone is clearly understood. Those who are not heard are urged to repeat. Those who do not hear or understand are urged to speak up.
- students take risks and dig for deep meanings, new insights.
- students back up what they say with examples, quotations, etc. Students ask each other to back up assertions with proof (if possible). (Not all of the time: there is also a need for much speculation and even "uneducated" guessing in a discussion like this).
- ALL STUDENTS COME WELL PREPARED.
- the TEXT is referred to often!

The class will earn a B by doing most of the things on this list (a pretty good discussion). The class will earn a C by doing only half of what's on the list (half of the class is cruising). The class earns a D by doing less than half of what's on this list (everyone is cruising). The class fails if it's a real mess or complete dud and virtually nothing on this list is accomplished or genuinely attempted.

It should be clear that unprepared, unwilling students cannot hide or be carried by the crowd, but will, rather, force others to motivate them or else bring the group down as a whole. Don't do that to your classmates!