



Noble Network, Pritzker College Prep and The Noble Academy

Student-Led Teaching: The Harkness Method

April 21, 2021

Noble, founded as Noble Street Charter School in 1999, is a nonprofit organization that manages 17 charter public high schools and one middle school in the city of Chicago that serve more than 12,000 students. The Harkness method intrigued teachers at Pritzker College Prep who noticed that students who attended a summer program at Phillips Exeter Academy outperformed peers on several metrics. Teachers subsequently trained with Exeter to implement the Harkness method. At The Noble Academy, which opened in 2014, all classes use the Harkness Method, providing evidence of the relevance and utility of Harkness for all students.

What is Harkness?

The Harkness Method was established in 1930 at Phillips Exeter Academy with a gift from Edward Harkness. In the Harkness Method, students take the responsibility for cognitive lift: leading discussions with peers, exploring topics, citing evidence to support claims, and providing feedback to one another. A small group of students and a teacher sit around an oval table, emphasizing an equal standing between students and teacher. Students discuss ideas in an encouraging, open-minded environment with only occasional or minimal teacher intervention. Students make observations, raise questions, and lead the discussion.

Key to successful Harknessing, the term used in the Noble Network, are classroom norms marked with respect for ideas, a safe and nurturing learning environment, encouragement and compassion, student preparation, and a commitment to collaborative exploration of a topic.¹ The teacher models the skills expected of students: listening, respecting, encouraging, and engaging. The teacher presents students with a challenge that will engage them in discussion and exploration and listens with genuine interest as students lead the interactions. The teacher facilitates discussion without directing it, which marks one difference between Harkness and the Socratic method.

Harkness across the content areas

Harkness can be used in all content areas. Harkness discussions can help students analyze topics in literature, current events, and history; develop language skills;² explore ideas in alignment with the Next Generation Science standards;³ and discover rules and formulas of mathematics.⁴

Student responsibility for learning

In all Harkness classrooms, students shoulder the responsibility of thoroughly preparing their homework and coming to class with ideas and a commitment to engage with the material and their classmates.

Challenges of Harkness include hurdles for students who struggle or are unprepared, adapting the method to large class sizes, building a class culture to support collaborative learning, and balancing the time necessary for this approach to be effective versus covering content. Teachers need to reimagine their role, hone facilitation skills, and plan differently, including assigning worthwhile homework assignments and topics that will support discussion.

How to Harkness

Philips Exeter Academy

- [Harkness teaching tools](#)
- [Videos: Math & Science Harkness](#)

Harkness at Noble Network

- [Teaching at Noble: Pritzker College Prep](#)
- [Teaching at Noble: The Noble Academy](#)

Blog - [Teaching around the oval: Thoughts and resources on Harkness](#)

[Concise Guide to Harkness for High School Teachers](#): The Teaching Mirror

[Strategies for Classroom Discussion](#)
by Katherine Cadwell

¹ <https://www.exeter.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Revolution-The-art-listening-Harkness.pdf>

² <https://www.exeter.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Revolution-The-Art-of-Harkness.pdf>

³ <https://www.exeter.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Revolution-Reflections-teaching.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.exeter.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Revolution-Harkness-Math.pdf>