



## Experimenting with the Harkness Discussion Method

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I began to research the Harkness discussion method for teaching Core Critical Thinking lessons to de-centre myself (and my lesson plan), to encourage less vocal students to express their opinions, and to encourage the students to question ideas more rigorously (Harkness, 2009).

The name 'Harkness' sounds more intimidating than it is in practice (Williams, 2014). The key features are student discussion being the source of learning, preparatory student work and processes of reflection. Superficially the method seems akin to an Oxbridge tutorial or the Socratic Method, however it is actually very different as the teacher in the Harkness discussion is 'the cultivator of that sense of responsibility [for the discussion], rather than the fount of information and analysis' (Williams, 2014,p.60). A loose definition suggests Harkness is about:

'finding ways to get students to make the discoveries for themselves, to get them to draw their own conclusions, to teach them how to consider all sides of an argument, and to make up their own minds based on analysis of the material at hand.' (Smith and Foley, 2014, p.478)

The oval tables and small class-sizes that have come to symbolise Harkness, may present a danger of Harkness becoming a method only utilised by elite schools (which have the funds to facilitate the buying of specialist tables and small classes) (Smith and Foley, 2014). There are, however, several ideas in the literature for using Harkness with all kinds of classes; for example, the obvious idea of rearranging desks instead of the oval table, and to reduce numbers by assigning different roles to students who are not in a discussion, having an outer circle of listeners/mappers, and setting up multiple discussions at once (Orth et al, 2015). For my own lessons to create more intimate discussions, students enjoyed pairing up and alternating who was active in the discussion. The listening student would either take notes on the discussion (such as their own ideas or points they found interesting) or take notes to provide feedback to their peer.

It was not possible for my students to do preparatory work outside of class, due to not having homework slots for my subject. Therefore, we did preparatory learning (either reading in year ten or a condensed version of lesson activities for years seven and eight) in the first ten to twenty minutes of a lesson before embarking on Harkness discussions. This not only provided more variety for the younger students but also meant the examples were fresh in their minds. It allowed students to use examples easily when making their points but also to explore their initial questions and ideas as a group.

To use Harkness as an effective learning tool with my students, it became apparent we needed to work on making sure every point developed/linked to a previous one and examples were used well. Sometimes, a discussion wouldn't take off and it was a levelling experience to simply ask students why they thought this was. The feedback helped to build my confidence in the method and create a team-spirit in the classroom, contributing to the sense that the students were in control of their learning. They might reflect that a question wasn't good enough (too vague or too specific), that they needed more preparatory knowledge, or that the group dynamic wasn't working that day. Planning for flexibility became an important element of setting up a successful Harkness discussion, such as having multiple iterations of the lesson's question, and having material/activities to use if a discussion wasn't progressing. Equally, if the discussion is going well, being prepared to scrap subsequent material, and just let the group continue.

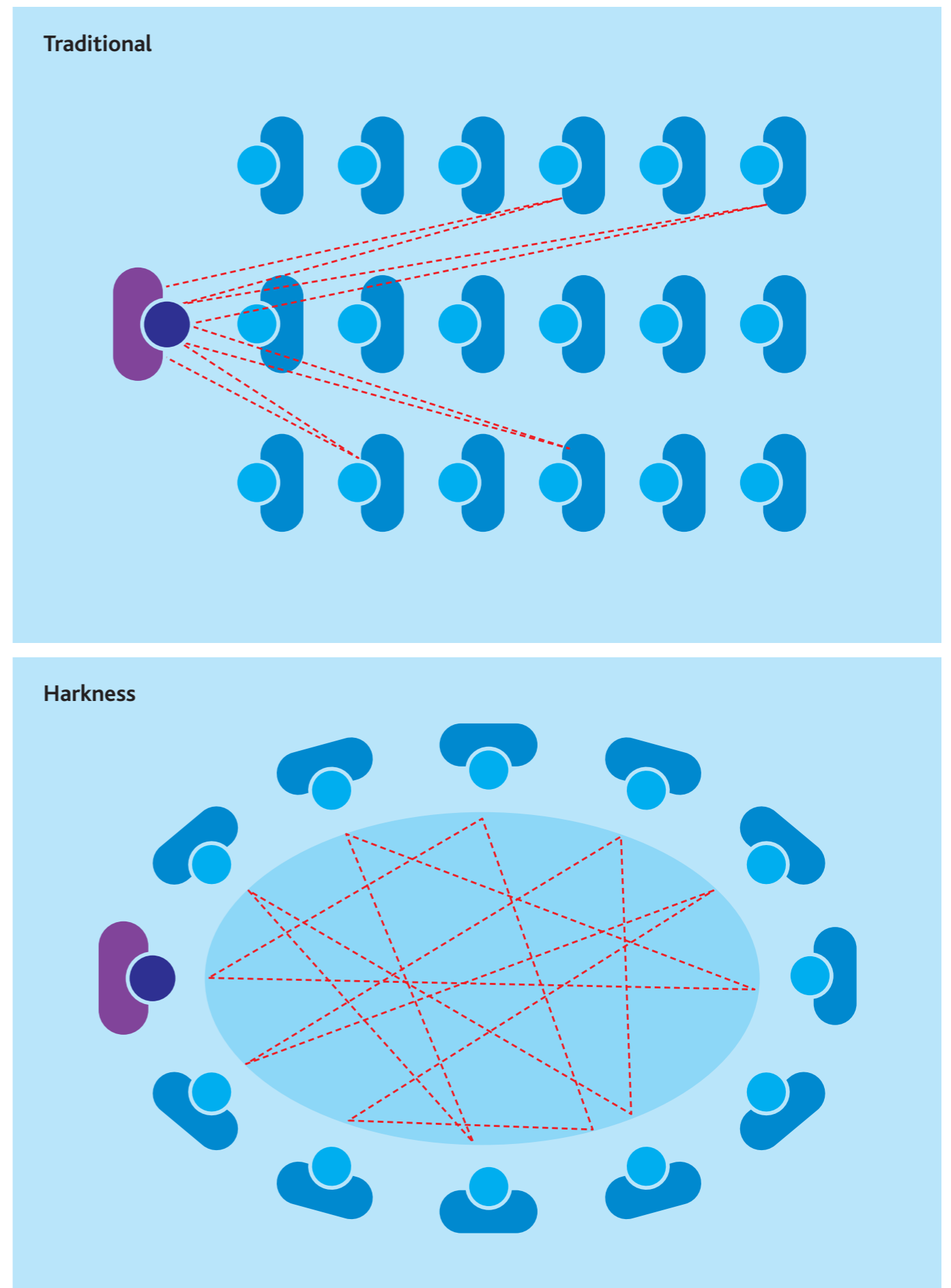


Fig 1. Map for a whole lesson discussion

It was also very interesting to play with the Harkness mapping technique. Beyond being able to visualise how well balanced the discussion was, in terms of who was speaking, I found annotating the charts enabled me to give precise and meaningful feedback and praise to students (fig. 1). These annotations were in accordance with the aims the class chose as the starter activity (such as to include examples, to make a link to another point, to listen well) or my own observations (such as

taking a leadership role, nuancing the discussion, positive non-verbal gestures).

In a survey conducted after six different lessons two thirds of the students (of a total of 86 responding) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident to contribute in discussions (66.3%), they felt like their ideas are respected and listened to (67.4%) and that Harkness was improving their critical thinking skills (67.4%). Reflecting on the positives and negatives of Harkness the key themes from student feedback were:

Positives	Negatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusivity – everyone can be involved (including those who would normally remain quiet).</li> <li>• The freedom to share opinions, new ideas and for the class to control what is discussed.</li> <li>• It’s fun and different to other lessons.</li> <li>• You can develop thoughts more deeply and learn how to communicate your opinion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes people find it hard to contribute.</li> <li>• The process can feel awkward, such as at the start of the discussion or when there are pauses.</li> <li>• In a large class it can be difficult to have a good discussion with everyone involved.</li> </ul>

When asked finally to comment on the purpose of Harkness, students wrote:

The purpose of the Harkness method:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To allow an idea flow and a constructive discussion to interpret and learn about a topic listening to multiple opinions before forming your own.</li> <li>• It allows us to contribute to the lesson more and develop the question or think about the topic in a deeper way.</li> <li>• To encourage everyone to contribute and to create an inclusive learning environment.</li> <li>• For us to be able to gain confidence.</li> <li>• To encourage leadership.</li> </ul>

Ultimately, experimenting with Harkness has developed my teaching because I now feel more able to adapt my lesson plans on the spot and more confident to trust in the student voice. Of course, using Harkness for Core Critical Thinking was not a scary prospect as it is a non-examined and discussion-based subject. I am looking forward to the challenge of seeing if I can apply Harkness in Latin classes next year, with the reassurance that if it’s possible for Maths then it must be possible in everything (Isgitt and Donnellan, 2014).

