

Harkness After Exeter: The Shape of Things to Come

How the shape of a table shapes lives.

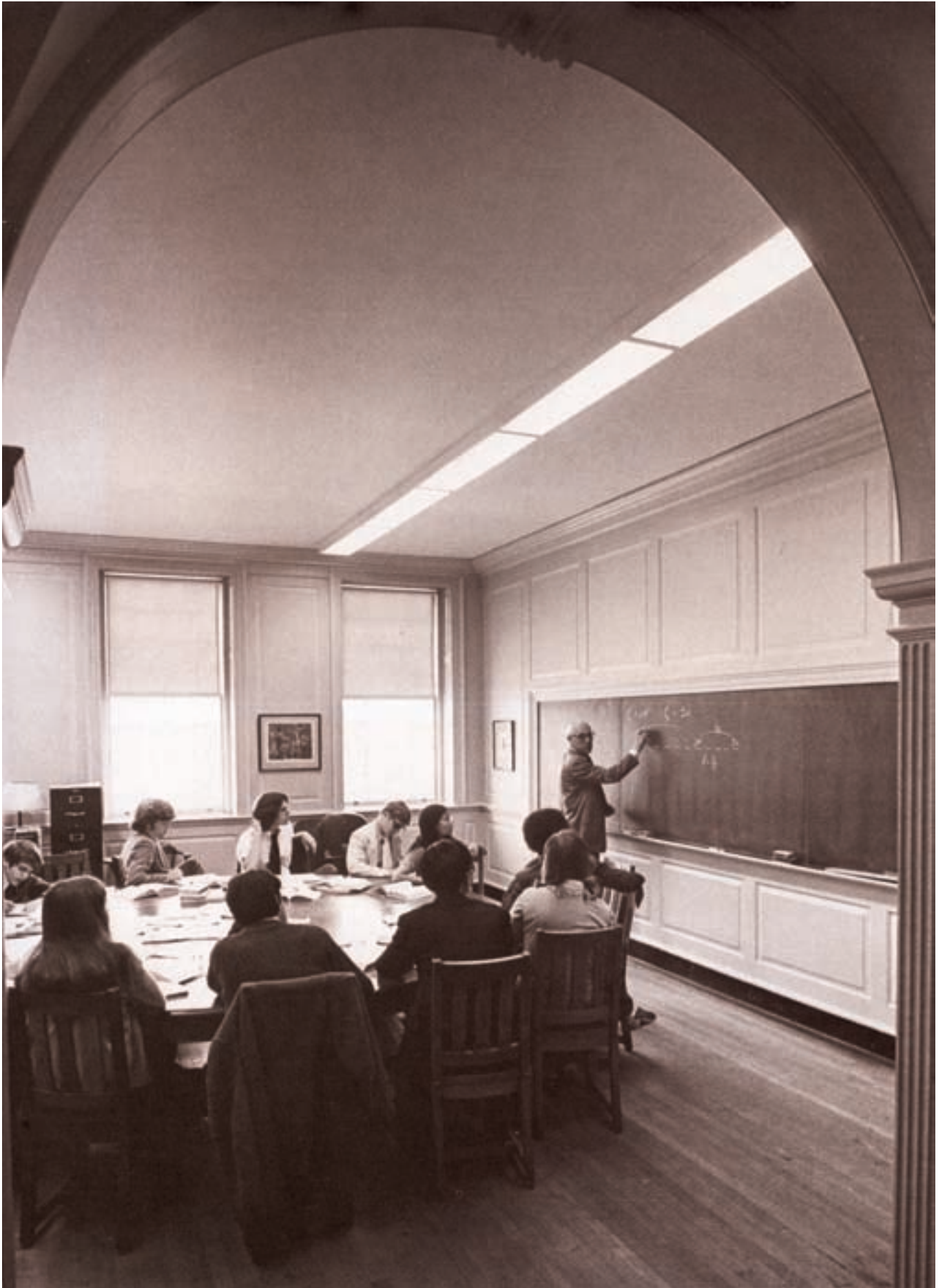
Is there Harkness after Exeter?

That's the question we put to readers earlier this year, asking about your formative experiences at the Harkness table, and about the form those experiences have taken in your later life. For many, the answer has been an abiding faith in the power of collaboration and a commitment to learning from others—or as Brad Haseltine '39 puts it, a preference for “operating in the round.” For others, the lessons that have lasted were taught by a particular Harkness instructor, whether over the course of a semester or in a single, especially memorable encounter. Here are their reflections on where Harkness has taken them, and where they have taken Harkness.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When I arrived at Exeter in the fall of 1972, a nervous prep with no idea what to expect, I saw the Harkness table as a big dining room table. My previous school used those little desk chairs made only for right-handed people (I, of course, was left-handed), but I didn't understand the academic difference immediately. What I did see right away was the social aspect. My grandmother used to host family gatherings at her house every Sunday lunch, and I had recently graduated from the “kids” table. That meant equality with all the adults. They talked, I listened. I talked, they listened.

That is exactly what happened in most every Exeter class I attended, and I felt com-





comfortable with my teachers and classmates as equals from the start. My first semester was an exercise in beginning to get to know myself, and I especially struggled those initial weeks. In getting over my anxiety as a 13-year old on his own for the first time, amazingly, I was most at home in the classroom. I just wish they had a Harkness table for Prep “Spaz”!

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As I progressed through that first year, I began to understand the subtle and almost stealth learning that was happening around the table. It seemed natural that math was taught the same way as English; one of the reasons I think I didn’t take to science was that we didn’t have similar round-table discussions. (I recall that Harkness tables have since been added to the science classrooms.) I also found that my later educational experiences paled in comparison, largely because of the lecture and Socratic-method classes that made up most of my higher

education. Every chance I could, I signed up for small seminar or discussion classes. Even out of school, I still learn best in smaller meetings around a table.

For all of that, the memory that stands out over all the others involves a moment that had no impact academically or socially. It was lower year, second semester, I think, and the first day of a history class taught by Henry “Ted” Bedford ’48, who was still the Academy librarian at the time. He was passing out something to all of us and one piece settled in the middle of an especially large Harkness Table where our adolescent arms couldn’t reach. We sat there, not really paying attention, more focused on each other as we normally would be at the beginning of a semester. Suddenly, with what looked like one huge stride, Mr. Bedford was standing in the middle of the table. He bent down, picked up the stray paper and handed it to one of us. Then he straightened back to his full height and slowly turned. He had our attention now. We were all so surprised and shocked we didn’t say a thing. He walked back across the table, stepped off and sat down, all in one fluid motion.

I look for “table-walking” moments to this day . . .

—Larry Hatch ’77

EQUALS AT THE TABLE

It takes a lot fewer than 300 to 600 words to reflect on how important Harkness was to my career development. It made me a fan of committee meetings where members sit as equals.

The round-table discussion approach dominated many of my committee meetings in the mar-

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keting department at New England Life (1977–1994). Prior to that, I ran a life insurance general agency for National Life of Vermont in Cleveland,

OH (1952–1976), and my office was set up so I had a round table for discussions with staff, agents and my management “team.” My working table credenza was at my back, so I could leave paperwork out of sight and mind when I had a visitor or meeting. It worked like a charm. Even today, I



continue to use Harkness in many retirement home committee meetings (1994 to 2006).

I avoid the “head of the table” like the plague when I really want input from my peers, even if I don’t like what they contribute. I had three years in the Navy (1943–46) where everything was top-down, sitting according to rank. Those three years taught me to operate “in the round” in civilian life.

Of all my years in education—including prep school, college, a year of business school and one year of law school—the most memorable and useful to me was my year at Phillips Exeter, for which I am eternally grateful.

—Brad Haseltine '39

NOBODY GOES UNNOTICED

Until I arrived at Exeter, I had always been a good student. In the small school I attended, my only problem had been knowing the answer and not being allowed to give it. Suddenly, the questions were more difficult and I was in the unfamiliar position of not being sure about the answers, yet compelled to participate. Frankly, it was terrifying at the time, but it forced me to a level of preparation far beyond simply reviewing the assigned material and having better recall than the others in my class. I learned that I also had to have some logic behind my response, as it would be critically evaluated by everyone in the room.

As I look back, it is obvious that the experience had a profound effect on my later career. In college, I was a good student because I had learned how to study. In my career as a designer of underground mining machinery, I continued to “do my homework” and report back with not just the facts, but also with proof that they were actually facts, and to explain the conclusions I had come to as a result of them. I was also prepared to defend the logic involved in those conclusions. When we had a peer review seminar I was somewhat surprised to learn that I was regarded as a fierce debater.

As I moved into management and began to oversee a half-dozen engineering groups, I acted on the belief that differing opinions on an action to be taken are not a bad thing as long as you stay in the problem-solving mode, as opposed to personal attacks. I wanted to hear from everyone with a legitimate interest in the issue at hand, even if they were reluctant to speak up, in order to arrive at the best course of action. I think this approach goes back to my own terrified participation in the room where nobody went unnoticed.

—Prescott Greene '53

“My working life was based on what he taught at the Harkness table: careful writing, accuracy, clarity, all under the pressure of a deadline.”

“Ever since I became a full-time educator, I have nearly always (sometimes subconsciously) tried to rearrange my students so they are seated in a semicircle, if not a full circle.”

THE HABITS OF A LIFETIME

Before he became a dean, Robert Kesler taught German and also English, during the World War II years when the military draft snared younger faculty members and stu-

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dents alike. The burly, blond ex-Princeton lacrosse player inserted a unique theme-writing requirement into his English course.

One day a week he ordered his students around the Harkness table to assume the familiar angle: slides out, chairs arranged for writing. He passed out those well-remembered blue books, and then issued our “theme-of-the-week club” assignment. It could be on the reading we were supposed to have done for that day. Or it could be an essay about the morning’s war news; or perhaps it was to be a profile of a friend, a sibling or a parent. One week he might say the topic of the theme was up to the student, giving us the right to make our own perilous choices.

Mr. Kesler had a dictionary for our use in the middle of the table as well as a college handbook of composition containing a bewildering set of rules of grammar, punctuation, style and usage. We were encouraged to use both books while we wrote.

The theme began as soon as we sat down. It must have a beginning, middle and an ending. Writing must cease at the tolling of the Academy Building bell; that 50-minute hour determined your grade for the day. The grade itself, we quickly learned, depended as much on the details of grammar and punctuation as on content.

Each spelling mistake, each violation of a grammatical rule, each misplaced comma cost a grade: an A dwindled to an A-minus, a B-plus became a B. There was no appeal. After all, he said, you had the dictionary and the grammar book right there in front of you.

Within a few weeks, the weekly theme became our way of life. His red-pencil corrections splattered our first embarrassing attempts. But most of us pulled ourselves up from the early weeks’ E’s and D’s by taking care: looking up words and their meanings before writing them; checking on the proper use of semicolon s, quotation marks and exclamation points.

Years later when Vice Principal Kesler retired from the Academy, I wrote to tell him what the theme of the week had meant to me at college and during my career as a reporter, editorial writer, copy editor, public relations man, government official and corporate executive. My working life was based on what he taught at the Harkness table: careful writing, accuracy, clarity, all under the pressure of a deadline. One hopes today’s PEA English teachers still teach this lesson. —Jacob B. Underhill III ’44

DOING HIS PART FOR HARKNESS

In 1947, the Academy embarked upon a capital-gifts campaign of an amount small by today’s standards, but major as of then. One of the goals of the campaign was to energize the Harkness plan, then in its second decade and proving to be a great educational innovation, just a step up from Mark (or was it Johns?) Hopkins on the other end of a log.

A brochure was to accompany fund solicitations, and a photograph of a Harkness classroom was to be the centerfold. The class selected was Robin Galt’s Latin 2. I was a member of that class, and usually sat close by Mr. Galt, staying, I hoped, out of his line of sight. When the photographer arrived, however, he shifted me from my defilade position next to Mr. Galt to a seat directly across the table. and then took my picture over Mr. Galt’s

shoulder. Perhaps the photographer mistook my intense expression for comprehension rather than fear, but there I was, appearing studious and engaged.

The brochure was widely circulated (and I discovered later that my mother had 15 copies for distribution to friends and relatives.) For the rest of the term I was forced by my classmates to sit in the illustrated seat, in case more coverage was needed. Still, the campaign was, of course, successful. And so, while no long-lasting notoriety has attached, I did have a key role in the success of the Harkness Plan. *Arma virumque cano.*

—Norman R. Carpenter ’49

HOW TO BUILD A HARKNESS TABLE

I am certain that all of us have varied definitions of the nature of Harkness, but a few characteristics are probably held in common. My view is quite simple. The dimensions of table and chairs are well recognized, but when those chairs are filled with a dozen inquisitive minds, we are filling the first syllable of Harkness. Then the search for truth begins, usually initiated by the faculty leader, but soon followed by a spirited encounter among the students at the table. This may be Socratic at times, but often a point of view is pressed by delicate persuasion. Thus, this educational technique embraces philosophy (the search for truth) and rhetoric (the art of persuasion). We now have a Harkness table.

I also consider the athletic department a part of the Harkness program, because there is a certain amount of symbiosis between the classroom and the athletic fields. Skilled coaches like Ralph Lovshin and Bill Clark ’31 inculcated in us the value of and the need for teamwork.

These Harkness experiences are often carried forward to the playing fields of adulthood. The combination of a skilled faculty influence and the intimacy of the Harkness table has provided most of us with significant motivation in our lives. My own Harkness experience started at about age 8 or 9. My father, who graduated from Exeter in 1906, prepared educational topics to be discussed around the family dinner table. Subjects were varied, and almost always interesting. A form of home schooling! At Exeter, my courses of study, taught under the umbrella of the Harkness standards, prepared me for an active and participatory life style.

In my professional life as a physician, I have learned to listen, a sure guide to good care. And in the operating room, a team effort was essential for good results—just as it was at the Harkness table. Each member of the team is recognized as providing integral support, where the exchange of ideas is welcome and often helpful. —Bruce Hallett M.D. ’40

SNATCHING VICTORY FROM DEFEAT

One of my greatest Harkness experiences came on the heels of a great disappointment.

I was starting third baseman on the Exeter baseball team in my lower-middle year. We were playing, I believe, the Harvard freshmen, and had a one-run lead in the top of the 9th inning, with two Harvard men on base. Their next batter hit a hot groundball down the third-base line to me. I caught it with no problem, and then proceeded to throw it to first base—about 10 feet over the first baseman’s head. Both runners scored, and Har-

vard won the game.

I was disconsolate. Nothing like this had happened to me before in sports. Bill “Bull” Clark ’31 was the football coach at the Academy, and also my math teacher. He had been to the game and watched me make this gross error.

The next day in math class, I was sitting at the other end of the Harkness table from Coach Clark. At one point, Coach Clark looked at me and saw that I was miserable, with my head resting on my chest. All of a sudden, Bull’s booming voice rang out. “Monk!” he said, using my then-nickname. “Perk up. Never let yourself get down over a physical error—only a mental one!”

I cannot tell you how much those words of reassurance meant to me. I continued to play baseball throughout the rest of my Exeter career, in college and on into semi-pro ball into my late 30s. I never forgot that advice and try to follow it today in other endeavors, as well.

—Montgomery Knight Jr. ’50

HARKNESS IN OTHER CLASSROOMS

Ever since I became a full-time professional educator, I have nearly always (sometimes subconsciously) tried to rearrange my students so they are seated in a semicircle, if not a full circle. This arrangement facilitates interaction and high-level discussion, and I know for certain that the lasting influence of the Harkness experience is the explanation. In fact, I have found that I am actually uncomfortable when my students are not seated in some arrangement like that.

The first half of my career was spent working with students of all ages, from elementary school through the university level; the second half was spent teaching university students who were deaf or hard of hearing at Gallaudet University, where I was a professor (and later dean) of the School of Education and Human Services. The Harkness approach has a special advantage for deaf people, who use a visual language and for whom a total visual line-of-sight is critical. Even now as an adjunct professor in several hearing universities in the Boston area and as a teacher-workshop leader in various school systems around the country, I continue to adapt or adopt Harkness methods wherever possible.

—Dave Martin ’55

ALL THAT’S MISSING IS THE TABLE

As a member of the class of ’41 at Exeter who has never “gone back,” my memories of the Harkness plan are admittedly hazy. But upon reflection, I realize the discussion skills nourished in round-table Exeter classes have carried over into my academic career.

Harkness has been especially useful to me in my field of Middle East politics and history. Although long retired, I am still teaching at Flagler College, a small four-year undergraduate institution in St. Augustine, FL, the oldest European city in North America (1565). Our students—like most Americans—come here with little understanding of the complexities of social, political, even cultural life of societies in this important region. To address this, I find myself increasingly using Harkness methods and techniques. When teaching courses on Middle East conflicts I divide my students into small groups, pose questions for debate and establish scenarios. These scenarios often involve role-playing and role-reversals, so that students who have argued for the Israeli position find themselves abruptly shifted to the Palestinian

side of a particular issue. In fact, the only thing we lack in our classes here to be truly Harkness-directed is a round table.

—William Spencer ’41

A HARKNESS BUILDING

For me, the Academy Library *is* a Harkness table, and it has influenced me as both an architect and as a teacher. When I first encountered the library, I was 14 and fancied myself knowledgeable about architecture. I was new to life at boarding school, excited by the experience of an almost-collegiate campus, with its majestic buildings and broad lawns, as well as the pleasantly casual relationship to the town of Exeter. Everything was within walking distance, and the place was populated by people from all over the world; I felt quite grown-up.

But there was a big, ungainly brick box under construction, smack in the middle of my idyllic new home, marring the beauty and tranquility of the campus. And it was ugly; it seemed to have none of the grace (or familiarity) of the Georgian and Federal buildings, none of the rhythm and scale of those comfortable styles that seemed to work together so effortlessly. It was, to my nascent architectural sensibilities, an affront.

On the day the Academy Library was opened, Principal Dick Day canceled classes, and all the students, faculty and staff gathered together and formed firemen’s lines, passing cartons of books across the space between the two buildings: the richly ornamented Davis Library, and the big, brick box. I was thinking that it was pretty cheap of the Academy to use us as “free” labor, rather than hire a moving company (not that I wasn’t glad for a day without class obligations). Only later did I realize the significance of this event, with the whole community coming together to transfer those books, and all the ideas and possibilities contained within them.

And then I had the chance to walk inside, and climb the stairs into the ethereal light of the great hall. It was a truly transcendent experience, a moment of awe and disbelief; how could anything so plain be so beautiful? How could a space be so empty and yet so full? It was cavernous and anonymous, and yet intimate and personal. The solid serenity of the structure also suggested a subtle beauty that would reveal itself over time, and in that moment, the possibilities of that space conjured up all the wonder of places and ideas that I had experienced only in books, and that now I could really imagine as real.

That fall, Mr. Dawson, who had been a student of Kahn’s at Penn, came into our architecture studio and said, “We’re going over to the Library; Mr. Kahn is here and is going to give us a tour.”

We walked through the building, following behind this small, strange man, wondering if he was an architect, or a mystic. As he spoke eloquently, and a little elliptically, about the structure and the spaces, I began to see that he was like the building: a little rough and even ugly on the outside, but full of amazing things within. And then I began to wonder if he was talking to us at all, but rather was addressing his remarks to the building itself, in easy conversation as with an old friend. And then the electricity of a strange sensation suggested another possibility: that Kahn was the human medium through which the building was talking to us; he and the building were one and the same, he knew it so well.

—J. Scott Finn ’73