

# *Power at the Table*



GLORIA GONG

CLASS OF 2003, PHILLIPS EXETER ACADEMY

*Editor's note: This article appeared in the Exeter Review, Fall 2006.*

**H**arkness: a clash of battle tactics or an exercise in communication? “The goal is to intercept the conversation and run in your own direction with it,” Calvin tells Hobbes in one of my favorite comic strips. “You get a point for every sentence you complete before the opponent steals back the topic.”

“Conversation isn’t a competition,” Hobbes exclaims, aghast.

“Fine, you get a point,” Calvin says, “but I’m still ahead.”

When I was a prep, a ninth grader, Harkness conversation seemed to follow Calvin’s Machiavellian guidelines. Grades were somehow tied to participation, which seemed to mean making a certain quantity of quality statements. Good grades were awarded, I would have said if being honest, for saying the smartest thing most often.

Of course, I never would have admitted while at Exeter that the Harkness table struck me as an exercise in Competition Pretense. I knew it was supposed to be a collaboration, a participatory learning experience. I don’t think I was alone in feeling that way, however, and it crept out in the language we used. Listen in on a frustrated, after-class lunch conversation, and you’d think we were wounded soldiers struggling back from the battlefield:

“Shot down! Again! It’s like I open my mouth, and he goes for the kill.”

“No, we tore it apart, everyone on my side of the table just destroyed that idea.”

“What gets me is she keeps scoring points, but it’s so obvious she hasn’t read a single paragraph. Why am I the only person who can see through the lie? I swear, some day I’m just going to shout, ‘Don’t say another word until you’ve read something.’”

If the Harkness table was a *Ship of Curiosity* captained by our intrepid teachers through the Waters of Exploration toward the Fields of Knowledge, then we were the mutinous crew grumbling about unfair rations, willing to set slackers adrift in shark-infested waters, and throwing dagger-eyed glances at anyone who seemed eager to curry too much favor with the captain.

## DIAGRAMED CONVERSATIONS

At the end of one of our discussions in my prep Junior Studies class, our teacher revealed a drawing of an oval crisscrossed with lines. It was a diagram of our discussion, he explained. Each dot represented a student in our class, and the lines symbolized students’ dialogue. He tacked the drawing on the wall and invited us to learn from it.

The diagram most clearly illustrated who was saying a lot and who wasn’t. We interpreted this as a picture of who was talking “too much” and “too little,” and we subsequently struggled to make an average number of above-average comments. Dissatisfied with the diagram’s inability to include simultaneous conversations, flippant remarks or interruptions, I redrew elaborate alternatives in the margins of my notes, which quickly proved it was harder to illustrate Harkness than I thought.

In 2003, I participated in a study group looking at the “hidden culture” at Exeter—part of a larger curriculum review. We ran focus groups and conducted interviews asking, among other things, about experiences at the table. Responses were fascinating, varied and contradictory. Did power reside in the hands of a majority, or with a vocal minority? Was smartness respected more at the table, or hard work? Are Exonians learning to listen and think, or merely to opine? Are we arrogant academics who love to hear our own voices, or are we earnest scholars struggling to communicate?

“Today in math everything clicked,” one student said. “I was having a hard time understanding something, and I’m usually pretty good at math. But then it came together; I understood it. I could explain it.”

“Harkness is awesome. There’s no plot summary; you’re not told,” a second student said.

But another student pointed out that “people here are really good at talking but not at listening.”

In response, a classmate added, “I really like to listen in class and absorb what everyone is saying, but I get in trouble for not talking. I don’t want to talk. I want to listen. I’m still participating; in my mind, I’m thinking about what everyone is saying.”

Who has power at the table? For what resources are participants competing? What unspoken dynamics guide individual experiences? Many students emphasized their tension with grades and evaluation. They described facets of a problem they weren’t sure how to navigate. Is changing what you say and how you say it to meet a teacher’s expectations selling out—a kind of cheating—or is it learning to adapt to new academic environments?

One student complained that “when the teachers find out you’re BS-ing, they don’t care.”

“The teachers give higher grades to the people who care,” another student said. “If I care about something, I want it to reflect in my grades.”

But another responded, “No, some teachers don’t like it if you’re trying too hard.”

Even the power of my combined sketches (The Grand Model) didn’t seem up to the task of describing the range of experiences happening around the table.

## DINNER TABLE POWER

Hour-long interactions among twelve to fourteen people were simply too complex to depict with arrows and lines. But the idea stuck, and I kept looking for ways to understand what was happening in Harkness discussions. Who was scoring points? Who was awarding them? What was the purpose of the game, and how did you win? When I became a tour guide, I sang the praises of the Harkness table to prospective students and their families. “It can be a town hall meeting,” I’d say, “or a dinner table conversation.” Later, at a family dinner table, I was not surprised to discover the elements of power relations I had observed in the classroom. My siblings and I formed coalitions, rebelled against order imposed by my parents, or tried to impose order on each other. History-of-the-family dinners

tended to move in cycles: dynasties of tyrannical rule overthrown by peasant uprisings, which devolved into anarchy and were eventually replaced by martial law. Perhaps there was an inevitable historical dialectic, as we struggled to wrest the means and distribution of conversation from the hands of our landed parents and distribute it equally amongst ourselves.

The most rigorously-enforced rule was that everyone had a chance to speak around the dinner table. Coming home prep year, I found this false equality irksome. I was a world-weary wanderer of the intellectual realm, a jaded traveler ready to impart my hard-won wisdom at length, and it seemed obvious to me that my seven-year-old brother didn't have much to say that could compete. But strict law prevailed, and Jacob was offered as much time at the dinner table as I to describe his day and talk about what he had learned at school. He meandered through his descriptions of class activities, and I saw that as we asked him questions to clarify his thoughts, he became a more confident speaker, better able to share his experiences with us. That didn't fit too well into my Darwinian model of weeding out the weakest orators and their ideas through vigorous debate, but it fits nicely into this iteration of Edward Harkness' vision of the table's purpose: "I am thinking of a boy," he said, "who isn't a bright boy—not necessarily a dull boy, but diffident and not being equal to the bright boys doesn't like to speak up in class and admit his difficulties . . . What I have in mind is teaching . . . where the average, or below average boy would feel encouraged to speak up, present his difficulties, and the teacher would know . . . what his difficulties were. This would be a real revolution in methods."

## GETTING GOOD AT HARKNESS

At the end of prep year, one of my teachers wrote a scathing review in my grade comments. He gave me an A, praised my articulate comments and clear thinking, and then added that if I did not learn to enjoy and listen kindly to what other people were saying, I would "never become good at Harkness." Never become good at Harkness? I had thought that being articulate and clear-thinking were synonymous with being "good at Harkness." But, according to my teacher, there were other things—like gentleness and encouragement and compassionate listening. The table wasn't a battlefield for the supremacy of ideas. There was room for mistakes and pauses and inarticulate wandering. I spent a

gloomy break hoping my teacher would get fired, and then resigned myself to learning how to get “good at Harkness.”

What are students doing at a Harkness table? Are we competitors for attention, jostling each other in a narrow field? Are we debate partners refining each other’s ideas? Are we delegates at a convention striving to reach consensus? Are we actors auditioning for roles? Are we advocates of our diverse viewpoints, or mediators seeking common exchange?

Are we fulfilling Edward Harkness’ dream of creating a place that is safe for all who want to learn to share difficulties without fear?

The amazing thing is that all these layers exist at once. One person can be drifting off into a daydream while another suddenly connects with the material in a personal and powerful way. One can be straining to meet whimsical expectations, while another undermines productive conversation. One can be listening intently to another who is struggling to speak. While we have agreed to confine ourselves to certain roles—students and teachers—and certain texts, the rest of the experience is ours to create. Harkness can be whatever we make it.

If I were a tour guide again, this is what I’d say about power at the table: The system, the students and the teachers are all flawed. But students at Exeter are given the chance to create themselves in dialogue around the table. They can try on different opinions and hammer out compromises. They can become belligerent or bold, critical or kind, shallow thinkers or thoughtful citizens. They have to navigate evaluation, risk and inexperience. They may learn to speak and to listen. And they have to do it together, so that the result is not just many well-spoken individuals, but a community.