

The Art of Harkness: *Language Learning Around the Table*



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This essay does not offer a prescriptive formula for teaching foreign language in a Harkness classroom; rather, it is an *essai à la Montaigne*, an attempt to describe through personal experience the practical application of a Harkness strategy within the context of day-to-day pedagogy. Likewise, as Montaigne warns his reader, “*C’est moi que je peins,*” the following depicts only my experience as an instructor whose goal is to facilitate an experiential, authentic language experience for my students. The purpose of this *essai* is to explore the nuances of my student-centered approach to language and multiculturalism. Insofar as my teaching practices seek to move students along a spectrum of multicultural literacy, my objective is to prepare students for the eventuality of real-world challenges and successes.

THE HARKNESS VISION

The notion of the Harkness classroom is especially slippery for language teachers at the introductory level. Edward Harkness, who donated the oval tables at the center of each classroom, left us with a name for which the faculty reinvents many meanings based on the original Harkness directive:

... I am thinking of a boy who isn't a bright boy—not necessarily a dull boy, but diffident, and not being equal to the bright boy doesn't speak up in class, and has nobody to sit down with him and explain things carefully and patiently with him. What I have in mind is teaching boys in sections of perhaps 8 in a section, not in a formal recitation room, where there would be a desk and a raised platform with an instructor behind the desk, but where 8 boys could sit around a table with a teacher who would talk with them by a sort of tutorial or conference-method, where the average, or below the average, boy would feel encouraged to speak up, present his difficulties, and the teacher would know and realize what his difficulties were. This would be a real revolution in methods.

As with any living language or dynamic community, the connotations of the Harkness gift evolve over time. We hear and use words often associated with the description of our daily *modus operandi*: adjectives such as “student-centered,” “Socratic,” or “Socratic-like” and more recently the term “flipped classroom” are coupled with such words as “method,” “philosophy,” “teaching,” or “pedagogy” as a well-established Harkness technique. One of my former students referred to Harkness as an art, and I am inclined to agree. My pedagogy espouses a core set of principles that paint in broad strokes interactions with and among students who are responsible for their own intellectual headway. Language learning in the Harkness classroom is experiential; the more my students engage with the language, the more they learn. They read, write, listen to, and speak the target language as they prepare assignments and contribute to the collaborative flow around the table.

Developing the art of Harkness in the Modern Languages classroom is likewise an evolutionary process. Not only does the nature of Harkness shift as students progress from introductory to advanced levels of the language, but the changing face of technology also redefines the potential for authentic multicultural experiences around the table. The Modern Languages Department at Exeter offers immersion programs in France, Ecuador, Taiwan, Japan, Russia and Germany, but short of living in the country, students on the PEA campus receive a daily dose of multiculturalism in their language classrooms. Harkness is an elusive notion when teachers challenge students to be independent learners in a language that is not yet their own. Modern language teachers wrestle

daily with this exercise in contradiction, but fundamental tenets emerge nonetheless: imitation and repetition are essential; vocabulary and structures develop through participation and practice; technology is the servant of pedagogy; and cultural literacy emerges with linguistic competency.

NEW LANGUAGE TECHNOLOGY

The teacher's role in the introductory sequence is by definition most significant. Beginning students spend at least part of the class focusing on the teacher rather than each other, and they learn through the teacher's effort to supply meaning. Students imitate the teacher's sounds and sentences, answer the teacher's questions, write at the board with the teacher's guidance, and listen attentively to the teacher's instructions and explanations. It is likely that my pedagogical toolkit for introductory levels of language does not differ wildly from standard practices for most language teaching. I draw pictures, make gestures, bleat and whinny, act out verbs, jump around the classroom pointing to objects, and generally make a spectacle of myself. Students work from books and workbooks, memorize vocabulary, read out loud in class, write on the board, play games, work in pairs or groups to practice dialogues, and act out skits—all the traditional activities we have come to associate with learning language. Such teaching does not require a table and begs the question of how to transition students to more “Harkness-like” activities that include listening attentively to each other, building upon the observations of peers, and working together to solve linguistic puzzles. Even the introductory course is different, nonetheless, not only in the quality of students' interactions, but also in the quantifiable skills they gain.

The art of Harkness encourages student engagement. What exactly is that qualitative difference that fosters interaction around the table? As a general rule, the prepared student is an eager participant. I would be dishonest, however, to claim that every day is a good Harkness day. Some days are better than others; some times of day are better; some classes have better chemistry; some personalities are more dynamic. My role as a teacher is to make material accessible, to nurture engagement, and to provide positive reinforcement for all students, including those who struggle. In a day and age when students are “digital natives” who process information through electronic devices, part of my pedagogical toolkit contains straight-forward technology that allows me to meet them in familiar territory.

Academic engagement for the digital native is influenced by the presence of many virtual connections. Within my limited understanding of the evolving landscape of digital reality, my goal is to nestle technology seamlessly and consistently into a Harkness setting. In the early 1990s, when computers were becoming part of our daily routine, I began creating multimedia as a tool to support learners who needed a different approach to the material. Today I value multimedia for its appeal to multiple learning styles. What began on a small scale, as a remedial endeavor, eventually became a fundamental aspect of my pedagogy. I always strive to find more efficient and effective ways to deliver content, whatever that might mean for any given individual. If Harkness favors the aural/oral learner (as it would seem to do), visual prompts at the table benefit another learning style. My use of multimedia in the classroom is an attempt to deliver content in a variety of ways to support collaboration among learners of all sorts.

In a discipline where cumulative content and skills are inextricably entwined, I find it useful to organize and optimize my classroom time by laying out content to project on a screen. While it takes time outside of class to prepare visual representation, the savings of time in class allows us to move more quickly and effectively through material. Pictures and animations keep us in the target language and act as prompts for more interactive discussion. Graphics provide meaning without translation, and they add cultural content. Examples of structures allow students to work through generalizations (or “rules” of grammar), and I save the time of writing on the board by having examples ready to flash up on the screen. We review vocabulary, practice verbs, and reinforce oral exercises with written responses all prepared ahead of time. Note-taking is an important skill, but language students must be fully engaged in class to enhance their aural/oral facility. Students know they can find on our class wiki all the materials I create for them, and they benefit from using class time to focus on the collaborative activities. Using interactive visual content on the wiki, students can repeat, review, and test their grasp of the content outside of class. My time investment serves not only to economize class time but also to better define parameters for students who are learning to ramp up their study skills.

STORYTELLING

Harkness in the language classroom is active learning within the framework of a target language. Students learn to communicate by “doing” rather than “receiving.” While the reality of processing through English (or another native language) is unavoidable, students grow into more spontaneous use of language through authentic contexts. Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of language learning at Exeter. Students read stories, listen to stories, answer questions about stories, practice structures and vocabulary from stories, and ultimately learn to tell their own stories. Within the first few days of my French classes, students begin to read simple online stories formatted with multimedia to facilitate and reinforce processing with pictures and sound. We expect students to prepare a maximum of 50 minutes of daily homework assignments, effectively extending the learning process beyond the classroom. They come to class ready to answer questions both orally and in writing, and they work together on chapter summaries. Whether students write in groups on the board during class or collaborate on our wiki outside of class, they are coordinating their efforts and contributing to a communal learning process. They can make linguistic associations through pictures and activities, engage each other in the language, patiently support one another, gently correct one another, and answer questions for one another. In a class of twelve or thirteen students, each individual interacts with classmates throughout the hour. At first the teacher may have to choose and guide language activities, but the students also acquire skills as responsible, independent learners outside the class and collaborative learners at the table.

Reading becomes more challenging as students move from the beginning to intermediate levels, and students acquire flexibility and creativity in their use of language. Teachers now choose texts from different francophone cultural contexts that include not only Europe, but also North America or West Africa. Homework assignments and classroom activities change in nature from simple identification of vocabulary and repetition of structures to greater investment in cooperative learning. Students direct questions to the class, find their own answers, write together at the board (or on the wiki) and correct each other; they listen attentively to their peers around the table and provide their own explanations and clarifications. As a teacher, my role shifts from guide to facilitator. With the use of carefully chosen songs, video clips,

commercials, movie trailers, and films, I gradually relinquish my voice in the classroom, still providing multiple models for imitation, but allowing students to participate more actively and spontaneously in response to their peers. Students not only read and retell stories, but they begin to create stories. Typical end-of-term projects might include the writing and acting out of skits based on the reading, or collaborative writing and retelling “lost chapters” of a book like *Kirikou et la Sorcière* or *Le Petit Prince*. Students begin to live language as they learn to engage, create, and communicate with each other and on their own.

THE MATURING STUDENT

Students at advanced levels of the language have sufficiently developed the content and skill to paint their own Harkness art. They have matured in the practice of Harkness, and they are linguistically prepared to hold their own paintbrushes for a communal tableau. My role as a Harkness teacher diminishes greatly. The use of language moves from concrete to abstract, as students study and discuss subtle nuances of literary texts. While constantly reviewing and enhancing the fundamental structures of language, students are able to reflect on personal experience and also discuss and analyze newspaper or magazine articles, movies, songs and pictures. The amount of material on the internet can be overwhelming, and while I provide choices for my students when looking at digital resources, I also invite them to seek their own sites to share with their classmates. Driven by their own curiosity and interests, many students take advantage of the opportunity to “explore” the language and culture on their own, while others are content to stick to the basics. By whatever means students choose to interact independently with cultural and linguistic content on the internet, they use the target language to develop their skills. With homework in hand (or on a tablet device), they come to class ready to focus on the skills necessary to creatively manipulate what they are learning. Everyday vocabulary is intertwined with discussion and exploration of great works of literature; through readings and discussions, students tackle the challenge of looking through the keyhole of their second, or third, or even fourth language into cultures from around the world. Language, multiculturalism, and a global perspective walk hand in hand.

THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Students in the language classroom move toward a process of self-discovery through the lens of language and culture. In our increasingly global society, multicultural literacy is all the more necessary, and it becomes all the more available through the internet. Students have abundant resources that provide an outward perspective to facilitate inward growth. As I plan my courses around the Modern Languages reading program, I find on the internet documentaries, interviews, television shows, commercials, music, plays, picture dictionaries, radio programs, folk tales, and daily news blurbs. The content is limitless. Students find it sobering to read Maryse Condé's *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* and discuss scenes from Pascal Blanchard's 2012 documentary *Noirs de France*. Likewise, they are struck by the description of a colonial Algeria in Mouloud Feraoun's *Le fils du pauvre* and watch the 1946 documentary *Sur les routes de Kabylie* about the "benefits" of the French presence in the very same region. One of my students told me that the most memorable moment of his French studies came while watching Ousmane Sembène's 1966 film *La noire de ...*, the story of a young woman who commits suicide after moving from Dakar, Senegal, to work for a white family in Antibes, France. These materials were inaccessible to me in my early days of teaching, and they now serve not only as a tool for experiencing authentic language, but also as an anchor in literature from a different time, place and reality. My hope is to promote opportunities for students to expand their linguistic skills while I also provide a multicultural space within which they explore their own *humanitas*.

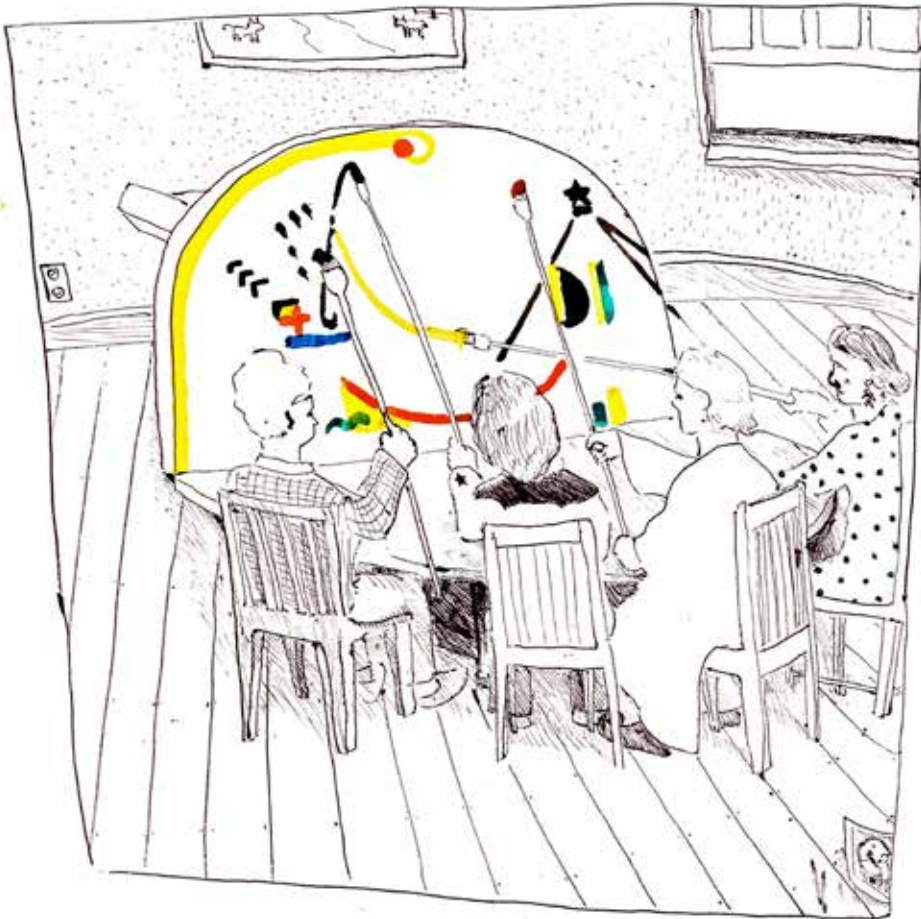
THE TEACHER GROWS

When we talk about the Harkness language classroom, the focus is most often on students. My voice as a teacher may grow quieter as students grow more confident and skilled in using theirs, but I still nudge and prod from time to time, direct them back to the text if necessary, help them establish connections, provide enrichment materials, and offer suggestions for clear, succinct, effective writing. In fostering intellectual independence for students, the Harkness classroom also provides intellectual independence for the teacher. As I choose content and support students in their communication skills, the students challenge me to expand my own knowledge, which in turn infuses and enthuses my

own pedagogical creativity. While the art of Harkness is student-centered, it is nonetheless important to include the teacher in the equation, and my intellectual engagement is as important as the students'. Through the internet, I have at my fingertips a perpetually evolving world of content that speaks to my own interests and skills. Long gone are the days when it was necessary to travel to francophone countries to hear French on the radio, read French in newspapers and magazines, tune in to French newscasts on television, buy tickets to the French theater or cinema, or rely on the telephone for French conversations. While technology in no way reduces the importance of the immersion experience for the language teacher and student, it does extend the possibilities for constant development, whether professional or academic. I believe I am a better teacher because my creative juices flow from constant exposure to new materials and resources available through technology. Furthermore, producing new avenues of exploration for the students allows me to manipulate content in new ways, address the needs of my students in different contexts, and develop my own pedagogical repertoire. The spirit of Harkness exploration that drives my students pervades my teaching and satisfies my own passion as a life-long learner.

The point at which the teacher and student share the common goal of learning is, in my experience, the culmination of the Harkness art. The “aha” moments that happen for me are every bit as important as those precious instants when the students light up with genuine understanding of and appreciation for the power of their new language. The skills I have learned as a teacher—listening, respecting, encouraging, and engaging—are precisely those I want to instill around the table. The disengaged teacher no longer practices the art but rather puts away her tools and proceeds to describe them without showing students how to use them. As a Harkness instructor in language, I walk alongside my students by sharing discoveries with them, and the experience is as authentic for me as it is for them. The quality of engagement I feel influences the quality of engagement my students feel. Through my own preparation, my constant search to expand my knowledge of francophone cultures, and my continuous revision of materials to make them more readily accessible, I feed a shared passion for multicultural literacy. Students know when an instructor is actively engaged in his or her own discipline, and more importantly, they know when the instructor cares about their progress. In classical French literature, the triple goal of literary endeavors—*docere*, *delectare*, and *movere* (to guide and

teach, to delight, and to touch emotion)—as prescribed by Greek and Roman models, define as well the art of Harkness where I, the instructor, am equally engaged in the joy of learning.



Davis Moore '05 illustrates Harkness in an art class. He explains, “When I taught at the Phillips Exeter Summer School, my co-teacher asked our students to engage in a drawn conversation—one paper, two artists, no talking.”