***Planning for Harkness Discussions***

***Sam Shapiro, EHI Discussion Dynamics***

Different teachers have different approaches, and many will change their techniques

based on the chemistry of their particular class. For the most part, the following

description accurately portrays how I run my Harkness classes.

With the nightly reading is assigned, I try to include specific and overarching questions

on which the students should focus as they read; they are told to make margin notes about

these specified topics and questions, and sometimes to write prepared notes on separate

paper. When they come to class, I’ll appoint some or all of the following roles to

students: moderator, participant, observer, and note-taker. Occasionally I will notify

students the day before that they will moderate the following day’s Harkness. I tend to do

this if I know the topic will be difficult, and thus I want the moderator to be very well

prepared.

The role of **moderator** is the most crucial. The moderator, and I must stress this often, is

not the de facto teacher. Rather, their job is to introduce topics, organize the flow of the

conversation, ask participants to specify and/or provide textual references, and generally

set an intellectually engaged and stimulating tone; I let the moderator decide if they want

participants to raise hands, or to just speak as they wish. The **participant** is the student

(For a good sense of the expectations of participants, see the next section in this packet

on evaluating Harkness students.) The **observer’s** role is to silently monitor the

discussion. They may take notes on what works well, and what does not. They might also

draw a Harkness discussion diagram: they draw a circle, put down the names of each

person around the circle such that the drawing mirrors the arrangement of the people at

the table, and then draw lines to and from each person as they speak. In the end this

diagram offers a powerful visual reflection of how the conversation flowed. If one area is

dark with lines, while others are blank, it becomes clear that the discussion was

unbalanced. The **note-taker**’s job is to take notes from the discussion about information

and ideas that might be useful for future test or essay preparation; the notes are written in

the communal class journal.

I will start class by clarifying any issues or questions left over from my last time with the

class, and then I’ll announce the moderator and the focus questions for the day’s

discussion. I try to pose questions and ideas that are broad enough to allow fluidity of

discourse, but not so broad that students don’t know what their focus should be. For very

difficult readings, I will, however, often narrow my questions, being very specific so

students don’t feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the piece or topic. Ultimately, I’m

still very much in the development stage of learning this art form of setting up Harkness

discussions.

During the discussion I intentionally sit removed from the circle. This is symbolic as well

as practical: symbolically, it demonstrates that the students and their ideas are central.

Practically, it weans students off of their tendencies to look and speak to me; even with

sitting outside the circle, I still notice some students always looking at me when they

speak. I do not remain completely silent during the discussions. Sometimes I offer an

opinion, but often when I speak it will be to clarify or pose a question, assert an opinion

different from the group’s consensus, or provide the class with some necessary piece of

historical background on the topic. I generally end the discussion five to ten minutes

before the class time finishes. The rest of our time together is spent evaluating the

strengths and weaknesses of the conversation—this makes explicit the lessons about

academic discussion dynamics—and making plans for how to improve future

discussions. I might also use this time to summarize what I heard, or to offer feedback

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