

How to conduct your first Harkness discussion

by Alistair Macrae
April, 2016

1) What is a Harkness discussion?

At least in the context of a class of approximately 30 Ontario secondary school students, a Harkness discussion is a timed, observed, un-moderated and text-centred discussion. These four terms are explained on pages 4-7 of this document.

2) Why should senior-level teachers incorporate this classroom activity into their program?

This question is addressed in Appendix F.

3) How can I obtain a Reading Package that would be suitable for a group of senior-level students?

Appendix A includes a Reading Package that has been designed for students enrolled in a senior-level class at an Ontario secondary school. To obtain more Reading Packages, send an email to macraealstair@gmail.com

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Conducting your first Harkness discussion

Step One: Preparing for your first Harkness discussion:

In what follows, I will make the following assumptions: (1) These instructions are being read by an Ontario secondary school teacher who has no prior experience with Harkness discussions. (2) This educator teaches a class of 30 senior-level students. (3) These students have never participated in a Harkness discussion, and only some of them know the names of all their classmates.

- a) Decide which students will participate in the Harkness discussion.
(These individuals will be referred to below as **Participants**. In what follows, I will assume that you have decided that 15 of your students will be Participants.)
- b) Decide which students will keep a record of what happens during the discussion.
(These individuals will be referred to below as **Observers**. In what follows, I will assume that you have decided that 15 of your students will be Observers.)
- c) Decide which students will not keep a record of what happens during the discussion.
(These individuals will be referred to below as **Visitors**. In what follows, I will assume that you have decided that none of your students will be Visitors.)
- d) Select a **Duration of Discussion**.
(In what follows, I will assume that you have chosen to conduct a 25-minute discussion.)
- e) Select a **Topic of Discussion**.
(In what follows, I will assume that you have chosen the following Topic of Discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy? **Appendix A** consists of three texts, each of which sheds light on this Topic of Discussion.)
- f) Create a **Reading Package** that meets the following criteria:
 - (a) It consists of at least two texts.
 - (b) It includes only texts that shed light on the Topic of Discussion.
 - (c) It includes texts that shed light on the Topic of Discussion from at least

two points of view.

(In what follows, I will assume that your Reading Package consists of all three texts in Appendix A.)

- g) Photocopy 30 copies of your Reading Package.
- h) Photocopy four copies of Appendix B1: the Collaboration Form, four copies of Appendix B2: the Disagreement Form and seven copies of Appendix B3: the Participation Form.
- i) Arrange 31 student desks (or chairs) so that they form two concentric circles. The inner circle – which has a diameter of approximately four metres – consists of 16 desks, each of which faces the centre of the inner circle. (These 16 desks will be referred to below as the **Participants' Desks**.) The outer circle – which has a diameter of approximately seven metres – consists of 15 desks, each of which faces the centre of the inner circle. (These 15 desks will be referred to below as **Observers' Desks**.)
- j) Print the name of each Participant on a sheet of 8½ X 11 paper. Using masking tape, attach these 15 sheets of paper to the front, vertical surface of the 15 Participants' Desks.
- k) Print the name of each Observer on a sheet of 8½ X 11 paper. Using masking tape, attach these 15 sheets of paper to the front, vertical surface of the 15 Observers' Desks.
- l) Place a large wall clock (or digital timer) at each end of the room.
- m) Attach each of the following to a blackboard or a classroom wall:
 - (i) A large sheet of paper – referred to below as **Paper A** --- on which the following words have been printed in large block letters: Today's Topic of Discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy?
 - (ii) A large sheet of paper – referred to below as **Paper B** --- on which four sentences have been printed in large block letters:

T stands for **T**imed discussion

O stands for **O**bserved discussion

U stands for **U**n-moderated discussion

T stands for **T**ext-centred discussion

... continued on next page...

- (iii) A large sheet of paper – referred to below as **Paper C** --- on which each of the following has been printed in large block letters:
 - Four Suggestions for Participants:
 - Discuss ways in which the Reading Package sheds light on the Topic of Discussion.
 - Override the urge to utter non sequiturs.
 - Make appropriate eye contact with all of the other Participants.
 - Encourage other Participants when it is appropriate to do so.
- (iv) A large sheet of paper – referred to below as **Paper D** --- on which you have drawn the diagram that appears in **Appendix G** (page 27): a large, umbrella-like dome, a group of little faces below the left half of the dome, another group of little faces below the right half of the dome and one little face just above the dome.
- (v) A large sheet of paper that completely covers Paper A.
- (vi) Four strips of paper, each of which completely covers one of the four sentences on Paper B.
- (vii) Five strips of paper, each of which completely covers one of the five items on Paper C.
- (viii) A small sheet of paper – referred to below as **Paper E** --- that covers the little happy face above Paper D's dome.
- (ix) A large sheet of paper that completely covers both Paper E and Paper D.
- n) Instruct each of the 15 Participants to take a seat at one of the Participants' Desks, and instruct each of the 15 Observers to take a seat at one of the Observers' Desks.
- o) Provide each Participant and each Observer with a pen or pencil.

Note: The three texts in Appendix A have been taken from “Harkness Readings 2016a,” a file that includes 20 texts about the following Topic of Discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy. To obtain a copy of this file, email Alistair Macrae at macraealister@gmail.com

Step Two: Explaining a Harkness discussion to your students:

- a) While seated at one of the Participants’ Desks (in the presence of 15 Participants and 15 Observers), make the following announcement:

“For today’s activity, I have divided the class into two groups. Those of you who are seated around the inner circle of desks are Participants, and those of you who are seated around the outer circle of desks are Observers.”

- b) Remove the large sheet of paper that conceals Paper A, and make the following announcement: “Today’s activity is a discussion of the following topic of discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy?”

- c) Remove the strip of paper that conceals the first sentence on Paper B: T stands for **T**imed discussion. Read the sentence aloud, and make the following announcement:

“Today’s discussion will end 25 minutes after it begins. In order to help everyone keep track of the time, I have placed a wall clock (or digital timer) at each end of the classroom.”

- d) Remove the strip of paper that conceals the second sentence on Paper B. Read the sentence aloud – O stands for **O**bserved discussion – and make the following announcement:

“Only the Participants will be permitted to speak during today’s discussion. While they are discussing today’s Topic of Discussion, the Observers will maintain a written record of what is said using forms that I will distribute in a few minutes. Immediately after today’s discussion, the Observers will provide the Participants with feedback.”

- e) Remove the strip of paper that conceals the third sentence on Paper B. Read the sentence aloud – U stands for **U**n-moderated discussion -- and make the following announcement:

“All of you are familiar with discussions in which nobody speaks unless called upon by a moderator. During today’s discussion, Participants are expected to speak without first raising a hand. If I see a raised hand during

today's discussion, I will ignore it. I will ignore raised hands because I hope that today's discussion will be un-moderated."

- f) Remove the strip of paper that covers the fourth sentence on Paper B. Read the sentence aloud -- T stands for Text-centred discussion – and make the following announcement:

"In a few minutes, I will be giving each of you a copy of a Reading Package that consists of three texts. Each of the three texts sheds light on today's Topic of Discussion. Sometimes the relationship between a text and the Topic of Discussion is obvious. More often than not, however, the relationship between the two is not obvious."

- g) Remove the strip of paper that covers the first item on Paper C, and read it aloud: Four Suggestions for Participants:

- h) Remove the strip of paper that covers the second item on Paper C. Read it aloud -- Discuss ways in which the Reading Package sheds light on the Topic of Discussion – and make the following announcement:

"Because Participants will have only 25 minutes to discuss the many ways in which the Reading Package sheds light on today's Topic of Discussion, it is important not to wander off topic. If I think that a Participant named X is making comments that are unrelated to at least one of the texts, I will ask X the following question: "What text are you discussing?" If it turns out that X is not talking about any of the texts, I will ask X to re-phrase their contribution to the discussion."

- i) Remove the strip of paper that covers the third item on Paper C. Read it aloud – Override the urge to utter non sequiturs -- and make the following announcement:

"If a Participant named X begins their contribution to today's discussion by talking about something other than what was said by the preceding Participant, then X has uttered a non sequitur. Simply put, a non sequitur is a comment that does not follow from what was said by the preceding Participant. If I think that X's contribution to the discussion begins with a non sequitur, I will ask X the following question: "How are your comments related to what has just been said?" If X does not have a suitable answer to this question, I will ask X to re-phrase their contribution to the discussion."

- j) Make the following announcement:

“Because there will be no raised hands during today’s discussion, Participants may be wondering how they can possibly be expected to know who is waiting to say something. Here is a suggestion: Make eye contact with all of the other Participants. I will now pause so that each Participant can make eye contact with every other Participant. If your view of another Participant’s face is obstructed, please adjust the position of your desk. (While Participants are completing this task remove the strip of paper that covers the fourth item on Paper C: Make appropriate eye contact with all of the other Participants.)

- k) Remove the strip of paper that covers the fifth item on Paper C: Read it aloud – Encourage other Participants when it is appropriate to do so -- and make the following announcement:

“In a moderated discussion, the moderator is expected to keep the discussion moving. In an un-moderated discussion, however, the Participants are expected to assume collective responsibility for this important task. If a Participant named S makes a comment to which no one responds, here are two ways in which another Participant – referred to below as T -- might encourage S:

If S has said something with which T agrees, T might make one or more of the following comments:

“I agree with you.”

“Text # ___ has an example of what you just said.”

“Your comment reminds me of what Participant W was saying a few minutes ago.”

“Your comment sheds light on Text #___.”

If S has said something that T doesn’t understand, T might make this comment:

“Please elaborate on what you just said.”

If Participants S and T start to speak at the same time, here is a comment that one of them might address to the other:

“Go ahead. I’ll wait until you have finished speaking.”

- l) Make the following announcement:

“Suppose that someone wanted to ruin everyone’s enjoyment of a baseball game that is being played on a rainy day at the Rogers Centre. One way to achieve this childish goal would be to open up the retractable dome, thereby making sure that everyone watching the game gets soaked

to the skin. In a manner of speaking, today's discussion will take place under a dome. I am not referring to the roof of the building in which we are gathered. I am referring to the dome created by the first letter of the Four Suggestion for Participants:

Discuss ways in which the Reading Package sheds light on the Topic of Discussion.

Override the urge to utter non sequiturs.

Make appropriate eye contact with all of the other Participants.

Encourage other Participants when it is appropriate to do so.

- m) Remove the large sheet of paper that conceals Paper D, but do not remove Paper E. Make the following announcement:

“This diagram represents a five-second interval during a hypothetical discussion. The umbrella-shaped dome represents the Four Suggestions for Participants. The faces under the left side of the dome represent the Participants. The faces under the right side of the dome represent the Observers. The blue dots – each of which is supposed to look like a drop of rain – represent conduct that might dampen someone's enjoyment of the discussion. For example, laughing sarcastically at someone is a drop of rain. Yawning loudly while someone is speaking is a drop of rain. So is entering into the discussion while someone else is speaking. And so is speaking on and on and on while someone is waiting to speak. How much of today's discussion will resemble this drawing? This is one of the questions that the Observers will address immediately after today's discussion.”

Remove Paper E from Paper D, and make the following announcement:

“The face that stands apart from all the other faces represents me. My job will be similar to that of the Rogers Centre employee who makes sure that drops of rain don't fall through the dome. In other words, it is my job to ensure that nothing is said or done that might dampen anyone's enjoyment of today's discussion.”

- n) Give everyone a copy of the Reading Package, and read it aloud.

(This should take less than five minutes. As the Reading Package is being read aloud, Participants may wish to underline sentences and/or phrases that they plan to talk about during the discussion.)

- o) Distribute the photocopied forms from Appendix B. To be more precise, give four of the Observers a copy of Appendix B1: the Collaboration Form; give four other Observers a copy of Appendix B2: the Disagreement Form;

give each of the eight remaining Observers a copy of Appendix B3: the Participation Form.)

p) Make the following announcement:

“Please look at Text #001. (Pause while Participants and Observers locate this text.) Like all of today’s texts, Text #001 consists of two parts. Examine the first part of Text #001. What light does it shed on today’s Topic of Discussion?”

(Start timing the discussion as soon as a Participant starts to speak.)

(Note: **Appendix C** includes comments about the relationship between Text #001 and the Topic of Discussion.)

Step Three: Conducting a Harkness discussion that is moving along:

- a) Override the urge to moderate the discussion.
(If the discussion is moving along, focus your attention on maintaining a written record of what is being said. Looking down at what you are writing will remind Participants that they are expected to make eye contact with one another instead of looking at you.)
- b) Override the urge to share your interpretation(s) of the Reading Package with the Participants.
- c) Override the urge to display body language that communicates either approval or disapproval of what the Participants are saying.
(If the Participants are focusing their attention on their teacher’s body language, they are not focusing their attention on one another.)

Step Four: Conducting a Harkness discussion that grinds to a halt:

- a) Moderate the discussion until it gets back on track. Here are some questions that you might throw out to the Participant whose comments were followed by silence:

“Could you elaborate on what you just said?”

“How is your interpretation of Text #__ unlike that of other Participants who have discussed this text?”

“What would happen if your interpretation of Part One of this text were to be applied to Part Two of the same text?”

“What would happen if your interpretation of this text were to be applied to another text?”

- b) Override the urge to share your interpretation(s) of the Reading Package with the Participants.
- c) Override the urge to display body language that communicates either approval or disapproval of the fact that the discussion has ground to a halt. If the discussion does not start to move along after a (very) long silence, go to the second half of Step Eight. In other words, terminate the discussion, and ask the Observers to provide the Participants with feedback.

Step Five: Conducting a Harkness discussion after a non sequitur has been uttered:

If a Participant named X begins their contribution to the discussion by uttering a non sequitur, ask X this question: “How are your comments related to what has just been said?” If X does not have a suitable answer to this question, ask X to re-phrase their contribution to the discussion.

Step Six: Conducting a Harkness discussion after an off-topic comment has been uttered:

If a Participant named X is talking about something that is unrelated to at least one of the texts, ask X this question: “What text are you discussing?” If it turns out that X is not talking about any of the texts, ask X to re-phrase their contribution to the discussion.

Step Seven: Conducting a Harkness discussion in which Participants are becoming distracted:

If two Participants -- referred to below as V and W – enter into a private conversation (and/or become visibly disengaged from the discussion) look up at the ceiling and make this comment: “I feel drops of rain.” If this doesn’t have the effect of bringing V and W back on task, go to the second half of Step Eight. (In other words, terminate the discussion, and ask the Observers to provide the Participants with feedback.)

Step Eight: Conducting the last 5 minutes of a Harkness discussion:

Five minutes before the end of the discussion, make the following announcement: “This discussion will end in five minutes.”
Five minutes later, announce that the discussion is over. To be more precise, announce that the discussion is over even if Participants are

eager to continue the discussion and/or some of the texts in the Reading Package have not been discussed.

Step Nine: Conducting the post-discussion portion of a Harkness discussion:

Call upon the Observers to share the information that they recorded during the discussion. Moderate this portion of the discussion. Invite Participants to respond to the Observers' comments.

Appendix A: Text #001

Topic of Discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy?

Source: *The Globe and Mail*, Thursday, November 26, 2015, page A15

Headline: U.S. Thanksgiving: Obama jokes about presidential race during the turkey pardon

Written by Julia Edwards, Washington

Speaking at his annual Thanksgiving turkey pardoning [ceremony on November 25], U.S. President Barack Obama joked about his teenage daughters, his critics and the 2016 presidential election.

The tradition of the U.S. president pardoning a turkey at Thanksgiving began in 1947 under President Harry Truman...

... Mr. Obama pardoned two California-raised turkeys, named Honest and Abe, who will retire to a historic farm in Leesburg, Virginia, rather than end up on Americans' Thanksgiving tables.

The two turkeys were raised by Dr. Jihad Douglas, whom Mr. Obama referred to as Dr. Douglas, sidestepping the man's first name, which can refer to spreading Islam through violence. Mr. Obama referred to a second turkey farmer, Joe Hadden, by his first and last names.

... Mr. Obama was joined by his two teenage daughters, Sasha, 14, and Malia, 17. He joked that they 'do this solely because it makes me feel good, not because they think that this is something I should be doing.'

Last year, Sasha and Malia Obama were criticized on social media for not smiling during the [turkey-pardoning] ceremony. A Republican congressional staffer was

fired after she posted on Facebook that [Sasha and Malia] should show ‘a little class.’

On Wednesday, both Sasha and Malia appeared with beaming smiles and chuckled at their father’s jokes.

Source: *A New Yorker* cartoon: November 9, 2015, page 45
Cartoonist’s name: Luna Finck

Description of the cartoon:

While seated at a table in a restaurant, a woman holds a menu and looks at the waiter. ‘The soup of the day is mushroom-barley,’ says the waiter, ‘but I’d rather talk about the soup of November 6, 1946.’

Appendix A: Text #002

Topic of Discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy?

Source: *Toronto Star*, Monday, November 30, 2015 page A15
Headline: Women will shake off public contempt for years to come
Written by Heather Mallick

... [Whereas] most successful men have been praised all their lives... [many women] are still raised to have pink personalities...[In other words, they are raised in a way that encourages them to express disapproval of themselves and be]... critical of other girls... [For example,] ... according to *Girls Like Us*, Sheila Weller’s 2008 book on music history, the husband of [American singer/songwriter] Carol King... beat her and at one point came close to killing her. In 1967, the husband of [Canadian singer/songwriter] Joni Mitchell... beat her... The histories of brilliant women are full of fear and pain caused by the self-hatred that [some women acquire during childhood.]

American songwriter Carly Simon’s new autobiography, *Boys in the Trees*, [reveals that]... Simone... endured sexual harassment as she began her career...

[By the time she had reached adulthood, Carly Simon had acquired the Beast, a term that she uses to] refer to her self-hating voice...

[The problem faced by many women is not merely that they] hear the Beast in their head...[The problem is that they hear this voice] in public. [Women] have to block it out, shake it off.

Source: *The Globe and Mail*, Friday, December 4, 2015, page A8
Headline: 'Beautiful' response to online bullies
Written by an identified person who writes for the Canadian Press

A young woman from Newfoundland and Labrador is getting flowers, support and thousands of positive messages for turning a case of online bullying into what her mother called 'something beautiful.'

... Lynelle Cantwell...was named in [an online] poll... called 'Ugliest Girls in Grade 12.'

Ms. Cantwell said that she learned about the poll on Tuesday during a math class... Later that day, she posted a message on Facebook that went viral, directed at the anonymous bullies: 'I'm sorry that your life is so miserable that you have to try to bring others down.'

Appendix A: Text #003

Topic of Discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy?

Source: *Toronto Star*, Friday, November 20, 2015, page A8
Headline: 'Hard-hitting TV ad targets sex harassment'
Written by Bob Ferguson, Queen's Park Bureau

...[T]he Ontario government [has taken] another step to raise awareness of harassment and violence ... and [also] the need for bystanders to speak up when they see something wrong.

Building on the popular and edgy 'WhoWillYouHelp' campaign that was unveiled [in 2014], the [Ontario government's] 30-second [television advertisement] begins with a woman saying aloud what she's thinking while eyeing an office mate: 'Hi! I'm going to discuss your skanky outfit with all of our co-workers.'

... [Another television advertisement] shows a young man on public transit, confiding "I love a crowded bus. It makes it easier for me to grope you.'

Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne introduced the ad ... at a sexual harassment and violence conference [on November 19, 2015].

... The ads [are intended] to help people recognize what types of comments are over the line...[They are also intended to encourage people to] intervene when an incident takes place in front of them.

... 'The ads are scary and they make people feel uncomfortable,' Wynne added, noting that that is the point of the ads...[Wynne also reminded her audience that

the ads are] part of [the Ontario government's] \$41-million effort [to raise awareness of] sexual harassment and violence...

... Also of concern are so-called 'grey areas' in recognizing what constitutes harassment or violence, such as sending nude pictures, ... sexually touching someone who is drunk or spreading rumours about someone's sexuality...

Source: *Toronto Star*, Tuesday, December 1, 2015, page A1

Headline: Pirelli rolls out shocking new look in 2016 for its once-racy calendar

Written by Peter Edwards, Star reporter

...The Pirelli tire company has announced that it is... leaving behind its calendars featuring nude and semi-nude supermodels. In their place, the 2016 Pirelli calendar shows women of all ages in all states of attire... *The New York Times* [claims that Pirelli's 2016 calendar] 'may signal a cultural shift'...

Appendix B1: The Collaboration Form

Instructions to the Observer who is completing this form:

During today's discussion, focus your attention on incidents in which Participants work collaboratively to interpret one or more of the texts. For any two of these incidents, answer the following questions using the space at the bottom of this page:

- 1) Which Participants collaborated?
- 2) About what text (or topic) did they collaborate?
- 3) Which of these Participants – if any -- changed their mind during this collaboration?
- 4) Which of the following statements best describes the outcome of this collaboration?
 - a) As a result of this collaboration, the discussion took off.
 - b) As a result of this collaboration, the discussion ground to a halt.

(If you need more space to record your answer, use the back of this page.)

Appendix B2: The Disagreement Form

Instructions to the Observer who is filling in this form:

During today's discussion, focus your attention on incidents in which Participants disagree. For any two of these incidents, answer the following questions using the space at the bottom of this page:

- 1) Which Participants disagreed?
- 2) About what text (or topic) did they disagree?
- 3) Which of these Participants – if any -- changed their mind?
- 4) Which of the following statements best describes the outcome of this disagreement?
 - a) As a result of this disagreement, the discussion took off.
 - b) As a result of this disagreement, the discussion ground to a halt.

(If you need more space to record your answer, use the back of this page.)

Appendix B3: The Participation Form

Last week, Naomi, George, Army and Helen participated in a discussion that began at 10:00 am and ended at 10:20 am. Here is a summary of the times at which each of the four Participants contributed to the discussion:

Participant's Name							
Naomi		10:00	10:13	10:16			
George		10:06	10:14	10:15	10:17	10:18	
Army		10:10	10:19				
Helen		10:02	10:03	10:08	10:12		

Instructions: Using the table below, record the times at which four of today's Participants contribute to the discussion.

Participant's Name							

Note: Before the discussion begins, your teacher will make sure that the name of each Participant appears on at least two of the various Participation Forms.

Appendix B4: The Ino-Odysseus Form

In Homer's *Odyssey*, a king named Odysseus travels from Troy to Ithaca. In the final year of this ten-year journey, Odysseus builds a raft and launches it into the sea. After making good progress for a few days, "a great wave of sea water [crashes down on Odysseus] ...and [spins his home-made] raft in a circle [with such force that Odysseus is] thrown ... far from the raft..." (Book 5, lines 313-315) Just as Odysseus pulls himself back onto his raft, a divine being named Ino makes her one and only appearance in Homer's epic poem. After urging Odysseus to abandon his raft, she offers him some advice: "Take [my] veil... [I]t is immortal... [F]asten it under your chest... [If you do this] there is no need for you to die or to suffer." (Book 5, lines 346-347) Odysseus pauses for a moment, seizes Ino's veil, wraps it around his chest and swims away from his disintegrating raft.

Instructions to the Observer who is completing this form:

During today's discussion, look for re-enactments of the Ino-Odysseus encounter. For purposes of this exercise, make the following assumptions:

- a) Constructing and sharing an interpretation of one of today's texts is a re-enactment of the incident in which Odysseus builds and launches a raft.

- b) The moment during which a Participant named P realizes that their interpretation of a text doesn't stand up to scrutiny is a re-enactment of the incident in which a large wave crashes down on Odysseus' raft.
- c) The moment during which P listens to another Participant's suggestion about how P might modify P's flawed interpretation of a text is a re-enactment of the incident in which Ino advises Odysseus to abandon his raft and seize her veil.
- d) The moment during which P accepts another Participant's advice is a re-enactment of the incident in which Odysseus seizes Ino's veil, wraps it around his chest and swims away from his disintegrating raft.

Using the back of this sheet of paper, answer the following questions for any two of today's re-enactments of the Ino-Odysseus encounter:

- 1) Which Participant(s) re-enacted the role of Odysseus?
- 2) Which Participant(s) re-enacted the role of Ino?
- 3) What suggestion did today's Ino throw out to today's Odysseus?
- 4) What opinion (or interpretation of a text) did today's Odysseus abandon?

Appendix B5: The Homeward Journey Form

(page 1 of 3 pages)

People sometimes talk about discussions as if they were journeys. For example, while participating in a discussion that feels as if it is doing what discussions are supposed to do, people make one or more of the following comments: "This discussion is moving along" or "We are making progress". While participating in a discussion that exceeds the participants' expectations of what discussions are supposed to do, people make one or more of the following comments: "This discussion is taking off" or "This discussion is taking us to the next level." While participating in a discussion that falls a little short of the participants' expectations of what discussions are supposed to do, people make one or more of the following comments: "This discussion is grinding to a halt" or "This discussion is taking us nowhere." While participating in a discussion that falls a long way short of the participants' expectations, people make one or more of the following comments: "This discussion is going right off the rails" or "This discussion is going rapidly downhill."

Here is Student W's description of a 16-minute discussion in which W was a Participant: "The discussion moved along for the first four minutes and then took off for two minutes. Then, the discussion moved along again for four minutes

before going rapidly downhill for four minutes. It then moved along for two minutes.”

Table A – which appears at the top of the next page – includes arrows that represent W’s description of this 16-minute discussion. As you examine Table A, make the following assumptions:

- 1) The space between any two side-by-side vertical lines represents a two-minute segment of W’s discussion.
- 2) The column located on the left side of Table A represents the first two minutes of W’s discussion; the column beside it represents the second two minutes of W’s discussion and so on across the page.
- 3) Horizontal arrows represent segments of W’s discussion that moved along.
- 4) Vertical arrows that point to the top of the page represent segments of W’s discussion that took off.
- 5) Vertical arrows that point to the bottom of the page represent segments of W’s discussion that went rapidly downhill.
- 6) Circles represent segments of W’s discussion that went nowhere. (The radius of these circles indicates the length of time during which a discussion goes nowhere.)

Appendix B5: The Homeward Journey Form

(page 2 of 3 pages)

Table A:

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Appendix C: Miscellaneous comments about Text #001

Topic of Discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy?

The first part of Text #001 – which can be found at the beginning of Appendix A -- is a newspaper article about an annual ceremony in which the President of the United States spares the life of two turkeys.

Part of this newspaper article reads as follows: "... A Republican congressional staffer was fired [a year ago] after she posted on Facebook that [Sasha and Malia Obama] should show 'a little class' [while attending the turkey ceremony]." Assume for a moment that this Republican staffer honestly believed that Sasha and Malia should have displayed a little class. Assume, too, that her decision to post her story about the President's daughters was guided by her belief that honesty is the best policy. What – if anything – is wrong with using Facebook to post such opinions?

The fourth paragraph reveals that President Obama referred to as Dr. Jihad Douglas, as Dr. Douglas, “sidestepping the man’s first name, which can refer to spreading Islam through violence...” Under what conditions – if any -- is it dishonest to identify someone without mentioning the person’s first name?

Here is the seventh paragraph of this newspaper article: “On Wednesday, both Sasha and Malia appeared with beaming smiles and chuckled at their father’s jokes.” Suppose that neither Sasha nor Malia were at all amused by the jokes that their father shared at this year’s ceremony. Would honesty – in the form of shaking their heads or frowning – have been the best policy? Why?

The second part of Reading #001 is a description of a November 9, 2015 *New Yorker* cartoon: While seated at a table in a restaurant, a woman holds a menu and looks at the waiter. ‘The soup of the day is mushroom-barley,’ says the waiter, ‘but I’d rather talk about the soup of November 6, 1946.’

Assume for a moment that this waiter is speaking the truth when he says that he would rather talk about a soup that was on the menu seventy years ago. What assumptions – if any – do the waiter and the above-mentioned Republican staffer share about honesty? Do you agree with their assumptions about honesty? Why?

Appendix D: Suggestions for your 2nd, 3rd and nth Harkness discussions:

Suggestions for your second Harkness discussion:

- 1) Before beginning your second Harkness discussion, give each of your students a copy of the following documents: *Appendix E: Summary of the Four Suggestions for Participants* and *Appendix B4: the Ino-Odysseus Form*. Read both documents aloud. Ask some of the Observers to complete the Ino-Odysseus form during the discussion. *Appendix B4* replaces *Appendix B1: the Collaboration Form*.
- 2) Ask the Participants from your first Harkness discussion to be the Observers, and ask the Observers from your first Harkness discussion to be the Participants.
- 3) Use the same Topic of Discussion that was used in your first Harkness discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy?

- 4) As a Reading Package, use the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th readings in the file called Harkness Readings 2016a.
- 5) Increase the Duration of Discussion from 25 minutes to 30 minutes.

Suggestions for your third Harkness discussion:

- 1) Before beginning your third Harkness discussion, give each of your students a copy of following documents: *Appendix E: Summary of the Four Suggestions for Participants* and *Appendix B5: the Homeward Journey Form*. Read. *Appendix B5* aloud. Ask some of the Observers to complete this form during the discussion.
- 2) Use the same Topic of Discussion that was used in your first Harkness discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy?
- 3) As a Reading Package, use the 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th readings in the file called Harkness Readings 2016a.
- 4) Increase the Duration of Discussion from 30 minutes to 35 minutes.

By the time your students participate in their nth discussion, abiding by the Four Suggestions for Participants will have become second nature. Here are three suggestions for your nth Harkness discussion:

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- 1) Use the same Topic of Discussion that was used in your first Harkness discussion: Under what conditions is honesty the best policy?
 - 2) As a Reading Package, use four readings in “Harkness Readings 2016a” that have not been used in previous discussions.
 - 3) Increase the Duration of Discussion from 35 minutes to 40 minutes.

After conducting your nth discussion, reflect upon the possibility that you may have provided your students with an opportunity – perhaps even their first opportunity – to engage in a classroom activity that is timed, observed, un-moderated and text centred.

Appendix E: Summary of the Four Suggestions for Participants

First suggestion: Discuss ways in which the Reading Package sheds light on the Topic of Discussion.

If Participant X’s teacher thinks that X’s contribution to the discussion is unrelated to any of the texts in the Reading Package, X will be asked the following question: “What text are you discussing?” If it turns out that X is not talking about anything in the Reading Package, X will be asked to re-phrase their contribution to the discussion.

Second suggestion: Override the urge to utter non sequiturs.

At least in the context of a Harkness discussion, a non sequitur is a comment that does not follow from what was said by the preceding Participant. If Participant X's teacher thinks that the first words out of X's mouth are a non sequitur, X will be asked the following question: "How is this related to what has just been said?" If X does not have a suitable answer to this question, X will be asked to re-phrase their contribution to the discussion.

Third suggestion: **M**ake appropriate eye contact with all of the other Participants.

Making eye contact with all of the other Participants will help you figure out who is waiting to make a contribution to the discussion.

Fourth suggestion: **E**ncourage other Participants when it is appropriate to do so.

If a Participant named S makes a comment to which no one responds, here are two ways in which another Participant – referred to below as T -- might encourage S:

If S has said something with which T agrees, T might make one or more of the following comments:

"I agree with you."

"Text # ___ has an example of what you just said."

"Your comment reminds me of what Participant W was saying a few minutes ago."

"Your comment sheds light on Text # ___."

If S has said something that T doesn't understand, T might make this comment:
"Please elaborate on what you just said."

If Participants F and G start to speak at the same time, here is a comment that one of them might address to the other:

"Go ahead. I'll wait until you have finished speaking."

Appendix F: Miscellaneous suspicions about Harkness discussions:

1. Here is part of a letter to the editor from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education curriculum instructor John J.C. Meyers:

"... Back in the 1990s, the [Ontario] government called for teachers in K-12 to assess as best they could 'responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative and self-regulation.' ... [I urge secondary school teachers to design learning tasks that] in addition to curriculum expectations and learning outcomes, show teachers and students the importance of these competencies..."
(*Toronto Star*, February 22, 2016)

I suspect that secondary school students that participate in Harkness discussions will develop at least some (and perhaps all) of the competencies to which Meyers refers: responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative and self-regulation.

2. Here is part of a *Globe and Mail* interview in which Malcolm Gladwell discusses tweaking:

Interviewer: [In your November 14, 2011 *New Yorker* review of Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs]... you referred to Mr. Jobs as a "tweaker." It caused some discussion. Were you surprised by that response?

Gladwell: Oh. I don't know. I don't know what you're referring to by the response. Lots of people seemed to like it. There were a handful of times when people thought I was dismissing him when, in fact, the point of the piece is that the tweaker is one of the noblest and most important of all roles in innovation. I was trying to both characterize and ennoble his efforts, but I think most people got that.

Interviewer: Are there such a thing, in your view, as political tweakers?

Gladwell: Most of politics is tweaking. There is very little revolutionary thinking – particularly in mature democracies. You have less real innovation and you have tweaking in the best sense of the word because politics is necessarily so grounded in the real world. You don't really have a chance to start over. We're happy with what we've got so, I think, by necessity, we avoid the really revolutionary voices and we embrace those who are willing to work to perfect what's already there.

Interviewer: Any examples come to mind?

Gladwell: Bill Clinton's a great example of a masterful political tweaker who, at the end of the day, for all the controversy that surrounded his time in office, accomplished a great deal, left the country in really good shape and worked really well within a very hostile system. He did not turn American society upside down. He backed away from his most revolutionary notion, which was health-care reform, and he contented himself with perfecting the society at the edges and did a real good job.

(*The Globe and Mail*, Saturday, December 3, 2011, Page F3)

I suspect that students who participate in Harkness discussions will be provided with many opportunities to tweak their interpretations of a Reading Package.

3. In *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (Yale University Press, 2012), Richard Sennett, who is both a cellist and a conductor,

makes the following remarks about the challenges of being part of a chamber orchestra:

“...Young musical hotshots are often brought up short when they begin playing chamber music; nothing has prepared them to attend to others. (I was like that, aged ten.) Though they may know their own part perfectly, in rehearsal they have to learn the ego-busting art of listening, turning outward. It’s sometimes thought that the result [of being attentive to the other musicians with whom one is performing a piece of chamber music] moves to the opposite extreme, the musician blending in, submerging his or her ego in a larger whole. But sheer homogeneity [as would occur if each member of a chamber orchestra were to become submerged by (or in) the group] is no recipe for making music together... Music character appears instead through little dramas of deference and assertion; in chamber music, particularly, we need to hear individuals speaking in different voices which sometimes conflict, as in bowings or string colour. Weaving together these differences is like conducting a rich conversation.” (Sennett, 2012,14-15)

I suspect that students who engage in Harkness discussions will learn “the ego-busting art of listening, turning outward.”

I also suspect that the rich conversation to which Sennett refers has much in common with the conversation that occurs during a Harkness discussion. (I am using the terms “discussion” and “conversation” interchangeably.)

In a manner of speaking, Sennett claims that for the duration of a musical performance, chamber musicians are in a situation similar to that of Odysseus as he steers his ship between a man-eating, multi-headed monster (Scylla) and a whirlpool (Charybdis). For chamber musicians, Scylla is any situation in which no one is listening to anyone else, and Charybdis is any situation in which – to quote Sennett – “[each musician has] submerge[ed] his or her ego in a larger whole.” (Such a situation is parodied in the 1998 film *Pleasantville*: During Miss Peters’ lesson about the differences between Main Street and Elm Street, Jennifer startles her classmates by refusing to submerge her ego into that of the group. A similar situation occurs in the 1979 film *Life of Brian*: Brian quickly becomes exasperated by his followers’ willingness to submerge themselves into a larger whole.) In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus cannot reach his destination without first steering his ship between Scylla and Charybdis (and losing a few of his companions by so doing.) In a manner of speaking, a group of chamber musicians – at least according to Sennett – cannot reach their (collective) destination (i.e., a successful performance of a piece of chamber music) without navigating a middle course between being insufficiently attuned to one another and being excessively attuned to one another. (The 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* includes a scene in which individuals are insufficiently attuned to one another, namely, the scenes in which Nurse Ratched tries – with mixed

results – to engage a group of psychiatric patients in a discussion.)

I suspect that what is true of chamber musicians is also true of any group of Participants: They cannot reach their (collective) destination without navigating a middle course between being insufficiently attuned to one another and being excessively attuned to one another.

4. In *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little, Brown and Company, 2005), Malcolm Gladwell makes the following comment about improvised comedy: “[One of the most important of the rules that make improv possible... [is] the notion that a very simple way to create a story ... is to have characters accept everything that happens to them. As Keith Johnstone, one of the founders of improv theatre, writes: ‘... Bad improvisers block action... Good improvisers develop action.’” (114-115)

I suspect that Johnstone’s distinction between improvisers who do and do not develop action parallels the distinction between Participants who do and do not override the urge to utter non sequiturs.

5. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines **kairos** as a propitious moment for decision or action. Here is another discussion of this term:

“[*Kairos*] means [among other things] knowing when to speak [and] when to be silent... One is reminded here of William James’s comment about the encyclopedia in the bookcase in his office. ‘Here is all knowledge and truth,’ [James] said, ‘but the question is *when* do I utter these truths? No one goes about uttering true propositions stretching from ‘Aardvark’ to ‘Zygote’. On the contrary, we cite this information only *when* it is needed or relevant.’”

(John E. Smith, “Time and Qualitative Time” in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory and Praxis*, 53)

I suspect that students who participate in Harkness discussions will be provided with many opportunities to learn when to speak and when to be silent.

6. Here is a recent discussion of the appeal of poetry:

“Poetry is a form of writing that, among other things, deliberately puzzles as a means of engaging the reader in the pleasurable business of solving them... [I]t is an intrinsic part of the pleasure of poetry to be able to unravel difficulties and to solve problems.”

(John Fuller’s “The brick-wall moment: What is poetry about? And other puzzles”, *Times Literary Supplement* (June 3, 2011, p. 3) review of *Who is Ozymandias? And other puzzles in poetry*.)

I suspect that Fuller’s description of poetry is also a description of the best Reading Packages: They deliberately puzzle as a means of engaging the reader in the pleasurable business of trying to make sense of the relationship between a Reading Package and a Topic of Discussion.

7. Here is part of Paul Woodruff’s 2011 discussion of leaders and followers: “Good followers have essentially the same skills and virtues as leaders. Good followers are not machinelike in their obedience to authority. Like leaders, they are focused on the common goal and will help the leader see the way to get there. They are independent minded...[Leaders] are not hamstrung by traditions or rules. They listen to advice from many quarters, but they are not bowled over by what others have said... Because they are not tyrants, they do not always get their way. They listen to others, and they may be persuaded to give up a cherished plan...When leaders lose on [any given] issue, they lose well. That is because, as leaders, they are not out to win anything for themselves personally...”

(P. Woodruff: *The Ajax Dilemma: Justice, Fairness and Rewards*, 2011 193-194)

I suspect that what Woodruff says about leaders and followers can also be said of anyone who participates in their nth Harkness discussion.

8. Here is part of Roger Martin’s 2011 discussion of innovation:

“... With global competition and low-cost jurisdictions like China, India and Brazil more quickly than before replicating and producing at lower costs everything we do, [Canada needs to become] an innovation nation. Let’s become the first nation on the planet to have universal education in innovation by explicitly and clearly teaching innovation in the primary and secondary school system...”

(*The Globe and Mail*, Monday, November 21, 2011, page B3. In 2011, Roger Martin was the Dean of the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management.)

I suspect that Harkness discussions would enhance any secondary school program that attempts to teach innovation.

Appendix G: Diagram of a Harkness discussion:

Page 4 refers to a large sheet of paper on which the following items have been drawn: a large, umbrella-like dome, a group of little faces below the left half of the dome, another group of little faces below the right half of the dome and a little face outside the dome.

This diagram represents a five-second interval during a hypothetical discussion. The umbrella-shaped dome represents the Four Suggestions for Participants. The faces under the left side of the dome represent the Participants. The faces under the right side of the dome represent the Observers. The blue dots – each of which is supposed to look like a drop of rain – represent conduct that might dampen someone’s enjoyment of the discussion. For example, laughing sarcastically at someone is a drop of rain. Yawning loudly while someone is speaking is a drop of rain. So is entering into the discussion while someone else is speaking. And so is speaking on and on and on while someone is waiting to speak.

The face that stands apart from all the other faces represents the teacher. The teacher’s job is similar to that of the Rogers Centre employee who makes sure that drops of rain don’t fall through the dome. In other words, the teacher ensures that nothing is said or done that might dampen anyone’s enjoyment of the discussion.

Appendix H: Final Comments

1. Here is part of a document that was distributed at Havergal College’s *Learning Through Dialogue Conference* (August, 2011): “On April 9, 1930, philanthropist Edward Harkness wrote the [Phillips Exeter Academy’s] Principal Lewis Perry regarding a substantial monetary gift he had made to the Academy and how he hoped it might be used. ‘What I have in mind is [a classroom] where [students] could sit around a table with a teacher who would talk with them and

instruct them by a sort of tutorial or conference method, where [each student] would feel encouraged to speak up. This would be a real revolution in methods.” Since the arrival of ‘Harkness tables’ on campus [i.e., Phillips Exeter Academy, New Hampshire], the principal mode of instruction at Exeter has been discussion around an oval table. The Harkness table is central to both the Exeter classroom and the Exeter curriculum. Though teaching and learning look different in disciplines and at different levels of study, all Exeter teachers and students are committed to an ideal of active, participatory, student-centered learning which values teaching students not just a given course’s content but the skills required to become their own and each others’ teachers. As the physical table itself implies, learning at Exeter is a cooperative enterprise in which the students and teacher work together as partners. The academic life of the school depends on the quality of each student’s preparation for active participation in learning. As one of the school’s legendary teachers said, ‘What happens in class depends upon what the students have done before the class begins.’ A place at the Harkness table requires students to exercise a high degree of self-discipline, and to engage eagerly and energetically with both peers and instructors. Exeter is a school for students who take pleasure in this distinctive mode of teaching and learning and in which each member of each class is in some measure a teacher of all others.”

2. I wish to acknowledge the generosity of Havergal College for having funded my trip to the 2006 Exeter Humanities Institute Conference in Exeter, New Hampshire. The sixty participants (most of whom were secondary school teachers) who attended this conference participated in several 45-minute Harkness discussions, each of which was followed by a 45-minute debriefing session during which (approximately) 4 observers provided feedback to (approximately) 12 participants. This conference -- held annually in June on the beautiful campus of Phillips Exeter Academy -- was my first exposure to Harkness discussions, and I recommend it highly.

3. I wish to acknowledge the generosity of the Toronto District Board of Education for having funded my three-day conference at McMaster University with Dr. Min Basadur in 1998. Basadur’s four-phase model of problem solving has influenced my understanding of Harkness discussions.

4. Notwithstanding my indebtedness to others, I do not speak on behalf of any person, school or institution.

File: OPTA Harkness 3