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## TEACHING ASIA

### ONLINE HARKNESS DISCUSSIONS

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Like many teachers this past spring, the responsibility of teaching online for the first time required significant and unique instructional changes. What follows is a reflection on my experiences making Harkness-informed pedagogy applicable to online Asian Studies. This entails a further explanation of Harkness and an articulation of how key elements of an online Chinese history course for upper-secondary-school students can mesh with meaningful discussion habits, the cultivation of cultural competence, and the realities of course assessment.

#### **Why Harkness?**

Those inspired by the Harkness method eschew lectures, summaries, and the traditional scaffolding of textbooks and worksheets. While we have goals for our courses, units, and each class session, we recognize that the vitality of the learning process allows conversation to remain fundamentally open-ended, even when it takes a different shape than we might have imagined when beginning a class. Why implement Harkness in person, let alone in an online environment where teachers sacrifice much structure and control over the learning process? Bill Jordan, a history teacher at Phillips Exeter Academy, gives a simple and compelling response: “I could be wrong.” This “epistemic humility” is valuable modeling of what Harkness instructors hope to inspire in their students.<sup>1</sup>

Harkness refocuses instructors from being knowledge purveyors to being facilitators of knowledge creation. Harkness requires teachers who believe in critical thinking to trust students to do the cognitive heavy lifting through presenting their own ideas in classroom interactions. This means teaching students how to frame questions and draw their own connections and supporting them in presenting arguments. In person, the Harkness approach is represented by the teacher sitting alongside their students at an oval seminar table.

We have a lot to learn from our students, and it is important for our students to realize that they have much to learn from one another. As Flower Darby, the author of *Small Teaching Online*, explains, “We may understand complicated concepts differently as a result of someone else explaining it to us in a way that makes more sense than the teacher’s explanation had.”<sup>2</sup>

## Purpose and Connection

For active, collaborative learning to occur online, learners need to have a clear sense of why they are gathered, who is present, and how group interactions can enhance learning. A small in-person class with motivated students can develop momentum organically and feel successful, even if these structural matters are not made visible to students. Virtual learning simply requires a bit more intentionality for learning and interconnection to feel meaningful.

When I ask, “Why are we gathered?” I am not simply repeating the backward design principles from *Understanding by Design*.<sup>3</sup> Of course, good unit design is key to successful online learning delivery, but I have something more elemental in mind. When students look back in five or ten years, what will they remember about my course other than it was about China? On the first day of class I set out that frame:

- Demonstrate fearless, independent thinking;
- trust and engage one another in community; and
- adopt the mindset of a historian and a cosmopolitan.

These are not just the course goals I share with my students on the first day of class; they also serve as touchstones I am explicit about referencing throughout the course. These exhortations need not be directly tied to specific lessons, though my students have found direct relevance to passages in *The Analects*: “When Confucius says, ‘The gentleman is not a vessel,’” one student asked, “does he mean we should think for ourselves?”

It is also crucial that my students feel seen as individuals and are prepared to connect with one another. Learning online can be isolating and distant. One exercise I find useful for building that connection is drawn from SEED (Seeking



Figure 1: A Harkness table being used at the College Preparatory School in Oakland, CA. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Educational Equity and Diversity). The exercise involves everyone in the class creating a name placard that tells the story of the name—or names—they go by. All students have a moment to share name rationales, and the class practices each student’s name. This process illustrates that something as simple as a name can be constructed in many ways and can draw on a variety of inspirations. The exercise is especially useful for students from China or of East Asian descent who might be sharing the meanings of their given names for the first time in an English-speaking context. Face to face, I might facilitate this activity by showing up with colored pencils and cardstock. Online, the exercise is reconfigured, completed asynchronously, and posted on Canvas, our learning management platform.

Connections are ongoing and a simple question like “How are you feeling?” can be useful. The Harkness method recognizes that learning is both social and emotional. If a student indicates they are having a tough day, it is a good opportunity to follow up individually or avoid putting them on the spot. In addition to asking students how they are doing, it is important to keep an eye out for patterns that might suggest disengagement. Liz Katz, who directs student support at the online school One Schoolhouse, explains, “When you’re online, you have to use data in a different way, and your data is different.” While in an in-person context, we might wait weeks before following up with a parent or advisor, Katz encourages her colleagues to follow up “if a student is missing more than two

assignments . . . [or] isn't responding to messages. One of the things that we know about students working in an online space is that when students have a hard time, they go downhill pretty quickly."<sup>4</sup>

## Building Strong Discussion Habits

In *The Discussion Book*, authors Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill admit they “both used to have faith in the spontaneous group process. . . . If the right people came together there would be a joyful combustion of energetic brainstorming with everyone involved.” It is not that “this never happens, but it's the Bigfoot of classroom, organizational, and community life—secretive, rarely seen.” Instead, they propose an idea that riffs on the concept of *wuwei* 無為 (“effortless action”): “you have to plan for spontaneity.”<sup>5</sup>

Harkness works best when participants have a shared set of agreements or expectations, sometimes called a “class charter.” In my own classes, I find it helpful to offer a few initial suggestions (using names when referring to others, committing to democratic use of time, etc.) and then open the process up for additions, edits, and tweaks. When introducing histories and cultures far removed from my students' own experiences, I add in a few other norms: for example, we make time to examine what is “weird” or “strange,” and after some reflection commit to describing, rather than judging, practices that are unfamiliar. In an online environment, it is important to establish additional norms for how students might like to use chat features and the trade-offs that come with other windows, notifications, or second screens. While I am comfortable declaring my own list of expectations, I prefer to invite students to participate in this process as a way to increase buy-in and demonstrate that I care what they think.

I recognize that class charters involving students are often aspirational and may take several rounds of initial individual and collective reflection to impact classroom habits. One tool that can help translate those aspirations to concrete feedback is Equity Maps, an iPad app (currently in development for other platforms) that provides detailed data on who is speaking, how long they are speaking, and the patterns of interaction in either a physical or virtual classroom.<sup>6</sup> Tracking discussions can help me address commitments like democratic use of time in ways that rebalance the focus from those who might be perceived as too “quiet” to those who might be taking up too much air time.

## “The Original Flipped Classroom”

Seminar discussions can be understood as the original “flipped classroom.” Effective Harkness discussions are supported by thoughtfully selected assignments that reflect an awareness on the part of the instructor not just of a sequence of topics, but of a clearly defined set of learning objectives. Instructors can further

prepare students for productive in-class discussions by making those goals explicit in the assignment description and by asking questions or providing tips that guide the students from understanding to application and creativity.

With good preparation, the next step is balancing predictability with novelty. Predictability comes in a couple of forms. The first is the familiar skills we touched on early—the clearly articulated habits introduced early and returned to throughout the course. The second is the establishment of predictable classroom routines. My students know, for example, that on a given class day, we almost always conduct some sort of quick check-in, followed by a low-stakes check-for-understanding, which is a multiple-choice quiz powered by Kahoot! or Google Forms (the lower the stakes, the less inclined students are to misrepresent what they know). We then dedicate most of the time to engaging together around a text.

A variety of approaches is important for seminar viability. As Brookfield and Preskill suggest, “Even the most energizing discussion protocol becomes routine if it’s overused. You need to make people feel that they’re not quite sure what’s going to happen in the class. . . . It’s a kind of pleasurable uncertainty.”<sup>7</sup> For that to be possible, though, it is crucial to think about the materials that are framing the discussion. Rather than just rely on historical writing for a history class, consider bringing in a short story; or, perhaps share a recorded lecture, podcast, or a portion of a documentary or movie. Sometimes even appending a short clip to a reading can help it come alive; for example, rare footage of Sun Yat-sen calling on the Chinese people to “wake up!” in a thick Cantonese accent as captured in *China: A Century of Revolution*.<sup>8</sup> Another option that has become more accessible with the sudden move to online learning is organizing a “field trip” to a museum online. The Peabody Essex Museum, for example, has recently expanded their virtual tours, and portions of both the “Asian export” and “maritime” exhibits present materials that can be used in discussing nineteenth-century trade ties between Asia and the United States.<sup>9</sup>

In digital seminars, possibilities are as rich as face-to-face encounters. Zoom breakout groups are useful for allowing more opportunity for individual expression and for playing out activities that involve “expert groups” and debates. Even when everyone is present on the same screen, it is possible to designate certain speakers to participate in a “fishbowl” and have others either pose questions or simply take notes and take the mic at the end to reflect on what they heard. One exercise that fits this model well is the “May Fourth Roundtable,” which invites students to work with a partner to prepare for discussion involving a diverse array of figures engaged in dialogue around prepared questions: students in this scenario might be asked to take up the role of Cai Yuanpei, Ding Yingchao, He Zhen, Hu Shi, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, or Mao Zedong. At times, I assign roles to students—for example, a facilitator, a notetaker, a questioner, or a devil’s advocate. And at other times,

I might take a more active facilitating role to delineate moments when we are reading supportively or critically, a frame that is especially useful when examining claims that might still be viewed as controversial within the context of our class, including most commentary on Sino-US relations.

Other strategies that promote interactive student engagement include digital polls as well as “silent discussion” together on a shared Google Doc. This strategy is useful both to engage in close reading and to reflect on the variety (and frequency) of voices expressed in this format versus the usual classroom space. One of the most common asynchronous approaches that approximates Harkness-style engagement is a discussion board. Readers who have taken an online course themselves know discussion boards can be rich opportunities to exchange ideas when managed well or tedious and exhausting when not. I generally divide students into smaller groups and forgo more than a minimal fixed requirement to respond to a certain number of posts and instead ask students to share a certain number of “original ideas.”<sup>10</sup> Releasing some measure of control is both consistent with the Harkness ideal and also may put students at ease when discussing more emotionally difficult content.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, I have found that it is important to actively monitor and participate in these discussions, both to be present for my students and also, as Darby suggests, to “carefully monitor online discussions for culturally sensitive language and behaviors, such as a student making a derogatory comment, or students simply neglecting to reply to some students.”<sup>12</sup>

## **Inclusion and Cultural Competency**

When all students feel welcome online—both “silent” and asynchronous discussions provide opportunities to introverts that may not be available around an in-person Harkness table. One challenge I face teaching Chinese history in the United States is knowing that what may feel like an academic exercise for me may be highly personal for those with direct ties to the places and events being studied. In *The Political Classroom*, Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy identify two potential responses for educators who encounter potentially sensitive material: avoidance and deliberation.<sup>13</sup> While avoidance has an unmistakable negative ring to it, there are certainly moments where it is worth considering. A parent of one of my mainland Chinese students once told me that her son would not be participating in discussions about Chinese history for the period after 1949. He indeed remained silent in full-class discussions, though he participated cautiously in smaller groups where he felt more comfortable expressing his reactions to the readings and the statements made by his classmates. Moreover, the Black Lives Matter movement has helped me reflect on what kind of role-playing simulations are appropriate for the classroom. Moving forward, I have committed not to ask students to ever playact roles that involve dehumanizing others, meaning I will

have to substantially rethink the dramatic reenactment I have students do of land reform scenes from Ding Ling's *The Sun Shines over Sanggan River*.

Hess and McAvoy also describe a deliberative approach marked by “exemplary materials, strong pedagogy, and enforced norms for civil discourse.”<sup>14</sup> During both synchronous and asynchronous encounters, this means stepping in to support students who might be vulnerable and helping students who are speaking insensitively to reframe their arguments. Knowing when to do so puts a high premium on my engagement or “presence” as an instructor, and it requires some intentional information gathering in the form of anonymous surveys to probe the ideological commitments and identities of my students. It also means staging my course so controversial topics are placed later in the syllabus and leaning on my expertise to identify and defuse potential minefields. Finally, I recognize that I may not understand all the salient factors that shape how a student will respond, particularly in an online environment where students could be logging in from vastly different settings. To keep an ear out for what my students are encountering, I collect feedback anonymously throughout the course using a simple Google Form modeled on Stephen Brookfield's critical incident questionnaire.<sup>15</sup>

## Assessment

The final piece of the online Harkness puzzle is assessment. Before constructing one's assessment structure, it is important to consider *why* assessment matters in our courses. I tend to weigh preparation and discussion heavily (at least 20 percent) because reading and engaging together are critical components of the learning objectives of the course. Reflecting on Jesse Strommel's four-word pedagogy, “Start by trusting students,” I aim never to play “gotcha” with students and always to focus on growth and build in opportunities for grace.<sup>16</sup>

As noted, low-stakes “checks for understanding” help me understand what students have read and what they have understood from that reading. I use a six-question multiple choice format, with the final question related to an earlier reading from the course. This provides me an instant read on how quickly we can press forward to higher order questions and takes a cue from James Lang's *Small Teaching* to support memory recall.<sup>17</sup>

The most important standard I use for assessing discussion is the charter we agree on together at the outset of class. I aim to engage students in self-assessment in monthly intervals and then compare their responses to my notes and impressions. I focus my comments on concrete suggestions, and when the results are divergent, I invite a brief conversation to try to work with the student to understand the source of the disconnect, leaving open the possibility that it might be me that needs to engage in more focused observations of that student to

adjust my impressions or that the class as a whole may need to adjust by providing more space for that student. Ideally, my students and I begin to align our own assessment of their discussion long before progress reports are submitted.

## Conclusion

Like many teachers plunged suddenly into online teaching this past spring, I am looking forward to the possibility that additional time for reflection and preparation might produce a better experience for my students in the months ahead. In pursuing this template of purpose, connection, shared commitments, discussion, and assessment, I hope that even when online learning is “weird,” it will still be “weirdly normal” (to cite my own students’ reflections) and that a core part of that sense of normalcy will be the feeling that learners in my classroom feel empowered to help guide their individual learning process and that of our class. That, for me, is the essence of the Harkness method.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>“The Exeter Difference: Bill Jordan,” Phillips Exeter Academy. <https://www.exeter.edu/people/bill-jordan>. To access a number of Mr. Jordan’s valuable resources, see his personal website: <https://sites.google.com/site/billjordanhistory/for-teachers>.

<sup>2</sup>Flower Darby, *Small Teaching Online* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2019), 76.

<sup>3</sup>Here I have in mind Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>“Student Support for Distance Learning,” One Schoolhouse, April 10, 2020, <https://www.oneschoolhouse.org/learning-innovation-blog/student-support-for-distance-learning>.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *The Discussion Book: 50 Great Ways to Get People Talking* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 4.

<sup>6</sup>Equity Maps, <https://equitymaps.com/>.

<sup>7</sup>Brookfield and Preskill, *The Discussion Book*, 5.

<sup>8</sup>*China: A Century of Revolution*, “Part One: China in Revolution, 1911–1949 (PBS, 1989). <https://zeitgeistfilms.com/film/chinaacenturyofrevolution>.

<sup>9</sup>Peabody Essex Museum, “Virtual Tours,” <https://www.pem.org/virtual-tours>.

<sup>10</sup>John Orlando, “What Research Tells Us about Online Discussion,” *Faculty Focus*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/research-tells-us-online-discussion/>, cited in Darby, *Small Teaching Online*, 234.

<sup>11</sup>For instance, I have occasionally used Hu Jie’s 2006 documentary on the murder by students of a vice principal at a Beijing secondary school in *Though I Am Gone*, which predictably evokes strong emotions in students.

<sup>12</sup>Darby, *Small Teaching Online*, 94.



<sup>13</sup>Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>14</sup>Hess and McAvoy, *The Political Classroom*, 176.

<sup>15</sup>Brookfield asks his students the following questions: “At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening? At what moment in class this week were you most distanced from what was happening? What action that anyone (teacher or student) took this week did you find most affirming or helpful? What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing? What about the class this week surprised you the most?” Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 34.

<sup>16</sup>The phrase first appeared in a tweet by Jesse Strommel on April 30, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Jessifer/status/726424167420145664>. He created the hashtag #4wordpedagogy to invite others to create their own condensed pedagogy: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/4wordpedagogy>.

<sup>17</sup>James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 76.