

Adaptable

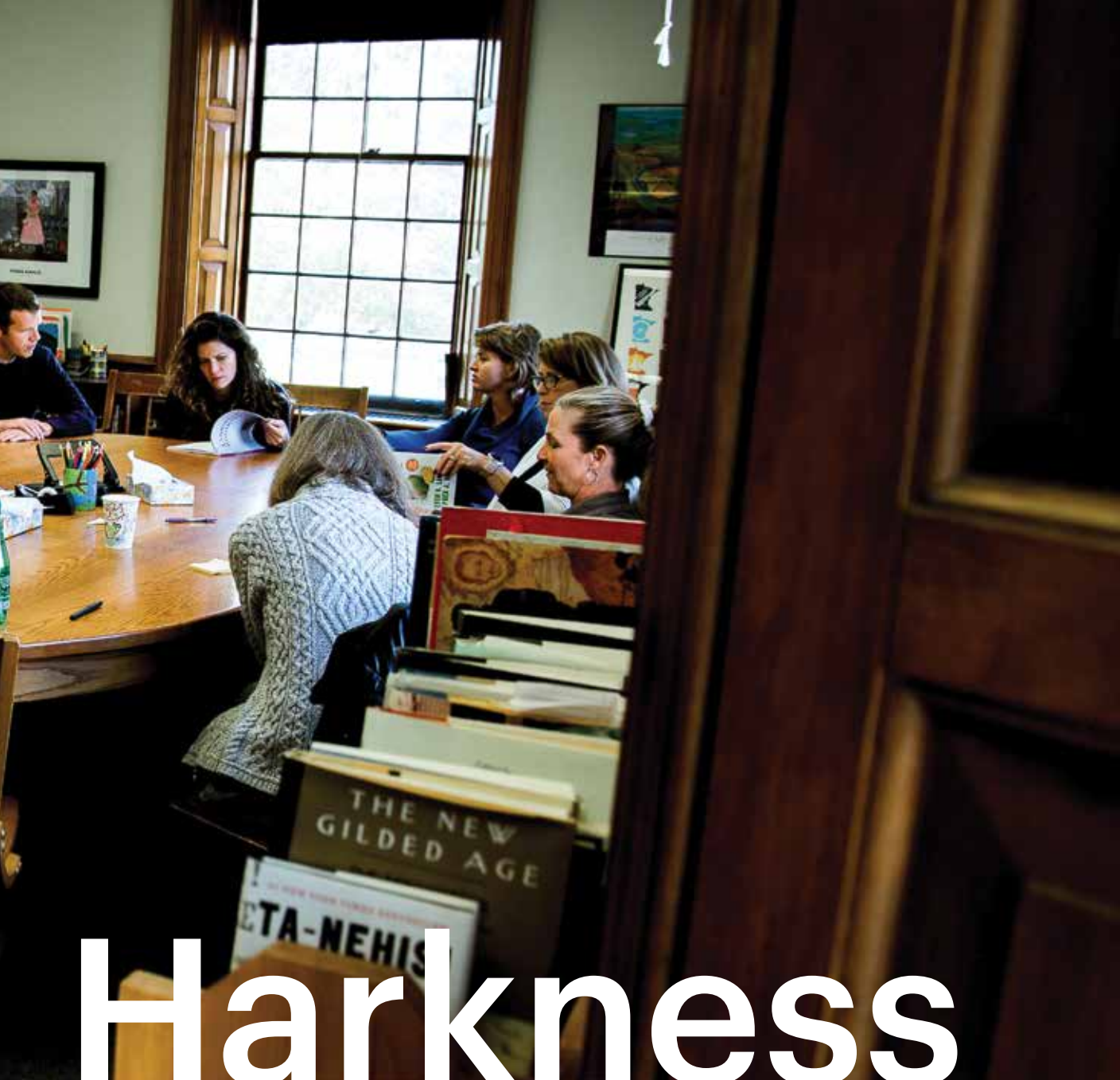
PRACTITIONERS SHARE THEIR METHODS AT EXETER'S PILOT CONFERENCE

By Sarah Pruitt '95

Meg Foley remembers her first experience in a Harkness classroom. It was 1999, and she was in the midst of applying for a teaching position at Exeter, having spent the past several years working at the Colorado Springs School, a small independent school.

"I thought I was a pretty student-centered teacher before I came to Exeter," Foley says. "[But] when I came to interview, I saw how radically student-centered the classes were here. I remember being astonished by what the students were able to do when it was really left in their hands."

PHOTO BY TYLER EATHERTON



Harkness

Now, as a veteran instructor in history and the Bates-Russell Distinguished Faculty Professor, Foley has become a leader of Harkness Outreach, Exeter's ongoing effort to facilitate the adoption of student-directed, discussion-based teaching in other schools across the country and abroad. In fall 2019, she organized the Harkness Leaders Conference, a three-day event attended by educators from five schools. Attendees at the pilot conference were specially selected due to their work implementing Harkness methods on their campuses over the past several years, and were invited to share their successes with such efforts, as well as the roadblocks they'd encountered along the way.

The five schools that participated are a mix of public and private, urban and rural, with diverse circumstances that can include larger class sizes and a high proportion of financially disadvantaged students. Two of them are newer schools founded expressly around Harkness principles, while the others are implementing the method within a system of more traditional teacher-directed learning. None has a great deal in common with Exeter, with its highly selective admissions criteria, small class sizes and faculty unified in its dedication to Harkness.

Educators from five schools gathered on campus last fall to learn from one another how to make Harkness work in their classrooms.



In her role as Exeter's Bates-Russell Distinguished Faculty Professor, Meg Foley has worked to support other schools' adoption of Harkness.

Despite their different circumstances, all of the educators who took part in the Harkness Leaders Conference share a commitment to the method and its potential to transform their schools and their students. With Exeter's support, they are seeking to empower those students to take control of their own learning — in the same radical way Foley first witnessed on the day of her interview.

“So much hard work goes into trying to develop things, in so many different ways that you necessarily thought of ... yourself in isolation,” says Leanne Abbott-Jones, vice principal of London's Isaac Newton Academy, of her experience implementing Harkness teaching methods at the school. For her, attending the conference felt for the first time like she was in a room with lots of other people all trying to achieve the same thing.

“I spent the whole three days going, ‘Oh wow, that's awesome — great idea, great idea,’” she recalls. “I felt like my head was buzzing at the end of each day.”

ORIGINS OF HARKNESS OUTREACH

Exeter's signature student-led teaching method was hatched in 1930, when the philanthropist Edward Harkness proposed a substantial gift to the school, where his friend Lewis Perry was serving as the eighth principal. As Katherine Towler recounted in the fall 2006 issue of the *Bulletin*, Harkness told Perry that he didn't want his money used for simple updates or expansions to Exeter's existing facilities; he wanted to accomplish something “much more radical.”

Harkness's subsequent gift to Exeter of \$5.8 million, or around \$89 million today, helped fulfill his vision of making learning at the Academy more democratic. “A simple but profound notion defined [Harkness's] thinking about education,” Towler wrote. “That a small group of students, seated around a table and guided by an instructor, could best be engaged in learning by voicing their own ideas and questions and listening to those of others.”



In the generations to come, Harkness's namesake method — or system, or philosophy, or pedagogy, as it is variously known — would become so integral to life and learning at Exeter that it's now nearly impossible to imagine the school without it. The objective to extend its benefits to schools beyond the Academy has inspired a growing slate of professional development conferences, beginning with the launch of the Exeter Humanities Institute (EHI) in 1999. Founded by English Instructor Rebecca Moore P'03, P'05, P'08 and three other teachers, EHI is a summer workshop that trains secondary school English and history teachers in key Harkness learning concepts. "They thought that Harkness should be demystified in terms of a teaching technique," Foley says. Due to overwhelming interest, EHI recently branched out to the West Coast, with educators gathering around Harkness tables at the Bishop's School in La Jolla, California.

Foley became involved with EHI early in her time at Exeter, but her commitment to Harkness Outreach stepped up in 2016, when she began a five-year term as the Bates-Russell Distinguished Faculty Professor. This rotating position, endowed by George F. Russell '50 and named for Robert Bates '29, a longtime instructor in English at the Academy, aims to give its recipients time to pursue outside projects. Exeter granted Bates, an accomplished mountaineer who helped map Canada's Yukon Territory for the National Geographic Society, leaves of absence for his mountaineering activities and for working in the Peace Corps.

For Foley's Bates-Russell tenure, she took on the project of Harkness Outreach, including the ongoing partnership between Exeter and Noble Academy in Chicago, founded in 2014 as part of the city's Noble Network of Charter Schools. Former Dean of Faculty Ethan Shapiro P'17, P'17, P'18

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worked closely with Noble Academy's founder, Pablo Sierra, who wanted to implement Harkness methods at the school to better prepare its students for college and careers.

Sierra was seeking to improve the college performance, graduation rate and career success of Noble alumni, wrote Lincoln Caplan '68 in *The American Scholar* in 2016. By 2018, when Noble's founding class graduated, members of that class had achieved a 63 percent projected college graduation rate — the highest in network history.

As the current Bates-Russell professor, Foley teaches a half-load of classes for the History Department and serves as the point person for Harkness Outreach, fielding inquiries from educators at all levels, elementary through postsecondary, in all kinds of schools. Foley welcomed the challenge, as she had long been curious to see how student-led, discussion-based learning could look in places very different from Exeter.

“It's kind of a no-brainer that it could work in a place like this,” she says. “To me, the interesting question is, can the core philosophy of Harkness be adopted to places that aren't as resource-rich?”

HARKNESS AT ISAAC NEWTON ACADEMY

“One of the benefits of the Harkness method is that it causes you to prepare,” says Gerard Griffin ’86. “You know you’re going to be exposed if you don’t.”

Griffin, who founded the London-based hedge fund Tisbury Capital Management and now works as managing director at QRails, had this type of accountability in mind when it came time to plan the curriculum at Isaac Newton Academy (INA), which opened in 2012 in Ilford, east London. Part of the United Kingdom’s state school system, an academy such as Isaac Newton functions like a U.S. charter school. As INA’s founding sponsor and chair of the board of governors, Griffin — like Pablo Sierra at Noble — saw Harkness as a vital part of empowering the school’s students to take charge of their own learning.

Before INA opened, Griffin and his founding principal, Rachel Macfarlane, who is no longer with the school, traveled to Exeter and met with Ron Kim P’18, P’20, then dean of faculty. “To make the numbers work, my average class size was 25 to 30,” Griffin says. “There was also a lot of pressure on all the teachers to get through curriculums and cover materials. So the question was, how do I incorporate as much as I can of Harkness into this system where I’ve got these curricular ... and budgetary constraints?”

Kim helped Griffin and Macfarlane work out how the Harkness spirit could be implemented at INA, even without an oval table in every classroom. They ordered a single Harkness table to be installed in the school’s library, with each class meeting there roughly once a term; movable furniture in every classroom allows for Harkness-style arrangements on a regular basis. Every year, two teachers travel to Exeter to observe lessons and speak to staff here, while six INA students go to Exeter Summer, the nation’s longest-running summer education program. All of them are



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tasked with bringing back the insights they gained and sharing them with their peers.

“What I’m trying to do is create a grassroots belief and excitement about the Harkness method to counterbalance the skepticism of teachers about this American system invented at a private school in New Hampshire,” Griffin explains. “Anyone who gets exposed to the Harkness method, particularly in its manifestation at Exeter, comes away believing in it.”

Abbott-Jones, the school’s vice principal, was one of the first INA educators to travel to Exeter; she later returned to teach physical education in the Exeter Summer program. For her master’s dissertation on the value of Harkness methods, Abbott-Jones incorporated the experiences of the first group of Harkness Champions, as the INA students who attend Exeter Summer are known.

“They wrote reflective diaries about their learning,” she says. “How it felt for them to be around the table, what happened when it became silent, how they best prepared



themselves for learning, [and] what made a really excellent question.”

The role of the Harkness Champions is key to the progress of discussion-based teaching at Isaac Newton, which now serves about 1,200 11- to 18-year-old students in its secondary school. A primary school opened in 2014. The champions meet with their teachers to plan lessons, and help introduce younger students to skills such as making eye contact, listening and taking notes, and even leading discussions themselves so that bigger classes can be broken up into smaller groups.

“People always comment on how confident our students are in terms of conversation, how articulate they are as learners,” Abbott-Jones says. “I think that really comes from empowering them to have a voice and lead their learning using the Harkness method.”

HARKNESS AT PINKERTON ACADEMY

Founded in 1814, Pinkerton Academy in Derry, New Hampshire, is a private school that also serves as the public high school for six towns: Auburn, Candia, Chester, Derry, Hampstead and Hooksett. With some 3,300 students and more than 500 employees, it is the nation’s largest independent high school.

At Pinkerton, Harkness is one of several instructional practices used to increase students’ efficacy and engagement, explains Kirsten Soroko, the school’s curriculum and instruction coordinator. As a longtime teacher of middle school English and language arts, she had used Harkness and other discussion-based techniques in the past but knew it would be a challenge to implement them at Pinkerton.

“For a traditional high school, using Harkness or other inquiry-based spaces is a shift,” Soroko says. To confront this challenge, she reached out to Exeter and began working with Foley, who for the past two summers has

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Faculty from London’s Isaac Newton Academy; Pinkerton Academy in New Hampshire; Little Rock Christian Academy; Chicago’s Noble Academy; and Vermont’s Harwood Union High School at PEA’s inaugural Harkness Leaders Conference.

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helped train 60 Pinkerton teachers in Harkness for the humanities and STEM.

Pinkerton also trains teachers in two other research-based instructional methods: reciprocal teaching and the Question Formulation Technique (QFT), both of which Soroko says help “build us toward Harkness.” In reciprocal teaching, students take on specific roles, such as clarifier or questioner, in smaller group discussions within a class. “As these kids develop the skill sets that are under their role, they’re learning how to facilitate this small-group discussion and look at purpose and intent or focus within that discussion,” Soroko explains. With QFT, a strategy originally developed by the Right Question Institute, students focus on learning to form their own questions and on using those questions to pave their own learning path.

Because Pinkerton’s class sizes are larger than Exeter’s, with 20 to 28 students, “We might end up breaking up into two Harkness circles and having kids facilitate those discussions,” Soroko says. “But they need to be trained on how to do that first.”

To train teachers, Soroko works with eight instructional coaches across different disciplines, and each coach then becomes the go-to expert for their department. Some early adopters embrace Harkness immediately, Soroko says, while other teachers are less comfortable with moving from a more teacher-directed classroom style. Soroko makes it clear that the school doesn’t force Harkness on anyone, but gives teachers the freedom to choose which techniques they adopt in their classroom.

“We’re making it actionable by breaking it down into smaller components, and allowing teachers to choose what is most appropriate for their content and their personality,” she says. “The reality is when you have 275 faculty, autonomy becomes extremely important, and [enabling] teachers’ personalities and authenticity in being with kids.”

Sometimes she gets pushback from those who say Harkness won’t work with students who struggle to perform at their grade level, or are less self-motivated academically. But Soroko doesn’t buy it. “Harkness works in all levels with all

different types of kids,” she says. “I think it allows for perspective and diversity to come to the table and actually have those conversations, which is so important for our empathy and for allowing kids to learn empathy.”

THE HARKNESS LEADERS CONFERENCE

Early in her work with Harkness Outreach, Foley talked with Ethan Shapiro, then Exeter’s dean of faculty, about the idea of a conference focused on the people who are leading the implementation of Harkness in their schools. EHI and other summer conferences are “totally teacher-oriented,” Foley says; they aim to share techniques used to successfully practice discussion-based teaching in the classroom. By contrast, “Ethan and I thought it would be an interesting idea to have the leaders come together and talk about the challenges of bringing Harkness to their schools.”

In October 2019, Abbott-Jones, Soroko and nearly a dozen other educators from five schools traveled to Exeter for the pilot Harkness Leaders Conference. Attendees were invited to visit classes on the first day, before the conference officially kicked off with a dinner at Dean of Faculty Ellen Wolff’s house.

Over the next two days, the participants gave and heard presentations on their experiences with Harkness on their campuses, followed by seminar discussions. In addition, several current PEA students presented about how students feel the burden of representation in Harkness classes. The students undertook their research last year as part of the School Participatory Research Action Collaborative (SPARC), a collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education.

“I’d never really thought much before about how students feel at the table,” Abbott-Jones recalls. “I walked away just thinking so much more about how they’re represented at the table, how they might feel about certain topics that we’re discussing, and how as a teacher, my role is to manage that situation and read it a lot better than I ever had before.”

Soroko emphasizes the feeling of connecting for the first time with fellow educators from far-flung schools. “It was lovely just hearing stories of their journey

and struggles, victories, things that they’ve come up with,” she says. “The stories were similar, even though the people at the table were extremely diverse.”

In addition to INA and Pinkerton, the conference included presentations from Vermont’s Harwood Union High School, where History Instructor Katherine Cadwell and her colleagues have trained 36 student leaders and 27 teachers in Harkness methods over the past two years, and where classes of more than 30 students are often split into three sessions of Harkness running simultaneously. A group of educators from Little Rock Christian Academy in Arkansas presented on their experiences in establishing Harkness in a Christian school setting, while Noble Academy’s Assistant Principal Jessie Weingartner shared stories of the school’s Harkness learnings and challenges over the past five years. Finally, Aida Conroy ’09 led a session about how to support students and teachers in their Harkness journeys. Conroy taught history and mentored colleagues at Noble from 2014 to 2019.

Of the educators she works with through Harkness Outreach, Foley says, “They just feel rather isolated, and they’ve got this set of challenges that they’re bumping into all the time when they’re trying to roll out Harkness.” At the conference, she believes, the participants “felt a camaraderie that was very deep.”

Soroko recalls that the group held their own Harkness circles during the conference, in which they shared ideas and stories, asked questions, and challenged one another. “I didn’t want to leave,” she says. “I was still learning. I was still on my journey of learning, and being completely engaged and empowered to partake in this space.”

Going forward, Abbott-Jones has plans to travel to Noble, while Soroko wants to visit Harwood, in Vermont. Both of them look forward to future experiences with Harkness Outreach, whether at conferences or in ongoing collaboration with Foley or educators from the other schools.

“We came out of the conference having created so many links, and also a shared area of resources,” Abbott-Jones says. “[Everyone was] just really open and collaborative, and I feel like there’ve been some relationships created there that will benefit everybody going forward.” ■