

Life & Arts



Buffalo Seminary juniors and sophomores sit around a harkens table and discuss a book during Kanika Durland's American literature class, Thursday, Jan. 15, 2015. Harkness tables are big oval tables that promote participation and discussion among students in the class. Harkness learning began in the 1920s. (Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News)

Learning legacy

Harkness tables in the classroom promote discussion among students, teachers

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When you hear the word "classroom," you might picture a room filled with desks, a chalkboard/white board, and a teacher standing at the front. The teacher is lecturing and asking questions, and students raise their hands, waiting to share their answers.

Although this is a familiar scenario, not all classrooms are alike. In some universities and high schools, the standard setting of the classroom does not fit this imagery. Instead, a huge, round table takes up most of the classroom. These tables are known as Harkness tables.

In 1930, philanthropist Edward Harkness requested that a donation he made to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire be used to create large oval wooden tables where students could sit around and discuss their current topic. It would allow for everyone to be seen and heard, all getting a chance to pitch in their thoughts and theories on a topic.

At that time, he wrote: "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."

The tables were then created by D.R. Dimes & Co., which was one of the most popular furniture makers in America at the time.

All history and English classrooms at Buffalo Seminary are equipped with Harkness tables, and the

students seem to enjoy them.

The purpose of a Harkness table is to discuss a topic, analyze all components of the topic, bring new ideas and questions to the table, and then collectively come up with a conclusion. It helps students to work on their discussion skills and to begin teaching one another, allowing them to become more independent. Students overlap ideas and thoughts, bringing together a more full understanding of the topic at hand.

“I love our Harkness tables,” said Jessica Silverstein, a history teacher at Buffalo Seminary. “I really like being able to sit at the table with my students and engage them in discussions that feel like great dinner table conversation, rather than the traditional classroom ‘chalk and talk.’”

Examples of discussions that students might participate in at a Harkness table include analyzing a piece of literature to find its deeper meaning, making sense of a difficult piece or trying to see different sides of a historical event.

“I enjoy using Harkness tables because they allow for scholarly conversations and mutual respect between students, where everyone has a voice in the conversation and every idea is heard,” said Tara Porter, a sophomore at Buffalo Seminary.

Fellow sophomore Rebecca Thomas agreed.

“What I like most about Harkness tables is that it’s a really unique way to make sure that mostly everyone’s ideas can be heard,” she said. “It feels more like a conversation about the subject rather than an assignment, and being able to see who you’re talking to can ... help you connect to what they’re saying.”

The Harkness table allows every student the opportunity to let their thoughts be heard and discussed.

“The biggest difference between Harkness tables and the traditional classroom setup is everyone is present and visible,” said Kanika Durland, an English teacher at Buffalo Seminary. “Everyone is responsible to contributing and there’s no one to hide behind. Everyone is at the same visible responsibility.”

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