

Talk time: Student-focused discussions at the heart of Stillwater class

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A large table replaces rows of desks when students are using the Harkness method at Stillwater Christian School.

At the Harkness table, there aren't teacher lectures or passive listeners. Instead, the teacher becomes a facilitator and all students are encouraged to lead discussion and respond to each other's comments.



The Harkness philosophy originated at Phillips Exeter Academy and was named after philanthropist Edward Harkness, who suggested a donation he made to the school be used to redesign the classroom setting so that teachers and students would sit around a large, oval table conducive to discussion, according to www.exeter.edu.

On Wednesday, high school students in Micah Tinkham's Apologetics class sat around their version of the Harkness table — two tables pushed together — where they discussed an assigned book, "Christianity for Modern Pagans — Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained."

Rather than sitting with students at the table, Tinkham sat nearby.

"I've sat at the table before and the tendency is, when the teacher is at the table, all the kids look at the teacher. Instead of talking to each other, they all talk to me," Tinkham said. "What I want them to do is turn toward each other and interact with each other. That skill set is really important."

While discussion is primarily student-led, students aren't entirely left to their own devices. Tinkham provides them with a list of questions they move through to cover the material.

"It's not just a sharing time," Tinkham said. "They're supposed to address their comments to what others have said."

Senior Courtney Beaver said this helps keep everyone focused.

"I prefer Harkness over a lecture. It helps me engage," Beaver said.

Occasionally, Tinkham will interrupt to emphasize key points and comments, move the discussion along, redirect conversation or make clarifications.

Back at the table, students take turns to comment on one of the questions. Speaking in turn is part of the ground rules, according to senior Sarah Paolini.

“There are specific rules like you can’t interrupt; you have to respect people that are speaking; and you try to enhance the conversation so that you can come to a better understanding through working it out yourself instead of just having the teacher tell you,” Paolini said.

Equal speaking time is also a key component, Tinkham said.

“The kids at the Harkness table who always want to answer questions have to restrain themselves and include other people. The kids who never want to speak have to speak up,” Tinkham said.

Beaver said students can sometimes get passionate about topics while other students such as senior Alex Sulzbacher are more subdued.

“I’m more on the timid side,” Sulzbacher said. “I prefer not to talk, but that’s the whole purpose.”

Next semester, sections of the Apologetics class will be reassigned to change the group dynamic.

“It’s an interesting teaching method and a lot of our teachers use it,” Beaver said.

Stillwater has used Harkness for about five years after Tinkham received informal training on the teaching method at a high school in Texas. Tinkham said Stillwater Superintendent Dan Makowski asked him to research the method as a way to supplement lectures.

Several Stillwater teachers now use Harkness in their classrooms.

While lectures have their place and purpose in the classroom, Tinkham said he finds the Harkness method lends itself to deeper learning.

“It’s not just the information they were able to retain that I taught them and they wrote down in their notebooks; it’s their ability to articulate it themselves, which I think is especially important,” Tinkham said.

“The process takes a little bit longer than it would for me to teach the same material lecture-style from the front of the room, but when they basically have taught the ideas to each other, they have a much greater understanding.”

http://www.dailyinterlake.com/members/talk-time-student-focused-discussions-at-the-heart-of-stillwater/article_64b66474-5bd9-11e4-a2a6-d390c65ac91d.html