

Does increased independence within the learning of Gifted & Talented students help to raise attainment?

The IMPACT - key highlights from the project:

- The use of Harkness tables has developed independent learning and increased attainment in Gifted and Talented students by 5%, as seen in the summer examinations.
- The use of Harkness tables has developed important higher-cognitive skills in all students, including applying judgments explicitly and logically, making effective arguments, enhancing higher-order thinking and developing the ability to raise philosophical questions (as identified by the students)
- Through the use of Harkness tables, students have asked that a Harkness extra-curricular lunchtime club be set up.
- Through using Harkness tables, staff have become more pro-active in wanting to engage with independent learning pedagogical tools and have run their own Harkness lessons; staff have also requested Harkness CPD be provided to help promote its use throughout the school.

1. Context

I chose to undertake an Action Research project for the academic year 2016-17 at Putney High School. I am a Religious Studies/Philosophy teacher, the Gifted & Talented Co-ordinator for the school and oversee the monitoring, evaluation and development of all students (KS3-5) identified on the G&T register, either through their MIDYIS score, examination results and/or teacher nominations (*policy available upon request*). On beginning the project 39% of our 634 students were identified as Gifted and Talented respectively, across all year groups. My question from this was, how to raise the attainment of those students through the use of independent learning?

2. Problem/Driver for Innovation

But where did this question come from?

In September 2016, after the GCSE and A level examination analysis, the school identified the need to increase the A*-A percentage at GCSE. Departments were tasked with raising causes and solutions to improve 'the problem'. I observed that our A*-A students, while excellent and diligent pupils, lacked an independence in their approach to learning that could help them develop their progress in a different and perhaps more effective way. As the G&T co-ordinator it was my responsibility to play a part in maximising the opportunities for our high performing students to reach those top grades. I saw a chance to explore the use of independent learning within our potential A*-A CCSE candidates (all of whom were listed on the Gifted & Talented register); that said, I knew that if we were to 'solve' the problem effectively we would need to begin developing this skill well before students GCSE years, and it was then I decided to trial a pedagogical-based study that would target independence in KS3 students.

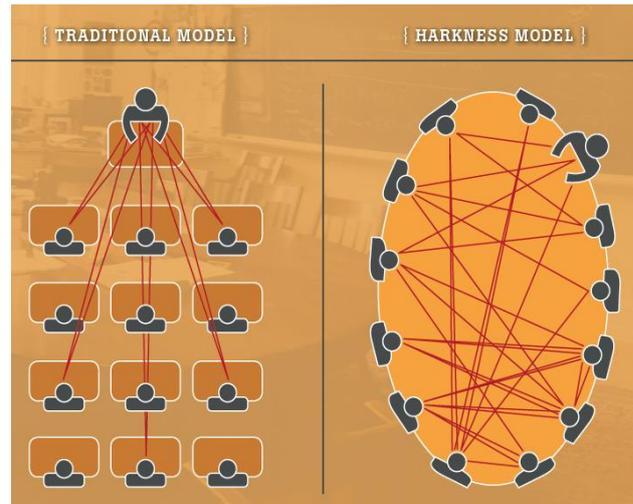
3. The Innovation

How though can we develop independence within students and do so in a way that will allow for meaningful data to be measured as a result of the intervention?

The focus of my trial and intervention stemmed from a pedagogical-based tool that I was made aware of through my involvement with the Eton College Research symposium group. The college had begun exploring

the use of Harkness tables, as had Wellington College, and having read the benefits (Williams, G. 'Harkness Learning: Principles of a Radical American Pedagogy') I saw an opportunity to bring the idea to Putney High.

Harkness tables originated in America in the 1930s as a result of Edward Harkness who donated the tables to his school – Phillips Exeter Academy - with the aim to make 'being smart more fun' (Tyler, C. *Educating with Harkness Tables*, 2002). Research suggests the overall goal is to 'provide children with the cognitive skills to be able to determine truth for *themselves*' (Williams, G. 'Harkness Learning: Principles of a Radical American Pedagogy'). By reducing the involvement of the teacher but still providing the students with the content, support and direction to access the material and task, the appeal of Harkness as an independent tool was significantly apparent.

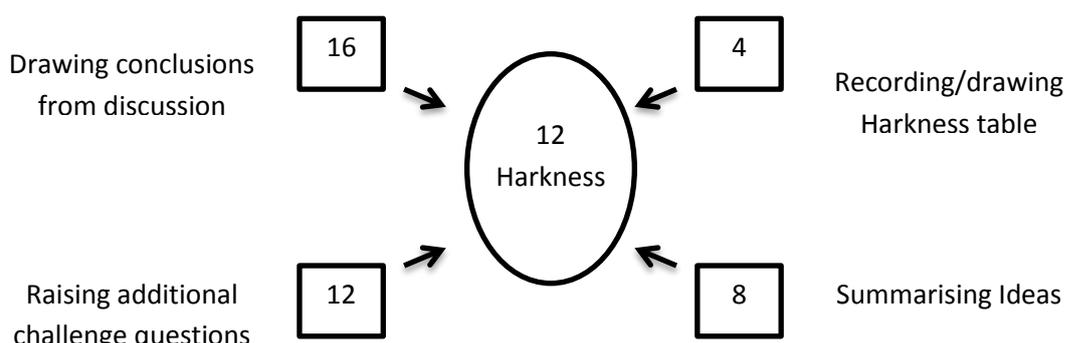


My focus was to implement, embed and experiment with Harkness tables with the aim to develop our students' independent skills, which in turn could positively impact their attainment. I also hoped that Harkness tables would increase confidence and self-belief within students in order that they can achieve a high standard of work without the same level of *reliance* on the teacher.

4. Activities/Interactions

I decided to keep the project small (as I had also just been made Head of Learning and Research and therefore needed to spend time co-ordinating and managing those teachers involved with research projects) and chose a treatment class in Year 8, so there would be comparative data from the other Year 8 group I also teach.

I intended to run Harkness table lessons at least once a term, in our regular classroom, during a normal one-hour lesson, by configuring the tables to make an oval shape (rather than an *actual* Harkness table, which are designed and made in America). There were however too many students in the group to perform a traditional Harkness table of 12 (Kennedy, R. 'To Harkness or Not to Harkness', 2017) and I therefore adapted the idea to include the other 16 students (28 in total). I selected the Gifted and Talented students (as identified by the schools G&T register) to sit at the table during the first Harkness lesson, but the group knew that everyone would have the opportunity to participate at the table later in the year (students at Putney High are not made aware that they are on the G&T register, as it is a staff document only). The students on the surrounding tables all had a purpose and function while watching the Harkness discussion in the middle. Group 1 = Recording (drawing) the table. Group 2 = Summarising the ideas discussed. Group 3 = Raising additional ideas/challenging questions. Group 4 = Drawing conclusion from the comments discussed overall (*see diagram below*).



I spent time ahead of the first Harkness table lesson explaining the aim, purpose and what a Harkness table is, so as to maximise its success (*if you would like to know more about this, please read Sarah Donarski's blog entry on 'Independent Learning week 6: Why Implement Harkness?' See bibliography for weblink*). The students were also given a short task, tailor-made to the area they would be working on during the real Harkness lesson, to help them prepare for the different style of learning.

How much did the students know about the project?

I was open and honest with the group, explaining the purpose of my research in relation to independent learning (without alluding to Gifted & Talented students). I made a conscious decision to make them aware so that they could reflect as we went through the process, in turn aiding my qualitative data. There are weaknesses in this approach to research but my decision was based on my relationship with that particular class. I would not necessarily choose that approach for a different topic/question.

The class were given a base-line data questionnaire (*see Appendices No 1.*), which among other things asked whether they believed their attainment could be raised through more independent learning. The students also completed a feedback survey at the end of the year (*see Appendices No 2.*), which asked them to reflect on the Harkness tables they had observed and undertaken (*for data analysis see 'Difference' section*) so that the qualitative data and impact of the intervention could be measured through analysis.

The students also knew that they would be doing a piece of written homework, based on the conversations had on the Harkness table, asking them to apply their new independently gained knowledge. This would then provide the measurable, quantitative data to compare with the other Year 8 class I teach.

5. Learning

Although I was the only teacher involved in this research project, the impact of Harkness tables has permeated across the whole school – in both students and staff. Not only have the participants in the project gained new skills, the interest in the table as a tool to develop independent learning has changed perspectives by staff members.

For students: It was my intention that those who participate in the Harkness tables would develop knowledge of the topic being discussed, as well as the skill of independence. Not only do they have to come to the lesson with prepared pre-read material and questions (independently sourced) but they also have to work independently throughout the Harkness table, without the aid of a teacher. By learning to respond to their peers and challenge the ideas being positioned at the Harkness table, they are also developing respect, kindness, tolerance and persuasiveness as skills to use in the future.

Each Harkness lesson was videoed and it has been clear from these and the essays submitted after the discussion that the participants have all gained a new level of understanding of the topic being discussed, as well as the ability to assess a topic in a truly philosophical manner. The points raised during the discussion were high-level ideas and I had never seen this achieved by so many of the students before at one time in my lessons.

From both the enthusiasm during class time, and the positive feedback found in their surveys (*Appendices No 2*) it is clear the students gained a lot from the project. The students have asked to set up a Harkness extra-curricular lunchtime club, and the style of discussion is now also going to form part of the Debating Society (a club attended by all year groups).

For staff: I organised and ran a 'peer-to-peer' observation week, as part of my Head of Learning & Research role in April 2017, and gave staff the opportunity to come and see me teach a Harkness lesson. Over 12 teachers observed and over four of those have gone on to teach a Harkness lesson of their own. I also ran a CPD session during our Teaching & Learning group meeting so that teachers understood the context and fundamentals of the tool. As a result staff members have embedded Harkness lessons into their department schemes of work for the next academic year.

6. Difference

The overall effect of the Harkness table use in Putney High has been substantial (*see above for staff and student impact in Section 5*), not only through its development of independent learning but also the engagement by staff to want to trial new ideas and the way in which students continue to pursue opportunities where Harkness can be embedded in different avenues of school learning. The benefits have been wide-spread, not just confined to attainment.

Did the use of Harkness tables however raise student attainment overall?

Overall Impact through data analysis:

- The Gifted & Talented students in the treatment class got 5 times more E grades (E = excellent. It is the highest grade you can receive at KS3) than the non-treatment class on the homework essay completed after a Harkness lesson (on the topic of forgiveness)
- The Gifted & Talented students in the treatment class got a 5% higher average overall in their summer examination results than the students who did not have access to the intervention.
- The Gifted & Talented students in the treatment class got higher marks in the questions that were answered having used Harkness tables around that topic in class (e.g.: 3% higher on the resurrection question, 1% higher on the forgiveness question)
- 96% of the whole treatment class (mixed ability) agreed that their independence and attainment had been raised (an increase of 58% from the 38% who agreed in the base line data questionnaire) having undertaken Harkness tables in lessons.

(Please see Appendices No 3, for full data analysis from the summer examinations)

Conclusion:

The research I have undertaken shows that through the use of Harkness tables in the classroom the attainment of the identified Gifted and Talented students in the class has been raised. While my research question focused only on Gifted and Talented students, what my project has also seen is that Harkness tables can have an impact on *all* students, of all abilities. That said, as yet I have not been able to measure the impact that greater independent learning has on GCSE A*-A grades (the original motivational driver) but this leaves room to develop my project further next year to account for this as yet unanswered question.

7. Reframing Value

The impact of the use of Harkness as a tool to develop independence has yet to be evaluated at a whole-school level in connection with performance by students, but the intervention has changed perspectives on what effective teaching and learning around independence looks like. I am running multiple CPD sessions next year on the use of Harkness so that a greater number of teachers can begin to use it. The Religious Studies department has also changed the Year 8 scheme of work to formally include the use of Harkness as a tool to develop independent learning.

Bibliography

- **Tyler, C.** Educating with the Harkness Table, 2002
<http://explorersfoundation.org/archive/tingleytc-harkness.pdf>
- **Williams, G.** 'Harkness Learning: Principles of a Radical American Pedagogy',
<https://www.nido.cl/uploaded/Harkness-Learning-Principles-of-a-Real-American-Pedagogy.pdf>
- **Kennedy, R.** 'To Harkness or not to Harkness', 2017
<http://www.boardingschoolreview.com/blog/to-harkness-or-not-to-harkness>
- **Donarski, S.** 'Independent Learning week 6: Why implement Harkness?' 2016
<http://learning.wellingtoncollege.org.uk/independent-learning-week-6-why-implement-harkness/>

Appendices

1. Independent Learning Questionnaire – Base line Data
2. Harkness Table Feedback Survey
3. Year 8 – Summer Exam Analysis

For any additional information about Harkness tables or the data that I tracked over the course of the year, please feel free to contact me at any time.

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