

# Harkness Tables Move to Public Schools



Men move a Harkness table from Phillips Hall into Rebecca Sharrow's middle school language arts classroom in Raymond, NH.

**S**eventh-grade teacher Rebecca Sharrow got a surprise addition to her classroom in July, one that she says fulfills the dream she's had since becoming a teacher of having a table. Sharrow works at the Iber Holmes Gove Middle School (IHGMS), in Raymond, NH, and her classroom received one of two Harkness tables from Phillips Hall.

As preparations began for interior renovations to Phillips Hall last spring, Principal Tom Hassan considered Exeter's three-year partnership with IHGMS and Raymond High School (RHS) through its Harkness teacher-training workshops and outreach summer school program for students. With the furniture headed for storage, Hassan contacted Director of Summer School Ethan Shapiro and Raymond School District Superintendent of Schools Dr. Jean R. Richards to ask whether the schools were interested in the tables. Dr. Richards was elated; so too was Sharrow when she learned she would be one of the recipients.

Sharrow participated in her first Harkness

NICOLE PELLATON (2)

## Expanding the Harkness Community

PEA instructors continue their work in public and charter schools

Rebecca Sharrow and the Raymond, NH, school district are part of a growing network of public and charter schools where PEA instructors provide summer workshops to teachers and students on Harkness and how it can be adapted within their classrooms.

This summer, English and math faculty members worked with schools in Raymond, Newmarket and Epping, NH, as well as charter schools in Chicago. "These sessions underscore the intentionality of Harkness—the skills that teachers and students need in order to be productive," English Instructor Jane Cadwell says. "It allows instructors to see that [Harkness] is not really a 'method' but rather a philosophy."

Newmarket High School English teacher Sara Cross sees the Harkness method as a natural fit in an English classroom, but she recognizes there are challenges: "There are many ways in which this method can—and does—overlap with my current practices. Student-driven discussion is an essential part of the English classroom, and it was great to observe new ways to encourage this type of learning environment. However, it does

present challenges . . . relying heavily on student accountability, and I have some concerns about students who may not prepare adequately for class. Ideally, everyone contributes."

PEA Dean of Academic Affairs and Math Instructor Karen Geary P'16 agrees that Harkness looks different in a public school setting. "The students are not as sure of themselves," she says. "I think they like the idea of student-centered learning but don't take to it naturally, in some cases. I am still the authority as the math teacher, and they have a hard time seeing it differently. In such a short time though, I'm still impressed by how far they have been able to come, in thinking and working with each other."

This summer marked the third year Exeter faculty members have engaged in the Summer School's outreach program for public and charter school teachers and students.

"To be out in our own community is meaningful," Geary says. "It is a way to share what we do with our neighbors, to break down, perhaps, some of the invisible barriers that exist."



training in 2010, attending meetings with Exeter instructors and observing Summer School classes on campus and during student enrichment programs at IHGMS. She says the traditional arrangement of students sitting in rows does not work well for language arts learning. She believes students should be comfortable. “Students should not look at each other’s backs but should work at a table where they can see and hear each other and have room to write,” she says.

Using Harkness methods for literature study and discussion, Sharrow’s students read at least two novels and tackle a unit on short stories. During discussions, students are assigned roles such as topic and discussion “police,” and everyone has an equal opportunity to speak. “[This] concept is great for creating students who take charge and are responsible for their own learning,” she says. “I think the [Harkness] style is transferrable to a public school setting with some tweaking.”

One major adjustment is Sharrow’s average class size of 20 students—about eight more than at Exeter. Before getting the Harkness table, Sharrow arranged her students’ desks in a horseshoe or circle, to encourage better discussions. This year, the Harkness table is used for literature study and discussion.

“After discussions, every other seat around the table is vacated and those students then physically transition to another station, the desks, to begin working on their writing assignments,” she explains.

Though it’s still a work in progress, Sharrow is confident of the outcomes of employing the Harkness table. “Working with the PEA teachers . . . has given me a great model for what Harkness should look like,” she says. “I have taken their strategies and tried to mold them to fit a public school setting. While I don’t believe I have a perfect situation yet, I do feel that Harkness is creating a positive workshop-type environment that is fostering a classroom of students who enjoy reading.”

**Seventh-grade teacher Rebecca Sharrow had always wanted a table in her classroom to aid discussions, particularly after she participated in PEA’s Harkness teacher-training workshops.**

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Watch a short video of the Harkness table’s move from Exeter to Raymond at [www.exeter.edu/bulletinextras](http://www.exeter.edu/bulletinextras).

