



Conversations for synthesis: Using the Harkness method in student-led historical inquiry

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ABSTRACT: The overhaul of the Queensland senior secondary syllabuses has provided a valuable opportunity to teachers to reconsider their pedagogy during the 2019-2020 implementation. For History teachers, the new syllabuses continue to promote inquiry and foreground the cognitions of analysis, evaluation and synthesis. However, the pedagogical approach suggested by the syllabus does not overtly support the students in the development of synthesising skills. This article explores one pedagogical approach, the Harkness Method, which through collaborative, student-led, structured conversations, may offer teachers and students a means by which synthesis can be explicitly modelled and practiced. This method may better enable students to develop and demonstrate this complex cognition, particularly when embedded within a broader practice of student-led inquiry. I argue that the implementation of a student-centred approach in senior History classrooms, coupled with the explicit emphasis on and development of synthesis through the Harkness method best enables students to demonstrate the syllabus objectives and also develop the broader 21st century skills which will enable them to become the “empathetic and critically-literate citizens who are equipped to embrace a multicultural, pluralistic, inclusive, democratic, compassionate and sustainable future” (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 1), that the Syllabus aspires to.

KEYWORDS: Inquiry, student-centered, student-led, Harkness method, pedagogy, Queensland, History

Introduction

Recent changes in the Australian state of Queensland’s senior schooling system offer teachers an opportunity to review and renew their classroom practice. These changes include the awarding of an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) based upon results in a suite of new syllabuses, each of which include an external assessment. In the discipline of History, a clear mandate for the inquiry approach¹ is evident. While inquiry has been an underpinning feature of Queensland syllabuses for decades (BSSS, 1987; 1995), in practice, pedagogy was not necessarily as student-centred as the documentation suggests. The ongoing debate amongst the history teaching community about the perceived content/skills binary highlights the differing views on the degree of student autonomy required by an inquiry approach (see Kiem, 2019; Counsell, 2018). The Syllabus explicitly identifies analysis, evaluation and synthesis (QCAA, 2019-a as key skills for students to master. However, the inquiry framework suggested in the syllabus (QCAA, 2019-a,) does not clearly allow for synthesis, as distinct from evaluation. This gap can be filled through the adoption of the Harkness method (Cadwell, 2018) as part of a broader student-led inquiry approach. Student-led inquiry sees students working collaboratively with their teacher and peers to devise questions, conduct research, analyse and evaluate evidence and synthesise their findings, rather than passively ‘receiving’ content through direct instruction alone. While a shift to student-led inquiry

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presents challenges for teachers' self-conception as 'experts', Erica McWilliam's (2009) construction of the teacher as a *Meddler-in-the Middle* is helpful in overcoming this hurdle. Once a shift to a student-led approach has occurred, the challenge of achieving synthesis remains, as the collation of research notes or the completion of individual summative assessment items does not give students the opportunity to rehearse and refine this skill. Here, I make a case for the Harkness method, a structured form of conversation pioneered at the Phillips Exeter Academy (Smith and Foley, 2009), although I suggest it is embedded within a broader student-led inquiry approach rather than a stand-alone pedagogy as it was originally designed. Harkness provides students the opportunity to practice synthesis, rehearse, and have the skill modelled with their peers and also develop a broader repertoire of skills that make the learning offered through the Harkness method relevant beyond the History classroom.

Syllabus and systemic reform

The implementation of the new QCE History syllabuses in Queensland secondary schools occurred in 2019. With the previous Syllabus having been in place for the past 15 years, this marks a significant shift in the teaching of both Modern and Ancient History. This will have ramifications not only in secondary classrooms but in the skills and knowledge these graduates will have when they enter tertiary institutions. For the past 40 years, Queensland schools have a rigorous system of internal, teacher-designed assessment that is externally moderated through the District and State Review Panels to confirm student results. These results are combined with student performance on the Queensland Core Skills Test to award an Overall Position (OP), which is used for tertiary entrance. The last cohort of Year 12s to receive an OP was 2019, as the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) introduced the most significant overall to senior schooling many teachers will have experienced. The new Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) system differs from the OP system in a number of key ways. Rather than a general ability test such as the Queensland Core Skills Test, students will instead complete one external examination at the end of Year 12 in each subject (akin to other Australian states such as New South Wales and Victoria). Teachers continue to develop the three internal assessment items and these are endorsed by an external review process (a continuation of the Review Panel approach). Student results on these internal items are also 'confirmed' by external review. Unlike New South Wales, Queensland will not use the external examination result to scale the internal results; instead, they are seen as a cumulative total. Subject results are then combined to award students their final Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). This systemic redesign has far-reaching implications for teachers, not only in how we design and prepare students for assessment but in how we design learning experiences that meet the expectations of the new syllabuses and best prepare our students for the world in which they will live and work as young adults.

The QCAA Ancient and Modern History syllabuses differ only in content; the Rationale and Teaching and Learning Frameworks outlined in each are the same. Reference here will be to the Modern History Syllabus but all comments are equally valid when applied to the Ancient History Syllabus. The Rationale of the Modern History Syllabus aims to have students develop historical knowledge and understanding, and "think historically and form a historical consciousness" (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 1). The Rationale states that to fulfil these aims,

Modern History uses a model of inquiry learning. Modern History benefits students as it enables them to thrive in a dynamic, globalised and knowledge-based world. Through Modern History, students acquire an intellectual toolkit consisting of 21st century skills. This ensures students of Modern History gain a range of transferable skills that will help them forge their own pathways to personal and professional success, as well as become empathetic and critically-literate citizens who are equipped to embrace a multicultural, pluralistic, inclusive, democratic, compassionate and sustainable future (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 1).

The mandate to adopt an inquiry approach is reinforced in the Pedagogical and Conceptual Frameworks of the Syllabus, which outlines a general inquiry framework. This framework emphasises “increasing responsibility” and “independence” as goals for student learning. The other key features of the Rationale include “21st century” and “transferable” skills (QCAA, 2019-a, pp. 11-12). The final piece of the puzzle is the direction given in the *QCE and QCIA Handbook v1.1* which states that students will receive feedback on “a maximum of one draft” and that “teachers may not introduce new ideas, language or research to improve the quality of student responses” (QCAA, 2019-b, p. 77). The overwhelming message to teachers is that by the start of the senior phase of schooling, students must be able to undertake inquiry genuinely independently of teacher direction and must have the skills to make judgements about the quality of their work and know how to improve it without explicit or detailed direction.

Teaching for independent inquiry

The question now facing Queensland teachers is how best to go about developing the “empathetic and critically-literate citizens” (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 1) with the wide range of skills the Syllabus describes. With the strong emphasis on increasing student autonomy, it is clear that teachers need to take a step back and allow the students to take ownership of their learning. While a general list, the 21st century skills outlined in the syllabuses make clear that students not only need to be able to work individually and independently, but also have skills in the domains of, “critical thinking, communication, personal and social skills, creative thinking, collaboration and teamwork and information and communication technologies (ICT) skills” (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 9). Taking all of these factors into account, a student-centred inquiry approach which fosters collaboration emerges as a suitable pedagogy for the new QCE system.

The inquiry process is not new to History teachers, but giving ownership of the process over to the students may require a shift in practice. Adopting an approach in which students co-create the inquiry questions for the unit of work; establish an understanding of “threshold concepts” (Meyer and Land, 2006) both in terms of content knowledge and discipline skills with teacher support; undertake collaborative research to develop responses to the class inquiry questions; and then communicate their knowledge through formal assessments, seems a logical structure and there are a number of ICT tools and collaborative pedagogies that can be used in this student-centred, collaborative learning approach. Meyer and Land describe threshold concepts as “a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (2006, p.3). This covers both content knowledge necessary for students to assimilate new knowledge and the skills needed to perform this act of synthesis, while also having strategies for when seemingly contradictory ideas are presented. Interestingly, Meyer and Land (2006) see history as a discipline with less well defined threshold concepts, yet the Syllabus clearly defines the skills which will enable students to negotiate these thresholds and construct new knowledge and understandings; for example, understanding that the past is “contestable and tentative” (QCAA, 2019-a, p.1) rather than a narrative then allows students to develop analysis and evaluation skills when engaging with historical sources.

The greatest hurdle to implementing a student-led inquiry approach with Harkness conversations embedded is often the teacher’s self-conception. The gradual release of responsibility to students for their own learning is not an act of abdication of responsibility on the teacher’s part (McWilliam, 2009, p. 287) but rather a shift in the relational dynamics of the classroom, where “teachers are mutually involved with students in assembling and/or dis-assembling knowledge and cultural products. Meddling is a re-positioning of teacher and

student as co-directors and co-editors of their social world” (McWilliam, 2009, p. 288). McWilliam’s construction of the teacher as a *Meddler-in-the-Middle* aligns closely with the role of the teacher in a Harkness classroom and the goals of the History Syllabus:

- less time spent on transmission and more time spent on working through problems in a way that puts everyone in the thick of the action;
- less time spent on risk minimization and more time spent on experimentation, risk-taking and co-learning;
- less emphasis on teaching as forensic classroom auditing and more time spent on designing, editing and assembling knowledge;
- less time spent on testing memorization and more time spent on designing alternative forms of authentic assessment; and
- less time spent on psychological counselling and more time spent on collaborative criticality and authentic evaluation (2009, pp. 290-291)

There is a close alignment between McWilliam’s description of the *Meddler* and the phases of a student-led inquiry. Working through problems is achieved in the design of inquiry questions; students and teachers are “co-learners” in the collaborative research phase, where they “edit and assembl[e] knowledge”; and there is “more time spent on collaborative criticality and authentic evaluation” (2009, pp. 290-291) in the opportunities for synthesis offered through Harkness conversations.

The inquiry model provided in the Syllabus is based on Marzano and Kendall’s 2008 *Designing and Assessing Educational Objectives: Applying the new taxonomy*, which has Forming, Finding, Analysing, Evaluating and Reflection as the key, interrelated, phases (QCAA, 2019-a). It is important to note that these phases are not seen as a linear progression, but rather a series of cognitive processes that students may return to again and again as they reflect upon their progress in each phase. In the Forming phase, teacher and students would work together to establish the threshold knowledge students will need to be able to assimilate and understand new information on the topic and devise inquiry questions for the unit. This threshold knowledge can be described as “what is fundamental to a grasp of the subject” (Cousin, 2006, p. 4), that is, the key ideas necessary for the student to be able to build upon and enlarge their understanding. This is the most teacher-centred component of the unit and in lower year levels the teacher may model for the students the development of the inquiry questions rather than allowing them to do so collaboratively. Having established the scope and scale of the inquiry, the class now moves into the Finding, Analysing and Evaluating phase, underpinned by regular Reflection. This ‘messy middle’ is where student-centred collaborative inquiry approaches can be used to develop independent learners.

Structuring a student-led inquiry

Having established the class inquiry questions for the unit, norms for collaboration must be clearly articulated. It is only in classrooms where students clearly understand what is expected of them and how to conduct themselves that collaboration works. Ensuring that students understand that they are responsible for helping one another learn is a key feature, as it tends to prevent those who would not usually contribute to the class from relying upon the work of others. Also ensuring students understand how to relate to one another respectfully, even when they hold different views is something that should be taught explicitly. Once the norms are understood, the inquiry process can begin, with the teacher stepping back and letting the students lead.

The Syllabus Objectives for both Ancient and Modern History are:

1. comprehend terms, concepts and issues
2. devise historical questions and conduct research
3. analyse evidence from historical sources to show understanding
4. synthesise evidence from historical sources to form a historical argument
5. evaluate evidence from historical sources to make judgments
6. create responses that communicate meaning to suit purpose (QCAA, 2019-a, pp. 6-7).

What stands out here is the misalignment of the cognitions of the inquiry framework and the Syllabus objectives. The inquiry framework stages align in that the forming stage asks students to “comprehend terms, concepts and issues” and “devise historical questions and conduct research.” The analysing and evaluating phases have explicit alignment with objectives 3, 5, and 6’s, “create responses” is addressed in the student’s assessment. While the evaluating phase of inquiry in the Syllabus states “synthesising findings” (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 12) as one of the activities of the phase, this does not match the definition of evaluate in the Syllabus: “make an appraisal by weighing up or assessing strengths, implications and limitations; make judgments about the ideas, works, solutions or methods in relation to selected criteria; examine and determine the merit, value or significance of something, based on criteria” (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 104). This mismatch is critical, as if teachers adhere to the proposed inquiry framework, they may miss the opportunity to highlight for students the differences in the cognitions of analysing, evaluating and synthesising, which are explicitly and separately addressed in the assessment and the ISMGs.

I argue that the use of Harkness conversations supports students to develop the ability to “synthesise evidence from historical sources to form a historical argument” (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 7) and so address this gap in the inquiry framework, and has the added benefit of improving the students’ ability to address Objective 6 in a wider variety of contexts. As a general outline, a student-centred inquiry would have the following structure. Both the inquiry phases and the key cognitions derived from the Syllabus objectives are outlined, with the addition of communicating as a distinct phase to recognise the formal requirement to complete summative assessment and other forms of sharing their understandings.

| | Students are: | | Teacher is: | |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| Inquiry Phases/Syllabus Objectives | Years 7-9 | Senior Years | Years 7-9 | Senior Years |
| Forming <i>Comprehend</i> <i>Devise</i> | Taking notes as “threshold knowledge” Observing teacher modelling of inquiry questions Developing questions with teacher support | Taking notes as “threshold knowledge” Responding to teacher provocations and guidelines to devise inquiry questions collaboratively | Providing comprehensive outline of the unit content Modelling the development of inquiry questions Demonstrating how student-developed questions can be improved for inclusion in inquiry | Providing a basic outline of key unit content Providing prompts for the development of inquiry questions Monitoring the development of inquiry questions |
| Finding (Reflection on | Collaboratively: Working with | Collaboratively: Locating sources | Providing sources that offer a range of | Modelling how to locate sources |

| | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| <p>the sources found may result in revision of the inquiry questions devised in the Forming phase)</p> <p><i>Devise and conduct</i></p> | <p>provided sources</p> <p>Locating sources with teacher support and instruction</p> <p>Reflecting on inquiry questions with teacher</p> | <p>independently</p> <p>Working with key provided sources</p> <p>Reflecting on if sources require redesign of inquiry questions</p> | <p>perspectives</p> <p>Giving direct instruction and modelling how to locate a range of sources</p> <p>Leading reflection on questions</p> | <p>Reminding students of good research practice, including reflection</p> <p>Observing and providing feedback</p> |
| <p>Analysing and Evaluating</p> <p>(Reflection in this phase may see students further refining the inquiry questions or needing to return to the Finding phase to locate a wider range of perspectives)</p> <p><i>Analyse</i></p> <p><i>Evaluate</i></p> <p><i>Synthesise</i></p> | <p>Collaboratively:</p> <p>Using scaffolds, guiding questions, and teacher modelling: identifying the features of evidence and making basic decisions about the reliability of sources</p> <p>With teacher guidance, reflecting on if a range of perspectives has been considered</p> | <p>Collaboratively:</p> <p>With reduced teacher support, making judgements about the features of evidence and making sophisticated decisions about the reliability of sources</p> <p>Collaboratively reflecting on if a range of perspectives has been considered</p> | <p>Modelling, using scaffolds and questions, how to identify features of evidence and make decisions about reliability</p> <p>Modelling and providing feedback to students on their reflection</p> | <p>Supporting students through feedback as they evaluate features of evidence and make decisions about reliability</p> <p>Providing feedback on the collaborative reflection</p> |
| <p>Communicating</p> <p><i>Synthesise</i></p> <p><i>Create responses</i></p> | <p>Individually:</p> <p>Completing assessment</p> <p>Using simple rubrics to provide peer feedback during drafting</p> <p>Making judgements about likely standards against criteria</p> | <p>Individually:</p> <p>Completing assessment</p> <p>Self-reflection against criteria and feedback rubric</p> <p>Peer feedback on criteria and feedback rubric or checklist</p> | <p>Modelling assessment task type and explain criteria</p> <p>Modelling the use of sources located during the inquiry</p> <p>Modelling the communication of source analysis and evaluation in historical writing</p> <p>Providing a reasonable level of feedback on student drafts</p> | <p>Modelling more sophisticated ways of communicating source analysis and evaluation and the development of more complex historical arguments</p> <p>Reminding students about basic expectations</p> <p>Providing limited feedback on one draft</p> |
| <p>Reflection</p> | <p>Individually and as a group:</p> <p>Students receive feedback (and do some guided self-reflection) about what they did well and what they need</p> | <p>Individually and as a group:</p> <p>Students self-reflect and receive feedback on what they did well and what they need to improve both on the</p> | <p>Provide detailed feedback for student to consider in future learning and assessment</p> | <p>Support students to self-reflect on how they can improve in future learning and assessment</p> |

| | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| | to improve both on the assessment and on their approach to learning | assessment and on their approach to learning | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|

In general, a teacher may devote one to two weeks to forming the inquiry and this will be a structured or guided inquiry, which still sees the teacher leading the learning for the most part. The finding and analysing and evaluating phases have reflection embedded within them and would take three to six weeks of a 10-week unit, depending on the nature of the assessment. The scope for increased student autonomy is greatest in these phases. Students formally communicate their knowledge and understanding through assessment which is generally completed individually, and receive feedback for reflection on this assessment. The assessment and feedback cycle may take several weeks if the students are completing a research essay, or only a week or so if completing an examination. There are a number of tools and approaches that can further support student-centred learning within a robust inquiry framework.

ICT tools for collaboration

Having established clear norms about respectful collaboration, students need to be able to share their research and ideas with one another. In schools that have one-to-one devices tools that allow for real-time collaboration, such as Google Docs or a Microsoft Teams shared OneNote, this offers teachers the oversight and control of the learning space while giving the students freedom to organise and share their ideas as they think best. Both platforms offer live collaboration, meaning many students can be working in the one file at the same time. Google Docs works particularly well for scaffolded research, as students can add text, images and links, and can comment on the document to offer feedback or suggestions or ask questions. OneNote has the added advantage of being able to embed videos and other file types within the Notebook, which allows students greater access to the source material that their peers have found. The pages structure of OneNote also offers more flexibility in how students can organise their work, for example having a separate page per inquiry question. This is possible in Docs if students work within a shared folder with multiple documents, but is a little more unwieldy.

Another strong contender is the web-based Miro (see figure 1). Previously called RealTimeBoard, Miro is a virtual whiteboard that expands to fit the content added. The flexibility of this blank slate approach offers a range of opportunities for student collaboration. Using the space for mind-mapping is one option, or collation of notes within a scaffold in a similar way to how students may use OneNote or Docs is another. Like OneNote, Miro allows videos, audio, and documents to be embedded within it. Because it is not restricted to a traditional page layout, Miro is an excellent timelining tool. In Figure 1, students have identified key dates and events and linked references and relevant sources to these (finding). Students work collaboratively to analyse the sources to identify the “features of evidence” found in the History syllabuses; context, origin, audience, motive and perspective (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 105). Having done so, students evaluate the source’s reliability and usefulness, and reflect if they need to undertake further research to find an alternate perspective or corroborating material. This process allows students to refine their own skills in the inquiry process of analysing, evaluating, and reflection, while also having it modelled for them by their peers and receiving feedback to improve from both their peers and their teacher.

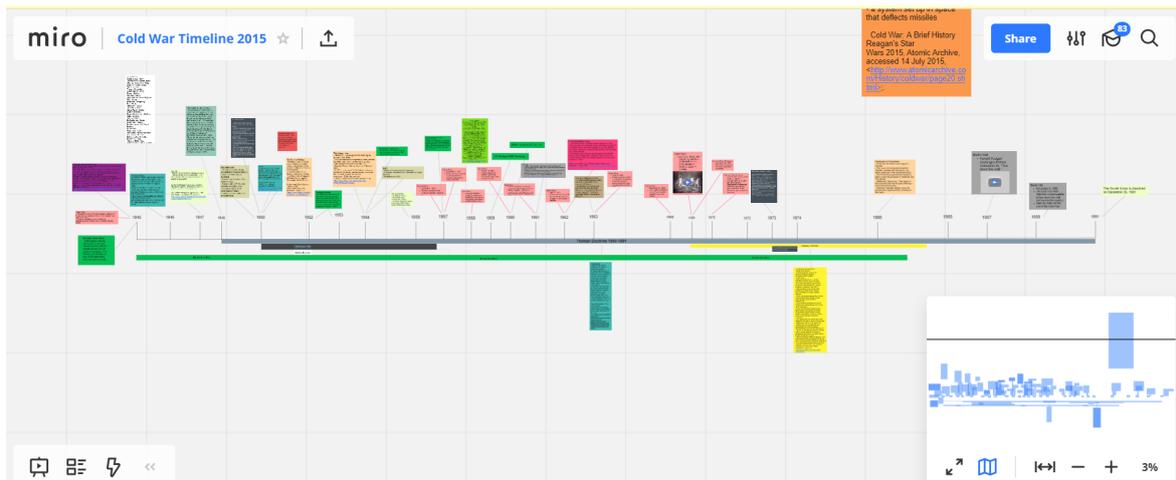


Figure 1: Miro ‘Cold War Timeline 2015’, an entirely student constructed project.

In Figure 2, students were also required to identify the defining ideology and policies that underpinned the events they researched. This timeline took students approximately three weeks in-class and served as the basis of a research essay. Having developed a shared understanding of the period, the Cold War, students then selected an aspect of the topic, for example the Space Race, for their individual research assignment. Having worked through the inquiry process collaboratively and reflected how they could improve, students then went on to undertake an individual inquiry. They were better able to adapt throughout the research process as they had had the experience of having participated fully in an inquiry rather than having just been taught the background content on the Cold War didactically.

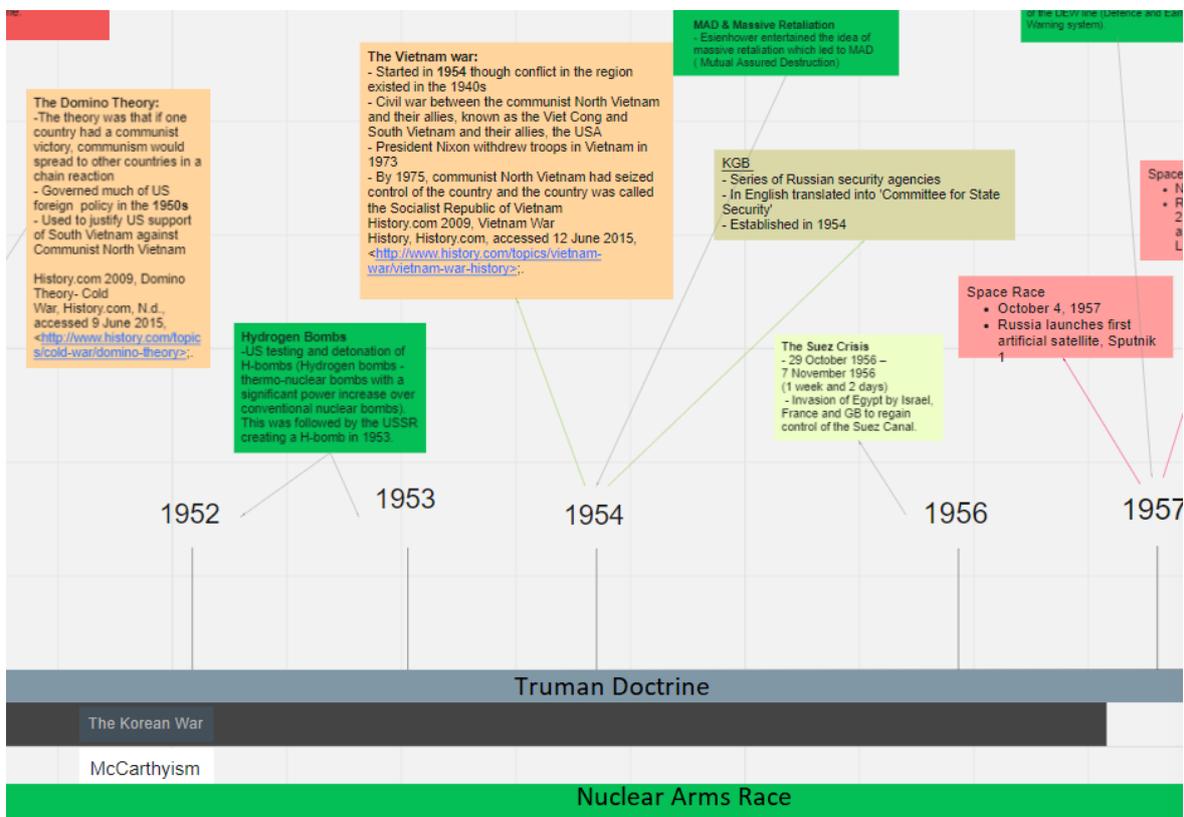


Figure 2: Timeline detail: broad ideological forces and key conflicts underpin colour coded timeline of key events.

The rapid rate of changes in ICT means these programs are not the only option, but their features provide a useful guide to teachers in terms of what to look for in selecting an online collaboration tool. These tools facilitate student collaboration and autonomy, but the key component of synthesis is still elusive.

No ICT? No problem

Digital collaborative tools are not the only option when it comes to establishing a collaborative classroom. The timelining activity outlined using Miro works just as well on large sheets of paper displayed around the room. The inclusion of images, copies of key quotes and references to useful websites or videos makes the classroom timeline almost as interactive as a Miro board. Equally, in classrooms that do not have a lot of wall space, the use of chalk pens on windows is another great way to timeline, and has the added advantage of making the learning visible to the wider school community as they pass by. Students can work collaboratively with sources by printing them on A3, annotating them in groups with analysis and evaluation and placing them on the class timeline. In both a digital or physical collaborative learning space, the emphasis must fall on the collaboration. This means that rather than having students undertake individual research in multiple lessons, students can locate sources at home or in their own time and bring these to class to be analysed collaboratively. In this ‘flipped’ approach, classrooms become a hub of discussion and critical thinking, rather than a space for the passive transmission of information that students are asked to engage with critically in their own time. When collaboration becomes the central mode of learning during the inquiry process, students need the skills to work in this way and also the ability to synthesise their ideas for clear communication. The Harkness method, “at its core, rejects the education-as-consumption passivity that distances students from responsibilities” (Courchesne, 2005, p. 56) and offers a viable solution for ensuring opportunities for synthesis and genuine collaborative learning.

The Harkness Method

The Harkness method was developed at Phillips Exeter Academy in the 1930s in response to philanthropist Edward Harkness’s offer of significant funding if the Academy could develop a new and innovative approach to teaching. What they devised has come to be called the Harkness method and involves:

Student-centred discussions in class, finding ways to get students to make the discoveries for themselves, to get them to draw their own conclusions, to teach them to consider all sides of an argument, and to make up their own minds based on analysis of the material at hand. (Smith and Foley, 2009, p. 478).

Essentially, a Harkness lesson starts with a prompt or reading with accompanying questions. The students bring their ideas to the table and, having established clear norms for conversation, seek to answer the questions, explore contradictions and respond as new questions are raised. The teacher’s role is to observe the conversation and in most instances, use a sociogram as a way to provide feedback to the students about the nature of their participation (Figure 3). In the example below, the students responded to the high number of ‘off topics’ and low number of ‘references’ to the stimulus text in their reflection, and in the subsequent Harkness conversation there were no ‘off topics’ at all, and an increase in references to the source material. This explicit exploration of how conversations work to foster understanding allowed students to improve not only their subject knowledge, but the critical thinking and social interaction skills. The goal of this new pedagogy to foster independent learners and the “successful teacher in the conference [Harkness] plan would not

be a drill master, but a partner in a human enterprise” (Perry, 1930). This view of the teacher as a partner in learning rather than “the fount of information and analysis” (Smith and Foley, 2009, 478) can be a challenge for teachers who came through a more traditionally teacher-centred schooling experience and so have replicated that approach in their own practice. The role of the teacher in a Harkness conversation shifts from a content-provider to a supportive observer (who will still address errors in understanding) and a guide for student reflection and self-improvement.

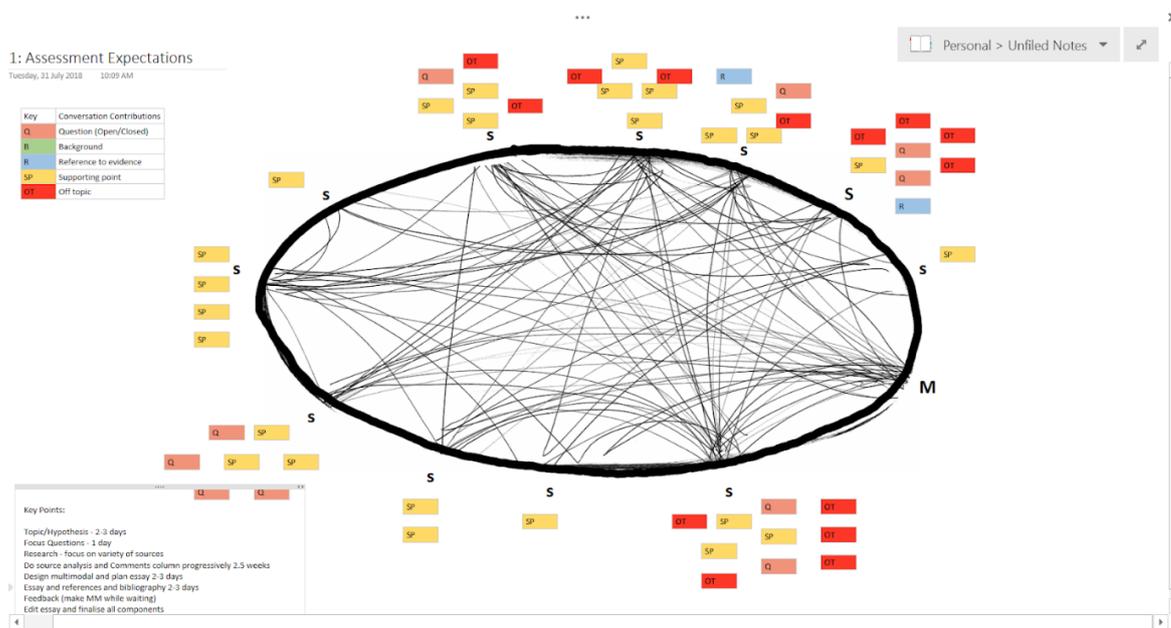


Figure 3: A sociogram noting the pattern of interaction and the nature of participant responses.

Harkness will not succeed if it is not embedded within a broader practice of student led inquiry,

because teachers don't have the power to impose student leadership on occasional lessons in an otherwise didactic pedagogical culture. It involves fundamental beliefs about learning, about the agency of learning. The idea that Harkness lessons can be conceptually borrowed as a form of novel academic extension therefore involves a certain absurdity” (Williams, 2014, p. 65).

We do not argue that the Harkness method should be adopted in every lesson, all of the time. Rather, we have found a place for it within the inquiry process where it is a targeted activity aimed at enabling the students to complete the synthesis that is the implied outcome of the inquiry model presented in the QCE Modern and Ancient History syllabuses. Using the Harkness method in this way means the students take these conversations seriously, are well prepared and understand the specific purpose of each conversation is to allow them to synthesise their understandings to date and to reflect upon areas they cannot yet address.

The challenges of Harkness

The biggest hurdle to the successful implementation of the Harkness method is the teacher's ability to rescind control of the learning. As Kimberly Fradale puts it, “our students are reticent and our teachers, talkative” (2018). Smith and Foley argue that,

the teacher has to let go. Silences, feared and dreaded by most teachers...are quite often nothing more than a moment in time when the students are all thinking, and if the teacher were to rush and fill the silence, the students will become dependent on this and effectively be “let off the hook”. (2009, p.485).

As the Modern History Syllabus states, an inquiry approach includes “developing self-directed learning over time, as students assume increasing responsibility for their learning” (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 11). If teachers are unwilling to enact a gradual release of responsibility, it is impossible for students to become the independent learners the syllabus aims for. The gradual release of responsibility framework is familiar to most teachers as the ‘I do, we do, you do’ model which fits well in a more teacher-centred approach. However, as Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey point out, “this three phase model omits a truly vital component: students learning through collaboration with their peers – the *you do it together* phase” (2013, p.3). If instead the units of work are centred around a lengthy period of student-led inquiry, where they *do it together*, the Harkness method is a natural fit as part of this inquiry process, and provides the opportunity for synthesis of the learning students have done in the analysing and evaluating stages of the inquiry cycle. Here, McWilliam’s (2009) construction of the teacher as a *Meddler* is a helpful way for teachers to conceptualise their role in a student-led classroom.

Once teachers accept that collaborative learning is “a little experimental, a little messy” (Fisher and Frey, 2013, p.7) and let the students assume responsibility for their own learning, a few other hurdles may arise. Fradale (2018) provides a concise summary of the other key challenges in adopting Harkness. In addition to teacher reluctance to step back, she states that students are reluctant to take risks and be wrong in front of their peers, need practice with the teamwork required for discussions, can have limited opportunity to participate in larger groups, and need to feel a sense of belonging. These challenges can be overcome if the Harkness method is introduced clearly and purposefully, within an already established culture of inquiry. As Smith and Foley note:

Assuming responsibility for the success of the class does not come easily or naturally to most students; in academic situations to which they have earlier been exposed, the teacher possesses both the authority and responsibility to fill the students with knowledge. Most students do not naturally question the teacher, nor question the text, nor disagree with their peers on intellectual matters, and yet this is exactly what they need to do in order to have successful class discussions. (2009, p.486)

However, if students are prepared well these challenges are surmountable. Explaining the approach and establishing clear norms for conversation are essential. Katherine Cadwell provides a list of expectations for Harkness conversations, including “curiosity, learning, respect and working with difference and tension” (Cadwell, n.d.). Specific expectations are then listed, such as being prepared for the conversation by completing the reading, being willing to participate and so on (Cadwell, n.d.). Another useful framework is Lauren Resnick’s *Accountable Talk* (Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2018) which gives students a language to use and encourages them to engage closely with the course material. Paul Sevigny (2012) also provides a useful outline of the various roles taken up in Harkness conversation.

Another risk is emerging in the scholarship around Harkness, which is the use of the method as a way to judge, measure or grade students on participation or quality of contribution (see Areaux, 2018 and Courchesne, 2005). While one of the key tenets of Harkness is reflecting on participation through the use of the sociograms, “the point of tracking is not to evaluate the discussion, but rather to pick up specific behaviours and look for trends” (Smith & Foley, 2009, p. 489), to assign a grade to this makes the students’ contributions performative rather than genuinely participatory; Smith and Foley argue against this practice (2009, p. 490). The goal of Harkness is not a grade, but a deeper understanding achieved through conversation. This understanding should be measured within formal assessment, not within the conversation itself. There is also some cynicism about Philips Exeter Academy having trademarked and monetised the Harkness method, with one article pointing out that they have “registered Harkness™, Harkness Method™, Harkness Table™ as

trademarks. Over 200 schools use Harkness tables in their classrooms according to the licensed manufacturer of Harkness Tables™, D.R. Dimes & Company” (Kennedy, 2017). However, this does not prevent schools adopting the approach, with furniture of their own choosing, nor does it invalidate the benefits of the approach.

Both teachers at Phillips Exeter Academy (Smith & Foley, 2009) and other researchers (Courchesne, 2005; Williams, 2014) note the potentially prohibitive costs to schools in adopting the Harkness method, particularly if all lessons are to be conducted as conversation. The maximum recommended class size is 12 (Kennedy, 2017), which is less than half the size of the maximum of 25 students recommended for Year 11 and 12 by the Queensland Department of Education (2018). However, a number of solutions have been put forward. Fradale (2018) suggests students could work in an inner and outer circles, the inner participating and the outer tracking the conversation. Alternately, two discussion circles may run simultaneously, with a sharing of ideas between groups and reflection on commonalities and differences in the conversations’ outcomes. As another solution, using Harkness at key points in the inquiry, as we do in our context, rather than all the time makes these adaptations of the method even more plausible and comes at no additional cost to our school. We have found the challenges that arise when implementing Harkness to be surmountable, and the benefits to our students are tangible and significant, making a short period of adjustment worthwhile.

A conversational classroom

Both the research and our own experience bear out the benefits of adopting a student centred inquiry approach in developing independent learners and critical thinkers. Further research on the efficacy of the Harkness method, particularly in an Australian context, would be beneficial. Many of the papers available are either written by Phillips Exeter Academy staff, or rely heavily on their work to make a case for Harkness. Nonetheless, what emerges in the scholarship is a clear sense that giving students the autonomy to lead their own learning through collaborative conversation has positive benefits for both the student’s understanding of the content and their ability to engage critically with this historical knowledge.

Developing a pedagogical approach that is driven by student centred inquiry and has Harkness conversations embedded at critical moments of synthesis clearly meets the Syllabus description of an inquiry approach.

- a method of learning, initiated by questions or problems
- personal construction of a student’s own knowledge, i.e. knowledge that is new to the student
- an active approach to learning where students have the central role
- the teacher acting as a facilitator
- developing self-directed learning over time, as students assume increasing responsibility for their learning. (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 11)

Harkness conversations have many of the features and outcomes that Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill describe in their list of 15 benefits of discussion (not focussed on the Harkness method specifically), including:

1. It helps students explore a diversity of perspectives.
2. It increases students’ awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity or complexity.
3. It helps students recognize and investigate their assumptions.
4. It encourages attentive, respectful listening.

5. It develops new appreciation for continuing differences.
6. It increases intellectual agility.
7. It helps students become connected to a topic.
8. It shows respect for student voices and experiences.
9. It helps students learn the processes and habits of democratic discourse.
10. It affirms students as co-creators of knowledge.
11. It develops the capacity for the clear communication of ideas and meaning.
12. It develops habits of collaborative learning.
13. It increases breadth and makes students more empathic.
14. It helps students develop skills of synthesis and integration.
15. It leads to transformation. (2005, p.21-22).

The natural fit between an inquiry approach and discussion for learning is self-evident, and the structured and reflective nature of the Harkness method also serves to address some of the pitfalls of discussion learning, such as underprepared students, insufficient attention to establishing clear ground rules and insufficient modelling (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). As Guy J. Williams notes, “it works within a disciplined framework with prescribed content, high expectations for reading and writing, and a demanding pace for course progression. So, the framework is tough and strictly delineated, but what happens within that framework is truly open-ended” (Williams, 2014, p. 61). The lack of prescription in the outcome of a Harkness conversation is one of the key ways it integrates with a genuine inquiry approach.

In addition to the opportunities to develop the students’ ability to synthesise, Harkness has the added advantage of providing students another opportunity to develop and rehearse communicating their historical understandings and thinking. As Smith and Foley (2009, p. 491) argue:

Another crucial area in the study of history for which student-centered discussion seems well suited is writing, and this is for two distinct and different reasons. First of all, class discussion teaches analysis of sources and ideas, and encourages students to develop the habit of questioning the accuracy and -validity of sources. It also teaches students how to create an argument and support their generalizations with evidence from the text; they do every day around the table. Secondly, having critiques and discussions about student essays helps all students in the class, particularly the student whose work is under review, to better understand the mechanics of writing.

This further serves to address another of the assessment objectives that is not explicitly addressed in the inquiry framework within the Syllabus, “create responses” (QCAA, 2019-a, p.7). This approach is particularly suited to the teaching of History as it drives the student back to the sources and the skills of analysis and evaluation that they need to use to underpin any sound historical argument.

The new Queensland Modern and Ancient History syllabuses offer teachers a rich opportunity to revisit their practice. The clear mandate to adopt a student-centred inquiry approach which offers students the chance to develop the skills necessary to meet not only the Syllabus objectives but also develop the broader repertoire of 21st century skills is well supported and there are a range of both ICT and non-digital tools that can help teachers shift to a student-centred inquiry. While the Harkness method does present some challenges in implementation and would benefit from further research as a pedagogy, it fits neatly within a well-developed inquiry process and allows students the chance to address the synthesis and creating responses objectives that are not necessarily well articulated in the general inquiry approach. In adding Harkness to our inquiry process, we have found that as students “explore ideas as a group, developing the courage to speak, the compassion to listen and the empathy

to understand” (Phillips Exeter Academy, 2019), which sets them up for success in a syllabus that seeks to develop students as “empathetic and critically-literate citizens who are equipped to embrace a multicultural, pluralistic, inclusive, democratic, compassionate and sustainable future” (QCAA, 2019-a, p. 1). By foregrounding the skill of synthesis in our teaching practice, we address a gap in the proposed pedagogy for this new syllabus and better equip our students for the world in which they will live.

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Endnotes

¹ The QCE History syllabuses draw upon the work of Spronken-Smith and Walker (2010) and Mazano and Kendall (2007, 2008) in identifying inquiry learning as an approach based on questions, where “students take a central role” and the teacher acts as a facilitator as the students work with increasing independence. This suggested model explicitly cites analysis and evaluation, however, synthesis is not present in the model.

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