BCL ep352 Training Students in the Art of Conversation with Justin Smith

We live in a culture of short soundbites, where thoughtful and deep conversation is truly becoming a lost art. And yet we're called as Christian educators and parents to form young people who can listen well and think deeply, and most of all, speak and reason with humility and grace. The Harkness Method, which is a modern form of Socratic dialogue, invites students to gather around a table to seek truth while examining and discussing great literature and ideas, including the gospel, that has stood the test of time.

It may be one of the most vital forms of discipleship in our time. Join us for this episode as we discover the power of conversation, not only in our schools, but in our homes as well. Mountains, we all face them as we seek to influence the next generation.

Get equipped to conquer the challenges, summit the peak, and shape exceptionally thoughtful, compassionate, and flourishing human beings. We call it ancient future education for raising the next generation. Welcome to Base Camp Live.

Now your host, Davies Owens. Welcome to another episode of Base Camp Live. Davies Owens here with you.

I am so grateful for those of you who email info at BaseCampLive.com. I'm really curious, if you're listening right now, where you're listening from. Take all of 15 seconds and say, I'm at this school in this location. I'd love to give you a quick shout out.

Many of you are listening internationally. If you are, also send an email. I'd love to hear where you are and what you're doing.

Classical Christian education is absolutely growing around the world in all of its different forms, from homeschooling to hybrid to a full five day a week. There are a lot of folks in startup schools. So wherever you are in the journey, we're glad to have you with us.

I am so excited to introduce you to Dr. Justin Smith, a really good friend of mine. He serves as head of school and president at the Little Rock Christian Academy in Little Rock, Arkansas. He's got a doctorate in educational leadership from Sam Houston University, where his research explored the transformative potential of tech-centered discussion-based pedagogy.

That's the kind of thing you say in a doctoral report. But it's really the heart of our conversation of the way that we can work to improve students' understanding of excellent conversation and dialogue using this form of a heartness approach. Very similar to what most schools use with Socratic discussions.

Justin's also completed post-doctorate studies in organizational leadership at Oxford University in the business school, as well as executive training through Harvard University's Graduate

School of Education. He's also a Colson fellow, and he is a Herzog Foundation coach, where I get to work with him four to five times a year on a track that's two and a half days long on parent engagement. In fact, if you're listening, your school leader, we'd love to have you be a part of that great program and get to hear Justin and myself working together to guide schools on this important work of parent engagement.

Justin is married to his wife, Amanda. They live in Little Rock, along with their daughter, Gracie, and son, Raleigh. It is a blessing to get to share with you this great conversation with Justin.

But before we do that, as always, I want to say thank you to the organizations that I deeply believe in that partner with us to help sponsor Basecamp Live podcast, including Wilson Hill Academy, the Champion Group, Life Architects Coaching, and our partners at the Herzog Foundation. And of course, just a reminder, Zipcast, which is really a sister initiative to what we do on Basecamp, allowing schools each week to be able to blend the local news and announcements and updates of their local school with syndicated content. We are actually fully onboarding all of our schools now to the new 2.0 Zipcast platform.

And if you're in a school that's not a part of Zipcast, it's not too late. In fact, we've got an opportunity for a number of schools to join us in January and February. All the details are at zipcast.media. Without further ado, here's my conversation with Dr. Justin Smith.

Justin Smith, welcome to Basecamp Live. Thank you for having me, Davies. It's so good to connect with you on Basecamp Live, but also just to see and be in dialogue with you.

It's always a joy. Well, and for folks that don't know, we got to know each other and continue to meet multiple times a year at the Herzog Foundation's coaching that they do the training for parent engagement. So we could do many podcasts, I think, on this topic of parent engagement.

Yeah. And I think that the dangerous thing is that we're allowed to present together at different times. And that's more like improv than it is presentation.

I still appreciate that about you, Davies. It can be more like comedy hour, but that's good. So we'll maybe bring some of that here to the interview.

So for folks that don't know your story, Justin, I have the privilege of hearing your story. And of course, folks will want to know just a little bit of how did you get to where you are now? So back folks up a little bit on the journey, especially as it relates to your educational discoveries. Sure.

Yeah. Well, I currently serve as head of school at Little Rock Christian Academy in Arkansas. I'm not originally from Arkansas.

I grew up in Southern California. I'm from a family of four, two children, and I have an older brother. I grew up in Orange County, a typical Orange County, California kid, rode skateboards, rode BMX bikes, learned to surf a bit and played baseball.

And that was what was most important in growing up in that area. I went south to the University of San Diego, which is, if you haven't seen it, is probably the prettiest campus in all of America. Truly a special place.

I met my wife, Amanda, there at University of San Diego. And since we met, after graduation, we moved to the Northeast and we worked together at a boarding school outside of Philadelphia. We did that for four years, moved to Houston and worked at two different schools there.

One was a startup international school in the Woodlands, Texas, and then jumped into Christian education at Second Baptist School, which is a K-12 school, over a thousand kids. It was incredibly formational in my understanding of this integration of biblical worldview and high-level academics. And so I served there as head of middle school for a few years, and the Lord brought me to Little Rock to serve here initially as head of upper school, and then now as head of school.

I've been at Little Rock Christian Academy for the last nine years, and it is like heaven on earth. Truly love, especially this time of year as we're recording in the early fall. Yeah, you obviously love where you're serving, and you don't always hear that in leadership because it can be challenging at times.

The other thing that we've talked so often about is while Little Rock is not a classical school, there are many elements of classical education. Talk a little bit about just sort of your own interest in a lot of elements of classical education. Of course, we're going to get into Harkness and Socratic discussion here at the heart of our conversation, but just sort of how has that played into some of your own discovery? So I was introduced to this style of teaching called Harkness in about 2012 from a guy named Jeff Williams.

He was serving as head of school at Second Baptist School, and he had hired me to be the head of middle school. And what we were doing with sixth graders was introducing them to what academic discussion looked like, sitting around these large oval wooden tables. Students were learning to ask questions, to listen, to lean in.

And so early on, I would sit in these classes as the head of middle school thinking, this is an incredible way for students to learn. Great engagement, asking thoughtful questions. I remember hearing one of our 12-year-olds say, I like Harkness because it takes the ceiling off of the questions I can ask.

And I thought, that is one of the most profound things I've ever heard a 12-year-old say. And so I got really interested in, I see, what I see in front of me is working and making sense, but I really wanted to dive deeply into the underpinnings of what Harkness was all about. And so I went up to, if you want to study Harkness, you go to where it originated.

And so I had an incredible opportunity to go up to Phillips Exeter Academy and spend a week

there in the summer of 2013, where I was with about a hundred other educators who were learning about Harkness. I remember specifically sitting in my dorm room for the week. And it was Wednesday of that week, that evening, I was looking out, I was in Amen Hall, looking out over the quad of this, this school that was founded in 1781, this beautiful New England boarding school, one of the top schools in the nation, looking out over this quad and thinking, I'm going to change my dissertation topic from independent school leadership to Harkness.

And so that was my first commitment to say, I really want to understand what's going on here. And it was through my doctoral studies, my academic research, where layer after layer after layer, I was unpeeling, it led me from Harkness to Socratic Seminar, to the Christian liberal arts, to the classical Christian world, to Paideia, to all of these things. And it was sort of like, it was this discovery.

I'd been looking at a picture that I recognized and I thought was clear. And then as I began to research it more, things began to crystallize in my mind. And so that's where I'm at as a Christian educator.

I am one who is seeking the very best form of Christian education. And that has led me to this overlap between what I'm familiar with, with Christian education, and what I'm learning about in the classical Christian or Christian liberal arts world. And so my desire is to improve the work that we get to do on my campus as a non-classical Christian school with some similar elements, but yet understanding that the DNA of my school, where I serve, has to remain the same.

And so I don't have an interest in moving the school out of who it is supposed to be. I have a desire to help us become the best version of ourselves. That's where I see that overlap.

Yeah, that's a great, it's very helpful to hear your discovery because most people are listening, while not everyone that listens to Basecamp Live is in a classical school or in a classical type of school. I think everyone, much like yourself, has been on this journey of discovery. Very few of us ever had this type of education growing up.

Most of us came to it late in life and realized, wow, there's something here that we, or maybe even a little jealous of our children, that they get to experience this. We're going to unpack and we'll get into unpacking a bit more what you mean by heartness, but just framing up some of the challenges that are in typical classrooms today across certainly most schools, even in Christian schools, which is just how do you really teach students to think and communicate today? Of course, we live in a world where it doesn't take more than about one minute to turn on the news and realize that the ability to have civil conversation discourse is completely out the window. We don't really train people in the ways that they were taught of old to sit around a table and really wrestle through ideas and to communicate well.

So help us understand, I guess, at a basic level, what are we talking about when we say heartness and how is it so unique in comparison to what so often happens in classrooms? I would first start by saying that when I think about what happens in a classroom, I would be the

first to admit that, at least in what I'm comfortable with and what I think is a best practice, is that heartness is not necessarily something that a teacher would use regularly, on a daily basis, every block. I just think that it would wear kids out in an unproductive way. But I think like any other pedagogical tool or any other instructional practice, the expert teacher, the master teacher knows when and where within a curriculum of study or unit of study where to implement a discussion, really to leverage the type of learning that they're hoping to get.

Now, many teachers will look at heartness and say, okay, what I want to do is I want to have my students read and analyze and annotate a text, come to the classroom and be willing to ask questions of the text, to peel back the layers, to get a deeper, a far deeper understanding of what they have read through dialogue with their classmates. And the teacher is not just sitting back hoping that they get to the correct answer, but the teacher has framed this in such a way, both using the text itself and maybe pairing it with other materials or artifacts. But so the teacher is very much in control, so to speak, of what the students are learning and then layering that with certain questions that are going to lead to this discovery.

And what they're doing is they're searching for truth, truth within the text, truth of what does it mean to be human in the context of what they're reading or analyzing. And all along the way, they're actually developing skills. So they're going deeper into the content to build a knowledge base, which is important in any educational setting, yet also pairing that with developing skills because we want our students to be able to think well.

In today's world, in the 21st century, you hear often in these sort of educational fads that maybe early, about 20 years ago, was differentiate instruction and then it was project-based learning and lifelong learners and critical thinking and all of these, a variety of 21st century skills that we hear about. And I think it's sort of interesting because we're using this sort of ancient practice of discussion-based learning with a text at the center of it that Socrates was using with his students 2,500 years ago. And yet it's almost like in Christian churches or maybe the Christian apologists would say, don't you love it when science catches up with the Bible? In a way, it's so interesting to me to see all of these educational fads catching up with a Socratic style or a Harkness learning.

So I just think that the more that I hear educators and teachers thinking about what if we were to use this approach to develop this skill? And it's almost like this new discovery. And I sort of just kind of sit back and nod my head and say, we have a thing for that. It's called Harkness.

And so how would you, you mentioned Socrates. So I would agree there's certainly deepest roots. And what's often in the classical circle, I guess, would be called Socratic discussions.

And it's really very similar in many ways. I know that you were referencing Phillips Exeter, and I guess that was where the origin officially of Harkness came out of in the 1930s. So how are they different? How are they similar? What are those methods? How do they link to each other? Yeah.

Let me talk about how they're similar and maybe where the difference is. And I'd love to tell you a story about who and what Harkness is. Let me begin initially just by saying that my perspective on Harkness is not necessarily the purest form of Harkness.

And that's primarily because I care more about being a biblical worldview school or Christian school than I do about becoming a Harkness school. And so for that reason, I don't see it as valuable to be so concerned with the purest form of a method as I do holding true to our core values of the school. So if a Socratic seminar and a Harkness discussion found overlap, they would find overlap in the text that they are using one another and their intellectual abilities to deepen their understanding of a concept or a text.

And yes, they are relying on a teacher, but they're also relying on one another. I think that where you would find a little bit of difference, at least in terms of how you define Socratic seminar from Harkness, is I think the Harkness camp is going to say that the teacher is, yes, the teacher is the facilitator, but the students are the ones who are generating the questions. Whereas in a Socratic seminar, it seems as though that responsibility rests on the shoulders of the teacher.

Now, does that mean that every Socratic seminar is entirely teacher asking student A a question, asking student B a question? I don't think so. And in the same way, most Harkness discussions are not solely the students that are doing all this. Well, and I want to take a quick break.

We'll come back because it's easy to kind of get into very deep waters. Obviously, you did doctoral work in this area. I think at a basic level, I think we all recognize, as we were talking before about our own educational journey, I mean, most of us, myself included, grew up and even in high school where it was the sage on the stage, the teacher lecturing through the literature, and then the questions tended to be very factual, you know, who is this character? What date was this? And you really could become very passive in the learning process.

And really, there's no way to kind of sleep around a Harkness table. You have to be kind of on your toes, ready to think and respond and engage. And again, that's part of the, part of the depth of what we want in any good education is, there's an old Charlotte, Charlotte Mason talks about the triad of the teacher, the text, and the one taught.

In any classroom, those are the three kind of pivot points. And ultimately, the idea is the teacher or facilitator is to really kind of get out of the way so that the students can actually engage that living text, that living book that has stood the test of time. So that's kind of what I hear you saying is, you're really just creating an environment where the teacher isn't just dominating from the lectern up front, but you're really enabling the learning to happen at the student level.

That's right. And there's, there is a place for that. There is a place for a teacher being at the front of the classroom and, and really covering some material, but there's also a place for

students to be able to uncover that material through discovery.

And it's not just aiming for a good conversation. What we're trying to do is, is to, to form the kind of people who can converse Christianly. Yeah, that's beautiful.

Let's take a quick break. We'll come back and continue to have our discussion. I don't know.

I don't know if we qualify as a Harkness because it's just us talking to each other, but unless you're Socrates, I don't think I've got a beard that would be that impressive. So, all right, we'll be right back. During this short break, I have a special invitation to all school leaders, administrators, and teachers.

I want you to imagine for a moment, stepping away from your everyday routine at school and diving deep into the rich foundations of Christian education, surrounded by world-class scholars, seasoned classroom teachers, and administrative experts with years of experience running schools with a lot of wisdom to share. That's exactly what the Herzog Foundation's Institute is offering. I've had the joy of serving as a training coach for the last few years, leading their two and a half day training on spiritual formation and another one on parent engagement.

They offer close to 50 unique training events ranging from board governance, to marketing, to classroom best practices. They even offer a training on how to teach the great books. And the best part of all, well, thanks to the generosity of the Herzog Foundation, these training events, including lodging, are completely free for educators.

Institutes are located around the country in beautiful locations, including at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., and the Reagan Library in Santa Barbara. Don't miss this incredible opportunity. Check out the details at theherzogfoundation.com. I know as a school parent and administrator that like many of you, when I hear the word fundraising, it can make me feel a little bit uncomfortable, but there's good news.

Our friends at the Champion Group have created something different, a fundraiser that is simple and effective. The good news is there's no selling of cookie dough, wrapping paper, light bulbs, and it's one that actually brings in significant support for our schools. It's called Feed the Need, and at its core, it's a peer-to-peer fundraiser, but it's so much more than that.

The campaign builds toward a powerful service event where students pack and ship 10,000 meals for families in need, both here at home and around the world. These meals don't just meet a physical need, they open the door for the gospel to be shared. That's what makes Feed the Need so unique.

It's not just a way to raise money, it is a discipleship experience, and giving students a hands-on service project at your school provides them an opportunity to not only connect your community to a greater mission, but it does provide your school with real financial resources that you need to thrive. Feed the Need is a fundraiser with eternal impact, practical, purposeful,

and Christ-centered. To learn more about how your school can be a part of Feed the Need, visit thechampiongroup.com or check out our partners page on the Base Camp Live website.

Justin, one of the challenges I'm sure folks are thinking about, especially if you're an educator, is number one, it seems like there's always risk of sort of handing the proverbial microphone over to the students that, on the one hand, we want their opinions and their thoughts. On the other hand, they are there to learn, and I have been in some discussion environments where students, naturally, start stating their opinion and what they think, and the next thing you know, it's what I call bad talk radio, and you really didn't get to the text, and you certainly didn't stay grounded in what is biblical truth. First of all, how do you navigate that conversation without stopping the good dialogue, but also reining it in and making sure it ultimately lands on a backdrop of truth? Thank you, Davies, for bringing that up.

That is absolutely something to consider, especially from a leadership perspective, but also for the classroom teacher. When we adopted Harkness at our school eight, nine years ago, really thought that it would take root initially and flourish in biblical worldview. That wasn't actually the case on our campus.

It actually began to really flourish in our English department, those teachers using the novels that they were reading, and we saw a ton of growth there. Where we were finding ourselves being stuck is in biblical worldview, and it was really out of the best of intentions, those teachers recognized that they had a great concern with if we were to allow students to have the reins of their learning, are they going to create truth? It really came down to us putting our heads together to say, we believe in absolute truth, and so what the students are we are presenting them with materials, whether that's the scriptures or a book we may be reading or artifact that they're taking a look at, and we are going to continue to point them to Christ, to anchor their understanding in truth, and to anchor to make sure that the teacher was more than a facilitator, but that they were a spiritual shepherd at the table. We felt that in a secular version of Harkness, you may have these open-ended, like your truth is, truth is your truth, or whatever it may be, but we feel a great responsibility to continue to point our kids to absolute truth, and in addition to that, to ask them some of life's biggest questions of origins, meaning, morality, destiny, and identity, and how are we rooting those in a biblical worldview, and so, and then on top of that, Davis, you brought up a great point earlier of the opinions of students.

The idea of a Harkness discussion or Socratic seminar is not, how do you feel about this? That's a fun conversation in the hallways or after the fact. We call this an approach to teaching and learning that is text-based and discussion-based, meaning this at the center of the conversation is the text, and so it's not so much, what do you feel about this, what you're reading, but it is, what is the author saying, who is the intended audience, what is the great meaning of this, and how does this connect to who I am as a person that is created in the image of God? So is that example, I would assume, where the teacher is, I guess, kind of like the coach on the sidelines, and kind of, okay, let me step in here, guys, because you're onto a good point, but what is, how does this resonate against maybe the scripture or this Christian ideal, and then sort of creating

that tension, if you will, or that opportunity for the discussion? Well, Davey's aiming to play off your illustration there. The master coach is one who knows when to call a timeout and when to let their veteran players lead on the court, and so as a teacher early on with younger students, you're probably going to need to call a timeout a bit more during discussion and bring people back on track.

As the students get older, it's sort of like this gradient as students get better and better at this. It's so fun to sit at a Harkness table, hear the discussion, and hear students begin to wrestle with ideas, and as they're moving away from where you think that the conversation should go, if you can show enough restraint, a lot of times, especially your really skilled students, they can bring the conversation back, and it's like, voila, there they hit it. They came back to it, and honestly, that learning, that learning, now you could have done that more efficiently from the front of the room, I'm sure.

I'm certain of it, and I think that's why a lot of teachers avoid some of this kind of, or this approach to teaching and learning, because they can do it more efficiently, but just because you taught it doesn't mean students understand it or learned it, and then on top of that, when a student comes to these conclusions on their own, in their own words, in their processing, and they've discovered this, it sticks. Learning sticks. The retention is so much higher.

Yeah, because really what you're describing is you're training them to pursue understanding, to pursue truth, to have to wrestle through it, as opposed to just getting the right answer, because that's just, again, sort of modern education at its worst is, you know, what's going to be on the test, give me the five things, jamming cream. They're learning to become learners. Yeah, you're absolutely learning to become learners, and not just intaking and spitting it back out and nothing.

And probably being okay with silence, because I'm sure that would be awkward at times, where you want to rescue the conversation, like, no, no, no, let them stall here till they figure it out. You know, sometimes we think we just, we interpret the silence as confusion or a group being introverted or too cautious, but oftentimes that silence is where they're thinking, and as a teacher, you don't want to rescue them from thinking. You want them to think, and so that's actually a really great practice, and you know what? Wouldn't we all do better to learn to listen a little bit more? Well, as we said before, I mean, look at our world today, and I have to think there's a strong corollary to the way that so many people have been educated, which has been, you know, jam and cream and forget it, not even care, not learn how to pursue understanding and truth, and therefore it's just, you know, a shouting match.

You know, it's sort of the difference in debate versus mock trial, like debates, like here's all the facts, let's just lob these things over the fence at each other versus, you know, mock trial where you really have to work through kind of a living court case. I mean, it's sort of the model where you said, it's different, but I mean, it's the same idea of let's teach students to really struggle through discussion dialogue, which by the way, I mean, I'm sure you can make the case, and

the case has been made, that I mean, this is really what Jesus did, right? I mean, he taught questions and stories and then dialogue. It wasn't always just a lecture.

You're exactly right. If you go back through the Gospels and read the words that are written and read, you will see many, many questions throughout. It's just a beautiful way.

And that's actually, you know, it's one of those things I listened to John Stone Street when he talks, and one of the things that he likes to do when confronting people with different worldviews is just ask the question, well, what do you mean by that? And what a beautiful question that is in a classroom when a student says something and for you to respond by saying, well, what do you mean by that? Like basically saying, can I get a little bit more mileage out of your understanding? Let's really see what you know about this. And I remember my mom, she's a college professor out in California, and she came out to visit me in Houston when I was the head of middle school at this school. We were using Harkness with 11 year olds.

And I said, you got to come and see this mom. This is just fascinating. And so she sat in a class and I kid you not, she about fell out of her seat when one of the students turned to another one and said, I understand what you're saying there, but could you support it with textual reference? She was like, I can't get my college kids to think this way.

This is an 11 year old student. And I think the point is the fact that this is a, it's a learned and trained behavior. This is, it's not natural.

Natural is to sit passively or to over-talk or something. But to have to learn how to engage thoughtfully, to ask questions or probing like that. And for students to be molded into that, boy, that's a lifetime skill.

I would think would change the course of their, the way they conduct their business engagements and conversations and even into the family life. Well, one of the, when I read Jim Collins book, Good to Great, one of the defining moments in his life was when a Stanford professor came alongside him and said, Jim, I think it would do you well to become less interesting and more interested. And when you think about the difference there and you think about the people who are interested, they're typically asking a lot of questions.

Well, that was Jesus for sure. I remember Os Guinness has talked many times about that just from a apologetics. I mean, we just need to be quick to inquire and ask questions, which sets up good conversation.

Well, let's take another quick break. We're those who are listening who are school leaders and ways to begin to integrate this into their school and for parents, because there's a role that we play as well in creating home environments and dinner conversations that kind of pull from some of these skills as well. So let's take a quick break.

We'll be right back. Every school year tells a story. The big chapters like the first day of class or graduation are easy to see.

But the real heart of the story is often written in the quieter pages, a science experiment that sparks wonder, a class pausing to memorize a Psalm, a teacher encouraging perseverance when the work gets hard. Those are the moments parents long to hear. That's why we created Zipcast.

Each week, families receive a short 10 to 12 minute episode, local updates from their school leaders paired with syndicated wisdom from trusted national experts in both Christian parenting and education. Parents can listen in the rhythm of daily life on the drive to practice while making dinner or during a quiet walk. Nearly 100 schools are already using Zipcast this year to strengthen trust in community and fall or winter isn't too late to sign up.

It's often the best time to begin. Save your spot at zipcast.media. Zipcast, encouraging you on the go with what you need to know. I'm here with my friend Joanna Hensley, head of lower school at Wilson Academy to tell you about their exciting new program.

Maybe you already know about Wilson Academy. We talk about Wilson all the time on Base Camp Live. They're known for their really effective and helpful online classical Christian education they offer.

They have lively courses for students in grades three through 12. But what you may not know is that Wilson Hill is now offering a rich early learning program they call Forma for students in K through second grade. I'm here with Joanna.

Joanna, tell us more. Oh, thanks, Davies. Forma is such a wonderful way to begin a lifelong love of learning.

You know, we talk often about the cautions of technology. So let's just go ahead and get this out of the way. Are you encouraging kindergartners to be on Zoom all the time? Is that what this is? Absolutely not, Davies.

Forma does not involve putting five-year-olds on Zoom. Forma is a program that gives to parents valuable guidance from an experienced mentor teacher who walks them through a carefully curated curriculum for teaching reading, math, nature study, and enrichment like picture study and music, all within a like-minded encouraging community. I love what you guys are doing, especially for children in those younger ages.

How can folks learn more about what you're doing with Forma? They can visit our website, wilsonhillacademy.com slash forma, F-O-R-M-A. Fantastic. Thanks so much, Joanna.

Justin, over the years, I'm sure you've sat in many of these Harkness discussions and conversations and seen education come alive. Share some experiences that you've seen firsthand. Yeah.

I think that leadership is on display in a Harkness conversation. And so one of the fun things to see is who are the students who will lead and who will follow? And I know that we often think

we all want our kids to be leaders and not followers, but at the same time, there's a back and a forth. And I think that a Harkness discussion allows students to take on different roles.

It's important to lead at times, to follow at times. And so leadership is developed at a Harkness table. I'll give you a couple of examples that I've seen over the years.

One would be a more recent example of a student that was taking an English class here, and the teacher did not use Harkness regularly in the classroom. And I remember that student who had been a part of many Harkness discussions over the years just say, you know, yes, we learned about the book and we learned the, our teacher's impression of the book. But there were a lot of kids in there that really wanted to discuss different elements of the book that we never quite got to as a result of the lecture in the class.

And it was fine. We all did well on our papers and we moved on through the curriculum, but felt like it was a missed opportunity for students to really dig into even word choice and the prose of the author and the historical context and building in some connections to biblical worldview that many of these students had in their adjacent class, yet that teacher didn't know that. And so it felt to the student that we could have taken something that was good and turned it into something that was great and beautiful.

And it just, it was sort of a miss. And that's interesting when you can hear a teenager explain that because they've become accustomed. Well, it's like we were saying, once they've tasted and seen, it's kind of hard to go back to maybe passive learning.

That sounds biblical too. Yeah. One quick question that I don't want to, maybe we kind of skipped over this at the beginning, but I know that in a typical kind of classical school environment, we tend to think of these and the trivium, we think of the grammar and the logic and the rhetoric stage and rhetoric would naturally be where kind of this type of Socratic hardness would typically fall in the life of the school.

It sounds like it, you alluded earlier to maybe earlier years where this type of hardness or maybe early, early forms of hardness can be implemented. What, where does it fit in, in terms of the K-12 journey? Yeah. On our campus, we formally begin teaching students how to, how to develop their capacity for a hardness discussion in seventh grade.

Okay. In seventh and eighth grade, those are typically shorter discussions and they're, we, we care about the process and we care about the skills they're developing. We really practice using one another's names, question stems, their manners, even at the table.

And we think that's really important. Their body language, their eye contact, they're not interrupting one another, and then using textual references. And so we give them tons of feedback after the discussion on the discussion itself.

Here's how you did. And so that seventh and eighth grade and ninth grade, as our students get older, you don't have to spend quite as much time on the technical side of, and then you really

get into the depth of the meaning of the conversation. What's the learning that's happening there? That's really interesting.

And this idea of you're teaching them the technical aspects, and it really, again, where in the modern education model do students learn the art of conversation and how do you, you know, how do you politely interrupt as you're saying, you know, and how do you balance? And it is a question. I mean, we naturally, you're going to have students that I'm sure the idea of having a discussion is horrifying because they're introverted and they really like the lecture way better. And now they're being asked actually, and be graded on participation.

And then you've got the other students that are, you know, aspiring podcasters, I guess, and they want to talk the whole time. So how do you balance that? And when it comes to technique and training? Davies, it happens all the time on tours of families when they come to visit our school, and we're walking them through, and we walk them through an upper school classroom, and they see these large tables in the middle of the classroom and all the students sitting around. And we're talking about, what does it look like to be a student here? And some of the families will say, oh my goodness, my son or my daughter would be a wallflower.

They would never be able to enter into the conversation. They're just so quiet and shy. And then others have said, oh, I don't know if my student can handle letting other people have airtime because they talk all the time.

And I say to both families, this is the perfect place for it. And here's why. After every discussion, there is a reflection, a metacognition moment where our students are debriefing with their teacher, what went well? What didn't go well? What did we miss? Who spoke too much? And we track the conversation.

And so the teachers have evidence of what happened during that. And a lot of times our teachers post those on the wall just so everybody can see this was the dynamic of our last conversation. What can we do better as a team? And so when students begin to see their class as a team effort, they begin to help one another out.

They'll ask each other, they'll draw each other into the conversation. They'll pull back when they know that they've spoken too much. So I would say to both, on both ends of that spectrum, harkness is actually going to be a way that's going to train their students to find that happy medium, that happy medium where they're confident enough to speak, but they know the value of listening as well.

And I'm sure that to your point, there are situations where maybe even a student that's not accelerating in athletics or the arts, but they have so much to offer. And students see something in their classmate that really builds up their self-esteem and their confidence because they're the ones in these conversations that are often given the peripheral microphone to contribute and have a lot to say. So it's another way to find the gifts in students.

Opportunities to lead. That's right. So for those who are listening that are kind of, we'll speak to kind of two audiences, the educators that are thinking, gosh, this has been really encouraging and I don't know really where to begin.

Maybe we do some form of this. I need to learn more. What have been resources that you have found helpful that you've pointed your educators to? Sure.

Yeah. One of the, a book that we read years ago that was really helpful was Alexis Wiggins wrote this book on spiderweb discussions. And I think the greatest takeaway from that was that she encouraged teachers to, I hope that I'm not just putting words in her mouth.

She encouraged teachers not to grade every single thing, but yet to convince the students that it is a team approach to learning. And so if you can get to that point where the students see their work together as a collaborative effort, that learning is collaborative, that this type of learning is collaborative, they are all in, they link arms in a way that in a typical class, whereas where a teacher is lecturing, it's competitive. And I don't share my ideas.

And it's the person who has the best memory and probably the best handwriting that does well in those classes. And so that book was really helpful for us. There's a collection of essays that the folks up at Exeter wrote that you can buy that book from their bookstore.

A friend of ours who is at a school in British Columbia, their whole faculty put together a collection of essays. So we constantly read these types of things, but also just a greater understanding of the Christian intellectual tradition, the Christian liberal arts, and even some of the resources that Paideia has put forward. And so just understanding that there are a ton of resources out there on the value of discussion and dialogue and Socratic work.

I would say that when I first started doing some academic research in this area, there was a limited amount of research done specifically on Harkness. And so that broadened my search engine, so to speak, to Socratic seminars, and then beginning to differentiate in my own mind the differences there. But there's plenty out there if you're interested.

Yeah, for sure. Well, and in conclusion, for those parents who are listening, whose children are in schools where this is part of the learning methodology, are there ways at home to kind of create without getting too formal at the dining room table, but maybe really leverage these skills as we talked about, these habits that are being formed to pursue deep and thoughtful conversation? What might that look like at home? I have a good example of this at our dining room table. My wife is known for the questions that she brings to the table.

She actually types out questions, cuts them into these long paper ribbons, folds them up, and throws them into a bowl. And so whether we're having dinner, the four of us, or oftentimes my kids will have their friends over, and so it's a larger dining room table, or we have other couples over, maybe from our small group from church, we always have these questions that we pull out. And in that bowl of questions, there are questions that are personal, like, talk to us about

your faith journey, or when you came to know Jesus, or the, and then there are others, like, if you weren't doing your job, what job would you do? Or maybe the best, put together the best vacation that you could ever dream of.

And so these are the types of, these are the questions that are asked at our dining room table, and it's so fun because sometimes my children will have their friends over, and they're like, this is the coolest thing ever. Questions, can we write our own questions? And so we practice that quite a bit. We always do roses and thorns at our table.

And so we, our kids know that after every day, we say, okay, tell us about your rose of the day and your thorn of the day. And it gives us an opportunity just to hear in a different way, what's going on in their life, the things that stood out to them in a very positive way, and things that maybe we need to talk through or pray about, or even just show some grace in the end. I love that, Justin.

Yeah. I mean, this is, as you know, you blink a nine, and our children go off to college, as you've just discovered. And there's a, the blessing of those rare moments around the dinner table.

Those are great suggestions. Our family would often do something called heaven and earth questions. So the kids were allowed to ask kind of an earth question that could just be literally, you know, something as basic as, you know, you know, how do you fix a particular item? Or, you know, how does, how long does it take to get a rocket on the moon? Or, you know, I guess that's actually leaving earth.

And then heaven would be much more in terms of just questions that are maybe more theological or biblically based, and just, again, encouraging. The point is to create a spirit of inquiry and conversation and redeem those times. So I love that you do that at your home.

I'll be prepared if I come to dinner. I think I'm going to have to think through all of my deeper answers to these types of questions. We will put in the stump questions.

Oh, great. Great. Right there in the bowl.

I mean, this is rigged. It was rigged. Yeah.

Well, Davies, this has been so fun and there are no thorns in this conversation, only roses. So good. Thank you for that.

Well, folks should come to the Herzog parent engagement. If you're a teacher or an educator, come join us and you get to hear Justin and I hamming up on the, up on the platform to guide school leaders. But at any rate, Justin, thanks so much for sharing your journey there and encouraging us with this great and wonderful resource.

Thanks so much. Thanks for having me on. Thank you for listening to this episode of Basecamp Live.

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