The only “D” I ever got in school was on a sixth-grade project that I felt was nearly perfect. I had conceived the idea, executed the idea, and taken my group along for the ride, as I had throughout elementary school. Always before, I had been rewarded with delighted teacher compliments and group-member approval. That pattern changed in one stabbing moment that I can still call up in a mental play-by-play.

My teacher pulled me aside after class to show me my grade on the “Create Your Own Religion” project.

So angry and confused, I didn’t know what to say; I listened as my teacher explained that here, at my new private school, things were different. My other group members had given me low grades for dominating the project.

My response: "Whatever." As I stormed out the door, I felt like someone had stolen something from me. In six years of education, no one had ever suggested any group skills for me to work on. No teacher had stepped in to teach me how to be a good listener or how to draw out other students. Rather, they had either leaned gladly on me to answer questions or ignored my fervently waving hand, calling on silent student after student to answer a question while we hand-raisers hovered above our chairs. Neither approach gave me much to go on when it came to group work.

So began a journey of frustration. Unsure of how to include others, I always felt disappointed when group projects were announced. Mostly, all it meant to me was I would have to do a lot of work, but be prepared to squelch my own ideas, the ones I was really excited to spend time on.

In my senior year, one of my best friends bravely confronted me after a seemingly insignificant argument.

"It just seems like you always think you are right. Please don’t be mad; I don’t want to fight."

I was devastated, but it was true, I did always think I was right. I was a top student, state Spanish award winner, State National History Day finalist, city essay contest winner, etc. But I didn’t know how to debate a point with my friend or hash out a project idea with a group. None of my teachers had taught me.

And so it went on. I did my best. I tried to learn to be a good listener, tried not to get attached to my own academic dreams during cooperative projects. But mostly I just hated those oft-repeated words, “Find a group and..."

Group dynamics didn’t really make sense to me until I became a teacher. In my first year, at a new faculty retreat, I received a handout about the Harkness method of discussion, invented and pioneered at Phillips Exeter Academy (New Hampshire) — and named after philanthropist Edward Stephen Harkness, a friend of Exeter Principal Lewis Perry, who in the 1930s donated $5.8 million to the school to change its pedagogy. As I read about the roundtable discussion method — in which the teacher acts as a guide for the discussion and works mainly to help students learn to ask good questions, share the air, provide support for their opinions, and navigate through distractions and accidental domination — I became more and more interested. I decided to launch a Harkness experiment in each of my four classes. We would try the method for one month, and see what we
A lot, as it turned out. We learned the value of a quiet student’s opinion, when we finally heard it for the first time. We felt the tension in an awkward silence, as every student hoped I would jump in to save him or her. We ran head on against the obvious problem of a conversation in which one student speaks 25 times while others speak only once or twice. We learned that if there are no pauses for consideration, no one is really listening. We came to see that many opinions enrich the conversation.

Soon after that fruitful month, I signed up for the Exeter Humanities Institute and spent a week engaged in Harkness discussions alongside other teachers, learning the art of group dynamics simultaneously as student and teacher. I ended up dating and then (later) marrying a man who sat across from me at my second Harkness table there.

Back at my own school and completely converted, I introduced roundtable discussion to every one of my classes on the first day. I also began the “Harkness Breakfast Club” for teachers at my school, presenting and sharing the ideas from the conference with anyone who wanted to listen. I wrote an introductory article for the school’s wider association and presented to avid groups locally and then at the state convention of English teachers. Once I really understood the power of Harkness, I had no doubt that it, or some related pedagogy, had a role to play in every classroom. Whether using literature circles, fishbowl discussion, Socratic method, or some other similar tool, the point is the effort to truly teach students how to learn from each other.

I never taught another course without trying to teach my students about the feast of opinions and experiences available to them when they sat down at the table. In honors, regular, and I.B. courses, I tried to teach them how to listen and learn from each other. In courses I taught at home and abroad, I tried to share what I wish my teachers could have shared with me: how to be heard and how to listen at the same time, how to build a story that is everyone’s.

Part of Harkness is having a student observer sit back from each discussion and chart the progress of the group. I watched in amazement as observers presented back time after time, evermore nuanced as they shaped our evolution at the table. Observers quickly moved beyond charting the amount of comments and questions, considering such broad-ranging discussion elements as interdisciplinary connections, allusions to other works, and connections between points. They observed dynamics between the sexes, among groups of friends, between sides of the room. Since every student had a chance to observe over time, every student not only contributed to our conversation, but also added to our conversation about conversations.

To Learn More About Harkness…

To see my short introductory video, including some discussion observation charts, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3bD8KYGLEw.

For another helpful video, check out “75 Years of Harkness Teaching” at Lawrenceville School: www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RGYSvRWOtM.


Exeter also offers an overview of Harkness teaching and learning at www.exeter.edu/admissions/109_1220.aspx

For information about the annual Exeter Humanities Institute, visit www.exeter.edu/summer_programs/7329.aspx.

To see my short introductory video, including some discussion observation charts, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3bD8KYGLEw.

Before a presentation to other faculty members, I polled my students anonymously about their experiences. “I think I’ve always been able to share my opinions, but I’ve definitely changed as a
listener. I’ve learned how to pay attention,” wrote one student. Another experienced a different kind of transformation: “I have changed. I seem to like to talk a lot more than I thought I would. Harkness has allowed me to gain confidence in myself and what I believe is right.”

“I think I’ve always been able to share my opinions, but I’ve definitely changed as a listener. I’ve learned how to pay attention.”

The beauty of these responses is that they show the connection between the students’ different kinds of growth. As some students learn to listen, they enable others to believe in themselves. As some students learn to speak, they enable others to widen their understanding.

For me, watching my students learn how to have a conversation was sometimes hard. I struggled alongside students who had been trained to believe domination was success for half their young lives.

In one memorable senior English elective, there was an obvious barrier within the group between the dominators and the quiet students from the first day. Two students were taking the course alongside an AP Language elective; they had registered for two English courses because literature was their passion. Ten students were taking the course because their grades weren’t high enough to get into the senior AP course. For a while I listened as the conversation drifted back and forth between the two strongest students, doing my best to encourage the quieter students. I tried various tricks to prompt a shared discussion, but my usual repertoire did not pay off. Finally, I came up with a challenge, that everyone in the course would get a free “A” grade in my gradebook if we could have just one discussion in which everyone spoke.

It took us a while. Several quiet international students, who had never become fully comfortable with speaking English, really struggled. We kept trying. Eventually everyone began to participate. In private conversations with the two dominators, I worked with them on the idea that if they could back off, someone else would simply have to step in and carry more of the weight of conversation. We would not have 45 minutes of silence. I shared my hope that we would learn more with 12 people’s thoughts than with two, no matter how easily commentary might come for those two. Both seemed skeptical that such a conversation would ever take place.

Finally, we had a discussion in which two previously silent students stepped to the fore. The ice broken, everyone began to speak. The conversation was unlike any before, unexpectedly beautiful. One of the dominators, smart and talented, the school president, stayed after to talk to me. She started to cry.

“I really didn’t think they would say anything,” she said.

I completely understood how she felt. It was a lesson she was learning years ahead of me, and I hope it was worth the pain of learning it. I believed, as we talked, that she would carry out of that day a new kind of self-knowledge, a knowledge that would help her in business meetings, conversations with family, college projects, community gatherings. Understanding the power of group dynamics transcends the classroom for anyone who lets it.

When I introduce the concepts of roundtable discussion and group dynamics now, I feel they make up the most important lesson in my classroom: how to share ideas with others. To me, this is more
important than the analytical essay, more important than SAT vocabulary, more important than giving a good speech. What can be more fundamental than conversation?

These days, I unconsciously notice the group dynamics wherever I go, and often wish I could discuss them with groups of adults in which some have never learned how to listen and others don’t feel heard. No doubt I still fall into my old dominating ways sometimes, but at least they are just that now, my old ways.

I am taking some time off from teaching, but a recent conversation with a ninth-grader I know brought it all back. He felt trapped as a silent onlooker in one of his classes, wondering how to break into the conversation.

“There are these two girls who always talk. And it seems like the teacher looks at them to answer every question. I used to say a lot at my old school."

I gave him all the strategies I could think of to help him enter the conversation, and thought about approaching his teacher to share some of my experiences. Suddenly I wished to be back in the classroom. Finally, a decade after graduating from college, I know exactly what my role is in a group. To make sure everyone has a role. To facilitate the creation of a complex story, made up of many voices, every day.

Betsy Potash is an educator and writer, currently living in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, with her family.

http://www.nais.org/Magazines-Newsletters/ISMagazine/Pages/Learning-to-Share.aspx