Chicago Hope

Can the Collaboration between a Progressive Boarding School and a Big-City Charter Academy Transform American Public High School Education?

Lincoln Caplan

On the front wall of Aida Conroy’s classroom at the Noble Academy in Chicago is a “Get Smart!” poster. It instructs:

- Sit up properly;
- Make eye contact;
- Articulate when you speak;
- Respect everyone at the table; and
- Track your classmates when they speak.

The high school’s administrators are convinced that how smart students turn out to be depends on how hard they work at developing their minds. The table—an oval consisting of rectangular tables and a semicircular one at each end—is where some of the work gets done. The rules on the wall reflect the school’s approach to learning, an approach called the Harkness method. Noble’s administrators believe Harkness can help its students climb America’s steep ladder of social, cultural, and economic opportunity, starting—as all but a tiny fraction here are—at the bottom.

Only 14 percent of ninth-graders in the Chi-

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Chicago public school system will graduate from a four-year college. For students in the system’s Noble Network of Charter Schools, those odds climb to 34 percent. Students at the Noble Academy, which opened in 2014, carry weightier expectations—that 75 percent or more of them will graduate from a four-year college, with the ablest becoming doctors, lawyers, and other types of professionals. For now, the school has only ninth through 11th grades, but next year it will have its first seniors.

Of the 400 students at the academy, 83 percent are from poor or low-income families and 96 percent are minorities. At Noble, diversity means teaching students how to get along with the country’s white majority. Many of its students travel an hour or more to school on buses, trains, or both. If they choose to go there, Noble must accept them.

The Harkness system calls for students to take the lead in classroom discussions, with the teacher as a moderator, not the fount of knowledge. “HARKNESS REMINDERS” showed on a screen at the front of the room as students in a first-period freshman world literature class turned to The Kite Runner. The Khaled

At the Noble Academy in Chicago, students take the Harkness system outside. Since the method has been in use, test scores have dramatically improved.
Hosseini novel explores the ruptured friendship between two Afghan boys, Amir from the Pashtun ruling caste and Hassan from the poor Hazara caste.

“You are a TEAM,” the reminders said: “Help and support each other! Use lots of text evidence. Be open minded and respectful.” The previous homework assignment for the 14 students in attendance was to finish the book. Together, they decided to focus on how Afghanistan’s culture affected the society the boys grew up in. Sitting at the oval table and, without raising hands to speak or talking over each other, they conversed in a careful, almost formal, manner. Javerrea Barber, like other students wearing khaki pants and a navy blue polo shirt with the Noble insignia, said the Pashtun looked down on the Hazara. “I don’t think it’s because of their personality,” he said: “They just don’t like ‘em.” Miguel Beltran replied, “I respectfully disagree,” without making clear what he disagreed about. Conroy, also seated at the table, said, “Look for evidence in the text: Is hatred something you’re taught or you pick up from people with authority in your group?” Zadali Ventura answered that Amir “was taught to be racist.”

At the core of The Kite Runner is a shocking betrayal. An older boy rapes Hassan as Amir, hiding nearby, watches without trying to protect his friend. This moment of cowardice haunts Amir long after he moves to America a few years later. Decades pass, and Amir returns to Afghanistan to make amends. He learns of Hassan’s death and rescues his friend’s young son from the Taliban—from being a sex slave of the tormenter who raped Hassan. At the end of the book, Amir notices a corner of the son’s mouth curl up in a half smile: “It was only a smile, nothing more. It didn’t make everything all right. It didn’t make anything all right. Only a smile. A tiny thing. A leaf in the woods, shaking in the wake of a startled bird’s flight.”

In Conroy’s second-period class that morning, with another group of ninth-graders talking about the book, the students zeroed in on that passage. One asked, “Is this about redemption?” They went back and forth until Danny Ortiz, soft-spoken yet incisive, settled the issue. “No,” he said, “this is the start of redemption.” In the first-period class, the students didn’t get that far. They struggled to answer their culture-and-society question until the session ended.

After class, Conroy focused on the positives. “The most impressive thing about that first-period discussion,” she told me, “was that all the text references came before page 50 in the novel. That tells me they are reading and understanding. They are learning to annotate their books so they can access information later on. When we first used Harkness six weeks ago, it was for comprehension. Now, it’s for interpretation.”

The Noble Academy is a collaboration between Noble and Phillips Exeter Academy, the renowned four-year boarding school in New Hampshire. Founded in
1781, Exeter has almost 1,100 students and a $1.2 billion endowment. Harkness is Exeter’s pedagogy: “student-centered learning which values teaching students not just a given course’s content but the skills required to become their own and each other’s teachers.” In 1931, Exeter implemented this system of teaching and learning, named for the philanthropist Edward S. Harkness, who gave the school $5.84 million (the equivalent of about $83 million today) to transform itself from an admired but conventional institution into one of the most progressive high schools in the United States. Harkness made clear that once Exeter had refined the system, he expected other schools around the country to replicate it. The collaboration with Noble is the first step toward fulfilling that early ambition.

Aida Conroy, who is 25 and in her second year at Noble, is typical of the school’s young teachers: upbeat, motivated, competitive, and able. She usually arrives at the school by 6:30 A.M. to prepare for a school day that starts two hours later. Having majored in American studies and sustainable development at Columbia, she also used her time there to strengthen the Chinese that she had learned in high school. She was born and raised in Chicago by her Puerto Rican-American father and white mother. They never made much money, weren’t married, and split up when she was born. If the Noble Academy had existed a decade ago, she could have been one of its students.

She went to a public elementary school in the Rogers Park neighborhood, with 30 to 32 kids in her classes. Although she excelled at school, she was bored there. Her parents knew how much she loved learning, so her father took her to a recruiting event that boarding schools held in Chicago when she was 13. She made a beeline for the Exeter table because her father had heard about the school. Susan Herney, an Exeter admissions officer at the event, told me that Conroy was poised and intent, the kind of determined kid the school was looking for. She went to Exeter on a full scholarship, beginning the odyssey that led her back home and into a Noble classroom.

After a school day at the Noble Academy, Conroy told me about her time at Exeter. Arriving in 2005 when she was almost 15, she felt excited about the adventure—proud of her new bedding from Walmart, for instance—and pretty much lost. She cried herself to sleep almost every night for weeks. An older girl in her dorm, who heard the crying, gave her some advice. “Others here will tell you that it gets easier over time,” Conroy remembered her saying. “It doesn’t. But you’ll get used to it.” “It” was the challenge of feeling that she belonged at Exeter.

When a student in a history class said that being poor was a matter of choice, Conroy felt too timid to disagree strongly. It took her a while to find her voice at the Harkness table, she said: “I was quiet, a listener.” I asked her to describe herself once she felt
she hit her stride that first year. Straightening up, she replied, “Unusually committed.” And after four years? “Important. Like I was expected to do something important with my life.” Talking about Exeter got her talking about Harkness. “You have to believe that there is more than one person at the table you can learn from,” she told me, “and then, that you have the ability to teach someone, too.”

After spending a couple of days watching her teach, I went to Exeter to learn something about how she developed her beliefs. Exeter is 60 miles north of Boston. In A Separate Peace, John Knowles’s classic coming-of-age novel set during World War II, he renamed the place Devon, calling it “the most beautiful school in New England,” an institution that “emerged naturally from the town which had produced it.” He wrote, “It is the beauty of small areas of order—a large yard, a group of trees, three similar dormitories, a circle of old houses—living together in contentious harmony.”

The summer before Conroy started to teach at Noble, the school sent her back to Exeter for five days of Harkness training. One of her instructors was Rebecca Moore, who had been her crew coach when she was a student. Until the workshop, Conroy considered Moore the best teacher she never had in class. Moore came to Exeter in 1990 after teaching at other private schools for a decade and getting a master’s degree in education at Harvard. At 59, she is a senior member of the English department.

In 1999, she and three other teachers started the Exeter Humanities Institute, the workshop that Conroy took part in. In the past five years, teachers from 223 schools have attended, from as nearby as Massachusetts and as far away as Bangkok. The premise is that there are teachable skills for Harkness teachers and students that can be identified—along with some tricks of the trade.

The workshop teaches, for instance, that name cards in the early days of a class make it easier for students to credit each other’s ideas. Also that having students prepare questions about their reading to discuss in class raises the chances that they will get involved in the discussion; assigning a student to take notes on a discussion and present them at the next class is likely to improve that student’s listening; and encouraging students around the table to change chairs from class to class raises the chances that they will stay agile in shifting roles in discussions—from questioner to summarizer, for example, or from derailier to connector.

I sat in on Moore’s English 220 class for 13 sophomores, described in Exeter’s course catalog as having readings that “introduce broader and more-complex personal and social issues” and writing assignments that “encourage awareness of audience and exploration of perspective.” Her classroom is in Phillips Hall, a handsome Georgian Revival building built with Harkness money and designed for Harkness classes. It opened in 1932 and was recently renovated, with 44 classrooms equipped with Harkness tables. Moore’s classroom is like an industrious writer’s study, with
books piled everywhere and tools of the trade (dictionaries, a thesaurus) within reach on the table.

Moore began the class with a theater exercise. In pairs, students stood, looked their partner in the eye, and told each other about their previous day, conveying this information solely with the numbers 1, 2, and 3, using vocal tones and physical expressions to convey their ups and downs, as in 1! (ecstatic voice, fingers splayed) and 2, 2, 2 (despondent voice, trailing off). The idea was to remind them how much communication depends on listening for what is not said.

As homework, the class had read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story “Cell One,” about a 17-year-old boy from an upper-middle-class Nigerian family who is arrested for being a gang member and who witnesses the arbitrary abuse of power while in prison. Moore asked the group to do pair-sharing, with one student in each pair explaining to the other why a quotation he or she had picked out from the story seemed revealing. The students buzzed for a few minutes, and Moore said, “Now you know at least one person’s point of view about the story and can promote that if it makes sense in our discussion.” The students launched right in. A few students talked a lot, others less, one not at all. Moore: “Be sure everyone has space to talk. If you lose the thread, say so. Don’t pretend it’s boring.”

After 10 more minutes, Moore asked the class to shift focus to the story. “Start with the puzzles,” she said. “Use the table to get at the puzzling stuff in the story.” One girl, speaking of the boy at the center of the Adichie story, asked, “Why did his mother always protect him?” The discussion moved in a related series of answers, new questions, and attempts to tie answers together. “There’s a lot of really furtive stuff that’s just brushed over,” a boy said about the story’s narrative. That turned out to be the day’s theme. Before the class ended, Moore said, “You’ve done a very good job of getting at the heart of the story. Anything else still bugging you?”

Of the classes I sat in on, Moore’s most closely embodied what Noble Academy teachers call the Platonic ideal of Harkness. “The goal is to increase the student’s power,”
a former Exeter English teacher once wrote: “people learn by doing—by reading, writing, thinking, talking, yes, and by listening—but not just by sitting there.” That is so even though many Exeter students are years ahead of where a strong class at Noble would be, and some Noble students are years behind where their grade level indicates they should be by Chicago public school standards.

A generation ago, William Bennett, a secretary of Education in the Reagan administration, singled out Chicago’s public schools as the worst in the country. The system was riddled with graft, patronage, and other signs of acute mismanagement. In many ways, the system has never stopped struggling, even after a series of efforts by admired reformers. In 1968, almost half of the almost 600,000 students were white; now, nine percent of the 400,000 are white.

The city’s most recent efforts at reform involve a major investment in charter schools. In exchange for flexibility about which teachers a school can hire, what they can teach, and how they can teach it, and about the length of the school day and other elements defining a school, a charter holds a school accountable for its performance. A state can revoke the charter and put the school out of business, which happens less often than it should.

In the past decade and a half, from charter organizations concentrated in cities with struggling school systems, a remarkable segment has emerged. Last year, CREDO, a Stanford research center, issued a watershed report about educational outcomes. Margaret Raymond, the center’s director, summarized: “Many urban charter schools are providing superior academic learning for their students, in many cases quite dramatically better.” The study measured the gains in learning of students over time rather than through snapshots of their level of achievement on a given day. The results indicate that students in urban charter schools are getting the equivalent of roughly 40 days of additional learning per year in math and 28 additional days in reading. The biggest gains came among students who are low-income and black or Hispanic, or who are Hispanic and speak English as a second language.

Today, Chicago has 130 charter schools, about one-fifth of all public schools. Michael and Tonya Milkie, two Chicago public school teachers, founded the first Noble charter school in 1999. They were tired of seeing good students drop out of high school or not go to college because they had incompetent teachers and lacked other support they needed to succeed. The Noble Network maintains a no-excuses culture, which many charter schools adopted in the 1990s, emphasizing discipline—students must show respect and pay attention.

Ninety-seven percent of the network’s graduates get accepted at four-year colleges. They have been awarded a total of $365 million in college scholarships. Ninety percent
of those go to four-year colleges, and the other 10 percent don’t go because they get too little financial aid or their family situation requires them to stay home, often to be a breadwinner. Of those who get to college, 84 percent are the first in their families to go.

In 2015, the Noble Network won a respected national prize as the highest-performing group of charter schools in the country serving a large percentage of poor and minority students. Of the more than 12,000 students at the network’s 17 high schools and one middle school, 98 percent are minorities and 89 percent come from low-income families. Their test scores have consistently ranked among the top 30 percent when compared with those of other low-income, African-American, or Hispanic students in Illinois. The main test is the ACT, a three-hour-long multiple-choice exam said to measure how ready students are for college. In the 2015–16 school year, the ninth- and 10th-graders with the best overall scores in their grade throughout the then-16 high schools in the network attended the Noble Academy.

Pablo Sierra, 60, started the academy, and the Noble-Exeter collaboration was his idea. In the fall of 2007, Ethan Shapiro, then director of Exeter’s summer school, went with a colleague to Chicago to recruit for the summer program. The Noble Network, with three schools then, attracted them because of its mission and early success. They recruited two network students for the summer of 2008, the first of dozens who have since attended. In the summer of 2011, Sierra brought some network faculty to Exeter for a visit.

He was looking for a way to motivate students to avoid what he and colleagues call “the Noble Alumni Death Spiral”: 90 percent start out at a four-year college, but only 75 percent return after the first year and fewer than 40 percent graduate. What really bothers them is that only seven percent are employed in “high-powered careers.”

He decided that the way to accelerate the learning of Noble students and equip them for successful careers was to teach them with the Harkness system—and get Exeter teachers to coach them how. The prep school said yes. Sierra told me, “I wanted to give my kids what Exeter kids get.” He ran an experiment at another network school: two star teachers each taught a literature section of 15 honor students, chosen because of their ACT scores and because they were strong enough students to survive if the experiment bombed.

The “Harkness 30” soared. Thirteen got perfect or near-perfect scores on the reading portion the next time they took the test. One of the teachers decided to adapt Harkness to two lower-scoring classes, each with 35 students, in the spring semester. For half the period, students read quietly. For the second half, the teacher split them into three groups of 11 or 12 students, set them up in ovals, and had them discuss their reading while she moved from group to group. The increase in their overall reading scores, though to a lower level, was even greater than that of the honors students.

Michael Milkie—he became the CEO of the network, and Tonya Milkie became
a dean at the first network school—was bluntly dubious that a semester of Harkness made such a difference in the reading scores. At Exeter, with a typical class size of 12, a standard teacher’s load is 50 students a term. At the Noble Academy, with an ideal class size of 25, the standard load for a teacher is 125 to 150 students. The larger class size had to reduce the effectiveness of Harkness. A presentation defending the Sierra experiment (called “Harkness Shmarkness!”—a putdown that Milkie had used) was subtitled, “Can kids really learn by simply talking to each other?” The question was rhetorical. Kids were learning that way by holding each other accountable: “Who wants to look stupid in front of their friends?”

Edward S. Harkness’s resolve to reshape high school education grew out of his feeling that his own could have been a lot better. His father had been a financial partner of John D. Rockefeller’s and ended up with a 15 percent share of Standard Oil. At 52, Edward became the sole heir to the Harkness fortune. His wealth rose to around $125 million—about $1.7 billion today.

As president of the Commonwealth Fund, a foundation his mother established, he oversaw grants addressing health problems of poor people. But he is better known for the philanthropic donations he made to educational and cultural institutions from his personal fortune rather than from the fund. Between 1920 and 1940, he made gifts equivalent today to well over a billion dollars.

In donating money to Exeter, he envisioned changes to the school “of a fundamental nature that were so sweeping and so different from methods prevailing here”—in the United States—“that one could see at a glance that were they adopted, the whole educational system in our secondary schools would not only be changed, but changed enormously for the better.” The plan the school came up with had three main elements: “individualizing of instruction,” “the conference plan,” and “the smaller housing unit.”

An Exeter business manager designed the
conference table in 1931 for a class of 12 students and one teacher. Exeter purchased 45 tables, most oval or oblong, 11 feet long and six feet 11 inches wide. The combination of the table, the plan that gave rise to it, and the system of teaching that developed got shorthanded to Harkness.

I WENT FOR ALL FOUR YEARS TO PEA, as we called it, graduating in 1968. (The school became co-ed in 1970.) That put me about two-fifths of the way through the 85-year history of the Harkness system. I loved going to school there. Framed on the wall to the right of my desk today are pen-and-ink drawings of the campus. My favorite is of the bell tower above the school’s main classroom building, now a century old. A boy holds on with one hand and leans out, as if looking to the future.

What strikes me now is how little talk about Harkness there was at Exeter in the 1960s. I have asked friends who were students then whether they remember talking or hearing much about Harkness. They don’t. The origins story that Exeter concentrated on in those days was about John Phillips, the preacher-turned-businessman who gave the land and money establishing the academy named for him and for the town. Phillips did so, he wrote in the Deed of Gift, “for the purpose of instructing youth, not only in the English and Latin grammar, writing, arithmetic, and those sciences wherein they are commonly taught, but more especially to learn them the great end and real business of living.”

One reason Harkness wasn’t discussed more often was that the pedagogy wasn’t then what it is today. On its 50th anniversary at Exeter, the school acknowledged that:

Even around the oval tables didactic teaching persisted; teachers still insisted that students gather large bodies of factual information; coverage of material often remained the end rather than the means of education. Teachers continued to concentrate on honing the verbal and numerical skills that good students brought to the Academy.

In my time there, Exeter recruited “youth of requisite qualifications from every quarter,” as the Deed of Gift prescribed. About one-fourth of Exeter students were on scholarship. One-fourth of those boys were on full scholarship. PEA called itself a national high school. It seems like an oxymoron to say that Exeter was a democratic place, but it was, largely—and definitely meritocratic about the exploits that mattered there. They were in academics, sports, the arts, and for lack of a better term, leadership. At Exeter then, boys made their own reputations, which had nothing to do with who their family was. The school kept social class out of the culture.

Exeter has since enlarged some of the commitments that defined the school for me as a student. It does a much better job of bringing together students of different
classes and races to learn together. In the current school year, for instance, 49 percent of the students receive a scholarship of some kind. About half the students are white, about a quarter Asian, about a 10th black, a little fewer Hispanic, with the rest unknown. The gender balance is 51 percent male, 49 percent female.

The school concluded that from 1970 until 2005, the share of American families that could afford the tuition of schools like Exeter fell from 40 percent to five percent and perhaps less. (This year’s tuition and mandatory fees for a boarding student are $48,550.) In 2007, the school announced that any admitted student from a family with a household income of $75,000 or less would receive a full scholarship. The decision followed a report to the school’s trustees that made the droll and indisputable observation that “it seems unlikely that the country’s smartest and most motivated students actually reside in the gene pool of the upper 5%.” The school also increased the amount of scholarship money for students whose families made more than that but could not afford full tuition and fees. This year, almost one-fifth of Exeter’s students are on full scholarships, about three times the percentage of full scholarship students in the 1960s. Of the 529 students receiving financial aid, more than 82 percent receive a grant amounting to 80 percent or more of tuition.

These numbers reflect what I admire about Exeter, so why do I think they tell only part of the story?

Harkness.

Last year, Exeter published A Classroom Revolution: Reflections on Harkness Learning and Teaching, which makes wonderfully clear how empowering Harkness can be for students and how rewarding it is for teachers. Yet there is a tension in the book between Harkness as a source of revelation about teaching and learning and an almost obsessive scrutiny of the pedagogy. Much of the text is inward looking, even self-satisfied, almost as if Harkness were on a par with the training given in the magical arts at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Exeter has embraced Harkness as its brand as well as its pedagogy. The effect of the book’s conviction that Harkness
is now synonymous with Exeter has made the school seem cloistered rather than connected, more intent on perfecting itself than on pursuing the school's public purpose.

That’s why the Noble-Exeter collaboration is so significant. Ethan Shapiro, now dean of the faculty and leader of the Exeter team working with Noble, told me, “This isn’t about Exeter riding in on a white horse to help Noble rescue its students. We’re learning as much as they are, about how to serve students who come to us from backgrounds similar to Noble students’ and how Harkness can serve kids who aren’t at the very top academically, as our kids are.”

The sweeping economic and social changes since the 1960s, which reduced the share of American households that can afford tuitions like Exeter’s, have been much harder on America’s public schools. They educate 50 million students a year compared with 5.4 million students in private schools and 2.5 million in charter schools. In the past half-century, American high school students have gone from world leaders in math and reading to also-rans, with the performance of American students comparatively worse in each successive group down the socioeconomic scale. Social class heavily affects educational opportunity and attainment. That attainment is a primary determinant of economic and social opportunity.

For generations, Exeter has shown its ability to find, recruit, and educate talented students from low-income families, and to do so well enough that the school doesn’t need to monitor so-called college persistence rates of those graduates the way the Noble Network does. From feedback Exeter gets from college admissions offices, it is confident that no difference exists between the college graduation rates of its grads who received full or substantial scholarships at Exeter and those whose families paid for their education. Changing the education and life trajectories of those scholarship students, in four years or less, is a remarkable feat.

Now imagine changing the trajectories of the more than 12,000 students in the Noble Network, or of up to 100,000 students in the Chicago public schools, if a quarter of the students in the system would be exposed to it. Judging by the early success of the Harkness experiment, such widespread adoption of the pedagogy could result in “something that is revolutionary in Secondary Education,” as Edward Harkness envisioned.

Exeter recently commissioned the first independent scholarly evaluation of its pedagogy. The study is answering the questions: What are the basic elements of Harkness, and is the system used similarly or differently to teach, say, English versus physics? How does academic research on adolescent learning and thinking support or challenge Harkness teaching? How does Harkness work on the emotional and ethical levels, in addition to the cognitive level?

Some leading education reformers have already identified ways that scholarship
supports central features of Harkness teaching. They are the features identified for learning most effectively: mastering the basic subjects of reading, writing, math, and science; learning how to think critically and solve problems; learning how to talk and write clearly and to work well with others; learning how to learn on your own; and developing “an academic mindset”—the belief, as Noble stresses, that no one is born with this knowledge and skill and that almost all students can develop the proper mindset with sustained work because “the brain is like a muscle” that gets stronger with use.

Barbara Chow, who directs education funding at the Hewlett Foundation, named these features “deeper learning.” The foundation regards it as the critical means of increasing economic opportunity as well as civic engagement for America’s youth, “particularly for children and youth in high-poverty communities.” Hewlett identified 10 school networks that concentrate on helping students develop this knowledge and skill and commissioned an assessment of the results.

Students who attended the network schools achieved higher scores on a test that assesses core knowledge and complex problem-solving skills than similar students at conventional high schools. They were also likelier to graduate from high school on time. Students who began a network high school with low achievement showed particular improvements in test scores and graduation rates.

This focus on socioeconomic class is essential: nothing else comes close in the amount of influence it has on whether and where students go to college, how they fare there, and how far education carries them. But the clear second-ranked influence is how well a teacher teaches. In 2015, the Transforming Teacher Project at Harvard completed an evaluation of teacher training and teaching in the United States. Jal Mehta, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, summarized its conclusions: “The quality of a teacher is the most critical school-based factor in student success. But we do not have a reliable system to build teachers’ knowledge, skills, and expertise.” He also wrote, “And, as is always true in America, the costs of our failures are greatest for our most vulnerable students.”

The paper calls for bolstering an R&D system that now barely exists, to gather “usable knowledge” about good teaching and to identify or create “intermediary organizations to get what knowledge there is into the hands of teachers.” It calls for being more selective in granting licenses to teach, strengthening support for teachers so that the work pays better and attracts more people who are capable, and developing ways to retain successful teachers over the course of a long career.

Elements of the proposed system are being implemented in pockets across the nation. Each is a proof point. The Noble Academy is one of them. Exeter is, too. It is also an R&D center about deeper learning. Critically, the collaboration between them is helping Noble students develop the most powerful element of deeper learning: it moves them to take responsibility for their own education—as a Hewlett paper put it,
lighting the inner fires that “compel students to engage in learning.” The collaboration could be just as important for Exeter. It could help the school fulfill the public purpose of Edward Harkness’s vision.

LISA MACFARLANE, IN HER SECOND academic year at Exeter, is the school’s principal instructor, as the head of school is called. Now 58, she came from the University of New Hampshire, where she was provost and vice president for academic affairs as well as a professor of English. As a 21-year-old, she was a teaching fellow in the English department at Exeter, after graduating with a bachelor’s degree in English from Princeton. She credits that year with convincing her she should get her PhD in American culture from the University of Michigan and become a scholar and a teacher.

In May, she visited the Noble Academy and was inspired by what she observed. She sat in on a ninth-grade composition class that was discussing a speech about the arrogance of power. It contained the word *zealot*, which none of the students understood. The teacher suggested a few ways they could figure out its meaning, like using “context clues” and comparing the word to similar ones they knew, like *zealous*. MacFarlane told me, “It was a wonderful example of a teacher teaching a learning skill.”

When I spoke with her at Exeter, she said, “Many schools offer discussion-based learning and each does it a bit differently. What Harkness seems to do especially well, and at Exeter we do it in every discipline, is develop the ability to ask important questions. That’s a skill I see in every Exeter cohort, from recent graduates to much more senior ones.”

She went on: “For Harkness teachers, the least understood requirement, I think, is patience. It can seem as if nothing is happening in a class, that the discussion is moving sideways, when suddenly there’s a breakthrough. The talented teachers will call attention to that moment, but let the kids own it.”

She also pointed out that at its best, Harkness is not about the individual but “about the self in community. It’s about individual insight in the context of respect for community values. We are trying, I think, to instill in our students the ability to recognize the importance of both.”

“Do you know the work of Paulo Freire,” MacFarlane asked me, “who wrote *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*? He was a Brazilian educator and activist who believed that education should be an instrument of freedom, that the purpose was to train students to think critically and creatively and to give them the skills to transform their world for the better.”

She paused. “It’s really a pedagogy of liberation, giving each student a voice and the skills and confidence to use it well.”
Chicago Hope is an American medical drama television series, created by David E. Kelley. It ran on CBS from September 18, 1994 to May 4, 2000. The series is set in a fictional private charity hospital in Chicago, Illinois. The show starred Mandy Patinkin as Dr. Jeffrey Geiger, a hot-shot surgeon with emotional issues stemming from the psychiatric condition of his wife (played by Kim Greist), who drowned their infant son. Adam Arkin plays Dr. Aaron Shutt, a world-renowned neurosurgeon and Dr. Geiger's Chicago Hope, Chicago, IL. 545 likes. Learn more about us at http://chicagohope.org.