Topping the Table

By Mike Allegra

The conversations that occur around a Harkness table are an essential component of the Lawrenceville learning experience. What’s found on the Harkness, however, can often reveal the ideals and pedagogical philosophies of the teacher who sits at the table’s head. In celebration of the 75th anniversary of Lawrenceville’s adoption of Harkness teaching, The Lawrentian shows how a simple centerpiece can be a window into a master’s soul.
No one on campus has a more beautifully decorated classroom than English Master Deb Larson’s H’08. Not surprisingly, her meticulous attention to detail extends to her Harkness typewriters, each containing a helpful Sterling, 1935; Facit 1620, 1969; Underwood Portable, 1930; Olympia SM-3 DeLuxe, 1959. It’s like a museum exhibit; each specimen is pristine. Unlike a museum exhibit, however, all the typewriters are fully functional, with fresh ribbons, and ready for action. Her students obliges. Paper has been scrolled into each one, and each sheet is filled with stream of consciousness musings that range from the frivolous to the profound.

Larson purchased the typewriters for her Beat Literature class – so the students could get the feel of how scribes such as Ginsberg and Kerouac constructed their prose. She encourages students to use them, though. Typewriters, she says, are a window into the creative process. “When we use the computer, the record of our thought process is erased,” she says. “On a typewriter, if you don’t like something, you can X it out, but it’s still there. It can be considered again at a future time. On a typewriter, you leave a creative trail.”

Students took to them immediately, enthusing about their tactile quality, the beauty of their mechanics, their smell, and the satisfying “thwack” of key striking paper. Although no one is planning to give up his laptop or iPad in favor of a black portable Royal anytime soon, Larson’s charges do see the merits of such a machine; several of them, she notes with evident glee, have since purchased typewriters of their own.

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What makes Gonzalez’s table unique is what his students have done to decorate it. All the other tables on campus, without exception, are new – or, at least, of wear. Gonzalez’s table, on the other hand, remains “as is.” He insists upon it. His table, he explains, is a historical contribution. To be more accurate, it contains lots of years or more.

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What makes Gonzalez’s table unique is what his students have done to decorate it. All the other tables on campus, without exception, are new – or, at least, newly refinshed after a few short years of wear. Gonzalez’s table, on the other hand, remains “as is.” He insists upon it. His table, he explains, is a historical document, a reflection of an earlier time. To be more accurate, it contains lots of graffiti, in some cases dating back 20 years or more.

On the first day of each term, Gonzalez makes a point to set aside a few minutes at the beginning of class for the students to take it all in. What’s there is a feast for the eyes. “They’re transfixed by it,” he says. After they complete this unofficial art appreciation portion of Spanish class, they get down to the business of conjugating verbs without further distraction.

Surreptitiously carving initials into Harkness tables is a student tradition that is nearly as old as the Harkness table itself. Lawrenceville masters have a tradition, too: punishing any and all carvers they catch in the act. So make no mistake, as much as Gonzalez appreciates his battered and abused table, he will not turn a blind eye if he spies a student attempting to etch a new contribution. “I do like the way my table looks,” he says with a smile. “But if I see anyone marking it up, he’s in trouble.”
History Master John Sauerman’s H’84 Harkness table is a tribute to serenity. “I wanted something homey,” he says in his distinctive baritone. “Study after study shows that when people are comfortable, they are prone to learn more.”

So instead of an assortment of personal knick-knacks, Sauerman’s table contains five philodendrons artfully cascading over five blue and white pots he picked up in Chinatown. These pots rest on a low, black, wooden rack of his own design. For Sauerman’s own sense of serenity, he takes to the woodshop and his classroom serves as a testament to his skill; there one finds two tall pedestals (one supporting a Greek bust, the other a globe), a small pedestal for another plant, and a plinth to hold a Parthenon horse sculpture.

All in all, the scene creates the calm, inviting environment that Sauerman was on the lookout for. His design, he notes, is also practical. The plants he chose are designed to droop rather than sprout vertically, preventing a student who doesn’t want to be called on in class from finding a good hiding spot behind the foliage.

The students in his classes appreciate the décor, says Sauerman. The plants are not doing too badly either; all five of those philodendrons have stayed alive since Sauerman first arranged them in the center of his Harkness back in 1999.

More and more of my classes are becoming like kindergarten,” English Master Deborah McKay H’85 ’88 P’97 says with a merry laugh. The centerpiece of her Harkness table seems to invite that comparison. Piled high on a sky blue bathmat are crayons, pens, markers, scissors, glue sticks, and short stacks of multicolored paper.

“My students are not allowed to write in their notebooks with pencil that has gray lead,” she explains. “Or with blue or black ink.” McKay wants each student notebook to be a personal document, a sincere source of creative expression. “I tell them ‘No pressure, but your notebook has to be a work of art by the end of the term.’” So students leave their Bic pens and Ticonderoga No. 2s in their bookbags and dig into the art pile. Each takes to heart the six commandments written on McKay’s blackboard:

1. Take Risks
2. Be Shockingly Brilliant
3. Be Wildly Creative
4. Suspend Your Disbelief
5. Tell the Radical Truth
6. Be Playful

This idea seems a natural fit with the McKay-created class, Avant-Garde Literature, but she affirms that the philosophy (and the crayons) also work well with the traditional books she teaches. To best understand and interpret any creative work of literature, McKay explains, students need to find and explore the creativity in themselves.
English Master Pier Kooistra’s Harkness table is a thoughtfully arranged assembly of mementos, mostly gifts from his family. The shells were from his grandparents, given to him when he was a young child. The ornate, inlaid wood box was given to him by his father after the elder Kooistra returned from a 1981 trip to India. Dwirling the shells and other keepsakes, however, is a gift Kooistra gave himself, a wooden elephant sculpture, picked up in a Philadelphia 10,000 Villages store. “I saw it, and it just had to be a part of my classroom,” he says.

The sculpture has plenty of company. There’s a large, water-damaged, red silk-screen of an elephant on the wall; a small clay elephant statue on a bookcase; a decorative framed elephant print near Kooistra’s desk; and a set of marble elephant bookends on the windowsill.

Kooistra has a lifelong love of elephants, that is clear, but the animal’s presence serves a pedagogical purpose as well. “Remember the folk tale about the blind men and the elephant? They each touch a different part of an elephant and draw preposterously incorrect conclusions as to what the unusual object might be, turns out to be a spot-on symbol for Kooistra’s view on reading literature. “If you want to read well, reread,” he explains. “Don’t rely on your first take.” During classroom discussions (as any of his charges will attest) Kooistra often references that elephant on his table when a student’s analysis fails to consider every detail. “What part of the elephant,” he asks, “have we not yet discussed?”

There were no more roommates. Art Clark ’62 spent six years at Lawrenceville, entering seventh grade in the fall of 1956 – the last year that Lawrenceville had a Shell Form. “Lawrenceville was the foundation of my education,” says Art. “Wesleyan was just icing on the cake.”

An astute investor, Art recently funded a series of charitable gift annuities that will ultimately create a named endowed scholarship fund. The annuities pay a guaranteed income to Art for his lifetime (at a rate much higher than available anywhere else). The income is only partially taxable, and he received an up-front charitable income tax deduction for a portion of each gift. “Lawrenceville and I both aspire for the School to be need-blind in admissions. The celebration of my 50th reunion is the ideal time for me to help Lawrenceville move closer to that lofty goal.”

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