4.6: Philosophical Chairs: Classic Style

Student Objective
Students will develop inquiry, oral language, and argumentation skills, through participation in an informed debate on a controversial issue, while considering various points of view.

Overview
Philosophical Chairs: Classic Style is a structured form of academic discourse which relies on a prompt as the foundation for discussion and informed debate. It is a form of dialogue in which students develop a deeper understanding of a text or subject. This strategy gives students opportunities to improve verbal capability and fluency, as well as develop skills in the precise use of academic language.

Materials/Set-Up
- Handouts:
  - 4.6a: Pre-Discussion Organizer for Philosophical Chairs
  - 4.6b: Rules of Engagement for Philosophical Chairs
  - 4.9a: Participant Reflective Checklist for Philosophical Chairs
- Teacher Resources:
  - 4.6c: Creating a Prompt That Works
  - 4.6d: Source Material for Prompts
  - 4.6e: Example Topics for Philosophical Chairs
  - 4.6f: Tips for Philosophical Chairs
- In advance of the activity, complete the following:
  - Develop a controversial statement, based on the objectives for the unit or text, to serve as the prompt. These should generally be simple "agree or disagree" scenarios, which are divisive in nature and contain two clear positions.
  - For more information on developing a prompt, see Creating a Prompt That Works. For additional resources in helping to select a prompt, see Source Material for Prompts and Example Topics for Philosophical Chairs.
  - Review Tips for Philosophical Chairs for ideas and points to consider as preparations are made for the Philosophical Chairs activity.

Instructional Steps
1. Review the purpose and format of the Philosophical Chairs activity with students.
2. Introduce the central statement that will be discussed and define all of the relevant terms.
3. Utilizing the Pre-Discussion Organizer for Philosophical Chairs, have students brainstorm and record as many arguments as possible for and against the statement, and then summarize their current personal position on the statement.
Another option is to instruct students to complete a quickwrite on the prompt in order to allow them the opportunity to process the statement individually, while they determine the reasoning behind their perspective.

4. Before beginning the activity, review the Rules of Engagement for Philosophical Chairs and the Participant Reflective Checklist for Philosophical Chairs with students.

5. If this is a text-based debate, have students select quotations, paragraph numbers, or page numbers that support their positions.

6. To begin the activity, designate one side of the room as the agree side and the other as the disagree side.

7. Instruct students to move to the side that best represents their perspective, and have each side face the other.

8. As students become more accustomed to this activity, consider adding a smaller third side that represents those undecided about their stance on the statement. For students who remain uncertain, encourage them to move to the side that is closest to their perspective, ensuring that they are permitted to move should their minds change during the course of the activity.

9. **Starting with the agree side, alternate between the two sides as students debate the merit of the statement in a structured manner.**
   The debate should move in an orderly, structured manner, back and forth between the two sides.

10. Each student should summarize the previous speaker's argument before providing a reason supporting their perspective, clarifying a previously mentioned statement, or directing a question at their opposition—which can be answered or ignored. Expect students to regularly integrate quotes or sources when providing their delivery.

11. Encourage students to switch sides should they change their minds about the prompt. See the “During the Debate” section of Tips for Philosophical Chairs for more information.

12. The final step of Philosophical Chairs is to debrief and reflect upon the process. See the Philosophical Chairs: Debriefing activity for more information on this step.

**Extension**

- To increase rigor:
  - Once students have selected a side, promptly switch them and have them debate from the opposing perspective.
  - After introducing the central statement or prompt to students, provide them with two resources (e.g., articles, videos, etc.) with opposing viewpoints, and then have students debate the merits of their arguments.
  - Have small teams of students find an article or issue to analyze, create the prompt, and facilitate the debate. The teacher now focuses on coaching the organizing students on the metacognitive process involved in running a Philosophical Chairs activity.
• Have students assume the collective role of a historical figure or
  president and argue from his or her perspective in a manner that
  is consistent with their assigned person’s background and
  achievements.
• Use the debate as a call to action to address a need in the
  school toward which the students can provide leadership.

• To increase scaffolding:
  • When implementing Philosophical Chairs for the first time, try it
    as a low-risk sponge activity with superficial prompts and fun
    topics. This focuses on the general structure of the activity to
    gain comfort with how the activity looks in the classroom
    context.
  • Upon completing their pre-work, have students share their
    thinking with one of their WICOR Partners.
  • Once students have taken sides, have them huddle up and
    share their reasoning or pre-work before explaining their
    perspectives. This will provide students with the opportunity to
    give voice to their thinking, while hearing what like-minded peers
    have to say before the debate begins.
  • Turn the debate into a Four Corners discussion by altering the
    sides to the following: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and
    Strongly Disagree. Having a greater number of options for
    students to choose from gives those who are usually undecided
    more leeway in where they position themselves.
  • As time draws to a close or the argumentation becomes
    repetitive, instruct the students to huddle up into two groups and
    decide on a closing statement. Each group should review their
    reasoning for their position on the prompt and select a
    spokesperson to present their closing summary argument.

• To integrate technology:
  • Pair two classes together to debate a topic, using a supervised
    social networking site approved for classroom use or
    videoconferencing technology.
  • After debating a topic, create an online survey based on the
    statements argued, and canvas students within the school for
    their opinion.
  • Have a few students observe the process and provide a Twitter
    feed of the debate, instead of participating in it.
  • Conduct an asynchronous Philosophical Chairs by posting a topic
    on a discussion forum, and then requiring students to contribute
    to the online debate.
Pre-Discussion Organizer for Philosophical Chairs

Name: ___________________________ Date: ________

Record the central statement that is presented for discussion and list as many reasons as possible for why someone would agree or disagree with it. After listing these reasons, summarize your current position on the central statement using complete sentences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Statement:</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Summarize your current position on the central statement above.
**Participant Reflective Checklist for Philosophical Chairs**

Directions: Prior to the activity, review the statements below. Upon completion, check the boxes that best represent your Philosophical Chairs experience and summarize your reflection in the space provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did you…</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintain your understanding of the prompt or central statement throughout the activity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actively listen to the person who was speaking?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seek to understand the opposing speaker’s point of view, even if you did not agree with him/her?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contribute your own thoughts, offering your reasons as succinctly as possible?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take any notes to help track the arguments that were presented from both sides?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change your mind about the prompt as new information or reasoning was presented?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refrain from having side conversations during the debate portion of the activity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change your position if your thinking grew and changed as a result of convincing arguments from the opposing side?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you spoke, did you…</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wait until the teacher/facilitator recognized you to speak?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Briefly summarize the previous speaker’s argument before you replied?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Address the ideas that your opponents made, and not the people stating them?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Summarize your reflection by referring to the items above, the areas in which you did well, and the areas in which you can improve for next time:

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________