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.

ELL Integration: Consider providing sentence stems for students as a way for them to begin formulating their thoughts in a coherent, concise way.

ELL Integration: For ELL students, pay special attention to support students speaking in complete sentences as they share why they agree or disagree with someone else's statement and articulate their own points. Academic language scripts will help provide students with sentence frames with which to communicate with each other. Especially during the first few times using this activity, encourage students to acknowledge prior speakers' names in order to honor thoughts and practice addressing specific people and points.

- **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 them 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.

Central Statement:	
Agree	**Disagree**
Summarize your current position on the central statement above.	

Rules of Engagement for Philosophical Chairs

- Maintain your understanding of the prompt or central statement throughout the activity.

- Actively listen to the person who is speaking.

- Wait for the teacher or facilitator to recognize you before you speak; only one person speaks at a time.

- Seek to understand the opposing speaker's point of view, even if you do not agree with him/her.

- Briefly summarize the previous speaker's argument before you make your response.

- Contribute your own thoughts, offering your reasons as succinctly as possible.

- Respond to statements and ideas only, not to the person giving them.

- Change your mind about the central statement as new information or reasoning is presented.

- Refrain from having side conversations during the debate portion of the activity.

- Move to the opposite side or to the undecided position if your thinking grows and changes as a result of convincing arguments from the opposing side.

- Support the discussion by maintaining order and contributing constructive comments.

Creating a Prompt That Works

The prompt for Philosophical Chairs can dictate the success or failure almost immediately. The prompt must be engaging, **easily understood,** and clearly divided into two sides. A successful prompt will encourage students to debate the merits of the content behind the statement or question—and not allow students to hide behind one word as they search for a technicality in their argumentation.

When creating a prompt, consider the following:

1. Be sure that the issue has two debate-worthy sides. If more arguable positions exist, consider using Four Corners instead.

   Instead of: *Alternative energy sources are better than oil.* (Which alternative energy sources are better than oil: wind, solar, geothermal, or nuclear? Is the argument one of alternative energy versus fossil fuels in general, which include natural gas and coal?)

   Try: *Increased resources should be invested into making alternative energy sources efficient, instead of finding more ways to extract fossil fuels.*

2. Keep the prompt topic narrow enough to avoid overwhelming students, but open enough to provide a sufficient amount of debatable material.

   Instead of: *Addressing global poverty should be the world's focus.* (This is too overwhelming.)

   Or: *The impoverished need free housing.* (This is too narrow in scope.)

   Try: *State governments should raise income taxes to provide low-income housing for the working poor.*

3. Choose your ambiguity carefully and make it work for you.

   Instead of: *Hosting the Olympic Games is a waste.* ("Waste" is too vague.)

   Try: *Does hosting the Olympic Games use more resources than it is worth?*

   ("Resources" is ambiguous—it could mean labor, capital, or environmental—but all of these considerations must be critically scrutinized and measured against the Olympic Games' worth, which could refer to the financial, cultural, or political benefits.)

4. Avoid superlatives and absolute phrasing, such as "all," "every," and "never." Consider using comparatives instead.

   Instead of: *Football is the best high school sport.* ("Best" is a superlative.)

   Try: *Football provides greater benefits to high schools than basketball.* ("Greater" is a comparative.)

   Instead of: *Middle school students should never have homework.* ("Never" is an absolute term.)

   Try: *Middle school homework should be reserved for projects and test preparation.*

Source Material for Prompts

As experience with implementation of Philosophical Chairs activities in the classroom grows, the awareness of ideas for prompts in everyday lives grows. Although not exhaustive, the following list is a starting place for finding material or inspiration for debate prompts:

- AVID Weekly articles

- Content-specific sources:

  - Political cartoons
  - Data sources
  - Primary/secondary source documents
  - Math word problems
  - Literature

- Topical/local news stories

- State/Supreme Court rulings

- Magazine articles

- Gallup Poll results

- Inspirations from student writing/conversations

- College-related issues

- Blogs and podcasts

- Online video streams

- TEDTalks

- Museum websites

Example Topics for Philosophical Chairs

- Government should limit the types of content allowed on the Internet.
- University education should be free for all citizens.
- Wild animals should not be kept in captivity.
- Performance-enhancing drugs should be permitted in professional sports.
- Video game violence leads to more aggressive children.
- Vegetarianism should be promoted at the middle school level in order to promote healthy living.
- Freedom of speech is more of a privilege than a right.
- Genetically modified organisms in food benefit humanity more than they hurt it.
- American schools should lengthen the school days in order for students to compete more favorably on a global scale.
- Human organs should be made available through not-for-profit corporations and charities.
- The United States should withdraw from the United Nations.
- Animals should not be used as objects of sport and/or entertainment.
- Middle school students should be given more exercise opportunities during the school day.
- Music promoting or glorifying violent or criminal lifestyles should be banned.
- Torture is an acceptable practice to gain information from suspected terrorists.
- Teachers should not interact with students through social networking websites.
- A student should be held legally responsible for bullying if it resulted in the victim's death.
- The United States should address its own national financial needs before financially supporting other countries.
- Social media does more harm than good for middle school students.
- Food created with nanotechnology will greatly benefit humanity.
- Tobacco should be illegal for purchase or use.
- Discussions about religion should be allowed in schools.
- Students should be allowed to formally rate their teachers each year.
- The death penalty should be mandatory for those who commit rape or premeditated murder.
- Students should be able to work without parental consent at the age of 16.
- Students should be able to choose which high school they attend.
- Parents should be held responsible for their children's behavior until the age of 18.

- Girls should be able to participate in full-contact sports with boys.
- Prisoners serving multiple life sentences should be freed at the age of 80.
- Teaching about religion should be allowed in public schools outside of the regular school day.
- War is unavoidable.
- Everything we do is done mainly for ourselves, and this is true for everyone.
- Our nation should maintain an arsenal of nuclear weapons.
- Our nation should adopt official neutrality, similar to Switzerland.
- Men can care for children as well as women.
- The voting age should be lowered to 16.
- Adopted children should be allowed to obtain information about their natural parents before the age of 18.
- Recipients of heart, lung, and liver transplants should be given the identity of the organ donors.
- Offshore drilling should be discontinued.
- Greater penalties should be given to oil companies for oil spills.
- Computer crimes should receive stiffer penalties.
- Schools should have mandatory drug testing for athletes.
- The number of appeals before capital punishment is carried out should be limited to three.
- A sentence of capital punishment should be imposed within a one-year time period of the crime.
- Those charged with an offense should not be allowed to plead "no contest."
- Plea bargaining should not be allowed.
- The state government should provide shelter for the homeless.
- Refugees from Central and South American countries should be permitted to immigrate to the United States.
- The income tax should be abandoned as a source of federal and state revenue.
- The graduated income tax—higher for wealthy people—should be replaced by a flat tax for everyone.
- All chemicals that cause damage to the environment should be prohibited from use or sale to the general public.
- Pesticides should be outlawed for food crops.
- Cosmetic surgery should be banned.
- High school dropouts should not be able to obtain a driver's license.
- Retail stores should not be allowed to use plastic bags for customer purchases.

Tips for Philosophical Chairs

The points listed below are suggestions for enhancing students' skills during Philosophical Chairs, as well as additional ideas to consider before, during, and after the debate.

Before the Debate

- Be prepared with a second prompt in case students respond to the first with lopsided support for one side.
- Discuss with students the need for polite responses as alternatives to aggressive "You said…" statements. Additionally, remind students of the messages that they send through body language and non-verbal communication.

During the Debate

- To encourage a wider array of student speakers, put speaking limits, such as "Three before me," (i.e., "Three students must speak before I can speak again") in place to avoid having one or two students dominate the debate.
- Pause the activity at a strategic point in the debate—especially after a variety of perspectives have been shared—and ask students to contemplate where they are now in their thinking and consider changing sides.
- Consider asking all students to reconvene in the middle of the classroom halfway through the debate to discuss the merits of the debate so far. Then, prompt them back to the side which best represents where they currently are in their mindset. With everybody moving, students often feel more at ease with demonstrating their change of mind.
- Frequently remind students that they should be making eye contact with the other side of the class—and not with the teacher or facilitator—when delivering their points.
- The role of the teacher is to remain the facilitator of the debate, and not to engage students with arguments for one side or the other. The intent of Philosophical Chairs is to foster student confidence and critical thinking skills in a public speaking format. Students will often defer to the teacher's opinion and will be reluctant to challenge or elaborate upon it. However, effective facilitation may require the teacher to paraphrase a student's argument for the sake of clarity.

After the Debate

- Always allow time in class for a debrief after the activity ends. In addition to reflecting on the discussion points, it also functions as a "cool-down" period for when students are passionate about their opinions.
- Consider summarizing the arguments using a T-chart to inventory the statements made. It will demonstrate to students how much was truly said beyond their own beliefs and opinions.
- Choose the assessment/debrief writing tool that best fits the targeted learning standard.

Beyond the Debate

- Explicitly connect students' argumentative statements to real-world current events or judiciary decisions, whether on the local or global stage.