

PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS

Introduction

Philosophical Chairs is a format for classroom discussion and an activity that can be used in almost any classroom setting. While this activity uses a format similar to debate, it is dialogue that helps students develop the ability to give careful attention to other students' comments and to engage in constructive dialogue with one another.

Like Socratic Seminar, Philosophical Chairs exemplifies the use of AVID's WICOR strategies in lesson planning. Inquiry and collaboration are inherent in Philosophical Chairs, and writing and reading are easily incorporated into a plan that results in the integration of the four components of WICOR. Additionally, this activity makes a great prewriting activity as it allows students to gain and develop a variety of ideas about a topic.

Philosophical Chairs differs from Socratic Seminar in that it is not dependent on a text, but the reading of some text before engaging in the activity can only enhance the process. Philosophical Chairs focuses on a central statement or topic that is controversial. A list of possible topics is included in this unit, but you should also develop statements that are relevant to both your students' lives and grade levels. Current events make great Philosophical Chairs topics.

Because the basic format for Philosophical Chairs remains the same from grade level to grade level, no explicit differentiations are included here. You will differentiate from grade level to grade level by choosing central statements or topics with increased complexity and by decreasing the level of teacher involvement in the process. In the middle school years, the teacher will almost always provide the topic and facilitate the discussion. By the junior and senior years in high school, students should be responsible for developing the central statement and for facilitating the discussions. Included in this unit are three activity sheets that may be used as part of the Philosophical Chairs activity. They provide varying degrees of structure. For middle level, you may want to provide more structure to the reflection after the activity. For students who have become more practiced at Philosophical Chairs and/or are in high school, you may use the activity sheets that are less structured.

Step-by-step guidelines for Philosophical Chairs and additional ideas for successful implementation of this activity in your classroom follow.



Guidelines for Philosophical Chairs

Classroom Setup

Chairs/desks are set up facing each other with about half facing one way and half facing the opposite way.

Directions

1. A statement is presented to the students. This statement might be based on a reading or might be a stand-alone statement. Either way, the statement should be one that will divide the class into those who agree with the statement and those who disagree with the statement. Be sure that the statement is written on the board for reference during the activity. (Note: Allowing for a group of students who are undecided is addressed later in these guidelines.)
2. Those who agree with the central statement sit on one side and those who disagree sit on the other side.
3. A mediator who will remain neutral and call on sides to speak is positioned between the two sides. (This role is usually filled by the teacher in the beginning or middle school years. Eventually, students should take on this role.) In addition to facilitating the discussion, the mediator may at times paraphrase the arguments made by each side for clarification. It is important that the mediator always remains neutral.
4. The mediator recognizes someone from the side of the classroom that agrees with the central statement to begin the discussion with an argument in favor of the position stated. Next, the mediator will recognize someone from the other side to respond to the argument. This continues throughout the activity, and part of the job of the mediator is to ensure participation by as many students as possible and to keep just a few students from dominating the discussion. The mediator may also put a time limit on how long each side addresses the issue on each turn.
5. In addition to speaking in the discussion, students may express their opinions by moving from one side to other. Anyone may change seats at any time. Changing seats does not necessarily mean that a person's mind is changed, but rather that the argument made is compelling enough to sway opinions. Students may move back and forth throughout the discussion.
6. The discussion and movement go on for a designated period of time—usually one class period. The mediator may bring the discussion to a close at any time. Each side may be given an opportunity to make a final statement on the issue. If time allows, each participant states his/her final opinion and may also tell which arguments he/she found most convincing.
7. An additional piece to this activity can be to have a few students observe the process and take notes instead of participating. These students will debrief their observations to the class at the end of the activity. You may have students who were absent or unprepared to participate fulfill this role.

Evaluation

Leave time at the end of the period for students to reflect on the activity. Use one of the activities included in this unit. Students may begin the reflection in class and finish it for homework.



Modifications

It is recommended that you begin this activity with just two sides. If students have difficulty choosing a side to begin, encourage them to sit on the side that they agree with the most even if they do not completely agree. Once students are accustomed to this format, you may choose to add this additional component: You may add a third section of seats with a few chairs for students who are undecided. This section is placed between the two opposing sides. During the discussion, you may allow students from the undecided section to participate, or you may require that they take a position before participating. Students may move from the sides that agree or disagree with the statement to the undecided section if they wish. Before you end the discussion, require that all students still seating in the undecided zone move to one side or the other depending on which they believe made the most compelling arguments.



Philosophical Chairs Topics

1. Government should limit the types of content allowed on the Internet.
2. University education should be free for all citizens.
3. Wild animals should not be kept in captivity.
4. Performance-enhancing drugs should be permitted in professional sports.
5. Video game violence leads to more aggressive children.
6. Vegetarianism should be promoted at the middle school level in order to promote healthy living.
7. Freedom of speech is more of a privilege than a right.
8. Genetically modified organisms in food benefit humanity more than they hurt it.
9. American schools should lengthen the school days in order for students to compete more favorably on a global scale.
10. Human organs should be made available through not-for-profit corporations and charities.
11. The United States should withdraw from the United Nations.
12. Animals should not be used as objects of sport and/or entertainment.
13. Middle school students should be given more exercise opportunities during the school day.
14. Music promoting or glorifying violent or criminal lifestyles should be banned.
15. Torture is an acceptable practice to gain information from suspected terrorists.
16. Teachers should not interact with students through social networking websites.
17. A student should be held legally responsible for bullying if it resulted in the victim's death.
18. The United States should address its own national financial needs before financially supporting other countries.
19. Social media does more harm than good for middle school students.
20. Food created with nanotechnology will greatly benefit humanity.
21. Tobacco should be illegal for purchase or use.
22. Discussions about religion should be allowed in schools.
23. Students should be allowed to formally rate their teachers each year.
24. The death penalty should be mandatory for those who commit rape or premeditated murder.
25. Students should be able to work without parental consent at the age of 16.
26. Students should be able to choose which high school they attend.
27. Parents should be held responsible for their children's behavior until the age of 18.
28. Girls should be able to participate in full-contact sports with boys.
29. Prisoners serving multiple life sentences should be freed at the age of 80.
30. Teaching about religion should be allowed in public schools outside of the regular school day.
31. War is unavoidable.
32. Everything we do is done mainly for ourselves, and this is true for everyone.
33. Our nation should maintain an arsenal of nuclear weapons.
34. Our nation should adopt official neutrality, similar to Switzerland.
35. Men can care for children as well as women.
36. The voting age should be lowered to 16.



37. Adopted children should be allowed to obtain information about their natural parents before the age of 18.
38. Recipients of heart, lung, and liver transplants should be given the identity of the organ donors.
39. Offshore drilling should be discontinued.
40. Greater penalties should be given to oil companies for oil spills.
41. Computer crimes should receive stiffer penalties.
42. Schools should have mandatory drug testing for athletes.
43. The number of appeals before capital punishment is carried out should be limited to three.
44. A sentence of capital punishment should be imposed within a one-year time period of the crime.
45. Those charged with an offense should not be allowed to plead “no contest.”
46. Plea bargaining should not be allowed.
47. The state government should provide shelter for the homeless.
48. Refugees from Central and South American countries should be permitted to immigrate to the United States.
49. The income tax should be abandoned as a source of federal and state revenue.
50. The graduated income tax—higher for wealthy people—should be replaced by a flat tax for everyone.
51. All chemicals that cause damage to the environment should be prohibited from use or sale to the general public.
52. Pesticides should be outlawed for food crops.
53. Cosmetic surgery should be banned.
54. High school dropouts should not be able to obtain a driver’s license.
55. Retail stores should not be allowed to use plastic bags for customer purchases.



Philosophical Chairs

Rules of Engagement

- 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 you're thinking grows and changes as a result of convincing arguments from the opposing side.
- Support the discussion by maintaining order and contributing constructive comments.

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

