

Chapter 12

Philosophical Chairs¹¹

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 WICR 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 WICR. 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.

¹¹Risi, R., Schiro, P. Serret-Lopez, C. (2005). Unit Eleven: Philosophical Chairs. *Strategies for Success* (pp. 147–154). San Diego, Ca: AVID Press

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 seated 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. Tobacco should be illegal for purchase or use.
2. Interracial relationships are acceptable.
3. Everyone would be a lot better off without television.
4. Discussions about religion should be allowed in school.
5. Students should be able to ban a teacher who does not teach well.
6. We should be able to enforce the death penalty for murderers and rapists.
7. Students should be able to work without parental consent at age 16.
8. Students should be able to choose which high school they attend.
9. When a course is taught by more than one teacher, students should be able to choose their teacher.
10. If a student and teacher have problems getting along, either one should be able to request a change in teachers.
11. Parents should have to pay a fine when their kids skip school.
12. Girls should be able to participate in full-contact sports with boys.
13. Prayer in school should remain illegal.
14. The right to die should become a fundamental right.
15. Teachers should be able to make their students stay after class.
16. People with multiple life sentences should be freed at age 80.
17. Teaching about religion should be allowed in public schools outside the regular school day.
18. War is unavoidable.
19. Everything we do is done mainly for ourselves, and this is true for everyone.
20. Our nation should have many nuclear weapons.
21. Men can care for children as well as women.
22. The voting age should be lowered to 16.
23. Adopted children should be given information about their natural parents before the age of 18.
24. Recipients of heart, lung, and liver transplants should be told about the donors of the organs.
25. Most people on welfare are lazy and don't really want to work.
26. Offshore drilling should be discontinued.
27. Greater penalties should be given to oil companies for oil spills.
28. Computer crimes should receive stiffer penalties.
29. All employers should conduct drug testing before hiring any employee.
30. Organs should not be donated to those serving jail sentences.
31. Some books should be banned.

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32. Schools should have mandatory drug testing for athletes.
33. Euthanasia (mercy killing) should be legalized.
34. Schools should have courses on death and dying.
35. The number of appeals before capital punishment is carried out should be limited to three.
36. A sentence of capital punishment should be imposed within a one-year time period.
37. Criminals should not be allowed to plea-bargain to reduce their sentences.
38. The state government should provide shelter for the homeless.
39. Refugees from Central and South American countries should be permitted to legally immigrate to the United States.
40. The income tax should be abandoned as a source of federal and state revenue.
41. The graduated income tax (higher for wealthy people) should be replaced by a flat tax for everyone.
42. All chemicals that cause damage to the ozone layer should be prohibited from use or sale.
43. Pesticides should be outlawed for all food crops.
44. Children who went to school in the United States but whose parents are undocumented should be able to apply for financial aid.
45. If you have high SAT scores and an A average, you should be able to go to any college you choose.
46. Tax credits should be given for those who choose to use solar energy.
47. The parents of school-age vandals should be held liable for damages caused by their children.
48. Teenage vandals should be tried in courts as adults.
49. Police should arrest and detain runaway teenagers.
50. Stricter school dress codes would result in better behavior and academic performance by students in inner-city schools.
51. A driver's license should not be permitted for high school dropouts.
52. People should wait until the age of 21 to get married.
53. Drug traffickers in the United States should receive capital punishment, as they do in Asian countries.
54. Most people care enough about the environment to make personal sacrifices to save it.
55. The United States should not sell arms to any foreign countries.
56. Students should be able to select their own teachers.
57. Children should never be physically punished.
58. Unclaimed animals in the pound should be used for medical research.
59. It was easier to grow up when my parents were kids than it is for me now.
60. Legalization of drugs would result in less crime.
61. Chewing gum should be allowed in classes because it gives you energy to study.

Philosophical Chairs

Rules of Engagement

1. Be sure you understand the central statement or topic before the discussion begins. Decide which section you will sit in.
2. Listen carefully when others speak and seek to understand their arguments even if you don't agree.
3. Wait for the mediator to recognize you before you speak; only one person speaks at a time.
4. You must first summarize briefly the previous speaker's argument before you make your response.
5. If you have spoken for your side, you must wait until three other people on your side speak before you speak again.
6. Be sure that when you speak, you address the ideas, not the person stating them.
7. Keep an open mind, and move to the other side or the undecided section if you feel that someone made a good argument or your opinion is swayed.
8. Support the mediator by maintaining order and helping the discussion to progress.

Philosophical Chairs Preparation

Central Statement: _____

Agree

Disagree

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Reflection: _____
