

Using Philosophical Chairs

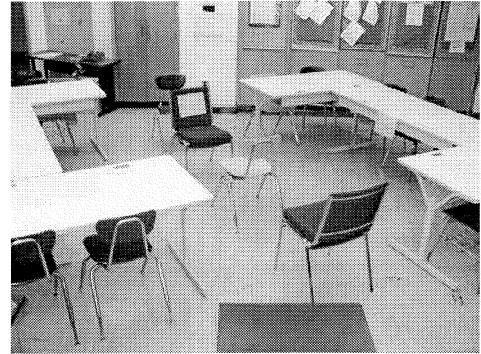
AVID Strategy

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Philosophical Chairs is similar to a debate. Students are given a central topic or question that they must choose to agree, disagree or be neutral regarding the answer. A great P.Chairs discussion starts with a great topic or question.

Topics that work best are ones that are important to students or that they feel strongly about. Each chapter or unit I try to come up with a discussion question that could be used in P.Chairs.



In Social Studies this is actually quite easy:

- Where would you rather live: Ancient Sparta or Athens?
- Will the US fall one day as the Roman Empire did?
- Should the US have dropped the bomb on Japan in WWII?
- Who would you vote for President – McCain or Obama?
- War is always an unnecessary act.

Similar topics can be done in English or Elective classes:

- While reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee: “The need to know is more important than personal privacy.” (as it pertains to Dill’s obsession with Boo Radley)
- (Health) The drinking age should be lowered to 18.
- (Health) Most people care enough about the environment to make personal sacrifices to save it.
- In English, change the motive or behavior of a character in the story and determine the outcome.

Instructions for the students:

- Explain how it works to the students, then give further instructions:
- The purpose of this format is to promote discussion. Students are encouraged to keep an open mind by listening to what the speaker is saying without leaping to judgment.
- No speaker may speak twice in a row for her/his side. This allows students who are less confident the opportunity to speak and/or challenge a more verbally skilled student without fear of immediate reprisal.
- Students do not raise their hands to speak (especially while someone else is speaking) In a discussion, the participants need to pay attention to the ebb and flow of the conversation and join in as appropriate.
- No one acknowledges any move, this is not a team game. This is not a win-lose situation.
- The goal of the participants is to be fair and open-minded. By the end of the discussion, the participants should be equally able to explain their own view as well as the opposing view.

Instructions for the teacher:

- The statement should be written on the board.
- As mediator, you must be neutral.
- Modify or switch the topic if discussion becomes stagnant.
- Use talking tickets, tokens or chips if a handful of students tend to dominate discussion.
- If the student who is speaking is looking at you, look at the students to whom they should be directing their comments.
- Use scaffolding techniques to prepare students for more advanced discussion topics.
- Be prepared to be comfortable with silent gaps (particularly with less mature, shyer groups).
- Possible ideas for closure: give the students 30 seconds to think and then 30 seconds each to make one statement explaining their position. Or have students each rate themselves on a scale explaining how open-minded they were during the discussion. Or have one representative from each side make a closing argument after a brief huddle with their side.
- Always follow up with a writing activity, summary or reflection.

How I play Philosophical Chairs:

There are lots of ways to do this debate/discussion technique. It’s quite scalable. P.Chairs can be done in 20 minutes with a topic that has not had any preparation. Or it could be the resulting exercise after a long unit of work. Either way, I use the same rules. And I always have the students pre-write, take notes, and write a

reflection at the end. Their assessment is done, not on their participation in the event, but rather in their written understanding of it.

I have 5 simple rules:

1. One minute in the hot seat.
2. Repeat or rephrase what the last person said.
3. Wait three seconds before responding; to be sure the last person is finished.
4. You can not talk until the discussion passes 4 times after you have spoken. Another way of saying it is (someone else on your side must talk before you can).
5. MOVE. Philosophical Chairs is about movement. Use your 5 toes and get up and walk to show support for ideas expressed.

Rules Explanations:

1. The hot seats are the few seats in the middle of the discussion. Students can remain there only briefly. I do allow comments from that section and the students can raise questions to either side to further the discussion. But, they should not camp out there for long.
2. Repeating or rephrasing what the last person said is practicing good manners. Plus, you are letting that person know you were listening and also gathering your thoughts to make a stronger point.
3. Students can sometimes step on each other's words. By waiting to respond it gives the person talking a chance to finish and it underscores fairness.
4. I use a little stuffed eagle that we pass back and forth during our discussion. This helps facilitate the discussion without having to raise hands. Plus the moderator is removed from making decisions about where the next comment comes from. I do step in and direct it if a person has not had a chance to speak yet. Try to make sure everyone has an opportunity.
5. Movement is vital. If students are not moving then they are more apt to say things out loud. "You go girl!" is not a proper way for students to give feedback on comments they agree with. Instead they should get up and move toward that person to show support – silently. They can return to their side or seat if they feel like the person hasn't changed their position completely. But, the movement is important to show support in a respectful manner.

How the teacher can roll out the technique:

- A. Write the topic/question on the board.
- B. The students write the topic/question down on their sheet of paper and next to their heading they will answer it in one word – yes, no, unsure. This gives the teacher a chance to walk around the room and find out how many students are on each side. The students are then writing a quick paragraph about why they chose the answer they did.
- C. Tell the students which side of the room is "yes or no." Students will then move to those sides. Middle seats are 'hot seats' for those undecided. I have the hot seats turn their desk to the side to signify that they are not sure.
- D. Begin with the side that has the least amount of support. This may cause people to change their mind.
- E. Call time out as the moderator to clarify inaccurate comments or falsehoods. (for example, do not let a student shape a discussion around 'Germany was on England's side in the war.')
- F. At the end of the discussion (they can last from 10 to 50 minutes in length), have the students write a reflection. I say to the students, "Explain how your viewpoint was strengthened, weakened or changed altogether." I also ask them to name names of students who made great points. Often I pick those up at the door as they are leaving for the period.
- G. Follow up the next class period with a 'teacher's reflection' about the comments made by the students. Often students will not have an opportunity to voice their great ideas, but this is a chance to revisit the topic and share some great points of view.

Philosophical Chairs can be a great activity where students are learning from each other. The best part of this activity is that the teacher can be informally assessing the depth of student understanding over a broad unit or topic.

If anyone needs any more information on this, please let me know. I have a power point, a video and can talk to you further about it. Also, feel free to let me know if you'd like to visit my AVID classroom and see a demonstration.