Philosophical Chairs

SUBJECT MATTER APPLICATION
In theory, learning happens when students use critical thinking to resolve subsequent conflicts which arise when presented with alternative perspectives, ideas or contradictions to what they have previously learned or believed. "Philosophical Chairs" is a technique to allow students to critically think, verbally ponder and logically write their beliefs.

PROCEDURE:

- Students read, prior to coming to class, a newspaper article, short story, essay or literary selection, taking notes as they read; bring those notes to class.

- After reading and taking notes students are presented with a second or third level statement that will elicit thought and discussion. Teacher can provide a statement for the first few discussions and may allow students to collaborate to create future statements if so desired. (Example statements follow)

- The chairs are placed in a horseshoe seating arrangement, with the two ends longer than the back. (see illustration on cover sheet)

- Students are told they will argue the merits of the philosophical statement and that their choice of seat during the discussion will illustrate their position. If they agree with the statement, they should sit on the right; if they disagree with the statement, they should sit on the left, and, if they are “undecided,” they should sit at the back of the horseshoe. They will have the opportunity to move as their minds change.

- Choose a student moderator whose job is to see that everyone gets a chance to speak.

- To gain full credit, a student must speak at least two times.
TIPS FOR THE TASK MASTER

- Set ground rules about the discussion before it starts. (Sample rules follow)

- Set a time limit for the discussion.

- Require students to summarize the previous speaker before they are allowed to present their arguments.

- Teacher should moderate the first and, if needed, the second time.

- If class had too many students to engage them all, you can have a subsection “take the stage” and have that group take notes and then debrief the rest of the class as to who had the “pivotal point(s)” that ultimately persuaded adoption of one side or the other.

- If all students have not read the material and taken notes, have a section of the room where they must go and cannot join the discussion until they have the notes. They also cannot be full group members so a hot seat is placed in the horseshoe to allow those members who have finished their notes to make a statement and then move out of the group. They cannot participate any further. (This gives them partial credit for the assignment, but full credit cannot be earned since they came to class unprepared).

- Moderator keeps track of students who have spoken and the number of times they did so.

EVALUATION:

- Students write a metacognitive reflection responding to questions either related to the material read or to the technique of “Philosophical Chairs” (Evaluation sheet for “Philosophical Chairs” follows)

- Simple rubric and score sheet for student speeches (Rubric and score sheet follow)
Question Levels and Sample Questions Which Lead to Philosophical Statements

Question Levels

**Level One** Questions Will: Define
Describe
Identify
List
Name
Observe
Recite

The above should not be used in forming questions for "Philosophical Chairs". The debate will not flow nor will there be the conflict needed to have a successful experience.

**Level Two** Questions Will: Analyze
Compare
Contrast
Group
Determine
Infer
Sequence
Synthesize

**Level Three** Questions Will: Apply a principle
Evaluate
Hypothesize
Imagine
Judge
Predict
Speculate
The above should be use in forming questions which generate statements for discussion. They allow for more ideas and different beliefs to be expressed more freely which is what the debate wants.

**Sample Opening Philosophical Statements**

**While reading* Hamlet* by Wm Shakespeare:**

In Act V scene 2, Fortinbras Says:

"Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal; and for his passage,
The soldier's music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him."

Fortinbras feels that Hamlet would have made a good soldier. What he does not know is that Hamlet was at war with his uncle and had acted as a soldier. **Evaluate** this statement by agreeing or disagreeing with it.

**While reading “Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau:**

"The government is best which governs least"

If acts of civil disobedience do not harm the government or its people, **analyze** whether jailing those who commit those acts is useless.

**While reading To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee:**

In chapters 1 through 6, we meet Jem, Scout, Atticus and Dill, as well as other members of Maycomb community. The children, Scout, Jem and especially Dill, are obsessed with the Finch's neighbor Boo Radley. The obsession creates problems for both Boo Radley and the Finch's. **Compare** whether the need to know is more important than personal privacy.
More Topics for Discussion

1. **Hypothesize** whether most people care enough about the environment to make personal sacrifices to save it.

2. **Infer** the validity of the United States selling arms to any foreign country.

3. **Judge** whether students should be able to select their own teachers.

4. **Determine** whether children should ever be physically punished.

5. **Evaluate** whether unclaimed animals in the pound should be used for medical research.

6. **Judge** whether it was easier to grow up when my parents were kids than it is for me now.

7. **Speculate** whether legalization of drugs would result in less crime.

8. **Determine** whether any censorship of music or art is wrong.

9. **Evaluate** whether rock music contributes to a rebellious attitude in some teenagers.

10. **Apply the principle** that every student has the opportunity to succeed in our school.
Philosophical Chairs
Rules of Engagement

- **Read** the material for the debate and the opening statement carefully; be sure you understand it.

- **Listen** to the person who is speaking.

- **Understand** the person’s point of view.

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

- **Respond** to statements only, not to the personality of the person giving it.

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

- **Move** to the opposite side or to the undecided chairs as your thinking grows and changes.

- **Support** the Mediator in maintaining order and helping the discussion to progress.

- **Reflect** on the experience via the closing activity or assignment.
Philosophical Chairs

"YES--AGREE"

"HOT SEAT"

"UNDECIDED"

"NO--DISAGREE"
Philosophical Chairs
Written Evaluation Sheet

Please respond candidly and specifically to the following questions:

1. What was the most frustrating portion of the exercise?

2. What was the most successful portion of the exercise?

3. What was said that caused you to change your seat, or what was said that caused you not to change your seat?

4. What conclusions can you draw about how you form your beliefs?

5. What conclusion can you draw about the nature of forming beliefs as it might relate to this activity?
“Philosophical Chairs”
Speech Rubric

Summary of Previous Speech:
1/Not Used = Did not do any summary
2/Little Used = Had a reference but not information
3/Acceptable Use = Made reference and included facts
4/Excellent Use = Restated arguments and included facts
5/Outstanding Use = Restated arguments and all facts

Thoughtful Reflection:
1/Not Used = Did not have understanding of the topic
2/Little Used = Had superficial understanding of the topic
3/Acceptable Use = Understood topic well enough to explain own argument
4/Excellent Use = Explained most of complexity of the topic
5/Outstanding Use = Complexity of the topic explained and used argumentation

Use of Specific Examples:
1/Not Used = No examples from the text
2/Little Used = One example from the text
3/Acceptable Use = Several examples from the text with some explanation
4/Excellent Use = Examples from the text with each explained
5/Outstanding Use = Examples from the text with each explained and extended to fit the argument

Usage and Grammar:
1/Not Used = Errors in agreement and non-standard English
2/Little Used = Informal English and words like “you know” and “thing”
3/Acceptable Use = Standard English usage and complete ideas
4/Excellent Use = Standard English usage with no mistakes and with use of some allusions
5/Outstanding Use = Standard English usage with allusions and precise references to develop arguments
“Philosophical Chairs”
Score Sheet

Name _____________________  Evaluator __________________
Topic ________________________________  Date __________

Speech 1
1 = Not Used  2 = Little Use  3 = Acceptable Use  4 = Excellent Use  5 = Outstanding Use

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Speech 2
1 = Not Used  2 = Little Use  3 = Acceptable Use  4 = Excellent Use  5 = Outstanding Use

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