

# 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 question that will elicit thought and discussion. Teacher can provide question for first few discussions and may allow students to collaborate to create future questions if so desired. (Example questions following)
- The chairs are then placed in a horseshoe seating arrangement, with the two ends longer than the back. (Illustration following)
- Students are told they will argue the merits of the question and that their choice of seat during the discussion will illustrate their position. If they believe the answer to the question is "yes," they should sit on the right, if they believe the answer to the question is "no," 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 following)
- 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 has 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.
- 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" following)
- Simple rubric and score sheet for student speeches (Rubric and score sheet following)

## Question Levels and Sample Questions/Opening 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
- Infer
- Sequence
- Synthesize

**Level Three Questions Will:**

- Apply a principle
- Evaluate
- Hypothesize
- Imagine
- Judge
- Predict
- Speculate

The above should be used in forming questions. They allow for more ideas and different beliefs to be expressed more freely, which is what the debate wants.

## **Sample Questions/Opening Statements**

### **While reading *Hamlet* by William 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, then 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 Finches. The need to know is more important than personal privacy.

### **After listening to/reading Colin Powell's speech before the United Nations on February 5, 2003:**

War with Iraq is necessary to maintain the peace and stability in the world.

## **More Topics for Discussion**

1. Most people care enough about the environment to make personal sacrifices to save it.
2. The United States should not sell arms to any foreign country.
3. Students should be able to select their own teachers.
4. Children should never be physically punished.
5. Unclaimed animals in the pound should be used for medical research.
6. It was easier to grow up when my parents were kids than it is for me now.
7. Legalization of drugs would result in less crime.
8. It is the duty of the United States to send money to foreign countries suffering from poverty and lack of food.
9. Any censorship of music or art is wrong.
10. Rock music contributes to a rebellious attitude in some teenagers.
11. Nuclear arms are necessary.
12. 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

Illustration # 1

