

7 Philosophical Chairs

Philosophical Chairs is a format for both classroom discussion and debate. Students take a position on a controversial issue and then try to influence the opinions of others through logical arguments and facts. Students improve their ability to give careful attention to others' comments and to engage in constructive dialogue with one another.

Instructions:

1. Teachers choose a reading on a controversial issue and formulate a question for students to take a position on. For example: All Americans should be required to purchase health insurance.
2. Students read a related article and mark the text for areas of agreement or disagreement as well as questions that need clarification.
3. Students take a stand on the issue and mark their text for evidence that supports their position.
4. Set up your classroom for the discussion by designating one side of the room for students who agree with the statement and the other side for students that disagree with the statement. The area between the two sides is for students that are unsure of their position.
5. Review Active Listening Resource.
6. Students are instructed to go to their side of room. In their group, students will discuss and decide their three most compelling arguments for their position.
7. Start the discussion with student(s) in each of the three groups stating their three most compelling reasons for taking their position.
8. Instruct the students that they may now change positions in the room based upon the arguments presented.
9. The discussion may now become a free flowing conversation between the two opposing groups. Students must be reminded that only one student may speak at a time, standing and respectfully addressing the audience. At anytime during the discussion, students may change their position on the issue by changing their seating position in the room.
10. When time is called, any students remaining undecided and in the center of the room must choose one side or the other.
11. Debrief the process of the discussion about what went well and areas that can be improved in the future.
12. Instruct students to write a brief essay describing their position at the beginning of the discussion and why their position changed or did not change over the course of the activity.