Source Material for Prompts

As experience with implementation of Philosophical Chairs activities in the classroom grows, the awareness of ideas for prompts in everyday lives grows. Although not exhaustive, the following list is a starting place for finding material or inspiration for debate prompts:

- AVID Weekly articles

- Content-specific sources:

    · Political cartoons
    · Data sources
    · Primary/secondary source documents
    · Math word problems
    · Literature

- Topical/local news stories

- State/Supreme Court rulings

- Magazine articles

- Gallup Poll results

- Inspirations from student writing/conversations

- College-related issues

- Blogs and podcasts

- Online video streams

- TEDTalks

- Museum websites

Creating a Prompt That Works

The prompt for Philosophical Chairs can dictate the success or failure almost immediately. The prompt must be engaging, **easily understood,** and clearly divided into two sides. A successful prompt will encourage students to debate the merits of the content behind the statement or question—and not allow students to hide behind one word as they search for a technicality in their argumentation.

When creating a prompt, consider the following:

1. Be sure that the issue has two debate-worthy sides. If more arguable positions exist, consider using Four Corners instead.

   Instead of: *Alternative energy sources are better than oil.* (Which alternative energy sources are better than oil: wind, solar, geothermal, or nuclear? Is the argument one of alternative energy versus fossil fuels in general, which include natural gas and coal?)

   Try: *Increased resources should be invested into making alternative energy sources efficient, instead of finding more ways to extract fossil fuels.*

2. Keep the prompt topic narrow enough to avoid overwhelming students, but open enough to provide a sufficient amount of debatable material.

   Instead of: *Addressing global poverty should be the world's focus.* (This is too overwhelming.)

   Or: *The impoverished need free housing.* (This is too narrow in scope.)

   Try: *State governments should raise income taxes to provide low-income housing for the working poor.*

3. Choose your ambiguity carefully and make it work for you.

   Instead of: *Hosting the Olympic Games is a waste.* ("Waste" is too vague.)

   Try: *Does hosting the Olympic Games use more resources than it is worth?*

   ("Resources" is ambiguous—it could mean labor, capital, or environmental—but all of these considerations must be critically scrutinized and measured against the Olympic Games' worth, which could refer to the financial, cultural, or political benefits.)

4. Avoid superlatives and absolute phrasing, such as "all," "every," and "never." Consider using comparatives instead.

   Instead of: *Football is the best high school sport.* ("Best" is a superlative.)

   Try: *Football provides greater benefits to high schools than basketball.* ("Greater" is a comparative.)

   Instead of: *Middle school students should never have homework.* ("Never" is an absolute term.)

   Try: *Middle school homework should be reserved for projects and test preparation.*

4.9: Philosophical Chairs: Debriefing

Student Objective

Students will reflect on the experience of participating in Philosophical Chairs and utilize metacognitive skills in order to improve future Philosophical Chairs experiences.

Overview

Debrief sessions enable students to reflect verbally and in writing on their communication skills, as well as the understanding that they gained on the discussion topic. Debriefing a Philosophical Chairs activity provides valuable insight into students' thinking, including how they perceive, construct, deliver, and receive communication from their peers. Moving beyond the simple restatement of the arguments for and against the central statement, the debrief is an opportune time to encourage students to reflect verbally and in writing upon their overall participation, self-assessing not just how well they followed the rules of engagement, but thinking about their academic language, non-verbal communication, use of rhetoric, and recognition of the skills and qualities that their peers bring to the classroom.

Materials/Set-Up

- Handouts:
  - 4.9a: Participant Reflective Checklist for Philosophical Chairs
  - 4.9b: Written Reflection for Philosophical Chairs

Instructional Steps

1. Depending on the specific objective of the Philosophical Chairs activity, the ability level of the class, and the grade level of the class, debrief with the class utilizing one or both of the options below:
   - Participant Reflective Checklist for Philosophical Chairs: This checklist can be introduced to students before the activity as a preview of the activity's expectations and focus areas. Students can then use the checklist to monitor their adherence to the Rules of Engagement for Philosophical Chairs during the activity and after the activity as a written summary.
   - Written Reflection for Philosophical Chairs: This resource focuses less on the logistics of the activity and allows space for in-depth writing about the arguments made and how participants' understanding evolved through the discussion.

→ Extension

- To increase scaffolding:
  - Have students complete the Participant Reflective Checklist for Philosophical Chairs and/or the Written Reflection for Philosophical Chairs verbally with a partner, rather than in writing.
  - Archive reflections in student portfolios. Before conducting subsequent Philosophical Chairs, have each student read through their reflection and set personal goals for the activity.
- To integrate technology, push out questions using a quick assessment tool, such as Google Forms or Nearpod.
- See the "After the Debate" section in the Tips for Philosophical Chairs resource for more information.