Title: Philosophical Chairs Debate

The Basics

What? A discussion technique which engages students in a debate about texts

When? After students read a text or a set of texts

Why? Develops critical thinking skills, promotes text-supported responses, improves communications skills

Student Outcomes

This strategy helps students refine their understanding of texts to meet reading expectations and engage in group conversations to meet speaking and listening expectations.

How to Implement

1. Develop a question or prompt based on text(s) read in class that has no right answer and two equally arguable "sides." This question or prompt should engage students in thinking deeply about the text and be focused on critical issues, character motivation, turning points in the text, conflict, etc.
2. Have students read the text(s) and then pose the question or prompt to the class.
3. Ask students, using an evidence chart, to locate evidence and choose a "side" based on the evidence.
4. Form two groups, each group representing a "side."
5. Have each group work together to develop a written statement of their position and their supporting reasons. For each reason, require groups to identify supporting evidence from their evidence charts. The group should also develop questions for the other group and locate additional evidence to debunk a counterargument.
6. Then have the class form two parallel lines in which each group is in a different line facing each other.
7. Ask a group to present establish their position and read their opening statement. Repeat with the other group.
8. Then ask the groups to engage in a conversation using accountable talk in which they question the other group's opening statement/position and present their own supporting reasons and evidence.
9. During the conversation, as reasons and/or evidence are presented that result in a change of position, instruct students to visually demonstrate their change in position by switching "sides" and moving to the other line. This can and should happen multiple times throughout the debate.
10. Continue the debate for approximately 10 minutes or until both sides have finished their conversations.
11. Conclude the debate by asking the final groups to revise their opening statements and declare in writing their final position, reasons, and supporting evidence in answer to the initial question or prompt.

Resources for Additional Information

- A brief video explaining this process and illustrating its use in a middle school classroom
- Another video of this strategy being used in a middle school classroom
- An article from Edutopia.org that discusses different debate strategies
- A guide for implementing a modified version of this strategy, "The Four Corners Debate"
- Examples of how to use in lessons: Grades 3-5, Grades 6-8, Grades 9-12