Philosophical Chairs: A Format for Classroom Discussion

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Students often ask for more classroom discussion time. But when substantial periods are given over to discussion, a common result is lack of student attention and involvement. Even while one student is making an excellent point, others will "tune out." And many students who do listen have suspended their critical faculties: when they are not called on to evaluate the point or reasoning which is being presented—they don't.

Ideally, each student should find class discussions interesting, and should feel that his or her presence makes a difference at most sessions. Ideally, students will weigh each argument, each point being made, and thereby sharpen their critical and evaluative skills.

"Philosophical Chairs" is a format for classroom discussion which, for the past seven years, has been used by many of my classes. It has helped me to realize those ideals rather well. The almost invariable results have been careful attention to, and weighing of, other students' comments, more participation, and class satisfaction with the process.

Conducting the Exercises

Two rows of chairs are set up, each row facing the other. A third row is then set up at one end of the first two rows, perpendicular to them, and facing the "middle ground" between the first two rows. For reasons that will soon be clear, this third row has about half as many chairs as the other two.

A statement is presented to the students. For example, "All intentional human actions are ultimately motivated by self-interest." The statement must divide the class. There should be at least several students whose initial inclinations are to agree with the statement and several whose initial inclinations are to disagree. The statement must be one which can be discussed on rational grounds, one for which supporting arguments can be proposed and refutations offered.

As shown in the illustration, students then seat themselves in Row A or Row B, depending on which side of the issue their inclinations dictate. Those who prefer to declare themselves undecided sit in Row C.

Someone from the pro side begins the discussion with an argument in favor of that position. Then someone from the con side responds to that argument, explaining why it does not sway him or her. The "undecideds" are encouraged to state their concerns or reservations at any time.

Students should understand the ground rules: Anyone can change seats at will. When someone on the pro side finds his mind changed by the course of the discussion, he moves to a seat on the con side. Perhaps later in the session he will move back again. Someone in the "undecided" row may move to the con side, then to the pro side, and finally, perhaps back to the "undecided" row. Such changes in one's "philosophical chair" may be made at any time.

The discussion and movement goes on for a specified period of time, perhaps one fifty-minute class period. Then the discussion might be just cut off wherever it is. Alternatively, each person might be given an opportunity to make a final statement about how he or she sees the current state of the discussion, saying, for example, which arguments have been persuasive or what kind of evidence would be necessary to resolve the issue. Some instructors using classroom exercises find it useful to reserve a few closing minutes for students to offer evaluations of the exercise itself.
Preliminaries

“Philosophical Chairs” has been a successful discussion format with as few students as eight and as many as forty. At the lower end of this range it is necessary that most of the participants be reasonably self-confident, because there will be peer expectation for each student to become actively involved. The possibility of being, at some point, the only advocate—or one of only two advocates—of either the pro or con side is high. When, by contrast, thirty or forty students are taking part, the format becomes unwieldy. It is easier for some students to lapse into anonymity, and others, who would like to “stay in the discussion,” find their opportunities to participate severely limited.

For those reasons, the format usually works best with about twenty students. I recommended that an instructor first apply it on an occasion when the group size lies between fifteen and twenty-five students. With experience, you may feel ready to widen the range.

The students should feel comfortable with their fellow students, and they should feel comfortable with the discussion format. To ensure the former, I recommend “Philosophical Chairs” be introduced only after a sense of trust and goodwill has been established within the classroom. To ensure the latter, I ask the class to decide whether this format should be employed. After explaining to the class that participation, at least collectively, is voluntary, and that this format works best in classes where there is a good rapport between students, the “yes” vote confirms in the students' own minds the belief that this cooperative spirit does in fact exist among them. I've never had a class decline the option.

In debates or disputes, success is often measured in terms of the proportion of one's original position which is retained at the end of the process. If many of the participants in an episode of "Philosophical Chairs" see their objective as "standing one's ground," then the exercise will be unsuccessful. When you introduce the format, stress to the participants that an open-minded willingness to allow one's mind to be changed upon the consideration of further evidence is an essential prerequisite of the experience.

Finally, the instructor should forewarn the participants that those who, at any one point, sit on one side (pro or con) need not agree on all points made or on the merit of specific arguments. Such a divergence of perspectives does not hinder the practical dynamics of "Philosophical Chairs."

The instructor or one of the students may take the role of moderator, choosing from among the raised hands of those who desire to respond to the previous point. Obviously, the object is to provide one or more speaking opportunities for each person who desires. Unless the class has already had some training in discussion techniques, free interaction between the sides typically results in multiple discussions (simultaneous conversations between particular persons on opposing sides), frequent reluctance to terminate the presentation of a point at an appropriate time, and continual interruptions. Even with a moderator, some exchanges become unmanageable because one or more persons get very excited about a point under discussion and forget that they must wait to be recognized. A hand bell, indicating a need for "silence in the room," may help.

Selecting a Discussion Topic

The topic to be discussed in the "Philosophical Chairs" setting need not be one which falls under a traditionally philosophical rubric such as ethics, metaphysics, or, epistemology. The topic could be one with direct implications for the humanities in general, or for the social or behavioral sciences. With imagination, "philosophical chairs" might instead focus on topics relating to mathematics, the sciences, or the fine arts. (Still, our format could be called "philosophical chairs", for the fundamental questions which resist simple resolutions and lie at the heart of each discipline, are indeed "philosophical").

The best discussion-statements are those which initially divide the class about evenly between pro and con, even if several are undecided. There should be at least four or five persons who choose the less popular of the two "decided" sides. The instructor therefore should prepare more than one discussion statement. Present them one at a time, asking students for a handshow of where their unexamined, first
inclinations would seat them at the outset. Once a statement passes this test, write it where all can see it, to help everyone keep in mind the precise formulation of the statement. Instructors new to this kind of classroom project will be surprised by the misunderstandings that regularly arise. Do not hesitate to spell out seemingly obvious qualifications.

For example, our sample question cited above is better stated as: "All intentional human actions are ultimately (if we look deeply enough) motivated by self-interest (a desire to benefit oneself)." Here is another: "All events, including human actions, are determined to be exactly as they are by past and present environment and/or biological factors." And another: "Human Reason is the tool which can discern whether an act is morally right or morally wrong." Your own statements need not be abstract as these. But it is desirable that the best arguments you can anticipate not rest primarily on factual knowledge. In fact, if the statement by its nature is unresolvable, or rests on definition, that is perhaps all for the better. The point of the exercise is to help students wonder and speculate about "what kind of evidence it would take" to resolve the issue. If the students themselves ultimately discover that the issue is, for some reason, unresolvable or that the truth of the statement rests on a matter of definition, then "Philosophical Chairs" will have made a definite contribution to their learning.

My experience with the format shows that the "undecided" row serves as a starting location for three kinds of students; (a) those who are drawn with approximately, equal force to both the pro and con sides, (b) those who feel that more thought or information would be needed to draw them toward either side, and (c) those who are not comfortable with this discussion format. Although the last might constructively be excused from class, "Philosophical Chairs" is a successful format for classroom discussion even when the number who start out undecided approaches fifty percent. There is almost always a significant amount of movement. The number of participants in each of the three rows will decrease and increase in several "waves" during the class hour. An interesting feature is that it is very unusual for the undecided group to boast more members at the end than at the beginning of the session.

Outcomes and Evaluation

As stated at the outset, the almost invariable results have been a more careful attention to and weighing of other students' comments, more participation, and class satisfaction with the process. The students pay attention to each point being made because each participant is, in effect, being constantly called upon to weigh that point in order to determine whether a literal change of position is warranted. The requisite willingness to modify one's own viewpoint in dialectical interaction not only reflects, but further fosters a perspective from which openmindedness is considered to be a virtue instead of a weakness. And exercise in actually evaluating statements on the basis of proffered evidence is crucial to the development of a person's critical-thinking skills.

Individual participation in discussions is greatly increased in almost every case.