

Social Studies Whole-Class Instructional Strategy:

Philosophical Chairs Debate

The Basics

What? A structured discussion technique that engages students in debate and deliberation about social studies topics and sources.

When? After students read a selection of texts or a set of sources, and are preparing to develop and express various claims about a topic in social studies.

Why? To promote text and evidence-supported responses, to improve communication and interpersonal skills, and to practice expressing and testing their ideas and claims against those of others.

How to Implement

Prework: Develop a question or prompt based on text(s) read in class that has no single right answer and has two reasonably equally arguable “sides” or positions. This question or prompt should engage students in thinking deeply about the topic and provided sources.

1. Have students read the text(s) and then pose the question or prompt to the class.
2. Ask students, using an [evidence chart](#), to locate evidence and choose a “side” based on the evidence.
3. Form two groups, each group representing a “side.”
4. 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 potential counterarguments.
5. Then have the class form two parallel lines, in which each group is in a different line facing each other.
6. Ask a group to establish their position and read their opening statement. Repeat with the other group.
7. 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 supporting reasons and evidence.
8. 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 happen multiple times throughout the debate.
9. Continue the debate for approximately ten minutes or until both sides have finished their

conversations.

10. Conclude the debate by asking the final groups to revise their opening statements and declare in writing their final position, reasons, and supporting evidence to answer the initial question or prompt.

Resources and Additional Information

- A brief [video](#) explaining this process and illustrating its use in a high 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.”
- Example evidence charts: [Grades 3-5](#), [Grades 6-12](#)
- Example topics in [Bayou Bridges: A Louisiana Social Studies Curriculum](#), in which the Philosophical Chairs Debate strategy would be helpful:
 - **Grades 3-5:** Code of Hammurabi (BB G4 U2, LSSSS 4.13.f), Articles of Confederation (BB G6 U5, LSSSS 5.9g)
 - **Grades 6-8:** Vietnam War (BB G8 U6, LSSSS 8.16, 8.16.c), Westward Expansion (BB G7 U3, LSSSS 7.10)