

Philosophical Chairs: Argument Writing

By Isabel Sawyer | Categories: Professional Learning

“The role of a teacher is to design and guide students through engaging learning opportunities.”

What do you think? Do you agree or disagree?

At our Instructional Leadership Team meeting last week, we had the chance to voice our opinions on the statement above. We examined the role of a teacher through a “Philosophical Chairs” discussion led by my colleague Tony Borash. Philosophical Chairs is a strategy for exploring a controversial topic through discussion. Using the protocol to guide our discussion gave us the opportunity to defend and think deeply about our ideas. As you can imagine, some of us switched sides several times!

The protocol is not only useful during professional development with teachers, it would be an interesting one to use when preparing your students to write persuasively. Through Philosophical Chairs, they have the opportunity to listen and understand an opposing side as well as clarify and state their personal beliefs succinctly. Using the discussion, they would then have a tremendous amount of information to think about when they write.

The protocol works as follows:

1. Choose and post a controversial statement that participants can either agree or disagree with.
2. Set up two rows of chairs facing one another. One side for participants who agree with the statement; the other side for folks who disagree.
3. Have participants move to one row or the other, depending on their belief or opinion.
4. Participants then take turns defending their position and may switch sides at any time.
5. Three rules guide the discussion: one person speaks at a time, everyone must have a turn before someone speaks twice, and you must repeat what the person on the opposing side said before you share your opinion.
6. The teacher serves as the moderator, helping speakers to stay on topic, encouraging all students to speak, and asking additional probing questions to keep the discussion going.