Lesson: Philosophical Chairs

Grade Level: 6-12

Students will learn about scenic conservation, visual clutter, and what defines community by analyzing points of debate surrounding some society’s most hotly debated issues. They will choose and support a stand on the issue during a round of philosophical chairs.

Objective:

- Scenic America Principles of Scenic Conservation #6: Teach young people to value the visual environment and to create and respect places of beauty.
- Analyze points of debate around various issues surrounding scenic conservation.
- Choose and support a stand on the issue of scenic conservation.

Vocabulary: claim, evidence, reasoning, visual pollution,

Materials:

- Chart paper, chalkboard, or whiteboard
- Markers or chalk for discussion board
- Philosophical Chairs Reflection Sheet printable
- Copies of the chosen current event article pertaining to topic, one per student
- Post-It notes or scrap paper
- Pencils
- Philosophical Chairs Discussion Assessment Chart printable
- Optional: Computers for online research

Teacher Preparation:

1. Set up your classroom for the "Philosophical Chairs" discussion. Have one designated area for students who agree with the topic. Directly across from the "agree" area should be a "disagree" area. In between the two should be a section for students who are neutral on the issue.
2. Select a debate topic from the options included in this curriculum guide and current event article which discusses the topic.
3. Write the topic/issue on a piece of chart paper or the chalkboard/whiteboard you are planning to use during the discussion.
4. Make a class set of the Philosophical Chairs “Rules of Engagement” printable to review with the students prior to the discussion.
5. Print copies of the Philosophical Chairs Reflection Sheet printable.
6. Print a copy of the Philosophical Chairs Discussion Student Assessment Rubric printable for your own use. **Note:** The chart has rows for 14 students. You will need to print a second copy to accommodate the number of students in your class.

7. Instruct students to read the current event article you chose about the topic prior to conducting the discussion.

**Procedures:**

1. Inform students that they will discuss the assigned reading with an activity called Philosophical Chairs. Essentially, Philosophical Chairs is a means of debating an issue. Students will respond to a question and be divided into groups based on their responses. They will then discuss their reasons for their answers.
2. Reveal the topic to students.
3. Provide each student with a Post-it Note or small piece of paper and instruct them to write down their name followed by their stance on the issue. They should write "agree," "disagree," or "neutral."
4. Collect student slips and position students in their chosen areas (agree, disagree, or neutral).
5. Select one student to start the discussion by stating why they chose their particular stance on the issue.
6. Throughout the discussion, take notes on students' participation using the Philosophical Chairs Discussion Assessment Rubric printable.
7. Continue with a detailed debate with students explaining why they have taken one of the three positions.
8. At the conclusion of the discussion, have students complete the Philosophical Chairs Reflection Sheet printable.

**Evaluation**

- Use the Philosophical Chairs Discussion Assessment Chart to rate the quality and quantity of each students’ contribution to the discussion.
- Review students' completed Philosophical Chairs Reflection Sheet printable.

**Differentiation:**

- You may want to review the current event article about your topic with your struggling students prior to the Philosophical Chairs discussion. Nonetheless, because this activity is strongly based on voicing opinions and listening actively, it is accessible to all learners.

**Extension:**

- Ask students to conduct online research to find texts and examples that either support their position on the issue or bring new information to the discussion.
- Have students get the perspective of their parents on the topic discussed in class in order to prepare for writing their position papers.

**National Standards:**

- **Science:** MS-LS2-1. MS-LS2-4. MS-LS2-2. MS-ESS3-4. HS-LS2-4. HS-LS2-1. HS-LS2-6. HS-LS4-5. HS-ESS3-1.
- **Engineering Design:** MS-ETS1-1. MS-ETS1-2. HS-ETS1-1.
- **Social Studies:** Culture; People, Places, & Environments; Power, Authority, & Governance; Civic Ideals & Practices; Science, Technology, & Society.
Philosophical Chairs
Rules of Engagement

1. Be sure you understand the central statement or topic before the discussion begins. Decide which section you will sit in.

2. Listen carefully when others speak and seek to understand their arguments even if you don’t agree.

3. Wait for the mediator to recognize you before you speak; only one person speaks at a time.

4. You must first summarize briefly the previous speaker’s argument before you make your response.

5. If you have spoken for your side, you must wait until three other people on your side speak before you speak again.

6. Be sure that when you speak, you address the ideas, not the person stating them.

7. Keep an open mind and move to the other side or the undecided section if you feel that someone made a good argument or your opinion is swayed.

8. Support the mediator by maintaining order and helping the discussion to progress.
**Philosophical Chairs Topics**

1. Visual pollution is an aesthetic issue.
2. Visual pollution is an ethical issue.
3. What makes a city a city—does it really matter anyway?
4. Culture determines the character of a city/town.
5. Knowing about ecosystems is irrelevant because I will never use it in real life.
6. How people get around cities and towns plays a vital role in determining its worth.
7. The character of a town is determined by the number of billboards.
8. The number of billboards does not determine the worth of cities and towns.
9. Geographical features do not determine the worth of a cities and towns.
10. Geographical features do not determine the character of cities and towns.
11. Visual polluters should pay fines for obstructing views of the natural world.
12. Greater penalties should be given to oil companies for oil spills.
13. All chemicals that cause damage to the ozone layer should be prohibited from use or sale.
14. Windmills should be outlawed because they obstruct the view of geographical features.
Philosophical Chairs Student Reflection

Philosophical Chairs Report Central Statement/Topic:
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Do you feel that this was a controversial topic that was applicable to our current unit of study? Why or why not?
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

My original position: Pro Con Undecided
  ● How many times did I change my seat? ________

My ending position: Pro Con Undecided
  ● How open-minded was I as I listened to other people talk?
    € Mostly open-minded
    € Partially open-minded
    € Not very open-minded

Explain why your position changed or did not change and the rationale behind your thinking.
_____________________________________________________________________________________
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Philosophical Chairs Discussion Student Assessment Rubric

**Directions:** Tally the number of times each student does the following.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Debate Explained Point Clearly</th>
<th>Asked a Question</th>
<th>Responded to a Question</th>
<th>Helped Others—Builds On Another’s Point</th>
<th>Helped Others—Had a Side Discussion</th>
<th>Made Eye Contact while Speaking</th>
<th>Referred to Text/Citations</th>
<th>Gave Examples/Expanded on Ideas</th>
<th>Disrespectful or Disruptive</th>
<th>No Contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Scenic America’s Principles of Scenic Conservation

Principle #1 - Retain the distinctive character of our communities and countryside by rebuilding older cities, towns and suburbs as beautiful places in which to live and work; and conserve agricultural land and open space.

- Set aside open space for greenways, parks, trails and river corridors;
- Protect farms and ranches from subdivision through agricultural zoning, conservation land trusts, agricultural land banking, and tax abatement; and
- Create incentives for growth to help rebuild older cities and towns, and to create compact, transit-oriented, pedestrian-friendly mixed-use communities.

Principle #2 – Foster new development that respects the special character of places as defined by their distinctive geographical features, cultures, climate and natural systems.

- Encourage communities to identify and map the visual qualities they most value, and then adopt strategies to conserve them.
- Incorporate aesthetics into performance measures for planning, siting and construction of all new development.
- Establish comprehensive community tree policies that preserve existing trees, control tree cutting and tree damage during construction, and add new trees to replace those lost over the years to development.

Principle #3 – Encourage a balance of regulatory and market approaches to protect scenic resources including rewarding land stewardship by property owners, local governments and corporations; and providing disincentives for practices that destroy scenic values.

- Provide tax incentives and property tax relief for scenic conservation and good land stewardship; and
- Make visual polluters pay by fining those who break the law; taxing those who use the visual environment for commercial advertising based on the true value of their asset; and levying fees for uncompensated use of the roadways to cover the cost of services and access to the public right-of-way.

Principle #4 - Design a national transportation system that respects aesthetic values as well as economic and energy efficiency, social equity, and environmental qualities.

- Encourage excellence in road design and in bridge construction and reconstruction; and allow flexibility in design standards to respect scenic, historic, natural and community values; and
- Landscape our highways and community gateways to incorporate native vegetation and to reflect themes of local history and culture.
Principle #5 - Prevent mass marketing and outdoor advertising from intruding on the landscape or community appearance.

- Produce dramatic and immediate results in the scenic character of our landscape by banning the construction of new billboards and strictly regulating existing billboards; using any constitutional means to remove existing billboards within a reasonable period of time; and halting all cutting of trees and vegetation on public land to improve the visibility of billboards;
- Set height and size standards for on-premise signs;
- Promote well-designed logo and tourist-oriented directional signage systems, along with other information technologies to help travelers find the services they need;
- Regulate other forms of outdoor advertising including the exterior of public buses, floating or flying messages, posters on bus shelters, street furniture, and store windows, corporate sponsorship of public service events so as to minimize intrusiveness on our enjoyment of the built and natural environments; and
- Minimize the visibility of cellular communication, utility and energy generation technologies.

Principle #6 - Teach young people to value the visual environment and to create and respect places of beauty.

- Incorporate scenic conservation into all elementary and secondary environmental and geography education curricula.
- Incorporate the values of scenic conservation into graduate courses in economics, planning, design, and public policy.
- Integrate scenic conservation projects into scouting and school service learning programs.

Principle #7 – Actively engage business, industry, civic and professional organizations in the movement for a more scenic America.

- Promote the link between business and tourism development and conservation of natural, cultural, recreational, heritage and scenic resources; and
- Enlist retired professionals whose skills and political clout can benefit scenic conservation.
Next Generation Science Standards

Engineering Design

K-2ETS1-1. Ask questions, make observations, and gather information about a situation people want to change to define a simple problem that can be solved through the development of a new or improved object or tool.

K-2-ETS1-2. Develop a simple sketch, drawing, or physical model to illustrate how the shape of an object helps it function as needed to solve a given problem.

K-2-ETS1-3. Analyze data from tests of two objects designed to solve the same problem to compare the strengths and weaknesses of how each performs.

3-5.ES1-1. Define a simple design problem reflecting a need or a want that includes specified criteria for success and constraints on materials, time, or cost.

3-5-ES1-2. Generate and compare multiple possible solutions to a problem based on how well each is likely to meet the criteria and constraints of the problem.

3-5-ES1-3. Plan and carry out fair tests in which variables are controlled and failure points are considered to identify aspects of a model or prototype that can be improved.

MS-ETS1-1. Define the criteria and constraints of a design problem with sufficient precision to ensure a successful solution, taking into account relevant scientific principles and potential impacts on people and the natural environment.

MS-ETS1-2. Evaluate competing design solutions using a systematic process to determine how well they meet the criteria and constraints of the problem.

MS-ETS1-3. Analyze data from tests to determine similarities and differences among several design solutions to identify the best characteristics of each that can be combined into a new solution to better meet the criteria for success.

MS-ETS1-4. Develop a model to generate data for iterative testing and modification of a proposed object, tool, or process such that an optimal design can be achieved.

HS-ETS1-1. Analyze a major global challenge to specify qualitative or quantitative criteria and constraints for solutions that account for societal needs and wants.

HS-ETS1-2. Design a solution to a complex real-world problem by breaking it down into smaller, more manageable problems that can be solved through engineering.

HS-ETS1-3. Evaluate a solution to a complex real-world problem based on prioritized criteria and trade-offs that account for a range of constraints, including cost, safety, reliability, and aesthetics, as well as possible social, cultural, and environmental impacts.

HS-ETS1-4. Use a computer simulation to model the impact of proposed solutions to a complex real-world problem with numerous criteria and constraints on interactions within and between systems relevant to the problem.