

## **Philosophical Chair Activity Plan: Washington State Coal Train Ports Controversy**

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### **Description:**

This lesson considers a high-profile regional issue and uses the “Philosophical Chairs” strategy to determine whether or not coal ports benefit Washington State. Students will have the opportunity to defend and think deeply about their ideas—and to “switch sides” as often as they want. A notably neutral article/video will serve as the impetus for discussion and three options are listed under “Materials”. There are many current articles in local papers that could also be used. If “the role of a teacher is to design and guide students through engaging learning opportunities”, then this activity does just that.

### **Grade Level:**

Grade 7

### **Duration:**

One Period (and many opportunities to extend beyond)

### **Goals:**

Students will better appreciate the environmental, social and political complexities of an important regional issue.

### **Objectives:**

Students will build critical thinking skills that involve:

- reading/viewing and citing informational media.
- analyzing points of debate around coal train ports in Washington State.
- participating in a Philosophical Chair and reflection.

### **Standards:**

This lesson meets the following Common Core and Washington State Social Studies Standards:

- Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration 1 - Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts and issues, building on other’s ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- Social Studies - Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary or secondary sources.
- Civics Standard 4 - Understands the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and the principles of democratic civic involvement.
- Geography - Understands and analyzes how the environment has affected people and how people have affected the environment in Washington State in the past or present.
- Economics 2.4.1 - Understands and analyzes the distribution of wealth and sustainability of resources in Washington State.
- Economics 2.2.2 - Understands and analyzes how the forces of supply and demand have affected international trade in Washington State in the past or present.

### **Materials:**

- Primary Resources:
  - Article: “14,000 Weigh In on Coal Trains” by Bill Sheets on Jan, 21, 2013  
[www.heraldnet.com/article/20130121/NEWS01/701219941](http://www.heraldnet.com/article/20130121/NEWS01/701219941)
  - Streaming Video: “Coal Trains” <http://sustainabilityhub.com/tag/kcts-9> or
  - Article: “Voices of Coal” <http://earthfix.info/coalvoices>
- Post-It notes
- Note cards or Cornell note sheets (use your school requirement for taking notes)
- Signs that read: “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Neutral”

- AVID Philosophical Chairs reflection sheet (see Page 3)
- AVID Philosophical Chair Discussion Assessment Chart (see Page 4)

### **Classroom Set Up:**

In advance of the lesson, physically arrange desks in the classroom to reflect “sides” for a debate. Have a designated area for students who disagree with the topic; directly across should be an agree area; and, in between the two, include a section for students who are neutral or undecided on the issue.

### **Directions:**

1. Inform students they will discuss the assigned reading or video with an activity called “Philosophical Chairs”, a means of debating an issue.
2. Describe the activity and review the rules: Only one person may speak at a time, followed by a debate from the other position. A student may move to the other position at any time.
3. Reveal the topic: Instruct students to read the statement (written on the white board):" Coal train ports will benefit Washington State."
4. Read article and/or view video, in class if it has not already been assigned the night before as homework.
5. Ask students to cite from source at least 2 pieces of information they might use as they debate.
6. Provide each student with a Post-It note and instruct them to write down their name followed by their stance on the issue. They should write "agree", "disagree", or "neutral."
7. Collect student slips and identify the designated areas of the classroom. Request that students move to the areas that reflect their positions.
8. Select one student to start the discussion by stating why he/she chose their particular stance on the issue.
9. A mediator—a reliable student volunteer—is selected to remain neutral and call on sides to speak. The mediator may paraphrase statements made by students.
10. The teacher will assess each student’s participation and responses by using the assessment sheet on Page 4.

### **Assessment:**

- Collect Student Reflection Sheets (see Page 3) and assign a value out of 5 for content, support, and expression. [www.scholastic.com/content/collateral\\_resources/pdf/m/mentor0708nicolesledge/philochairreflectionsheetsheet.pdf](http://www.scholastic.com/content/collateral_resources/pdf/m/mentor0708nicolesledge/philochairreflectionsheetsheet.pdf)
- Review Teacher’s Discussion Assessment Chart (see Page 4) and assign a value out of 5 based on notes. [www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/collateral\\_resources/pdf/m/mentor0708nicolesledge/DiscussAssessChart.pdf](http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/collateral_resources/pdf/m/mentor0708nicolesledge/DiscussAssessChart.pdf)

### **Lesson Extensions:**

Assign students the task of completing additional research on their own and writing a 250-word expository essay or “letter to the editor” to explain their position on the controversial topic.

### **Home Extension:**

Have students ask their parents to share their opinions and discuss, in class, how opinions are shaped.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Philosophical Chairs – Student Reflection Sheet**

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

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

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your original position (circle one): Agree Disagree Neutral

Your ending position (circle one): Agree Disagree Neutral

Explain why your position changed or did not change and the rationale behind your thinking.

\_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

**PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS – TEACHER’S DISCUSSION ASSESSMENT CHART**

Tally the number of times each student does the following:

Name	Asks Question(s)	Responds to Question(s)	Makes Eye Contact while Speaking	Refers to the Text	Has Side Discussion