



## Undergraduate Students and Philosophy for Children

Allie Clay (BA 2016)

For more than 15 years, the Center's work has included an undergraduate course about philosophical inquiry, part of which involves UW students visiting K-12 philosophy sessions. In the past 5 years, the program has grown to include 4 annual classes, including a graduate seminar. Students in these courses learn about the theory and practice of doing philosophy with children and youth, and participate in K-12 philosophy sessions with mentoring and supervision from experienced philosophy instructors.

"This is really getting deep," remarked an eleven-year-old student at a recent philosophy class session. I smiled at her candidness, yet indeed we were getting deep; we were in the midst of discussing what makes up a personality, wondering what is the "you" that makes you, you.

Philosophical discussions like these in UW Philosophy for Children classes and schools around Seattle keep us on the edge of our seats. Opportunities to spend time in these classrooms affect our college and career choices, and influence our perceptions of children and education.

"Philosophy for Children was one of my favorite classes at UW. We didn't just talk about doing philosophy with kids, we actually got to try out the lessons ourselves, and discuss the things kids doing philosophy would discuss," remarks Janaki Nagarajan (BA 2015). The UW Philosophy for Children classes are experiential. Students read stories, engage in activities, ask philosophical questions, and discuss and practice lesson plans for schools. Gurdeep Gill, a current undergraduate student, recalls, "It reminded me of how almost everything is philosophical. From children's books to games." In these classes, we practice creating space for authentic conversations with children, whose eyes are fresh to the world and who are willing to take seriously questions adults sometimes overlook. What emerges is a realization of how powerful inquiry-based education can be. The UW course is a mirror image of the work we do in school classrooms, the experience as illuminating.

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Doing philosophy with children requires hearing with both ears. “Kids are constantly saying amazing, notable, awe-inspiring things,” notes Dustin Stoddart (B.A. 2013). Gill remembers an insightful conversation in an elementary school about the distinction between needs and wants:

One student said she wanted a cat, but needed a dog. I thought that by need she meant REALLY wanted a dog, so I asked her the difference between a want and a need. She said she likes cats and would want to have one as a pet, but needs a dog because a dog keeps her safe when she is home alone and scared. It really stuck with me because it made me realize that in a different school in a wealthier district, both animals would probably have been labeled as wants, but for this student a dog was the difference between staying safe and unsafe.

We learn a lot from these classes and are able to impact the local community in a tangible way. “Getting to apply [philosophical] ideas in classrooms helped me see philosophy as a meaningful discipline concerned with much more than reading the thoughts of often long dead men,” comments Nagarajan. The Philosophy for Children program enables curious minds, from elementary school to college, to apply philosophy in meaningful ways both inside and out of the academic environment.

Outside the program, we find ways back in. The Philosophy for Children program is the reason Nagarajan chose to become an elementary school teacher, and how Stoddart ended up with a full-time position doing enrichment work at a local school. Furthermore, due to its experiential nature, Philosophy for Children transfers into our daily lives just as well. “When I see the news, or watch movies, or hear someone make a bold statement, I’m equipped with the tools and mindset from doing Philosophy for Children to really critically think about what’s being said, and if it makes sense,” states Nagarajan.

Experiences with philosophy in the UW course and classroom sessions with kids echo one another. There’s nothing like a classroom that feels alive, with everyone engaged and centered on a question. What began for me as an intriguing class on the time schedule has become something I plan to incorporate into whatever I pursue. From taking the UW class to facilitating philosophy in schools, Philosophy for Children has become a life experiment – one which breaks up routine thought and education structure, and illuminates how we can teach experientially and better listen to others.

## From the Blog

### The Important Things in Life, and Rules that Help Us Keep Them

#### IMPORTANT THINGS:



In two fifth grade classrooms at John Muir Elementary School last week, I read to the students chapter 12 from E.B. White’s *Stuart Little*, in which Stuart, who, despite being the son of human parents, looks exactly like and is the same size as a field mouse, has taken a one-day job as a substitute teacher. He tells the class that he would like to be “Chairman of the World,” asking them what they think is important and suggesting that the world needs some rules to run properly. The students suggest rules like, “No stealing,” “No being mean,” and “Don’t kill anything except rats.” [Read More](#)

## From the Director



The Center is involved in several exciting projects this year, all of which stem from the tremendous growth we have experienced over the past 5 years. We are grateful to the University of Washington and the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Department of Philosophy in particular, for all their support of our work, as well as to the individual and foundation donors who make our work possible.

First, we are working on the development of a Graduate Certificate in Philosophy for Children at UW, which would involve courses in philosophy and in education, time in K-12 classrooms, and a Capstone Experience. We hope that this will provide graduate students involved in this work with a clear and extensive structure through which to gain the skills and experience necessary to facilitate successfully philosophy sessions in schools.

Second, last fall we launched a new program at [Thurgood Marshall Elementary School](#), a racially and ethnically diverse school that offers two academic tracks to its students — the Scholars Cohort (SC) and the Highly Capable Cohort (HCC). Students are able to test into the HCC at a young age, and are mostly white and Asian, largely from middle to upper income families, while the SC program serves neighborhood students who are almost entirely students of color with about 70% qualifying for free and reduced price lunches. Teachers and administrators are aware that these two academic tracks have somewhat segregated the children along racial lines, and have prioritized race and equity efforts within the school to reduce the gap between these two cohorts. As part of that effort, the Center has run philosophy sessions with the entire 5th grade since last fall. This year College of Education researchers Debi Talukdar and David Phelps are taking field notes and audio-taping the sessions in two of these classrooms, each composed of an equal number of SC and HCC students, in order to better understand the impact of the work done by the Center. The questions we are most interested in are:

1. Are there changes over time in student engagement in philosophy sessions in mixed 5th grade classrooms of HCC and SC students?
2. What facilitation strategies lead to greater or diminished student engagement?

Third, for the first time we are leading monthly Professional Learning Community (PLC) sessions for teachers at UW. In the past, we have led monthly PLC sessions at individual schools, and this year we decided to try hosting a UW series, bringing together teachers from all over Seattle. We are very excited about the response to this initiative and are looking forward to the development in the coming months of a strong community of inquiry (see related article in this newsletter).

Our Philosophers in the Schools and High School Ethics Bowl programs are both off to strong starts this year, offering regular philosophy sessions to hundreds of elementary and middle school students and involving dozens of high school students in thinking about challenging ethical problems. Other coming events of note include plans for three Visiting Scholars this year, from Turkey, Portugal, and Iran, as well as our parent events and annual spring workshop for teachers.

## Monthly Professional Learning Community

This year we are hosting a monthly workshop on philosophical inquiry in classrooms at the University of Washington, which is approved for up to 13.5 clock hours. The workshop is open to teachers and others interested in exploring how introducing philosophy can enrich student learning.

We had our first session in October, with 20 participants exploring a High School Ethics Bowl case and discussing such questions as whether there should be an expectation of privacy for online behavior, what moral obligations colleges and universities have to their students and to helping to form students' moral characters, and to what extent are people's identities and characters revealed through social media.

Sponsored by the UW Center for Philosophy for Children and the Department of Philosophy, the workshop is free, including materials and refreshments.



## Philosophers in the Schools

So far this fall our [Philosophers in the Schools program](#) involves over 25 philosophy classes in Seattle public school classrooms in six elementary schools and one middle school, as well as three philosophy classes (for students in grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-5) in the [UW's Robinson Center Saturday Program](#), all led by faculty, graduate students, and volunteers, as well as involving a number of undergraduate students enrolled in our fall UW classes. We are also grateful for the continued support for this program from the [UW's Pipeline Project](#).

We are in the fifth year of our philosopher-in-residence program at [John Muir Elementary School](#), and very fortunate to have Karen Emmerman (Ph.D. philosophy, 2012) continuing to serve in this role. We greatly appreciate the support of the [Squire Family Foundation](#), which has funded this position for the past four years.

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Our Education Director, David Shapiro, writes about a practice he uses in classrooms:

## Mind Warmups

In preparation for physical activity, be it running a race, playing a sport, or even dancing a two-step, it's a good idea to warm up our bodies. Some simple stretching exercises can be quite effective in helping to prevent injuries like pulled hamstrings or muscle cramps.

Similarly, in preparing for mental activity, especially philosophy, (and especially philosophy with children), I like to suggest to students that it's probably prudent to begin by warming up our minds. Some simple activities that stretch our thoughts can reduce the likelihood that we will experience a headache, or even worse, the dreaded brain cramp, (an affliction made especially problematic, as one fifth grader at Whittier elementary a few years ago pointed out, since treating it would be so difficult. "I know that with a muscle cramp, I could put heat on it or get a massage," she said, "but with a brain cramp, would I just have to think about heat or a massage?")

With this in mind, I have made it a pretty standard practice, over the past four or five years of doing philosophy in the classroom—with students from second grade, through middle school, and even in my college classes—to begin with what I've taken to call a "Mind Warmup." Basically, each Mind Warmup is a series of questions or prompts for students to reflect upon, and often share back with the group, as a way of "stretching" their minds, mainly by giving them the opportunity to intentionally direct their thoughts to specific ideas and make note of their ability to do so as they do.

The Mind Warmups can be classified into two types: the first, and more common, in which students reflect upon each prompt and share their answers with the group; and the second, in which students are prompted

through a guided reflection, that they then write about and/or discuss afterwards.

An example of the first type is the following list of prompts originally developed to warm up the minds of second-graders:

Think a really big thought  
Think a really small thought  
Think a really hard thought  
Think a really soft thought  
Think a really heavy thought  
Think a really light thought  
Think the oldest thought you can  
Think the newest thought you can

After each prompt, students share their thought. "Big thoughts" are typically physically big things, like the Universe, or an elephant, or the school building. But sometimes students will offer a "big" thought that stimulates further philosophical reflection like "Why is there time?" or "Who made words?"

Or, for example, in the second-grade class, students were sharing their "hard" thoughts: one girl said "a rock;" another said, "diamonds;" the next boy said, "My dad." Surprised by this, I asked why, and he replied, quite casually, "Because he left us." Although I was quite taken aback by this answer, it provided a basis for a really interesting conversation about different meanings of the word "hard," and how come we use the same words to mean different things.

On that occasion, (as has happened a number of times subsequently), the Mind Warmup expanded to become the entire session; preparation for the lesson turned into the lesson itself.

And while students certainly stretched their thinking, no one suffered the dreaded brain cramp.

\* A collection of mind warmups appears on our website [here](#).

## Focus on the Classroom

### Lying and Pretending

Natalie Janson, Philosophy for Children Graduate Fellow

Young people are taught that “honesty is the best policy” and that lying is wrong, but often engage in role-playing behavior that allows them to explore other points of view. These ideas can be explored by young people in a variety of ways, including children's literature. Mo Willems' *I'm A Frog* is one of many great books to open up a conversation about lying and pretending. We explored the question, “Is there a difference between lying and pretending?” with my third grade class.

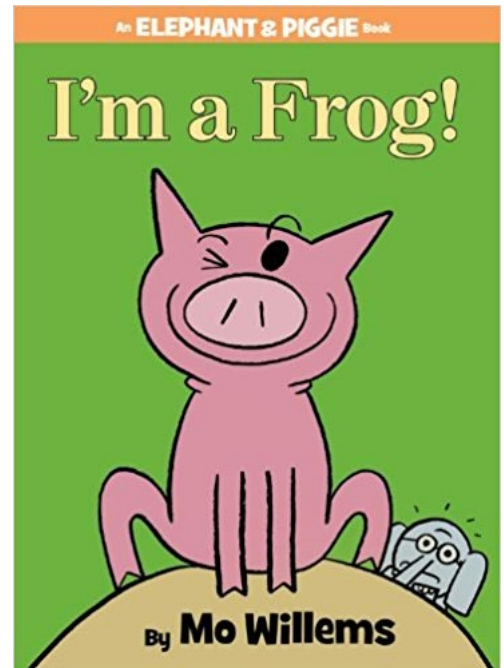
Individual students tend to have many experiences with lying and pretending, and the students offered varying answers to this question. Most of the students wanted to share experiences about how someone in their life, typically a parent, was aware that the child was lying. “My mom can always tell if I am lying!” Another student posed the view that there is no difference between lying and pretending. She stated that it doesn't matter if you are lying or are pretending, because in both cases the thing still never happened. Whether you are telling people you are a doctor, or just playing a doctor at recess, you still are not a doctor.

Another student contended that there is a difference between the two, because of the emotions associated with each act. He said that “lying feels sad” and that this involves the guilt that is often experienced in tandem with a lie. For young people, lying about doing your chores or homework might make you feel sad because it comes with an immediate and tangible consequence. Or

lying might feel sad because it can evoke negative social reactions. The student went on to claim that “pretending doesn't feel sad.” In fact, most students find pretending fun. Young people like playing circus at recess, they like acting like teachers and detectives and police officers. When children play games, it is clear to all that they are not actually cats or mermaids or astronauts.

As a class, we did not explore this further, but I am curious about whether pretending can eventually turn into lying. And can lying ever feel something other than sad?

In *I'm a Frog*, Piggie states that she is a frog, which is surprising to Piggie's friend, Gerald. Piggie then explains that she is pretending and the two discuss what it means to pretend and who pretends. This picture book provides an opportunity to explore ideas of honesty with young people, and to help them consider the relationship between lying and pretending.

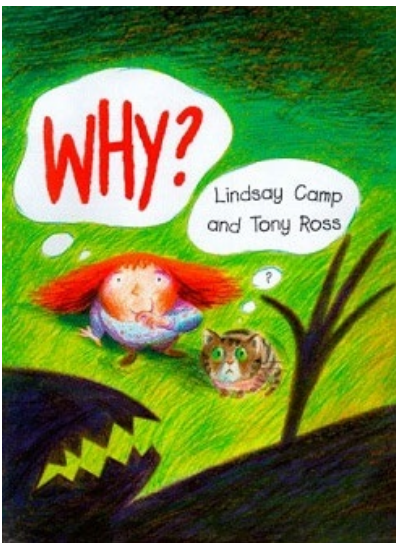


## For Parents

We will again hold two events for parents this school year – one in October and one in April – about ways to engage in philosophical conversations with children. These events are held at [Post Alley Café](#) in the U-District, and a big thank you to owner (and Philosophy Department alum) Marcia Evans, for contributing the space as well as the wine, coffee, and delicious appetizers.



Our first event this year was held on October 24 and was led by Janice Moskalik, Seattle University Philosophy Instructor and Center board member and philosophy instructor. Janice read to the group the picture book *Why?* by Lindsay Camp and Tony Ross. In



the story, Lily, in response to virtually anything that happens, asks the question, “Why?” Her dad tries to respond to her questioning, but sometimes, “when he was a bit tired or too busy,” he’d say only, “It just does, Lily. It just does.” One day a giant

spaceship lands and the aliens that emerge from the ship announce that their mission is to

destroy the planet. Terrified, no one responds, except Lily, who asks, of course, “Why?” After a series of Lily’s “why” questions, the aliens realize that they don’t know why, and they leave.

Reading the story with children can raise such questions as:

*Why ask why?*

*What is the purpose of a question?*

*Why do we ask questions?*

*What makes a question a good one?*

*Is curiosity a good thing?*

*Why do you think Lily’s father sometimes became annoyed with Lily when she asked “Why?”*

*Could a question really save the world?*

*Could it destroy it?*

*Can asking “why?” be dangerous? Can not asking it be dangerous?*

After reading the story to the group, Janice asked us to think of some “why” questions that we thought were important to ask and to which we didn’t have the answers. We then came together in small groups, adults and children, shared our questions and discussed many of them, including:

*Why were we created?*

*Why can’t we accept each other’s differences?*

*Why do we want to be happy?*

*Why does the universe exist?*

*Why do we ask the question “Why?”*

*Why are there bullies?*

*Why don’t we ever learn to get along with others in the world?*

*Why am I thinking about questions that start with the word “What?”*

**We hope to see many of you at future events!**

## High School Ethics Bowl

The [2018 Washington State High School Ethics Bowl](#) will be held on February 3, 2018, at the University of Washington School of Law. The Ethics Bowl is a collaborative yet competitive event in which teams analyze a series of wide-ranging ethical dilemmas. Over 100 high school students and teachers and 40 judges, lawyers, UW faculty and other educators participated last year, and we expect as many or more participants for the 2018 event. We again have an Ethics Bowl intern, Gurdeep Gill, a senior at UW, who has been doing a wonderful job organizing the registration and helping the involved schools and UW student volunteers get started.



Unlike debate, Ethics Bowls do not involve teams forced to take adversarial positions or hold fast to assigned perspectives. Instead, students have a forum in which to engage in dialogue, and they are judged on the quality of their analysis – how well they reason through the issues, organize and present arguments, analyze a case's morally relevant features, and respond to commentary and questions – and the degree to which they engage in a thoughtful, civil exchange.

**We invite all Washington State high schools to participate.**

High school teams typically include three to five students (and can also include a couple of alternates) and a coach (ideally, a high school teacher). We will assign a graduate or undergraduate philosophy student as a resource for each interested school. **Each school may enter up to two teams in the competition.** Schools can register [here](#).

The deadline for registration is December 15, 2017.



## Graduate Fellows

This year the Center has three graduate fellows, all from the College of Education. We are very grateful to alum and Center board member Dan Gerler (BA, Philosophy and Psychology, 1983) for his generous gift supporting our fellowship program!



**Natalie Janson** is a graduate student in the Social & Cultural Foundations of Education program in the College of Education. She is a certified K-8 teacher, with experience in third grade where she facilitated philosophical discussions with her students. She loves seeing students think critically and creatively about real world issues, and hopes that doing so will allow them to live their best lives.



**Jordan Sherry-Wagner** is a Ph.D. student in the College of Education and co-supervising director of a local early learning center. Broadly, his research aims at generating axiological change how we think about childhood development and education toward increased recognition and resources for the field. To him, there are few things as important and fulfilling as working with young learners to develop critical thinking skills, humanistic values, and philosophical dispositions. He is currently working on several intertwined projects that collectively work toward decolonizing human-nature relations in public science education, creating a modern instantiation of progressive early education through his early learning center, and studying the impact of increasingly complex technologies on culture, learning, and development.



**Christina Zaccagnino** is a Master's student in Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education, where she specializes in science education. Before attending UW, she spent three years teaching middle school science and building a STEM program at a private school in Brooklyn, NY. She was the director of a STEM summer camp for grades K-6. Her undergraduate degree is in Teaching Chemistry. Christina appreciates when the "why" questions show up in the science classroom and enjoys openly exploring them with students. She looks forward to her involvement with the Philosophy for Children program.



## Supporting the Center

Philosophy in schools makes space for children and youth to explore together some of the foundational questions in life that matter most to them. Students often observe that this is one of the few places in school that they feel empowered to ask their own questions and seek their own answers, building their confidence in their own perspectives and ideas.

### We need your help!

The Center's work is largely made possible through individual donations.

Gifts from donors help fund our Philosophers in the Schools program, the Philosophy for Children graduate fellowships, the High School Ethics Bowl, our parent programs, and our annual workshop for teachers.

We are working to build our capacity to keep philosophy in the schools continuing and growing!

Resources are needed to provide more support and education for teachers and reach more young people eager for engagement with philosophy.

**Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Center!**

**You can donate online [here](#).**

You can also send a check to:  
Center for Philosophy for Children  
University of Washington Box 353350  
Seattle, WA 98195-3350

Your gifts make all the difference - thank you!



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**Thank you to our board of directors for their steadfast support and enthusiasm!**

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