



[Home](#) > [Archives](#) > Student: Leanne Doherty

Student: Leanne Doherty

When Leanne Doherty stood in front of the grade six class at George P. Nicholson School for the first time, she was nervous. After all, it's not every day you lead a roomful of 12 year-olds in a philosophical discussion.

Doherty, a student in John Simpson's Philosophy 101 course, began by reading them *The Giving Tree* – Shel Silverstein's classic story about a tree that provides a young boy with everything he asks for until all it has left is a stump. As the story progressed, she asked the students to move from one side of the room to the other based on whether they thought the boy was being mean.

The exercise was designed to make the children think about complex issues like the relationship between humans and the environment, and to spark debate in the process. It worked. "They got really engaged and were super excited to discuss [the issues] even during the game," Doherty says, and afterwards a lively discussion continued until the end of the session.

The idea for university students to introduce children to philosophical ideas through picture books is part of the worldwide Philosophy for Children (P4C) educational movement. The U of A has had its own P4C program since 2008, when Professor Rob Wilson founded Philosophy for Children Alberta. A recent grant from the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund made it possible for Wilson to expand the program's reach into new territory this year, sending undergraduates into schools as a Community-Service Learning component offered in several introductory philosophy classes.

The point is not only to promote critical thinking in young children, but to provide U of A students with opportunities to apply their classroom knowledge in real-life settings and to develop new skills. "We had to make [the content] understandable for elementary students, but still keep it at the level of university philosophy," Doherty explains. "Trying to bridge that – and still trying to keep them engaged – was challenging."

After four sessions with the children, Doherty could see that she and her partner had made progress. "You're trying to get [the students] to build on their own ideas," she says. "By the last conversation I let them talk and only stepped in one or two times, which is what we were going for – to get them to stop looking at the teacher and start telling each other what they thought."