Live Animals in the College Classroom: The Difference an Animal Ambassador Makes in Enhancing Student Communication Skills

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Introduction

• College students lack “soft skills,” including oral communication (Bronson, 2007; Brooks et al., 2008; Schneider, 2015)

• Public speaking anxiety is a problem (Emanuel, 2005; Hunter, Westwick, & Haleta, 2014; Witt & Behnke, 2006)
  – Prompting speakers to avoid public communication
  – Debilitating to one’s perception of success
Can animals help?

• In educational settings, Animal Ambassadors (AA) can...
  – Increase learner engagement (Swanagan, 2000; Dillon et al., 2006)
  – Help learners identify with an animal on an emotional level (Dierking et al., 2002)
• Little empirical evidence on the influence of using AA’s on a presenter’s communication ability
The class: *Animals in Education*

- Students trained in safely handling, transporting, and teaching with live animals
- Team teaching activities using animals (videotaped)
  - Part 1: Build presentation and deliver to classmates
  - Part 2: Deliver revised presentation to special needs youth
- Animal Ambassadors
  - Turtles, snakes, salamanders, and baby chicks
Methods: Data Collection

• Qualitative
  – Student interviews (phone and in-person)
    • 3 student participants
    • 30-45 minutes in length
    • 9 questions related to their participation in the course and based on collective findings from assignments
Methods: Data Analysis

• Thematic Analysis (Creswell, 2008)
  – 3 reviews of the data to establish and refine themes
• Trustworthiness and Rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
  – Member checking
  – Triangulation
  – Journaling
  – Peer checking
  – Data saturation
Results

• Theme #1: Attention on the Animal

  – Participant 1 – “Everyone always focused on the snake instead of me…”
  – Participant 3 – “I felt like the students were watching the animal and not me.”
Results

• Theme #2: Opened Career Interests

• Participant 1 – “I had always known that I had an interest in Falconry, but it wasn’t until I took this class that I knew it could be a career!”
Results

• Theme #3: Unusual Animals

• Participant 2 – “Everyone has seen a puppy or a kitten, but most people are afraid of snakes ... that is what made them so cool to work with, I lost that fear and wasn’t afraid anymore!”
Results

• Theme #4: Audience Analysis

• Participant 3 – “The animal and engagement depends on the audience...”

• Participant 1 – “I was able to engage the participants because I had a snake or turtle in my hands...”
Conclusions

• Animals reduced anxiety towards public speaking
• Built awareness of new animals and reduced fear of some species
• Enhanced likelihood to pursue animal handling and teaching as a career
• Increased course engagement
Future Research

• What about an inanimate teaching tool?
  – Touching live turtles and rabbits reduces anxiety, while touching stuffed animal toys does not (Shiloh, Sorek, & Terkel, 2003)

• What is the long-term impact on students?
  – Impact of teaching youth with special needs?

• What about the instructor (modeling behaviors)?