Helping Students Connect to Animals through Experiential Assignments

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Humanity is often a very lonely species. Thinking that our big brains and technological advancements set us above all other beings (human exceptionalism and speciesism), we often feel a profound disconnection from the other living creatures with whom we share the Earth. Yet evolutionarily speaking, we are hard-wired to want to love and connect with animals and, when we prevent ourselves from doing so, we naturally suffer from ills such as anxiety and depression.[1] In this article, I will discuss two experiential assignments that I have developed for my undergraduate anthropology course on Animals, Religion, and Culture (ARC) at Texas Christian University to help students learn to pay closer attention to animals and human-animal relationships, with the ultimate goal of the students feeling more closely connected to and compassionate toward other than human animals.

Why Use Experiential Pedagogy to Learn about Animals?

Elsewhere I have argued that experiential education is an important way that we can help students in our animal-oriented classes engage with real animals.[2] Too often the animals we discuss are not actually present in the classroom, which makes it hard for the students to hear their voices. Showing video clips works well to a certain extent, but it lacks the element of playful, imaginative exploration that in-person encounters can offer.

We also learn different things about animals when we employ different ways of knowing them. To take just one example, think of the very different understandings of the life of a falcon that one can develop by watching them, drawing them, conducting a long-term field study of their behavior, hunting with them (falconers), or rescuing them (raptor rehabilitators). This is why the first learning outcome I include in the syllabus for my ARC class is to "evaluate how different ways of knowing animals can affect our perceptions of them." In the case of the two assignments that I share below, students experience two different ways of knowing animals: first by engaging in contemplative practice involving wild animals, and second by volunteering with local animal rescues.

There is also a bigger picture here. When humans mindfully focus our attention on other than human animals, whether through contemplative practice or rescue/care work, we can come to know them at a deeper level, including as individuals. Through this closer knowing, we can develop a feeling of connection with them, which in turn can encourage us to have compassion for them and work to care for them in species-appropriate ways. Picture a circle, labeled with the following terms, with arrows pointing from each to the next: *attentiveness* is key to developing deeper *understanding* of animals; deeper understanding is key to building strong *connections* with animals; connection is key to *compassion*; compassion is key to *care* (including species- and individual-appropriate action). As Lina Verchery has learned through her experiences with Taiwanese Buddhist nuns and insects, "it is not that we pay attention to those we care about, but that we care about those to whom we pay attention. By going out of their way to pay attention to insects, the nuns strengthen their capacity for compassionate care. Attention, in other words, is not an *expression* of compassion; it is a *method* of developing it."[3]

Furthermore, many students learn class concepts better through hands-on, experiential assignments. As one of the students in the Fall 2022 ARC class put it, "As I have gone through college, I have learned a lot about myself, one thing being my preference for, and comparative success, while learning hands-on rather than reading from a textbook or sitting in the classroom."

Assignment 1: Contemplative Practice for Attending to Animals and Exploring Animal Personhood

During each of the twice-weekly meetings of my ARC class, we begin with a five to ten-minute contemplative practice. Sometimes this is a simple breathing practice to help the students focus their attention on the class and to release whatever anxieties or worries they may be carrying from the day (I teach this class in the evening). More often we engage in a contemplative practice specifically focused on animals in relation to the topic of discussion for that day.[4] I explain to the students that these contemplative practices are an important way for them to understand animals in a new way.

At the end of the third week of the semester, I assign the contemplative practice presented below. Most importantly, I hope this practice will help students pay more attention to the wild animals with whom we share our urban community. I also use the practice to give the students a chance to apply some of the material we have been discussing in class from scientific perspectives about how other animals are similar to and different from

human animals in terms of their cognition, consciousness, and culture, and to consider while engaging directly with other animals whether they might be comfortable describing the animals as "persons."[5] This last question is directly related to Native American views of animals as persons, which they have been reading about and discussing in class that week.[6] I also hope that the practice will help the students connect more deeply to animals, and thus come to care about them more deeply, and ultimately view them with greater compassion.

> *Contemplative Practice: Attending to Animals and Exploring Personhood*
> This meditation is intended to help you use mindfulness practices to explore the world through other than human eyes. First, choose a place outdoors where you can be free of distractions and in contact with nature. Take a moment to breathe slowly and center yourself in this place (closing your eyes may help). Then spend 15 to 20 minutes observing any nonhuman animals you see there (remember that many of these animals may not be immediately apparent; they might be flying in the sky or perched in a tree, swimming in the water, or crawling through the grass or soil at your feet).
> 1) Pick one animal in particular and observe what she or he looks like, how they move, how they interact with their surroundings, how they react to you (if they do), etc.; write down your observations.
> 2) Now put down your pen, close your eyes, and imagine that you *are* the animal you have been studying. a) How would your experience of the world as that animal be similar to and different from your own experience of the world? b) Would you feel comfortable describing the animal you have been watching as a "person"? Why or why not?

Students share their written responses to this practice privately with me via our online course management portal. The students know as they write their responses that only I will see them, thus allowing them to feel freer to share their candid views and experiences.

Most of my students very much enjoy these contemplative practices. In their end of semester class evaluations, one student from the Fall 2022 ARC class wrote, "I really liked doing the meditations outside of class.... [They] made me think in ways I never had before and I am really thankful for these assignments that opened my mind to the outside world." Another

said, "Doing the meditations on our own was very exciting and relaxing. I felt not only connected to myself but [also] the earth." Comments like these suggest that this practice is succeeding in my goals of helping the students become more attentive to wild animals and to feel more closely connected with them.

In terms of personhood, a strong majority of the students felt they would be comfortable describing the animals they observed (and sometimes interacted with) as persons, while a couple disagreed, feeling that the lives of these animals were "much less intricate than those of people" and "due to the repetitive and seemingly programmed behavior I witnessed" (as two different students put it). Crucially, for the students who did view the other animals as persons, the time they spent closely observing the animal was what convinced them of their personhood. For example, one student wrote:

> Prior to this exercise, I would have been apprehensive to classify an animal as a "person." However, after observing this squirrel for an extended period of time, I really began to humanize the species. I began to wonder if it felt emotion, was it scared when I approached him/her? Did the squirrel think about who I was, or how I was in relation to itself?

For another student, the relationship that developed between them and the squirrel during their contemplative practice convinced them of the squirrel's personhood:

> In those moments of me and the squirrel staring at each other, I felt like I was interacting with a companion. In other words, I felt like I was in the presence of another person, a friend. I could tell he was thinking just as much as I was. He was wondering if I was a threat or just friendly company.... I felt more connected to the squirrel than I did with people in my classes. I made a friend.

Since I have been using versions of this practice in all of my religion and ecology-oriented classes since 2012, I feel comfortable with it as it is, and do not plan to change much about it in the future. However, when I first started using the practice, I noted that a lot of students got stuck on the differences they felt between them and the animals they observed. For example, when describing life as a squirrel, students focused on how nervous they would feel, how they would be afraid of being eaten by bigger animals, etc. These musings often made it difficult for them to engage more deeply

with the animals. So now in class, when I introduce the exercise, I encourage the students to try to move beyond such surficial comparisons between theirs and the other animals' lives, and to try to dig a bit deeper. This added instruction has led to much more thoughtful and wide-ranging written responses for this assignment.

Assignment 2: Experiential Final Project Assignment

The second assignment I will discuss is one of three options students may choose for their final project (the other options are a standard research-based term paper or a creative project paired with a reflection paper). For the experiential final project option, students select one of four sites that keep animals and volunteer with them for at least fifteen hours on four separate occasions. I ask that they visit at least four separate times to give them a more in-depth exposure to how the shelter works, and to hopefully allow them to build long-term relationships with one or more of the animals.

As with any service-learning project, it is important that the instructor be familiar with the sites where the students will be working and that they set up the project with the site well in advance (i.e., the semester before). For this project we work with Fort Worth Animal Care & Control (FWACC; the "City Pound"), the North Texas Humane Society, Mollie's Cat Place, and the Fort Worth Nature Center & Wildlife Refuge. I include the last option primarily for Environmental Studies majors and others who may want to work for a nature center or a park after graduation; the Fort Worth Nature Center houses a number of wildlife ambassadors who have been injured or cannot return to the wild for other reasons. (The director of the nature center also teaches a course on urban wildlife for my institution.) Mollie's Cat Place is a shelter that focuses on serving cats who would be rejected from mainstream shelters, primarily elderly cats or cats with long-term illnesses such as feline leukemia. And the first two sites are about what one would expect from their names; I primarily include them to provide options for students who want to work with dogs.

To connect their volunteer work back to class topics, and to help them think about and therefore reinforce what they learned from their experiences, I require the students to write a final reflection paper. Students begin by describing the mission of their host site in a way that demonstrates they know more about it than they could find out from a website. They then share what they did for their volunteer hours and describe what these experiences were like for them. I then ask the students to identify two or three concepts that we discussed in the course that seem most relevant to their volunteer work. For each topic they select, they need to briefly explain what

it means in their own words, referencing at least two course readings for each topic. Finally, they need to explore how their volunteer experiences helped give them a deeper understanding of these topics.

I assign this project for three reasons: to offer the students long-term opportunities to connect more deeply and compassionately with real animals, to understand class topics at a deeper level by applying them to real-world situations and animals, and as mentioned above, to provide a way for hands-on learners to demonstrate their mastery of course concepts. Many of the students who select this final project option have also volunteered with shelters before; placing their volunteer work in context within a course about Animals, Religion, and Culture can help such students look at this care work with new eyes and hopefully deeper understanding. For example, one of the students wrote in the conclusion to their reflection paper: "The impact this class had on me was evident to me as I volunteered. I have volunteered at animal shelters in the past and enjoyed it but this time I related to [the animals] better, noticed their behavior more, and had more empathy."

I feel this assignment succeeds at providing opportunities for students to connect more deeply and compassionately with real animals, although this is difficult to assess. For example, one of the students who volunteered with Mollie's Cat Place wrote in their final paper: "This class has taught me to prioritize the animal's needs over my desires. I am often tempted to pull a cat from its perch and hold them in my arms. But I know that if I was the cat I would not like to be disturbed." A student who volunteered at FWACC explained that "My knowledge of [the dogs'] consciousness and emotion deepened as well because I got to see dogs in a different light than usual…. Witnessing them in this state [in the shelter] showed me emotions I hadn't seen in them before, like desperation, anxiety and hopefulness/hopelessness."

It is easier to assess whether this assignment helped students better understand class concepts, and it seems clear the answer is "yes." Here are quotes from two different students' final papers that support my claim:

> If not for my experience at the cat shelter I do not believe that I would have been able to grasp the class concepts as well. It is one thing to learn and discuss a topic, but it's another to see it in practice. When I attempt to make a case for animal personhood to a non-believer, it is very helpful to supplement my argument with personal examples.

> All of this time spent there [at Mollie's] enabled me to observe the cats for long periods of time where I feel like I was better able to grasp the idea of intersubjectivity.... My idea of stewardship also got deeper. After going into this experience, I realize that stewardship is more than just providing basic care for things or animals. Stewardship is doing things that are sometimes hard, but in the end what the animal needs to have a better life.

Both students demonstrated in-depth understanding of key class concepts that they learned in part by applying them as analytical tools to help them reflect on their volunteer experiences.[7]

Conclusion

Both of these experiential projects have successfully helped students in my class on Animals, Religion, and Culture to achieve the desired learning outcomes of paying closer attention to and connecting on a deeper level with real animals. However, it is difficult to say whether the assignments helped the students to feel more compassionate toward animals and to act on that compassion. Some of their written responses suggest this was the case, while others were more ambiguous. To hedge my bets a bit, I have my students engage in loving-kindness [*mettā*] meditation in class, using a script I have written that focuses specifically on feeling compassion for other than human animals.

Here I am reminded of critical service-learning pedagogy, which advises instructors to meet the students where they are and not expect them to come too far along their path within the context of a single course. Tania Mitchell, for example, has argued that instructors should "support students where they are and affirm the commitments they are able and willing to make."[8] Similarly, Susan Benigni Cipolle has pointed out that it takes time for students to develop their critical consciousness of social justice issues—a process that takes years, not months:[9] "However, if students are equipped with critical-thinking skills, multiple service experiences, and a better understanding of themselves and the world, seeds are planted for continued growth toward critical consciousness."[10] I feel the same way about my students developing compassion for and engaging in caring actions toward other than human animals.

Experiential assignments similar to the ones described here could also be applied in other sorts of classes in the environmental humanities. For example, Bobbi Patterson created a contemplative journaling practice

to help her students connect to nature on a deeper level.[11] I have also developed a mindfulness practice similar to the one described above to help students connect to place and another to help students practice attentive listening to nature.[12] Indeed, experiential assignments offer tremendous opportunities for any instructor who wishes to help their students connect to the real animals and living natural world beyond our classroom walls.

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[1] Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Micah Mortali, *Rewilding: Meditations, Practices, and Skills for Awakening in Nature* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2019).

[2] Dave Aftandilian, "Teaching Animals and Religion," *Worldviews* 25 (2021): 48–70.

[3] Lina Verchery, "Learning to Walk Softly: Intersecting Insect Lifeworlds in Everyday Buddhist Monastic Life," in *Animals and Religion,* ed. Dave Aftandilian, Barbara Ambros, and Aaron Gross (London, UK: Routledge, 2024), 107–11.

[4] Dave Aftandilian, "Contemplative Practices for Connecting with Animals (and Ourselves)," in *Animals and Religion*, 199–211.

[5] Carl Safina, *Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2015); Matthew Calarco, *Thinking through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[6] Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[7] Two practical problems with this assignment that I hope to address in the future include: 1) students who plan their volunteer work too late in the semester to ensure four visits and 2) students without access to adequate transportation to volunteer sites. These students had to choose different project options. Ideally, these problems can be overcome with mid-semester check-in meetings with students and securing funding from TCU's Office for Community Engagement to reimburse Ubers or Zipcars (or similar services), as Fort Worth offers very little in the way of public transit.

[8] Tania Mitchell, "Critical Service-Learning as Social Justice Education: A Case Study of the Citizen Scholars Program," in *Service-Learning and Social Justice Education: Strengthening Justice-Oriented Community Models of Teaching and Learning,* ed. Dan Butin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 10.

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[10] Susan Benigni Cipolle, *Service-Learning and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Social Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 14–15.

[11] Barbara Patterson, "Sustaining Life: Contemplative Pedagogies in a Religion and Ecology Course," in *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies,* eds. Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 155–61.

[12] Dave Aftandilian, "Listening Contemplatively to Nature and Ourselves," *Cross-Currents* 72, no. 2 (2022): 93–111.