

## Education – public awareness about competency in pet ownership is not enough

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In 2002 I attended my first Urban Animal Management conference in Alice Springs. I was quickly impressed by the both the diversity of papers on offer as well as the obvious dedication and professionalism of the delegates. However, as a professional educator, I was also impressed that so many presenters recognised the importance of education as a solution to many of the issues they faced.

There were numerous papers covering the topics of responsible pet ownership, cat ownership and desexing, animal management and dangerous dogs, where the authors all emphasised the importance of education as a key to responsible urban animal management – and I believe they are right! Yet there appeared some uncertainty about what constitutes a good education program. Newspaper articles were cited along with television, radio and the distribution of brochures and other printed information as the way to educate the public. Now while these forms of media have the capacity to make people more aware of the issues they do not necessarily achieve the desired outcomes the authors would have wanted. It seemed to me that the goal of these presenters were aspiring to could be summed as ‘make the public more aware’. My contention that is that public awareness, while being an important beginning, is not enough!

Being aware of a problem or issue is a start – after all you cannot do anything about something unless you know it exists. However a truly effective education program should achieve a goal of more than making people aware – it should provide the knowledge, the skills, the desire and the motivation to achieve a real and a desirable outcome.

Perhaps a question worth considering at the outset is ‘what is the role of education in animal management? It seemed to me there was general acceptance last year that it is important and could best be summed up by the notion ‘prevention is better than a cure’. If people know why animal management is important, if they realise the problems many communities face, if they understand what they are required to do and how to take appropriate action, then many of the issues we face in the business of animal management will be greatly reduced.

Legislation is also often seen as a solution to animal management issues. However legislation is often seen as a regulatory or punitive measure that is the cure for a problem after it has occurred. Frequently it is contentious and sometimes vigorously opposed. Yet it can be argued that legislation is most successful when backed by genuine community understanding, acceptance and support. Education is therefore a partner in this process and can greatly contribute to the success of any legislation.

One of the main problems with employing education as a solution to the issues in our society is that it is often a long-term solution. It can take a long time for the results to become apparent.

As a Chinese poet in 500 BC said:

*If you are thinking a year ahead sow a seed  
If you are thinking ten years ahead plant a tree  
If you are thinking one hundred years ahead educate the people  
By sowing seed once you will harvest once  
By planting a tree you will harvest tenfold  
By educating the people you will harvest one hundredfold*

So the delegates at last year’s conference were right - education is a real solution – an important objective for any group or body that engages in community debate and welfare. RSPCA Australia is one such organisation where education is enshrined as a key policy objective. Of their six stated objectives, three relate directly to education viz:

- To sustain an intelligent public opinion regarding animal welfare;
- To take whatsoever steps are necessary to educate the community with regard to the humane treatment of animals;
- To diffuse information about the care, protection and treatment of animals by publishing and circulating literature and conducting seminars and competitions.

Education provides all of us with a completely different element to legislation and enforcement. It offers a wide range of new opportunities by lifting our sight to another dimension and providing a completely different, non-controversial and non-adversarial element to a holistic animal management objective. It is a vehicle that provides access to normally closed doors to pre-schools, schools and community groups. It can provide the opportunity to take animal management messages into a great and growing number of homes and be the catalyst for genuine communication with the community. Education thus provides the opportunity to expand the range of people who support the need for proper animal management and even encourage the development of future leaders in this field. While it provides a long-term solution it is also a solution in the short and medium terms as well.

If we accept the importance of education then it is important to clearly understand whom it is we wish to educate. It is essential to know who is our audience – or to be more exact – who are our audiences? Different people, different groups of people, have different starting points, have different levels of understanding, and so need different approaches and different strategies.

There are many ways to segment the community and these can be based on geography, age, gender, income level, ethnic background, religion or political preference. If we are seeking to engage the community in education programs then one useful way of tackling this issue is to break the community into two sectors – the formal education sector and the general public.

The formal education sector is where teaching and learning is both formalised and institutionalised. It consists of pre-schools, primary schools, secondary schools and tertiary institutions (universities and TAFE colleges). It can be further broken down into two further target audiences – teachers and students – and even further into subject areas, such as science, English, mathematics, technology, the arts etc. A key in any approach to the formal education sector is to understand that each level is generally guided by a predetermined curriculum – a set of teaching and learning experiences with key outcomes that are measured and reported. The formal sector is carefully structured and is expected to carry an enormous and often contradictory community expectation on what it provides for students. For example, a much-debated topic is whether we want our education systems to produce well-rounded students with a good general education or do we want them vocationally trained to fit straight into the workforce?

The general public on the other hand is a far more difficult audience to tackle. It too can be broken down into a variety of groups - junior community groups such as scouts and guides, and adult community service groups such as Rotary, Lions, Apex, Probus etc. There are special interest groups – canine associations, cat breeders etc. – pet owners, farmers, families and interested individuals, work related groups such as unions and employer groups. In addition there are people employed in the business of animal management – local government staff, state and federal governments, charities, veterinarians and nurses, animal attendants, inspectors and animal behaviourists.

The key point is that if we are seeking to engage these different target audiences in any form of education program, then we must understand that they have different interests or different starting points and so different approaches are needed.

As already mentioned, the formal education sector has specific curriculum requirements for different levels. Different teaching strategies are also required and vastly different approaches are needed for say, year one two in a primary school to years eleven and twelve in a secondary school. Hence any education program on animal management must be made relevant and appropriate to the existing curriculum. It must be developed to have a precise fit with the needs of the teacher - and the interests of the students. For those of engaging with the formal sector, the strategy generally has been to offer materials for school to use, to go and visit schools or to offer schools interesting excursion opportunities.

The Victorian RSPCA is employing all of these strategies and at the conclusion of this paper I will demonstrate a new resource we have developed for schools that employs information and communication technology that has become a regular, common form of information provision in schools.

However, I would argue that the most effective means of educating any group is generally through direct personal contact. Our new RSPCA Education Centre in Melbourne provides the opportunity to engage the use of new technology yet is backed by powerful, personal experiences with animals that are designed to have a high impact.

The Education team uses a variety of resources to make learning experiences relevant, meaningful and memorable. Primary among these resources is a collection of healthy, conditioned animals that can be touched and fed by participants who visit the RSPCA Education Centre in Burwood East. These animals are located in a rustic barn that stimulates the senses of sound, smell, touch and sight. It is all about exciting, hands-on learning that brings students and animals together in enjoyable experiences that fulfil curriculum requirements while developing responsible and caring behaviour.

Animals fulfil a number of crucial roles in RSPCA Education because they:

- engage the emotions of participants,
- provide multi-sensory learning opportunities,
- offer interactive experiences,
- facilitate demonstrations of appropriate husbandry,
- allow opportunities for observation, measurement and comparison,
- help us explain sources of food and textiles, and
- demonstrate physical and behavioural adaptations.

The interaction between people and animals in an educational setting can provide an emotional engagement. The role of this emotional engagement is important to understand and cannot be understated. Rachel Carson, the internationally renowned biologist and author of the best-selling book 'Silent Spring' wrote:

'Once the emotions have been aroused - a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love - then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found it has lasting meaning.'

The task of 'developing responsible and caring behaviour towards animals' is made far more effective if emotional connections between participants and animals are established. This is best achieved when people have opportunities to interact with animals especially within a context of respect, understanding and care. Put simply, emotional engagement results in positive action.

The key message here for those wishing to engage in education programs about animal management is that your most powerful and effective educational resource is an animal! We have found that students remember our pet dog long after the Education Officer is departed. Equally students will not go home after a school excursion and talk about the new video or movie they have seen anywhere near as much as they will talk about how today they patted a Clydesdale, milked a cow or collected eggs from a nest for the first time. First-hand, concrete experiences that interest, engage and entrance students are those that become memorable, lasting and hence effective.

The general public is by far a more diversified and complex audience and a wide range of approaches can be employed.

These range from formal courses, seminars, conferences, publications and media offerings to local meetings, training and information sessions. It is important to be able to identify your audience, know what it is they want, then deliver it accordingly. Obviously there is a vast difference in content and approach for a group at puppy pre-school to a group of bird fanciers, or a say a group of dairy farmers.

New information and communication technology allows educators to reach a vast new audience – the use of the internet, websites, email and CD-ROM all are commonplace in schools, businesses and homes. They provide a massive increase in the dissemination of information and advice and there are many engaging, exciting and interactive programs developed to engage learners of all ages. This new technology has challenged the traditional, paper-based means of dissemination of information materials and will continue to do so.

However the development and delivery of any education program or education resource, should be based on a clear understanding of what your objectives are. At the most basic level, education is about two things – teaching and learning. At its best, this can be inspiring, fun, beneficial – even life changing. At its worst it can be dull, boring and off-putting. So to repeat my key point, to be effective you must be clear about your objectives and the objectives for any education program about animal management are suggested as follows:

1. *Awareness.* This provides you with a realisation, a grasp, a preliminary understanding or recognition. It does not mean a detailed understanding and is a starting point on which to build. To have the development of 'an awareness' is not enough!
2. *Knowledge.* By providing people with facts, information, interpretations and details they can develop a more comprehensive understanding. This can be built on with experience so that greater insight is gained. However while 'knowledge of the facts' might be important it still may not be enough to provide a tangible and desirable result.
3. *Skills.* The development of skills means providing a new ability or proficiency to do something. Intellectual skills can be developed in measuring, recognising, or analysing whereas physical skills such as catching or hitting a ball, or to use a relevant skill, holding and restraining an animal.
4. *Attitudes.* This involves are more subjective element – the development of feelings, emotions and values. Your values and attitudes mean that you are more likely to be interested in something, or motivated by it and want to do something about it. Hence if your values are clear your actions or behaviours are likely to more consistent.
5. *Action.* This involves behaving in a different way, participating or doing something. It is the outcome of any education program that is the most desirable.

It is the result of having greater knowledge and understanding, the skills of how to do something appropriate, plus the motivation to want to do something. If we want to achieve responsible pet care or animal management then we want people to act in a certain way. This is the real goal of our education programs.

The Victorian RSPCA Education Program endeavours to achieve all of these aims but ultimately to ensure that people, all people, act with kindness and care towards animals so that their welfare is ensured. Our goal therefore is to ensure that people act in a certain way towards animals at all times.

As mentioned already we seek to achieve this through a variety of exciting experiences involving animals. Yet we also employ the use of technology, particularly for those we cannot reach in person. As already mentioned a traditional method of providing educational resources has been to produce something on paper – a kit, worksheets, project materials, games, posters or booklets. Other approaches have involved the use of media such as movies, videos or DVD's. Today the development of information and communication technologies has taken us to a different era – one that will continue to change at a rapid rate so that today's new exciting innovation is 'old-hat' a few months later. It is a stimulating yet somewhat difficult environment in which to operate. The internet has totally revolutionised the way we seek information, make bookings, and do our banking and shopping. CD ROMs make encyclopedias obsolete and new mobile phones have become cameras to take digital photos or to produce our image to the person at the other end of the call.

For those of us wishing to engage in the provision of educational resources or programs it can be difficult to know where to start – as well as to know what are the specific skills you need to produce what you want. Today I wish to demonstrate the use of just one aspect of the new technology to try and show how it can provide a new form of educational resource. It is a resource that can be used by teachers in the classroom and be used as an interactive medium for students. Hopefully the demonstration will show how simple this resource is to use.

The particular item I will demonstrate is a CD-ROM produced by the RSPCA Education team in Victoria. The disk has been produced to provide an introduction and overview of the work of the Victorian RSPCA. It contains information under the following headings:

- About the RSPCA,
- RSPCA branches,
- RSPCA education,
- stories,
- resources,
- campaigns,
- events,
- publications,
- links.

The item thus contains an enormous amount of information including interactive materials for both students and teachers alike. It requires specialist knowledge and skill to produce but costs very little to reproduce.

In conclusion the key messages I would like to leave you with are:

1. Education is a key to many of the issues in animal welfare.
2. Education is a partner in the legislative and enforcement process.
3. Identify your target audience as clearly as possible.
4. First-hand, concrete experiences with animals provide powerful learning experiences.
5. Be clear about your objectives – awareness, knowledge, skills, attitudes and action.
6. New technologies provide a whole range of educational opportunities.

Awareness is not enough!

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Jim is the Executive Manager Education with RSPCA Victoria. He manages the new \$2m RSPCA Education Centre situated in Burwood East, in the heart of Melbourne's eastern suburbs. This Centre is the largest education centre for animal welfare in Australia and has Education Officers who visit schools and local communities throughout the state.

Jim has been the Managing Director of the Lort Smith Animal Hospital, Director of Education with the Victorian Zoological Parks and Gardens Board, Senior Policy Officer in the Department of Education, Senior Education Officer with the Environment Protection Authority and teacher in schools in Victoria and Canada. He is past president and life member of the Victoria and Australia Associations for Environmental Education.