Animals and Society

Seven Mattes

Course Overview

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are key learning objectives in social science general education courses across the US, especially following the significant Black Lives Matters response to police brutality in recent years. Concurrently, DEI learning objectives have come under political and social fire, such as the ongoing demand for banning what some refer to as "CRT", or Critical Race Theory. Given the diversity of perspectives that fill large-scale freshmen Gen Ed courses, constructing innovative methods for introducing and discussing DEI topics is key to avoiding defensive responses or political bias assumptions.

I leapt into the course prep for my first interdisciplinary Animals and Society general education course with this goal in mind. Pulling primarily from DeMello's (Ed.), *Teaching the animal : human-animal studies across the disciplines*, Lloro-Bidart and Banschbach (Eds.), *Environmental Education: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Curriculum and Pedagogy*, Aph Ko's *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft,* and the many works by A. Breeze Harper (Harper 2011; 2013), I designed a class that matched the general education learning objections (many of which are DEI related) via human-animal studies themes and topics.

Teaching DEI via non-human animal contexts prior to the human-human connections has aided in student understanding and reflection. In this format, students were more likely to learn with their defenses down, and to better understand systems of oppression as part of their daily life. More so, I found teaching students their dominant role within the systems of oppression that uphold anthropocentrism, human exceptionalism, and the societal consequences therein aided

some in understanding how other systems of oppression function and continue in their culture. Among these students in particular, this identification of their active role in a system of oppression further served to expand empathy and encourage boundary crossing with those who may be, to them, "across the aisle" in terms of politics or beliefs.

Course Background and Plan

This 200-level course is an interdisciplinary general education social science course taught differently by each professor at the helm. While initially set up to teach cultural awareness and understanding, this course increasingly included more and more key DEI topics, such as anti-racism, implicit bias, decolonization, and intersectionality. The results from each semester inspires the addition of further material in the next. Working with my own defensive concerns – fearing the students will not enthusiastically pick up what I'm putting down or that I moved too far for our Midwestern land-grant, agricultural institution – guides the incremental changes with each semester. Furthermore, I am conscious of the political elements of discussing many of the human-animal societal issues we cover in the class, and proceed delicately, especially given my university had an incident of animal rights terrorism in the late 1990s (Shapiro 2002).

I teach 3-4 sections of this course each Fall semester, with 250 students per section. and one in the summer, which has a maximum of 100 students. While this was an in-person class, it has become on-and-off online asynchronous throughout the Covid-19 global pandemic. This large course size has presented many challenges to addressing timely, political topics in the classroom. Another challenge is assessment, as the topics at hand are best in a small, discussion-based classroom and that is not often what I have. Thus, I use weekly surveys (or TopHat) to have students critically think about the week's lessons (typically reflective ad opinion questions about the topics at hand, (e.g. "Would you support blind chickens in poultry farms?" (Thompson

2009)), discussion forums to assess reading comprehension and more debatable questions (e.g. should primates have personhood? (deWaal 2007; 2017), group activities to delve deeper together, weekly quizzes, and – sadly – multiple choice exams for assessment (hoping to change the last one). Beyond the grades, I look for noticeable critical thinking of the concepts at hand in the survey responses and discussion forums. The students blow me away every semester by their insights.

We use two books and an assortment of readings and films for the course. The books are: *Humans and Other Animals: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Human-Animal Interactions* (2012) by Samantha Hurn, and *Ishmael* (1995) by Daniel Quinn. The Hurn book adds examples and background to our themes throughout the course, and *Ishmael* is a fantastic book for getting students to step out of – and critically examine – the cultural bubble they live inside and how it influences their relationship with their environment.

Course Plan and Content

The semester begins with basic introductions to social science terms, such as ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, as well as key human-animal studies terms, such as anthropocentrism and human-exceptionalism. Once we have a solid foundation of basic understandings of social science terms and concepts, we jump into our first intersecting topic – Animality. Here, students are first challenged with deconstructing the human-animal binary. It is here we first confront race. We discuss the dynamic spectrum of who counts as a human versus who counts as an animal (Ingold 1994; Cormier 2003). We focus on Sara Baartman, as an example, an enslaved Khoikhoi woman who was placed on exhibition for having a different

body than those who purchased her. She was declared not human by a Western scientist, but instead between human and animal, based on her bodily characteristics (Maseko 1998). Not only was she on display throughout her short life, but her body – especially her famous genitalia – were placed on display in a museum until the 1970s. Via readings and discussion, the class is encouraged to reflect on other moments in time in which humans were declared animal, or something in between, in order to justify oppression, genocide, etc. (e.g. The Holocaust, Slavery, Colonialism). From here, we then turn to Continuity, exploring modern findings on how non-human animals are quite human-like, challenging human exceptionalism (Ingold 1994; Despret 2016; Hurn 2012; de Waal 2007; 2017).

The next lessons explore various topics that deepen understanding of how our relationship with non-human animals is culturally constructed, diverse and dynamic across time and space, and challenging common assumptions. We focus on how our switch to agriculture changed our relationship with our environment (domination, control, taming, etc.). We also turn to animals as food, reflecting on how we make animals "killable" in certain cultures so as to consume them as a given (Cudworth 2015). We talk about scientific classifications and the bias within. We talk about how the concept of natural, or normal, justify systems of oppression throughout the world even today. We stress, throughout, how social and cultural influences - worldviews, religion, institutions, etc. – have led us to our current relationship with non-human animals. We introduce our performance of gender, gender identities, biological sex, and the gender binary via lessons about Neuticles (testicular implants for dogs, so they do not feel less masculine after neuter – are they for the dog, or his person? Do dogs have a gender identity to preserve?) and brief dives into Queer Ecology.

We discuss our hominid ancestors and critically think about their similarity to us. A student favorite activity is to consider whether or not we would consider them part of our moral community – part of humanity, perhaps – if they were met today. And if not, what would our hierarchy look like if we included them with other animals? I challenge them to look at an image of our ancestors (australopithecus, homo erectus, neanderthal, etc.) and ask at what point they might consider them human versus animal. This is simply a thoughtful exercise to challenge the human-animal divide and show biological continuity, but it is also quite interesting to see – and discuss – what students choose. Almost always, students choose the first hominid with tan – rather than black – skin depicted in the image. We do not address it directly in class, but I do ask them to write about what characteristics they based their choice on and why, privately. We follow this up, later in the semester, by talking about primates and personhood – watching Steven Wise's *Unlocking the Cage* (Hegedus & Pennebaker 2016; Hohmann & Fruth 2003).

We also learn key terms such as cognitive dissonance and Carol J. Adams' absent referent to understand what is going on in our brains not only when we experience the lessons at hand in daily life, but when we're discussing them as a class – constantly checking in and reminding students that discomfort is normal, expected, and means we're learning something we have a lot of sugar-coating present to ignore (Adams 1990).

The key point in the above lessons is not only the topics at hand (which I want to stress are important), but that students see themselves within the cultural web – influenced by it, but also influencing it with their daily actions. The reason this is key is because one of the biggest issues with teaching topics within DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion), is defensiveness. Students do not like seeing themselves as the "bad guy" in these contexts and cognitive dissonance may

result in simply sticking their head further into the sand. As my students are primarily freshman, coming from diverse backgrounds, I take it as slow as I can to get to the next lessons.

Mid-way through the semester, students should not only have the language – institutions, worldviews, social constructionism, power hierarchies, etc. – for understanding how their culture has constructed a world in which humans are on top – justifying our sometimes problematic treatment of them. And at this point, they should see themselves as part of this system. They are a key actor, a participant in something that is much grander than them. They are aware that this has nothing to do with dislike of animals, or ill feelings by any one individual – it is simply the broader systems and institutions that they are acting within. From this point, we change gears for a second.

This change happened serendipitously, as my first semester teaching this course I had a documentary recommended to me and I decided to show it, despite it not involving non-human animals directly. The film is called *Dawnland (*Mazo & Pender-Cudlip 2018)*,* and is in regard to the cultural genocide of the Indigenous populations of America. It focuses on Residential Schools ("Kill the Indian to Save the Man" and so on), and children taken from Indigenous families into white foster homes all the way until the 1970s. This film was an incredibly effective bridge as students can then start to see these same processes being used among humans – and in a way that is still far removed from current racial issues that they see on the news every day. It is America, and it is people who look like them, enacting a system that is discriminatory, problematic, and devastating to another group of humans – all the while, the humans enacting it think they are doing the right, normal, good thing. The individual humans involved were not bad people, but what they did was nonetheless deplorable. This film became a regular.

Following *Dawnland*, we move on to more direct anti-racist lessons, but again, we approach it first from around the corner. We learn about institutional discrimination and structural inequality via pit bull discrimination. We learn about the changing perceptions of pit bulls over time, and modern discriminatory ordinances – breed specific discrimination – that is placed on them. This is the focus both as a bridge to discussing how this occurs with humans, but because I aim for the students to recognize that the discrimination based on pit bulls is not only baseless, but that the discrimination itself results in reiterating the discrimination. For example, if all keepers of pit bulls are required to muzzle them in public and place signs in their yard saying they have a dangerous dog, then people in that community will associate the dogs with danger, despite the actual dog's temperament. We also discuss lightly how pit bulls are associated with POC and lower-class communities (and Goldendoodles are associated with suburbia, etc.) and the discrimination ordinances may also be a sneaky way to keep them out of a neighborhood, as well, but this is only a brief mention.

We then jump right into it and watch the documentary, *13*th, as a means for understanding institutionalized and systemic racism (Duvernay & Moran 2016). We talk redlining and hint back to our early lesson on humans being considered less-than-human in order to justify treatment of them. As students already have the previous lessons under the belt, it is far easier to have these discussions at this point, and have students reflect on themselves as a part of the system, than if we were to start off with it.

The class ends by addressing earthlings as a whole, as we talk climate crisis and the Sixth Great Extinction. We address these issues as a multispecies community, pulling from Haraway's *Cthlulucene* (Haraway 2016), and encouraging all to consider their world as more-than-human as

we apply our knowledge to real world environmental problems (Kalof and Whitley 2021; Wilkie 2015).

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