

THE PEDAGOGY OF ENCOUNTER: HOW DO ZOO INTERPRETERS ACCOUNT FOR THEIR FACILITATION OF INTERSPECIES ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN VISITORS AND CAPTIVE ANIMALS?

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Resumo

Os educadores ambientais têm um papel educativo importante num ambiente de aprendizagem informal. Contudo, pouco se sabe sobre o que os motiva a trabalhar em parques zoológicos ou mesmo que estratégias educativas utilizam na sua rotina diária para facilitar os encontros entre humanos e os animais em cativeiro. Assim sendo, o nosso estudo foi concebido para compreender os métodos e as motivações destes profissionais. Entrevistas semi-estruturadas foram realizadas com educadores ambientais que trabalham em tempo integral no zoo de Ottawa (Canadá). Estas entrevistas foram transcritas e codificadas na tentativa de se identificar a emergência de temas. Os educadores ambientais usam as suas estratégias para potenciar eventuais benefícios advindos do encontro entre os animais selvagens, os visitantes humanos e os próprios educadores. Este estudo visa contribuir para a investigação no âmbito das interações interespecies com a finalidade de promover oportunidades ambientais e científicas para todos, especialmente as crianças.

Palavras-Chave: educadores ambientais; educação informal da ciência; educação ambiental; encontros interespecies; investigação qualitativa.

Abstract

Zoo interpreters have an important role to play in enhancing the educational potential of an informal learning setting. Nonetheless, little is known about what motivates individuals to pursue a profession in zoo interpretation, or how these individuals account for their educational methods. Our study was designed to gain insight into zoo interpreters' self-reported methods and motivations for facilitating human-animal encounters as part of their daily work routine. Semi-formal interviews were conducted with full-time interpreters at a private zoo in Ottawa, and the transcribed data was coded for emergent themes. Overall, respondents consistently accounted for their facilitation methods by referencing potential benefits to wild animals, to the human visitors, and to the interpreters themselves. This study will contribute to the scholarly body of research that analyzes

interspecies interactions for the purpose of providing enhanced environmental and scientific educational opportunities for all, specially children.

Keywords: zoo interpreters; informal science education; environmental education; interspecies encounters; qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

For over forty years, the field of environmental education (EE) has sought to find solutions to environmental problems both globally and locally. At the same time, researchers in the field of EE have tended to adopt a more socioculturally-oriented approach to EE (Reis & Roth, 2010; Robottom, 1993). In this context, zoos and museums play an important role in helping to educate the public about the need to adopt more sustainable practices in our society (Arbuthnott, Sutter & Heidt, 2014; Sellmann, 2014). Zoo interpreters specifically have an important role to play in enhancing the educational potential of an informal learning setting, and trends in the literature indicate that “zoo-based education relies heavily upon a guide's management of emotional display...and interpretation skills...when attempting to influence visitor behaviour, attitudes and values” (Wijeratne, 2014, p. 149). However, little is know about how human (visitor) encounters with other animal species are mediated by zoo interpreters and the possible impact of these encounters on the adoption of more environmentally-friendly attitudes and behaviors of the general population, especially children (Wulff, 2007; Knight, 2005; Milton, 2002). The goal of this pilot project is to investigate the potential that human encounters with other animal species have in/for environmental education. Specifically, we seek to answer the research question, how do zoo interpreters' account for their methods and motivations for facilitating of interspecies encounters between human visitors and captive animals?

1.1 Methods

The subjects for this study were recruited from amongst the full-time, adult interpretive staff of a private zoo facility in Ottawa. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews (between 30 minutes to 1 hour) with three full-time zoo interpreters. Subjects were invited to individually respond to a series of open-ended prompts designed to elicit their opinions on the topic of the study in an informal interview setting. The interviews were videotaped and subsequently transcribed, and the interview data was then coded for the emergence of themes (e.g., Joffe, 2011). That is, data were assessed for repeated statements, phrases, and words to examine recurring ideas or constructs that occur.

1.2 Results

Respondents consistently accounted for their facilitation methods by referencing the potential benefits that interspecific encounters can have for three different groups:

wild animals:

-e.g., "...people need to understand how what we do is very important for the animal itself, as well, not just we want you to pet them but in protection of them because it is a fact that animals are in trouble right now."

-e.g., "...the moment you have physical interaction with them when you bring one out to show and you get to see how big they are hear them roar... or purr, and actually pet them, then [you] have a greater sense of appreciation and perhaps a desire to actually want to help the population as well."

human visitors:

-e.g., "...and the other thing is that a lot of people have that bucket list right? Where they want to see a cougar, see a tiger, they just... they want to see a crocodile or hold a spider."

-e.g., "So people who don't get to see snakes and that stuff are able to come up and touch and see something different and its going to stick with them for the rest of their life."

-e.g., "...she was absolutely terrified. I tried to reassure her as much as possible and actually at the end of the show she came up to me asked if we could take out the spider again. 'I want to try to get over my fear.'"

the interpreters themselves:

-e.g., "Now, it is part of our job but everybody here goes above and beyond and tries to interact with the public and the animals as much as possible. So... just because its fun."

-e.g., "Its nice because I have people who want to try to work out their fears and I get to do that...So that's like just those things where we can work with that, that is absolutely the best feeling."

-e.g., "It was sort of, I guess it was a realized gift where it was just like, 'this is what I am supposed to be doing.'"

1.3 Conclusions

Zoo interpreters have an important role to play in enhancing the educational potential of an informal learning setting, and trends in the literature indicate that "zoo-based education relies heavily upon a guide's management of emotional display...and interpretation skills...when attempting to influence visitor behaviour, attitudes and values" (Wijeratne, 2014, p. 149). The interpretive staff at this particular zoo reported a multiplicity of methods and motivations for facilitating

interspecies encounters between humans and captive animals, and three specific themes emerged from an analysis of their explanations. Future studies should assess the extent to which these themes have an impact in the adoption of more environmentally-friendly attitudes and behaviors on the general population, especially children (Wulff, 2007; Knight, 2005; Milton, 2002). The continued conclusions and recommendations of this ongoing project will be of interest to teachers, parents and public educators who appreciate the importance of effective education in/for/about the environment.

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