

# What teachers could learn from animal trainers

Teachers apparently spend less time teaching and more time managing misbehaviour nowadays than they used to, at least in my country. I worry that standard Teachers' Education does not provide the tools to handle unruly behaviour, and that many teachers flounder. Interestingly, they could potentially have a lot to learn from animal trainers.

Children differ from non-human animals in many respects, but similarities abound, too. Animal trainers cannot use language when teaching, and have developed effective and humane techniques to achieve learning in non-verbal individuals, while still keeping the process fun and engaging. Many of these skills, in my view, would be useful in a school environment, since fundamental learning and decision making mechanisms are the same in poodles, pigs, parrots - and people.

Teaching is about changing the way the learner thinks, or behaves. Animal trainers know how to change behaviour: the type of behaviour, the frequency, and intensity. To bring about behaviour change, the trainer changes the environment.

Learners choose to keep doing behaviours that lead to desirable outcomes, and avoid repeating behaviours that do not.



Positive reinforcement produces motivated learners. Courtesy: Stephanie Edlund.



In modern animal training relationships are important. Photo graciously provided by Karin Stillberg. Photographer Evelina Rönnberg.

Communication in animal training is about letting the animal know what works, generally by providing treats when they show desirable behaviour. The cat raises his left paw, we give him some tuna fish. He does some more paw waving, gets more tuna. Do teachers always inform students when they behave correctly? With children, eye contact, a smile or a word of encouragement may constitute reinforcement. However, in a chaotic environment, teachers may focus on undesirable behaviour - an approach which would be highly counterproductive in animal training.

Animal trainers have a whole tool box to solve problem behaviours, such as

teaching the animal an incompatible behaviour. If the cat is climbing up your trousers to get to the food, paw waving would be a better alternative: he cannot sit and wave his left paw and dig those claws into your leg at the same time. In the classroom, a boisterous child may be solicited to help distribute papers.

Punishment is a last resort in modern animal training, for ethical reasons but also because the effects of punishment on behaviour are unpredictable and may damage relationships. Likewise, children may resent a teacher using aversive techniques, and stop focusing on learning.

If the animal is not motivated to participate she might move away, misbehave or become aggressive. An animal trainer gets instant feedback about the animal's *motivational state*, and can arrange to set up the environment for success. Similarly in a classroom, distracting stimuli can be blocked from vision, the schedule provide cues about upcoming events during the day, and the placement of children in the room might be strategic to avoid triggering unwanted behaviour.

To conclude, there is a lot that teachers could learn from animal trainers. They know how to communicate, motivate, and solve behaviour problems and the importance of avoiding punishment. To succeed as an animal trainer, verbal language is of limited use and the understanding of learning processes, motivation and the science of behaviour change is vital. I propose that this knowledge would be equally useful in any school.

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## Empowering the Teacher of Tomorrow

The Learning Teacher Network's 11th annual International Conference will be held at the four star Nordic Hotel Forum in Tallinn, Estonia on 22-24 September 2016 with the title 'Empowering the Teacher of Tomorrow'.

The focus of the 2016 conference is how to empower and build capacity of 'The Teacher of Tomorrow' for inspiring and successful teaching and learning today and

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tomorrow.

The underpinning perspective of the conference will be quality education and learning, and to embrace knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower teachers and learners to contribute to sustainable development. The conference programme is currently being finalised. The registration period will begin at the end of 2015. We hope to see you in Tallinn!

