

# **Live Animals in the College Classroom: The Difference an Animal Ambassador Makes in Enhancing Student Communication Skills**

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# Introduction

- College students lack “soft skills,” including oral communication (Bronson, 2007; Brooks et al., 2008; Schneider, 2015)
- Public speaking anxiety is a problem (Emanuel, 2005; Hunter, Westwick, & Haleta, 2014; Witt & Behnke, 2006)
  - Prompting speakers to avoid public communication
  - Debilitating to one’s perception of success



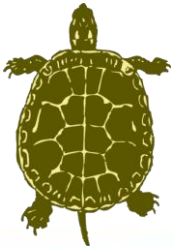
# Can animals help?

- In educational settings, Animal Ambassadors (AA) can...
  - Increase learner engagement (Swanagan, 2000; Dillon et al., 2006)
  - Help learners identify with an animal on an emotional level (Dierking et al., 2002)
- Little empirical evidence on the influence of using AA's on a presenter's communication ability



# The class: *Animals in Education*

- Students trained in safely handling, transporting, and teaching with live animals
- Team teaching activities using animals (videotaped)
  - Part 1: Build presentation and deliver to classmates
  - Part 2: Deliver revised presentation to special needs youth
- Animal Ambassadors
  - Turtles, snakes, salamanders, and baby chicks



# Methods: Data Collection

- Qualitative
  - Student interviews (phone and in-person)
    - 3 student participants
    - 30-45 minutes in length
    - 9 questions related to their participation in the course and based on collective findings from assignments



# Methods: Data Analysis

- Thematic Analysis (Creswell, 2008)
  - 3 reviews of the data to establish and refine themes
- Trustworthiness and Rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
  - Member checking
  - Triangulation
  - Journaling
  - Peer checking
  - Data saturation



# Results

- Theme #1: Attention on the Animal
  - Participant 1 – “Everyone always focused on the snake instead of me...”
  - Participant 3 – “I felt like the students were watching the animal and not me.”



# Results

- Theme #2: Opened Career Interests
- Participant 1 – “I had always known that I had an interest in Falconry, but it wasn’t until I took this class that I knew it could be a career!”





# Results

- Theme #3: Unusual Animals
- Participant 2 – “Everyone has seen a puppy or a kitten, but most people are afraid of snakes ... that is what made them so cool to work with, I lost that fear and wasn’t afraid anymore!”



# Results

- Theme #4: Audience Analysis
- Participant 3 – “The animal and engagement depends on the audience...”
- Participant 1 – “I was able to engage the participants because I had a snake or turtle in my hands...”



# Conclusions

- Animals reduced anxiety towards public speaking
- Built awareness of new animals and reduced fear of some species
- Enhanced likelihood to pursue animal handling and teaching as a career
- Increased course engagement



# Future Research

- What about an inanimate teaching tool?
  - Touching live turtles and rabbits reduces anxiety, while touching stuffed animal toys does not (Shiloh, Sorek, & Terkel, 2003)
- What is the long-term impact on students?
  - Impact of teaching youth with special needs?
- What about the instructor (modeling behaviors)?

