Megan LaFollette – Teaching Philosophy

Goals for Student Learning

As an animal scientist, teacher, and mentor _my first goal for student learning is to improve my students' interactions with animals_ through facilitating their understanding of animal behavior and welfare. Interactions with animals are prevalent in many people's lives whether they are simply watching animals in online videos, playing with pets in the home, or actually working with production animals. If students can recognize behavioral signs that animals are fearful – and the situations that are likely to lead to such behavior – then perhaps they can also learn to modify animal behavior or the environment for improved human-animal interactions.

While teaching students subject matter knowledge and skills in animal behavior and welfare, _my second goal for student learning is to promote development of transferrable skills relevant to future careers_. For example, by teaching students skills such as effective and persuasive communication – such as practicing arguing for a perspective on a contemporary animal welfare issue such as enriched cages for laying hens – my goal is to foster the development of confident communication in students that may then translate to job interviewing or cover letters. Similarly, I promote critical thinking and scientific literacy by teaching students to read and critique scientific sources, conduct small experiments, and consider different types of evidence. My goal is for these skills to transfer to a future career in any discipline, whether animal science or psychology. Finally, teaching animal welfare should always involve a discussion of different perspectives across individuals and cultures on the treatment of animals. Understanding and respecting different cultural values, morality, and context is important for our increasingly global world.

Enactment of Goals for Student Learning (Teaching Methods)

In class, I teach students that thoughtfully managing an animal's environment is key for promoting captive animal welfare; so too, I strive for thoughtfully _creating a welcoming, supportive, and inclusive environment_ to promote "captive" student learning. For example, on the first day of my courses I begin engaging with students by asking them about their interests and preferred names/pronouns to foster an accepting environment. I also survey students on their baseline knowledge of the class topic. From this initial survey, I share summarized results with the class to demonstrate that not all students are starting at the same place in the course in terms of experience and knowledge, but that I am confident that everyone has knowledge to contribute to class discussion and is capable of succeeding. By not assuming background knowledge, giving students plenty of advance notice of when assignments are due, and allowing for direct communication with me, I strive to make sure that all students' learning is fostered.

One of my main teaching methods involves _presenting lessons in multiple formats focused on foundational, relevant animal science knowledge and theory_. Throughout class, I emphasize why certain topics, lessons, or assessments are both relevant and important to students. One way that I achieve this is by beginning lectures with a short real-life case study that display how concepts of the lectures can be applied to various careers. For example, I might show a video of a hen that has been subject to feather pecking and ask students how they might respond to someone asking them how to fix this behavior. I may also give facts about economic and welfare costs of such abnormal behaviors. These perplexing problems and surprising statistics often spark curiosity and engagement with each lecture that follows. It can be challenging to pick out the most important areas of animal behavior and welfare to teach, but I

think this is also key to ensuring greater student engagement and learning. Finally, my teaching methods focus on using a combination of oral, visual, and written presentation techniques to acknowledge different learning styles while simultaneously being more inclusive of various disabilities that may inhibit learning with a certain modality.

Interactive activities and laboratory sessions can be particularly effective in enacting my goals for student learning. During each meeting with students I make sure I have at least one interactive activity to keep engagement and learning high. One of my favorite activities is graph interpretation since it sparks curiosity, promotes critical thinking, and develops scientific literacy. For example, I show students a graph that demonstrates a key concept in animal behavior such as sexual selection in guppies. I then ask students to interpret the graph relying on the data alone and then propose the graph's main finding using lay-language to a wider population. Usually I do this using the "think-pair-share" approach so that students can think independently, work in pairs to build confidence, and then share with the class. Laboratory sessions allow an even deeper dive into topics and use of critical thinking skills. One of my favorite laboratory series focuses on modifying animal behavior. First, students must train each other using positive reinforcement without any verbal cues. Then, we take a trip to a local animal shelter for them to train real animals using the skills they've learned with each other. Throughout the process, students are encouraged to make reflections about their direct observations and interactions. In conclusion, my teaching methods are designed to increase student engagement with my course and ultimately teach students both subject-matter and transferable skills and knowledge.

Assessment of Goals for Student Learning

Throughout the semester, I assess student learning through *multiple approaches ensuring students have ample, fast feedback*. I use multiple approaches because this acknowledges that students have different strengths and because different assessment formats serve different purposes. For example, I often use weekly low-stakes quizzes to test basic knowledge of animal behavior while giving students rapid feedback that can allow learning during assessment. I also employ slightly higher stakes weekly laboratory assignments to assess whether students have understood the concepts the laboratory was directed to teach. Additionally, I usually give a few larger exams with a combination of multiple choice, short, and long-answer questions that require students to apply their knowledge of animal behavior. For example, I may ask students to name a specific type of stereotypic behavior, identify its causes, and then design a treatment plan for an animal to reduce that stereotypy. In this way, I can assess whether students' interactions with animals may be improved through their learning. Throughout assessments, I strive to provide frequent and timely feedback to enhance learning.

Long-term projects such as creating handouts or conducting research projects are ideal assessments for student learning since they more *realistically mimic "real-world" experiences and often result in products that are relevant outside of the classroom*. For these projects, I always give students a significant amount of choice in topic. For example, in one course, I ask students to create a handout about a contemporary issue in animal welfare that they could post online, give to a future client, or even a friend who asks them about that issue. Students are graded not only on their knowledge of animal welfare, but also on their transferrable skills such as persuasive communication and ability to conduct scientific inquiry into a topic through literature reviews. Furthermore, they must respectfully address different cultural or individual perspectives that are different from their own. I encourage the students to post outcomes online

and include them in portfolios to employers, therefore encouraging an audience other than just me.

Overall, facilitating student learning into animal behavior and welfare – as well as career skills – is always a challenging but rewarding experience. During each course, I strive for improvement in my teaching and am always open to new ideas. I look forward to more opportunities to connect with students as a scientist, teacher, and mentor.