

Human / animal relationships and their educational value

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For most of us, dogs are man's best friend, a companion to amuse us, join in walks or to shower with love. A University of Kansas researcher is showing that for prison inmates dogs can be much more than companions, helping them learn vital skills for use in life after prison and to become better people. And the inmates are providing a new lease on life for the dogs.

Suzanne Rice, professor of educational leadership and policy studies, has done research on a program that matches greyhounds retired from the racing industry with prison inmates and argues that the program is a truly [educational experience](#) for both participants and that [animals](#) play an underutilized role in education.

"About 10 years ago I got it in my head that I wanted to adopt a greyhound," Rice said. "I did some research and found that about the only way you can get one is through a rescue mission."

After Rice adopted a dog she became interested in the educational potential of such programs, which, following the founder of the first greyhound prison program in Kansas, she calls "Greyhounds Behind Bars." Rice has examined the program philosophically, focusing on two theories in education. Since the original adoption, Rice and her husband have also adopted two more greyhounds.

The first, John Dewey's theory of experience, essentially holds that not all hands-on experiences are positively educational. Whether an

experience is truly educational can be assessed by whether it was pleasant or agreeable and, more importantly, how the experience lives on in the person. Rice argues that the inmates, who spend entire days with the dogs, teaching them manners and training them to be around people matches the second criterion.

"The benefits for the inmates far exceed the skills they learn in training a dog," Rice said. "It truly exemplifies Dewey's theory."

The inmates, who work with the dogs in teams of two or three cellmates for anywhere from one to six months, not only learn the techniques of training a dog that has never had human companionship or learned to walk stairs or live outside of a cage, they learn patience, empathy, trust, anger management, parenting skills and other skills that help a person live in society. The trainers are also required to keep journals of their work with the dogs. Illiteracy is disproportionately high among the incarcerated, and being required to write about their experiences gives the inmates needed practice and encouragement in improving their reading and writing.

"The more time I spent with the greyhounds... I also began to see a change in myself—I'm more relaxed and have become more social. I learned that as I spent time teaching the greys to sit, stay, heel, they were teaching me compassion and patience and that I could be a better person," one inmate and program participant said.

Rice also examines the program through Jane Rowland Martin's theory of education as encounter, which sees education as a "process of change in which the capacities of an individual and the stock of a culture become yoked together." By working both with program volunteers who teach dog training skills and their interactions with the dogs, the inmates gain educational experiences.

Viewed through a broader view of Martin's theory, Rice argues that through such programs the dogs have educational experiences as well, beyond simple rote training. In addition to learning commands such as "sit" and "stay" the dogs are learning manners and how to live with humans, something they've never done in their lives, having lived entirely for the racing industry. Many have never spent time with other dogs either outside of running next to them on the track.

"Both humans and dogs begin their prison lives as 'outcasts.' The humans are locked away from society having been convicted of all manner of crime, and the hounds are separated from their familiar lives at the track, having been judged too old, slow or crippled to be of any use to the dog racing industry," Rice wrote. "In their interactions with one another and with volunteers who teach inmates how to handle and teach dogs, prisoners and greyhounds undergo educative transformations."

Rice will present her research on the program in March at the National Conference for Philosophy of Education Society in Albuquerque.

Parents have been aware of the value of animals and education for decades, with countless families getting a pet to help teach kids responsibility. But academics have not been as warm to the idea. Historically, most of the time when animals have been mentioned in philosophical literature it has been to argue that non-human creatures are incapable of education themselves and have little to contribute to human education. Rice disagrees with that sentiment and focuses much of her research on the roles of animals in education.

In addition to her work with "Greyhounds Behind Bars" she is co-editing a book, tentatively titled "The Educational Significance of Human Animal and Non-human Animal Interactions" with A.G. Rud, of Washington State University that will explore human/animal relationships and their educational value. The book will contain chapters

on topics such as the role [dogs](#) can play in helping substance abusers in the recovery process, the role of animals in children's literature, and the cultivation of children's capacity for sympathy and other pro-social emotions.

"This is really an emerging area of educational scholarship," Rice said. "We want to bring a range of ways animals are educationally significant to the fore and help people think about these ideas. Not just for education in the traditional 'three Rs' but also for lessons in empathy, honesty and traits that help us in society. I feel we're not taking advantage of a readily available educational resource. Just as importantly, we have failed to appreciate the educative experiences animals may undergo in their associations with humans and with members of their own and other species."

Provided by University of Kansas

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