

Students surprised by how smart chickens are

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A cock and a hen roosting together. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

University of Adelaide research has shown that when students are taught to train chickens their attitude to chickens changes. Learning that chickens are smarter than most people think, and that they can be trained, promotes much more positive attitudes towards the birds.

The research, published in the journal *Animals*, demonstrates a way of promoting more [positive attitudes](#) to animals. Through 'clicker training' [chickens](#), [students](#) also learnt to train animals using 'force free' methods (encouragement rather than coercion) — important in future careers working closely with animals.

The study, with first-year School of Animal and Veterinary Science students at the University's Roseworthy campus, investigated the attitudes of the students before and after they had practical classes clicker-training chickens.

"We showed that attitudes to animals are linked to how clever we think that they are," says lead author Dr Susan Hazel, Senior Lecturer in Animal Behaviour in the School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences.

"When students learnt to clicker train the chickens — who pick up colour discrimination incredibly quickly — they were more likely to think that chickens are intelligent than before the class. The students were also more likely to think chickens can experience boredom, frustration and happiness.

"It was also a very effective class for teaching students the basics of animal training, and a number of students have told me afterwards how they have used that information in training their own animals."

The students paired clickers with food, so the chickens learnt the click meant they have done what was wanted and would be rewarded.

The students' first task was to get the chickens to peck on a red target. This behaviour was 'shaped', meaning initially the chicken was clicked and rewarded immediately with food when it looked at the target. Progressively rewards were only given when the chicken got closer, and closer, until it actually pecked the target. Chickens soon learnt colour discrimination. They learnt to peck on the red target, rather than green or yellow.

"Animals learn all of the time, even when we are not deliberately training them," says Dr Hazel. "Understanding how they learn is integral to being able to manage or train [animals](#) effectively.

"Chickens are descendants of wild jungle fowl, and to survive had to learn quickly what food was good to peck at and what they should ignore. The students not only learnt about how to train an animal, but they learnt chickens are much smarter they had realised, changing their views of chickens forever."

More information: "'Chickens Are a Lot Smarter than I Originally Thought': Changes in Student Attitudes to Chickens Following a Chicken Training Class." *Animals* 2015, 5, 821-837. [DOI: 10.3390/ani5030386](https://doi.org/10.3390/ani5030386)

Provided by University of Adelaide

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