

Human-animal studies: an interdisciplinary module exploring the role of animals in society

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Activity

Aims

The aim of this project was the formation and delivery of an undergraduate module that offered students the opportunity to explore the nature of human-animal interactions. Currently most human-animal modules in UK higher education institutions are embedded within a single department and discipline. In contrast, this was a cross faculty module in which the topic of human-animal relationships were considered from multiple disciplinary perspectives with interdisciplinary output in students assessed essays and journals. The module built upon the connections developed between Warwick scholars who were involved in the 'Being Human' and the 'Animal and Post Human Futures' Institute of Advanced Studies networks.

Development of the module

After consulting colleagues who were part of the 'Being Human' network as well as attending an international conference on human-animal relations the two module conveners found there was a high level of enthusiasm and expressions of interest across academic disciplines for it to be feasible to develop an interdisciplinary module exploring the role of animals in society. With this in mind staff willing to deliver lectures on the module were identified through the networks described above and, where gaps existed, academics were both emailed and approached directly. Most were Warwick scholars with the exception of Robert McKay, a lecturer in English from the University of Sheffield whose research focuses on human animal studies. The lecturers and title of their lecture were as follows

Chris Maughan. The moral status of animals

Robert McKay. What is Human-Animal Studies For? (University of Sheffield)

Amy KilBride. Animal welfare science: concepts, measurement and improving quality of life

John Pickering. Human-animal borders

Thomas Hill. Consciousness and free will in animals

Penny Roberts. Human-animal relations in history

Nickie Charles. Kinship with animals

Deborah Butler. Animals as spectacle and entertainment

Every effort was made to attract lectures from a wide range of disciplines and to address the key areas in which human animal interactions are pertinent. The number of lectures in the module limited the topics that could be covered. For example, consideration of human interactions with wild animals would have strengthened the module. However, this lecture was cut because of the limited number of time slots. The order of the lectures was designed to start with the broad theoretical

viewpoints that underpin human animal relationships (eg animal rights vs animal welfare) and move to more subject and species specific areas (e.g. animals as spectacle and entertainment).

Reading list

The module comprised of a broad range of topics in which the students had little or no academic background. Therefore it was essential that students completed reading to prepare for the taught sessions. We were keen to avoid the situation where students considered reading to be optional and arrived at class unprepared. Lecturers prepared a reading list of essential and additional readings that was posted on the module pages. We wanted to make it as easy as possible for students to access the essential readings so provided links from the module pages. Where documents were not freely available online, the link led to a depository provided by the library where photocopies of the documents were available to module participants. Students were expected to source the further readings through the normal channels (eg going to the library and finding the text).

The number of essential readings was between 1-3, depending on the length. When choosing the readings lecturers were asked to place the emphasis on introductions that readers from a range of academic backgrounds would find accessible. Students were asked to write about the essential readings in their reflective journal, which was assessed. Additionally, informal discussion with students at the start of taught sessions on what students had read and their thoughts on it encouraged a culture where preparation was expected. Overall this approach was successful and students engaged well with the background essential reading. Students were also of course encouraged to read the additional material recommended by the lecturer and it was evident from the reflective journals that students often did read this material.

Taught sessions

The format of the module sessions was a lecture delivered by a discipline expert followed by a seminar discussion. The exception to this was the first and last session. The introductory session started with an introduction to human animal studies followed by an outline of the topics that would be covered in the lectures and the assessment process and signposting students to resources such as essay writing support. The 2nd hour was used to complete two exercises. Firstly students considered the question 'What is an animal' individually, in pairs and then as a group with the focus on recognising diversity in people's answers. Secondly we completed a theory building exercise where pairs of students were given a set of images, graphics and text relating to animals and asked to build a visual display with the material that represented a theory or narrative. This exercise was used to explore with the students the idea that the module would involve them developing their own views and opinions based on the information we would provide. This facilitated discussion of documenting this narrative in their reflective journals. Finally the group as a whole considered group interactions where difficult and emotive topics are discussed and agreed on a list of ground rules for creating a safe space for discussion. These activities were documented on the lecture webpage http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/activities/modules/ugmodules/humananimalstudies/lectures/1/introduction_to_human_animal_studies.pdf

In the final session of the module the seminar hour was focused on allowing students to share their views on some of the many topics that we had covered during the module. We used spectrum lines to explore these views; individuals stand on a 'line' between two points that represent 'agree' and 'disagree' to express their opinion nonverbally. Individuals across the spectrum then volunteer or

are asked to explain their view point and the spectrum of views is discussed. We prepared a number of questions, students were also asked to suggest their own. We encouraged students to pose questions that related to their essay questions and this was well received.

The structure of seminar sessions varied between sessions, for instance, completing qualitative welfare assessment of videos of farm animal, to introspective reflection on their experiences of grief when pets/ animals died, to academic discussion of questions relating to the seminar readings. In general the students reported that they would like the seminars to be more structured and interactive. This will be addressed in next year's module (see below for more feedback from the students).

Students taking the module

Eight students registered for the module, but four subsequently withdrew before the start. Therefore the module ran with just four participants, two female life scientists and two male humanities students. This very small group limited the possibility for group interaction and cross pollination from students from different disciplines. However the mix of disciplines among the four was broad; maths, physics, philosophy and politics, and this diversity and gender balance added to the richness of discussion. The small group was also diverse in their views on the morality of use of animals, which was one of the key themes of the module. There were students that self-defined as animal rights activists and those that came from a farming background. The group worked well together, sharing views and feeling free to disagreeing when viewpoints contrasted. The students coped well with discussing emotive topics in a measured way.

Assessment

The module was assessed through a reflective journal and a 3500 word essay. The journal could be created in any medium (e.g scrap book, audio file). No word count guidance was provided for the journal. Students choose their own essay title. Students' titles and essay plans were discussed with the module leaders before a final title was agreed upon. This worked well with students engaging with the process, and fine tuning their title over a number of weeks. All students wrote essays on topics that they personally found to be the most interesting part of the module. Students were invited to submit a 500 word essay plan for their essay, which one student did.

Student feedback

We used Survey Monkey to collect student feedback. This allowed the responses to be anonymous, which would have been impossible otherwise with such a small group that we knew well. Students were asked to rate each lecture and general elements of the module, such as assessment, from 1 to 5 where 1 = poor and 5 = excellent. All questions also provided space for general comments.

Overall the four students reported a positive experience of taking the module (average score 4.5 out of 5), they would all recommend the module to others and would take a similar multidisciplinary module again the in future.

The area with the greatest need for improvement was the seminars. The students rated the seminars as only 2.5 out of 5. They suggested that the seminars should be more structured and interactive and lecturers should be encouraged more strongly to stick to the one hour deadline and avoid running over into the seminar time slot.

One of the four students rated their satisfaction with the assessment methods as only 2 out of 5 and commented that it was too much work for a 15 cat module. However, two others were very satisfied with the assessment methods. One commented that they found the reflective journal a very helpful approach.

Students generally found the essential readings to be at about the right level, and generally engaged with these texts very well in the seminars and in their reflective journals.

Improvements to the module based on student feedback

Some amendments to lecture content and running order would improve the module. We also propose having the entire final session as a summary / drawing together session would help students to synthesize the information they had received.

The content of the seminars was highlighted by the students as needing improvement. While a discussion of the lecture and essential reading content always took place, in future more structured and varied activities would be planned.

Outcomes

The main outcome of the project is the module content which was delivered in 2014. It was well received by the small group of students that participated and it is planned that the module will run again in 2015. Hopefully with a larger number of students. It is hoped that many of the same lecturers will be able to contribute their input again.

Reading lists and lecture slides were made available by all lecturers on the module webpages. Attempts were made to audio record each lecture. However, several lecturers did not want audio recordings of their session shared and technical errors made the quality of other recordings unusable. This has meant it was not possible to carry out the proposed plan of posting audio recordings on the module webpages. However, the audio recordings have proved useful to module leaders for the purpose of reviewing the content of the module and considering changes for the future.

Implications

Interest in the field of human-animal studies is growing in academia. The enthusiasm for this module from the participating staff is evidence of this. This module built on connections between scholars developed through previous IAS funded networks and has illustrated the strength in this area in researchers at Warwick University. This subject also has a lot to offer students. Human animal studies provides an excellent platform for truly interdisciplinary work drawing strongly as it does from thinking from natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. It is also a subject that is widely relevant to many people's everyday lives. We propose it has potential to be a popular module with students and hope this will be evident in 2015 enrolment numbers.

Resources

The funding provided in this fellowship was highly valuable in providing the support necessary to develop the course structure and teaching materials. It is intended that the web pages, reading lists and teaching aids will be used again as the module runs in the future.