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Supporting students' mental health and wellbeing through the integration of companion animals into tutorial programmes at a teaching-led university

Diahann Gallard and Elizabeth Taylor

Faculty of Education, Health and Community, Liverpool John Moores, IM Marsh Campus, Barkhill Road, Liverpool L17 6BD, UK

Contact: d.c.gallard@ljmu.ac.uk; e.taylor@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper considers the protocols and processes of a small-scale project involving final year university students and the companion animals (dogs and guinea pigs) of tutors, aimed at improving student wellbeing and fostering relational learning. Narratives and survey data revealed a range of perceived benefits including those relating to the technique of distraction to reduce anxiety and improve student wellbeing. Also identified are possible further benefits including relational learning and improved attendance. The paper reflects on a range of other issues, such as the welfare of the animals, potential risks and objections from staff and students. Recommendations from the pilot project are provided and the potential for further research identified.

Keywords

student anxiety; companion animals; innovation; student experience; relational learning; mental health and wellbeing; tutorials; student engagement

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Introduction

There are an increasing number of programmes in education settings featuring animal-related activities for therapeutic effect that are aimed at enhancing student wellbeing (Gee et al., 2017). Though the benefits that the presence of an animal can bring to a person's emotional state and wellbeing have been noted (Wells, 2011), few studies have attempted to uncover the core features of the activity, sufficiently detail the process or clearly differentiate how the animal-assisted activity accounts for the needs of both the student and the animals involved (Herzog, 2015).

Levinson (1969; 1972) conceptualised that when people are in the company of animals they talk more freely and this increases their capacity for relating to others on an emotional level; this idea underpins many animal-assisted activities in educational and therapeutic contexts. Kahn and Kellert (2002) have advised that animals can also act as 'social lubricants' to enable more positive social perceptions and social encounters. Zins et al. (2004) argue that it is the related gains in socio-emotional competence from such increased communication, and relationships, which then impacts on learning and academic performance. Recognising and facilitating animals as a social lubricant could therefore be viewed as positive influences on a student's learning process.

In this paper, we explain the process and outcomes of a pilot project delivered by a group of staff in the School of Education at LJMU. The project trialled the inclusion of animals (dogs and guinea pigs) in tutorials, specifically to address anxiety levels in students and to create the conditions for positive student-tutor interactions. This activity therefore aligned with LJMU's strategic aim of enhancing 'partnerships with students' (LJMU, 2012a), whilst also

addressing a key target from the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy of setting "consistently high standards for pastoral and tutorial support" (LJMU, 2012b: 4).

Background

This exploratory study was influenced by the idea of 'emotional hijacking' (Goleman, 1995) where a person's thinking can be impaired when they are preoccupied with feelings of anxiety. This can lead to a cycle of negative thoughts and interpretations of their experience and create feelings of anxiety. A temporary incorporation of animals into the university experience could, therefore, allow a deliberate and purposeful disruption of negative patterns of thinking at those times when anxiety is higher. At this juncture, a new way of communicating could be introduced that is compassionate and needs focussed, in line with Rosenberg's Method (Rosenberg, 1972, 1999; Rosenberg and Eisler, 2003) which is a relational way of working with students; helping them to reengage in a created space whilst their anxiety is temporarily reduced.

This project was designed to assess if animal-assisted activity alleviates increased anxiety that previous final year students had reported, which were heightened at 'hot spots' in the academic year. The yearlong project comprised of five parts:

- Pre-activity research and scoping
- Development of protocols
- Planning and delivery of animal assisted tutorials
- Evaluation of the project
- Dissemination at faculty level and across the University

The possibility of an animal-assisted activity was a popular suggestion in dialogue between personal tutors and students and supported further in a focus group discussion. At the heart of the focus group

debate was a view that, as a technique of distraction, animal-assisted activity (in preference to cake making or yoga) would be an enjoyable experience that represented a novel departure from normal university life or programme content.

Of central importance was ensuring that animal-assisted activities were organised to minimise disruption to existing practice. For example, as an embedded personal tutoring system was already in place (in the form of peer learning groups supported by a tutor), the project team ensured that the usual conversations and tasks related to these tutorials, which focus on pastoral needs and study skills, should continue as scheduled. In other words, the animal-assisted intervention would be part of an integrated approach. The team was also aware that it would be difficult to differentiate generalised anxiety from vulnerability. Therefore, when introducing a therapeutic environment, student disclosures were carefully listened to and the project team was on hand to signpost students to the appropriate welfare service and experts at LJMU.

As animal-assisted activity was not part of normal University practice, prior to the commencement of the project, care was taken to investigate fully the policy of the University in relation to animals on site. It was found that the University permitted assistance animals. Further, guidelines and good practice, such as those laid out by the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO) (2014) (a global association for organisations that practice, research and/or educate about animal-assisted activity, animal-assisted therapy, and assistance and service animal training) was also studied; following engagement with the project, the University became affiliate members of the IAHAIO.

Tutors' own companion animals took part in the pilot, as opposed to external organisation involvement. These animals were temperamentally suitable and offered an opportunity to investigate whether this more personal connection between the tutor and the animals would offer something more than unfamiliar animals. Further, it was recognised that not all external organisations worked within the IAHAIO principles. To pre-empt other issues, protocols were developed, not just for the delivery of the tutorial sessions, but for the roles and responsibilities of tutors and for the orientation and temperament assessment of animals before the delivery commenced.

Developing the protocols

Risk management

Third party insurance for the dogs taking part was arranged through the UK dog welfare charity, The Dogs Trust. Further, in the event of an emergency, reception staff would have the details of a local veterinarian practice and the project team members and the health and safety officers would be informed. These steps were undertaken to meet the requirements of senior managers.

Student responsibilities and welfare

Students were given the option of volunteering to take part (alternative sessions were scheduled for those opting out of the activity). Students who chose to participate had to first agree to be briefed about safe conduct in animal-assisted activities and about their own responsibilities. The terms of engagement with the activity were provided in advance and the students were asked for signed consent. During the briefing, students were asked about animal-related phobias and allergies and signed a self-disclosure stating that (if applicable) they would self-manage in the usual way when taking part. Also, students were given hygiene recommendations, for example, washing of

hands following contact with animals. Students were reassured that the animals taking part had undergone a temperament assessment (see below) and were the home-based companion animals of the tutors involved.

Animals and their welfare

The animal selection 'common requirements' were:

- Must feel comfortable when interacting with people
- Must have a friendly temperament
- Must not show aggressive behaviour
- Must be in good health and be vaccinated
- Must be clean and well groomed
- Must not be very young or very old
- Must not be an endangered species or illegal breed

All participating animals had to undergo a temperament test that took place during an orientation visit that was purposefully designed, and in line with those applied by Pets As Therapy (a UK-based charity) and The Delta Society (an Australian not-for-profit organisation). The animal's owner provided confirmation that the animal underwent regular health checks and that all necessary annual vaccinations were up to date.

The dogs taking part were provided with a jacket - with 'authorised visitor' (Figure 1) - to distinguish their role as an assistance animal and the guinea pig enclosure was given similar signage.



Fig. 1: Companion animal with jacket

The welfare needs of animals was a primary concern and the Five Freedoms framework was applied (Rogers Brambell, 1965), which makes clear the obligations when using animals in human care;

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
2. Freedom from discomfort by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.
5. Freedom from fear and distress by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

These 'freedoms' helped keep to the forefront the needs and rights of animals. They helped in the avoidance of an anthropocentric perspective (a belief that considers human beings to be the most significant entity of the universe, also termed 'utility trumping') or anthropomorphic assumptions (humans assuming animals have human wants, desires and emotions) (DeGrazia, 1996) which, it

was felt, would compromise the animal's welfare during the process.

Tutor responsibilities and role

Tutors had to undertake a compulsory pre-session check of the animal to confirm it was fit to take part. As the animal handler was also the tutor, they had an overall responsibility to make judgements about the animal's stress levels: to ensure animal welfare; to safeguard students; and to mitigate the risk of harm or damage (although another team member was always available in a support or 'on call' capacity). It was the tutor's responsibility to be tuned in to the needs of students and the animal and to use their professional judgement on whether to terminate a session.

Demonstrating preparedness: the orientation visit

Prior to the first planned visit, the animals had an orientation visit without students present to check how they reacted to the general environment and to build familiarity. A designated quiet space was provided as a safe space and relaxation area (which included, for example, a bed, water and toys) where the animal could choose to take time out from people, in an attention free space during the tutorial sessions. The animal was first allowed some initial quiet time in the designated secure area safe space for the owner to monitor any anxiety levels. The handler had to be convinced that the animal did not show signs of anxiety before moving from this area. If the animal had not accepted the space or showed signs of anxiety then the orientation visit would have been terminated. Once the animal was relaxed in the designated area, they were introduced to a person from the project team to monitor their response. If the animal did not show signs of anxiety then the temperament assessment could proceed.

Notice to the campus community

Campus users not taking part in the activities with animals were informed in advance by email at the beginning of the day. The email detailed the area being used which became a restricted area (permitted access only) to manage potential risks to humans and animals.

Delivery structure

Each tutorial consisted of the following:

1. Attention is initially paid to the animal (the student is encouraged to greet the animal).
2. The principles and theoretical underpinnings of animal-assisted activity are explained to the student.
3. The tutorial continued as it would normally, i.e. an animal present but not as the focus.

The 'Golden Rules' for delivering sessions were mutually agreed between the tutors delivering the sessions. These were:

- Brief students on their expected conduct around the animal to pre-empt issues;
- Before students enter the proximity of the animal, check again to see if they had any allergies or phobias;
- Explain to the students what the 'underpinning ideas' behind the animal being present are;
- Keep the belongings of the animal in a nearby place (water, care items, rewards, toys);
- Maintain observations of the animal for any signs of stress or to see if any of the Five Freedoms are being compromised; and
- Do not be afraid to terminate the session and return the animal to its secure 'safe space' at any time, or call in other team members for support.

Methodology

Alongside the delivery of the activities, data were collected which enabled a multi-lens evaluation that captured the perspectives of the students taking part (narrative data), the perspectives of two tutors delivering the sessions (narrative data) and views of the wider university community, that is staff and students who did not take part in the sessions involving companion animals.

At the onset of the exploratory study, a web based survey (using Bristol Online Surveys - BOS) was designed and distributed to staff and students. It was selected as a time efficient data collection method that would enable participants to remain anonymous and to limit the risk of the researcher's own views affecting the results (Munn and Drever, 1990). This was particularly appropriate to minimise bias as the researchers' own companion animals were an integral part of the project. Survey questions included a mixture of question types (open and closed) concerning the potential benefits and barriers to the inclusion of animals in tutorials.

Although anonymity was protected in the survey, individual respondents were tracked, as some of the question items were designed to differentiate whether respondents were members of staff or students and, in the case of students, to establish if they had participated in the tutorials or not. The link to the survey was promoted internally using staff and student mail lists. 48 participants completed the survey (students n=25, staff n=22). The reach was beyond the School of Education although most respondents for the survey were within the Faculty of Education, Health and Community (where the School is located).

In total there were 12 individual tutorial sessions and one group tutorial with companion animals present. During the

programme delivery, the tutors adopted an ethnographic approach and kept field notes. The notes included the behavioural responses and direct quotations from the student participating in the animal-assisted tutorials (n=16). Further notes were taken during conversations with Faculty staff before and after the animals were on site, which were supported by anecdotal notes from the process of delivery and about the delivery context. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings

All students who took part in the tutorials reported that they felt less anxious when in the presence of the animals. A key objective of the study was to provide a technique of distraction to reduce anxiety and to improve wellbeing in students and this emerged as an important theme, raised by participants both before and after the tutorials had taken place:

I expected that my mind would be taken off studying for a while.

It was calming to have a distraction and something else to focus on while my tutor looked through my work.

Participating students were reflective of their positive feelings towards animals and their therapeutic quality, and a recurring phrase throughout their responses noted how the animal assisted tutorials helped them to feel more 'relaxed':

When I left the session, I felt much more at ease and relaxed than when I had arrived at uni. I found taking part helped me relax, as I was quite worked up about the work I had to get done.

The presence of the dog made me feel relaxed and more at ease. I really enjoyed the session.

I have been so stressed and struggling just to relax and I found just being around the animals made me feel happy and relaxed, and everybody else in the room did too, which made it an even nicer atmosphere.

In one session, a student talked about her homesickness and how being able to spend time in the company of animals reminded her of her family home where there were many companion animals. She had missed them and said she felt “a normality” return to her life. Another student also spoke about their homesickness and, whilst grooming an animal, stated,

This is just so nice. If I could just do this more, I know I could cope better.

A different student contrasted their experiences in the tutorials with an otherwise “sterile” university campus. Further, students asked questions about the animal’s life at home with the tutor, which demonstrated their value as a social lubricant. The survey included responses relating to immediate effect of the presence of an animal can bring to a person’s emotional state of the students in line with Wells (2011), and the need for such approaches to supporting student wellbeing, as one respondent suggested:

If dogs can work in schools why not in universities? We have increasing numbers [of students] with mental health issues—it seems to me that we need all of the help we can muster to help them in their studies and as people.

Some respondents felt that possible benefits could also include those beyond individual student wellbeing:

It could also help groups of students to bond and form stronger friendships, this would be

particularly important in the early stages of each year.

For students own benefits and to show how it is used in education settings.

This concept can be used within students’ own practice in schools.

Promote attendance.

It may help those who are shy or quiet to open up.

I think that it is something that would help on a therapeutic level as well as with student engagement.

Overall, these potential benefits were beyond the scope of the project, but they provide insight for possible further studies and for fostering student engagement in terms of retention and attendance.

The idea of deliberate and purposeful distraction, through the presence of animals in tutorials, was highlighted by staff respondents as having both positive and negative impacts:

... could be very helpful to take some of the attention away from assessment anxieties.

There could be benefits but imagine it could provide a significant distraction also.

...for some students it could be calming, relaxing and a temporary distraction from stresses.

Additionally, four responding members of staff did not feel there was a valid purpose to the inclusion of animals in tutorials:

I do not see it's [sic] importance in relation to student time at university.

I don't see the point of having animals on the premises... it's not a zoo.

Does it have a pedagogic purpose?

It's just another gimmick.

Overall, three of the 22 staff respondents objected to the presence of animals on University premises and explained their view in relation to some personal anxieties and issues:

I'm scared of dogs.

Students or staff may have allergies and/or anxieties.

Fear of animals. Allergies to animals.

Additional responses concerned the welfare or issues relating to animal presence on site, most of which were considered by the team during the project design and protocols, such as:

Hygiene e.g. most of the lecture rooms and offices have carpets and are not vacuum cleaned very often.

Specific areas should be designated if [the] animal needs to drink or use toilet facilities.

Badly behaved pets.

Picking up poo!

Further possible problems or barriers to further integration and embedding of animals into tutorial programmes included a recognition of the perceptions of other members of staff:

People's short sightedness and lack of open mind and understanding.

Some staff would not be on board

The survey also revealed a number of ethical and moral issues, as well as concern about the welfare of the animals:

*Will the environment be safe for the animal?
I would want to know that the animals are being appropriate [sic] cared for*

Not fair on the animals

People might not want to leave the animals.

Too many people might turn up and overwhelm the smaller animals.

Another example of people 'using' animals.

Overall many of the concerns had been addressed within the planning and risk management stages of the study, but the comments suggest that the protocols had not been shared sufficiently. Another emerging recommendation from the study was the need for a clearer and shared understanding of the purpose of the project and explanation of the technique and rationale of purposeful distraction.

Conclusion

Animals integrated into tutorials as a distraction technique is a simple idea, however, the process of delivering such activities can be problematic. It is evident that, if the project is to be replicated, attention should be given to careful planning and development of a shared understanding of the purpose and place of the inclusion of companion animals. In this exploratory study, the preparation and protocols in the initial stages circumnavigated many potential issues and avoided harm to students and the animals.

Students who took part in animal-assisted tutorials valued the opportunity to take part in the project. No students taking part said (in the questionnaire or in person) that they did not benefit or regretted taking part. However, it should be noted that the participants were self-selecting. Those students who dislike animals, or gain little from being in their company, opted to stay away or chose not to take part in the survey. This is important to acknowledge when integrating animals into university activities – there will be some students who would not wish to engage, hence there is no

universal benefit for the intervention. Yet, for those students who are drawn to animals, the project proved a useful way to temporarily reduce anxiety and develop the student-tutor relationship. The project divided opinion in terms of staff perceptions, however, for staff who engaged with the idea, there was a clear sense of its value and potential.

Since the exploratory study was conducted, the mental health and wellbeing of students was supported by considerable political intent to reform mental health support in education (Prime Minister's Office, 9 January 2017), whilst other studies have endorsed the idea of developing greater student resilience (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017). Priorities for identifying and outlining support for students' with particular needs in higher education was also expressed by OFFA [Office for Fair Access] (2016), who noted that whilst a majority of institutions had set broad targets related to supporting disabled students, just a small fraction (four per cent) explicitly referred to mental health issues, specific learning difficulties or the autistic spectrum. The integration of companion animals in tutorials could, therefore, form part of a menu of support for those students who feel that it might be of benefit to them.

- **Diahann Gallard** a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader for the BA (Hons) Education Studies and Early Years degree route at LJMU
- **Elizabeth Taylor** is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Education

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