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## Teaching the Animal

**Margo DeMello (Ed.), *Teaching the Animal: Human-Animal Studies across the Disciplines*. New York: Lantern Books, 2010. 427 pp. \$50.00.**

In 2003, Clifton Flynn published an article in *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* entitled “A Course Is a Course, Of Course, Of Course (Unless It’s an Animals and Society Course): Challenging Boundaries in Academia,” in which he gave an account of the institutional hardships endured when navigating his Human-Animal Studies course proposal through the university bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup> When reading *Teaching the Animal*, it is encouraging to realize that academic orthodoxy and scepticism against HAS courses may pose less of an obstacle in 2010.

*Teaching the Animal* is a compilation of essays, course syllabi, reading lists, and other teaching and learning materials from HAS courses in 15 subject areas, with a clear emphasis on the humanities and social sciences (the natural sciences are only represented by two chapters). Twenty-one scholars from a range of disciplines have contributed with their vast educational experiences to this ambitious volume. The book is organized according to disciplines and offers multiple entry-points (although a bit difficult to find—either an index or a more detailed table of contents, or both, would have been helpful). A cross-reading of the different chapters provides ample educational inspiration for creating new HAS courses in, I would say, almost any field. The educators contributing to this volume generously share their “best practices,” concrete ideas for teaching, assessment, and course development, and a wide repertoire of experiences of what may take place in HAS seminar rooms, but also discuss problems and challenges involved in creating and teaching courses in human-animal relations. In so doing, they also invite interesting institutional and epistemological insight into discipline-specific conditions for HAS education. Indeed, reading this book is a learning experience in itself. Let me highlight just a few pedagogical snapshots from some of the contributions:

Carrie Rohman, in her chapter “Literature and the Discourse of Species,” lets her students produce a written life story-account of their most significant encounter with a nonhuman animal in the beginning of her course, and asks them to return to their narratives to analyze them at the end of the semester. In this manner the educator uses

the “baggage” of animal experiences the students already bring with them to class for the benefit of the course, and allows them to look back and reflect on their own learning processes when the course is coming to an end. Similarly, Paul Waldau (“Religion and Other Animals”) suggests an exercise he calls “personal archaeology” for both students and teachers as a way of uncovering multilayered personal histories with animals and their associated modes of learning, and initiating an inquiry into the complex process by which knowledge of other animals is built up. Kenneth Shapiro (“Psychology and Human-Animal Studies”) proposes exercises in intra-disciplinary critique to focus attention on how the students’ own field of study has treated animals. Cheryl Joseph (“Exploring the Animal-Human Bond through a Sociological Lens”) puts her students in personal contact with the author of the key text in her animal studies course, cooperates across disciplinary and institutional boundaries in her course development work, and provides several opportunities for students to apply theory to practice. David Fraser, Daniel M. Weary, and Marina A.G. von Keyserlingk (“Two Interdisciplinary Courses on the Use and Welfare of Animals”) work with a research-oriented pedagogical approach directed towards “real-life” problem-solving and independent discovery (although some of these exercises appear to be attuned toward supporting animal enterprises rather than radically transforming them).

When reading through this volume it strikes me that the numerous kinds of pedagogical advice, suggestions, and reflections offered speak not only to HAS education, but to education more generally (as Paul Waldau also notes in one of his two chapters). To reflect on teaching human-animal relations means, in a certain sense, to reflect on the education system as such. Thus, the authors address a number of educational issues that do not relate exclusively to HAS, but that may take on particular expression and meaning in the context of a HAS course. Student-centered curricula, the role of emotions in education, and the role of integrated field studies (or “community service-learning”) as part of the syllabus are just a few examples of issues raised that have general educational interest, and on which different HAS educators and students may have different views. More importantly, the significance of critical pedagogical approaches is emphasized throughout the volume in almost every chapter, and is also underscored in the Editor’s introduction. Critical pedagogy involves not only teaching critical thinking—on a more fundamental level it encounters and supports students as competent change-agents, in their own lives as well as others. Many chapters in this volume position themselves close to such approaches, addressing critical pedagogical notions such as unlearning, socialization, social advocacy, and species ideology critique.

A critical animal pedagogy would further seek to make in-depth interventions in the power structures and political economical forces in which human-animal relations are embedded, explore forms of counter-hegemonic resistance, draw on (and contribute to) activist knowledge, and problematize the very assumption of what makes certain bodies (human and animal) accessible for instrumental ends, but such a space is not always easily created in academia. For instance, it seems to me that inviting a farmer (albeit local and “organic”) to give a guest lecture on his animal products risks reinforcing the very ontologization of animals as commodities that a critical approach to human-animal education has an important task to dismantle, unless carefully balanced with exercises in immanent critique.

This leads me to what I perceive as a few “missing links” in the book. First, I would have wished that *Teaching the Animal*, as it takes on the impressive task of outlining and discussing educational practices in human-animal relations, would have included Education in its list of disciplines. I believe that an essay on the place of the so-called “animal question” in education studies and/or in teacher education programs would have provided a valuable meta-perspective to the overarching theme of the book. My second concern is that the book as a whole lacks a grounding in educational theory. How is the selection of material considered appropriate for teaching and learning carried out, by whom, and for whom? What does it mean to “teach” something to someone? What sort of actor is the formal education system in human-animal relations? What do the trope and the presence of “the animal” do to education? What tensions and contradictions in education discourse does this trope/presence bring to light? What are the limits to education in fostering critical awareness and to critique ideologies in which it is itself embedded? What are the different implications of “including” animal issues into existing curricula, as compared to recognizing that animals are always already part of hybrid educational assemblages and might require a critical posthumanist working through of entire curricular logics?

Some of the essays touch on highly relevant issues pertaining to educational theory. For instance, Annie Potts and Philip Armstrong emphasize the knowledge/power dimension, the political investments of knowledge production, and their implications for humans and nonhumans. Paul Waldau, Lori Gruen, and Kari Weil further remind us that animal life is not fully knowable to us, even if history of science has conveyed a different impression. What does this mean when educating about human-animal relations? Even a critically inclined animal didactics may inadvertently mediate a message of the discursive accessibility of the animal; the animal as always already subject to scientific exploration and dissection, however non-invasive. As Gruen and

Weil put it, the study of nonhuman animals brings us to the limits of our own knowledges, and this encourages us to continuously engage in critical inquiry into the particularities of our own forms of knowing.

Recognizing that this is essentially a practice-oriented volume, I still sense that there should be a place for a separate, concise section discussing HAS in relation to education theory, where issues regarding educational knowledge production and knowledge development raised in the chapters could have been brought together and discussed. Such a section would arguably have given the volume as a whole more academic depth, a potentially larger influence on curriculum development processes in the institutional politics of tertiary education, and a common focus around which the different contributions could have been brought in closer cross-disciplinary conversation with each other. These remarks aside, *Teaching the Animal* clearly achieves an impressive goal and will be an excellent resource for every university educator interested in human-animal relations.

#### Note

1. Flynn, Clifton P. "A Course Is a Course, Of Course, Of Course (Unless It's an Animals and Society Course): Challenging Boundaries in Academia." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23:3 (2003). 94-108.