

Transformative Learning in a Community-Based Veterinary Clinic

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Abstract

Student learning occurs in multiple contexts and sites, and real-world experiences provide meaningful and transformative learning. In this reflective essay, I discuss my personal experience and observations of student volunteers in a community-based veterinary clinic, sponsored by a community organization I founded in 2019. Through their participation in “People and Paws: Happy and Healthy Together” student volunteers have the opportunity to immerse themselves in a community-based veterinary clinic for low-income, multispecies families. Students are able to question their preconceived stereotypes of low-income families, develop their skills of self-reflection and to begin to see themselves as contributors to the larger community, beyond the university. I suggest that participation in a community-focused event, where students learn about themselves while helping others is a memorable and transformative learning experience, one which has the potential for significant impact on self and future community engagement.

Keywords: Community-engaged learning, multi-species families, transformative teaching

Transformative Learning in a Community-Based Veterinary Clinic

Student learning occurs in multiple contexts and sites, and real-world experiences provide meaningful and transformative learning (Rogers, 2019; Wright, Fink, and Cowan, 2022). Through their participation in “People and Paws: Happy and Healthy Together” student volunteers have the opportunity to immerse themselves in a community-based veterinary clinic for low-income, multispecies families. Students are able to question their preconceived stereotypes of low-income families, develop their skills of self-reflection and to begin to see themselves as contributors to the larger community, beyond the university.

In this reflective essay, I first discuss my unique role in this clinic, as both a professor with an extensive background in transformative and multicultural learning and education, and the founder and president of Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette (Indiana), the community-based organization that sponsors the event. While not a research article, this essay reflects on my personal experience and observations, drawing on my 30 years of transformative teaching and learning in universities. I discuss the concept of transformative learning, which is the pedagogical framework undergirding students’ experiences at the clinic. After providing an overview of the event, I discuss students’ roles and experiences at the clinic and how this real-world experience provides students with an opportunity to question their preconceived ideas about the concepts of “the human-animal bond,” “access to care,” and “One Health.” In conclusion, I reflect on ongoing challenges and opportunities of this model, future plans to strengthen student involvement, and the benefits of transformative, community-engaged learning at a time of higher education crisis (Porter et al., 2023).

Educating on Campus and in the Community

I am a professor of education, with an extensive background in multicultural, experiential, and transformative education (Dolby 2012, 2017; Dolby and Rahatzad, 2018). Additionally, I have a personal history of community engagement and volunteering in my community, including 12 years at a local animal shelter. As my comfort level grew at the animal shelter over many years, I slowly moved from focusing on working with animals to also having conversations with the people there: workers, potential adopters, owners who were surrendering their pets, and others. Through these conversations, I began to understand the limits of the animal sheltering industry (Guenther, 2020), and began thinking about how to build an organization that would provide emergency support for families in crisis, thus keeping pets with their families and out of shelters.

In 2019, I founded Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette (AAGL), a community-based nonprofit, with a three-part mission of keeping pets out of area animal shelters; keeping families together through providing financial resources in emergencies; and supporting the human-animal bond. Philosophically, AAGL takes an assets-based approach to family support: we work to meet families' needs, but always assume that pets are loved and cared for, and families need just a little help to make it through a rough patch (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). Pets are part of our families and our social policies should reflect and honor that reality (Clancy, 2014).

As an educator, I knew that including students as volunteers in the work of this community organization was one of my goals. While AAGL includes student volunteers and works with multiple student organization at my home institution, in this essay I focus on my reflections on student involvement in the project, "People and Paws: Happy and Healthy Together," (PPHHT) a semi-yearly no-cost community veterinary clinic for low-income families in our geographic area.

With partial funding provided by a Banfield Community Care Grant, PPHHT launched in 2023 as a partnership between Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette and the largest social service agency in the area, Area IV Agency on Aging and Community Action Programs. During the event, Area IV's expansive offices are transformed into veterinary exam rooms, waiting rooms, human wellness check and consultation areas, and rooms for family photos and supplies. Before leaving, families have the opportunity for a family photo with their pet(s), and to choose supplies to take home. Family photos are printed, framed, and distributed to clients after the event. PPHHT is designed primarily to serve older seniors and disabled people on fixed incomes: most of the participants rely on social security and other limited government benefits for daily expenses.

Each event has been made possible by the 30-40 volunteers who help on the day, including volunteers from multiple local veterinary practices, The Purdue University Shelter Animal Medicine program, the Shelter Animal Medicine club from Purdue, an undergraduate student organization, "A Cause for Paws," student nurses from Purdue's School of Nursing, and volunteers from AAGL, and Area IV. As PPHHT relies on student volunteers, it provides future veterinary and nursing professionals the ability to witness firsthand the struggles of low-income families to care for their pets, and the strength of their love and bonds with them.

Transformative Learning: A Pedagogical Framework

At the core of the philosophical approach and design of PPHHT is a commitment to student involvement and education through transformative learning, which disrupts and transforms problematic preconceptions and frameworks into ones that are more inclusive and open (Mezirow, 1997; Rogers, 2019). This essay is particularly focused on transformative learning that is both experiential and grounded in community-engaged learning (Wright, Fink, & Cowan, 2022). Experiential education, drawing on Kolb (1984), seeks to transform the learner from a passive recipient to an active creator of knowledge, where learning occurs through engagement with the activity (Dolby & Rahatzad, 2018; Wright, Fink, & Cowan, 2022). Community-engaged learning, one variation of experiential education, is focused on transformative student learning in the context of serving the community (Hannibal & Robertson, 2023; Wright, Fink, & Cowan, 2022).

As students participate as volunteers at PPHHT, they are positioned to question their pre-existing assumptions about how low-income pet owners care for and love their pets (e.g., the human-animal bond); the relationship between human and pet/animal health (One Health), and the realities of

the difficulties that low-income pet owners face in accessing veterinary care. The conversations that students have with clients at PPHHT are real, unpredictable, and sometimes challenging for students, given their limited personal experience interacting with people of different backgrounds from their own (Pearl, 2019). However, the presence of pets provides students with a common shared ground with the clients: these conversations take place in an environment that is supportive and caring for all participants. Thus, PPHHT provides a unique and powerful model of transformative learning.

The Clinic: Student Learning in the Field

As students arrive at the event and check-in, there are required orientations that include both technical information about the process and an overview of this philosophical commitment. Working within the combined framework and principles of both AAGL and Area IV, the leaders of both organizations (myself and the Director of Area IV) discuss the importance of respect for both people and pets, suspending judgement and understanding the real financial constraints that participants face. By incorporating our values into the brief orientation, students have a beginning opportunity to reflect on their preconceived stereotypes, and to understand how important pets are to clients, many of whom live alone with their pet as their only or primary companions (Arluke & Rowan, 2020; Beck & Katcher, 1996; Cole, 2019; Muraco et al., 2018; Rauktis & Hoy-Gerlach, 2020; Thompson & Kim, 2023). As students move into their smaller groups for orientations focused on their specific tasks at the event, they have additional opportunities to discuss their pre-existing ideas about low-income pet owners, before pets and owners arrive on-site. These early conversations prepare students for the event by helping them to begin to see the potential for self-transformation and exploration through volunteering.

During the event, students assist in multiple areas, including in the exam rooms with veterinarians and veterinary nurses (technicians), and in the waiting area with pets. Other students help with check-in, client and pet escorts, and in the family photo room. Nursing students provide human health wellness checks in a separate area of the event.

Questioning pre-existing stereotypes is an ongoing principle of transformative learning, and is often linked to social justice concerns (Rogers, 2019). PPHHT allows students an opportunity to reflect on their ideas and misconceptions about low-income clients and how they care for their pets (Arluke & Rowan, 2020; Guenther, 2020; Mithers, 2024). For example, many clients arrive on the bus, or in cars that are old and rusty. The majority of clients have multiple health problems, and use walkers, wheelchairs, and other mobility aides. Despite their owners' obvious financial struggles, pets generally are clean, groomed, and happy. Students are often surprised to realize this, as they had assumed that most pets would be dirty, smelly, and show signs of neglect. Instead, students have the opportunity to realize that pets are often the priority for low-income families, and their needs come first, often before human needs (Irvine, 2015).

Of course, there are exceptions, and during the training session, we stress the importance of suspending judgement and demonstrating empathy and respect for all participants, both human and animal. For example, if a volunteer witnesses a pet in need of grooming or a quick nail trim, we emphasize in our training this is not a sign of neglect for the animal. Often, loving and caring owners simply do not have the capacity to provide everything that a pet needs, despite their efforts. When one of our staff spots a frayed leash, the owner is offered a new and safe leash without question or judgement. Our primary mission is helping our citizens keep their animals safe and healthy without judgement.

Through conversations with clients and other volunteers at PPHHT, students have the opportunity to navigate their own professional and personal development, in a supportive and positive environment (Hardy & Chapman, 2022). The unique design of this organization allows for students to have meaningful conversations with clients. Because everyone at PPHHT is there to help pets, people relax with each other and are able to talk across differences of generation, socio-economic status, ability and race. The pace at the event is deliberately calm and slow, to allow these conversations to unfold and for students to have time to not rush through their duties, but to be able to interact with clients, and then reflect on those interactions throughout the event. For example, one of the clients in a wheelchair arrived with her small dog via a city-run public shuttle van. When the van was late coming to pick her up, a group of students sat and waited with her, as they comfortably talked together. As

organizers, we did not request that students do that: they saw that the person needed company, and as most other clients had left, they had the time to spend with her and her dog. Through these interactions, students are able to develop empathy and compassion for low-income families.

Understanding the depth of the human-animal bond and its importance for older adults, is a central component of PPHHT (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Cole, 2019; Gee & Curl, 2017; Thompson & Kim, 2023; Yang, Lee, & Tsao, 2017). Community events focused on providing pets with health care for low-income families are generally structured as drive through vaccine clinics, which have limited opportunities for interaction between volunteers and clients. PPHHT takes a different approach, providing both clients and volunteers with an experience that recognizes and celebrates clients' bond with their pet. At PPHHT, clients are supported in that relationship from their arrival at the event to their departure approximately an hour later. When clients arrive, veterinary nursing students talk with clients, generally at their cars, about the concerns they have about their pet and how to talk to the veterinary staff. All clients are provided with a small notebook, where they can record their questions for the veterinarian and then write down the answers. Once clients enter the building, each family is provided with an undergraduate host, who focuses on helping the person and their pet(s) together, understanding that they are a multispecies family (Irvine & Cilia, 2017; Laurent-Simpson, 2021). As the volunteers escort clients and their pet through the entire event, they have ample time to talk to the person and interact with the pet, strengthening students' understanding of community needs and the effects of long-term poverty.

PPHHT's focus on supporting the human-animal bond is particularly important for the low-income families who attend the event, as they are often made to feel shame and embarrassment at not being able to provide for their pets at a middle-class standard of care (Arluke & Rowan, 2020). PPHHT's philosophical approach supports them in the continuation and nurturing of a key relationship in their lives and provides validation for that relationship. At the end of their visit, people are offered "family photos" with their pet(s) in a room that has been set up as a photo studio. After the event, the photos are printed, framed, and delivered to participants. For many participants, this is their only opportunity to sit for a photo with their pets, and the picture will become a treasured memento.

The transformative learning experience provided by PPHHT is primarily focused on overcoming students' psychological barriers to connecting with low-income families and understanding the importance of the human-animal bond to these families. In addition, PPHHT gives students first-hand exposure to the concepts of "Access to Care" and "One Health."

Access to veterinary care is a significant concern in the local community. The Veterinary Care Accessibility Project (VCAP) (<https://www.accessstovetcare.org/>), provides statistical evidence to support what is a frequent observation in Tippecanoe County. VCAP uses data from a broad range of sources to assign a Veterinary Care Access Score (VCAS) to every county in the contiguous 48 states, on a scale of 0-100. The current (2024) score for Tippecanoe County, our local area, is 32, indicating that veterinary care is difficult to access because of expense, lack of transportation, and the low number of veterinarians in the county based on the pet population. Students who volunteer at PPHHT have the opportunity to both see and talk to clients who have difficulty accessing veterinary services, and to understand that access to care is a structural, not individual, societal concern.

The concept of One Health acknowledges that health outcomes between people, animals, and the environment are inevitably intertwined. For many decades One Health has been a key element of farm, food, and wild animal veterinary medicine because of public health and zoonotic disease threats (e.g., COVID-19). More recently, the fields of veterinary medicine, social work, and animal welfare have started to examine the connections between human and pet health (Clancy, 2014; McDowell et al., 2023; Rauktis & Hoy-Gerlach, 2020; Whipple, 2021). PPHHT incorporates elements of a One Health approach through offering human medical wellness checks during the event. After clients have completed their pet(s) veterinary exam and vaccines, they have the option of visiting with an undergraduate student nurse for basic medical screening including: blood pressure, glucose, heart rate, and cholesterol checks. Other student volunteers are available to watch pets, if needed, during this appointment. This integrated One Health model is a promising interdisciplinary path for future development, as many people (including those who are low-income and/or unhoused) prioritize their pet(s) health over their own.

Finally, clients at the event are also offered pet supplies at the conclusion of their visit. The selection of pet supplies reflects the One Health approach, focusing on items that help older and

disabled individuals care for their pets without injuring themselves. For example, PPHHT distributes high quality metal litter scoops, and non-slip food/water mats and bowls, to help people care for their pets safely (Dolby, 2024; Fields & Kogan, 2019; Keglovits et al., 2020). As student volunteers assist their clients with choosing appropriate supplies to take home, they again have the opportunity to hear about the daily struggles of low-income and disabled people to care for their pet(s) without adequate financial resources, and the difference that these (seemingly minor) supplies can make to the overall health of a person, a pet, and their relationship, which is the core principle underlying the One Health approach.

Conclusion: Building for New Futures Using Transformative Learning

“People and Paws: Happy and Healthy Together” is a pilot model of an approach to provide students with a transformative learning experience that is fully immersed in the community. Students in the veterinary, veterinary nursing, pre-vet, social work, and related fields rarely have an opportunity to interact with pets and people together. Generally, students work only with pets through volunteer or service-learning experiences at animal shelters, but lack the rich possibilities for learning that come from observing and talking to people with their pet(s) present, in an everyday, non-emergency context.

As the program grows and expands, there will be increased opportunities to provide transformative learning opportunities for students, with plans to deepen existing relationships with relevant units at Purdue University (veterinary, social work, nursing, animal sciences) to be able to provide both more comprehensive orientations and follow-up/reflection sessions through classes. As our pilot model has been successful, we are also planning to work to embed volunteering at PPHHT into experiential learning courses in coming years, with a focus on the development of an expanded sense of professional identity in veterinary and allied fields (Hardy & Chapman, 2022).

As Black and Dutta (2021) note, the current environment of higher education is often detrimental to the development of a sense of belonging among students, faculty, staff, and administration. Participation in a community-focused event, where students learn about themselves while helping others is a memorable and transformative learning experience, one which has the potential for significant impact on self and future community engagement.

Author Statement

AI was not used in this essay.

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