



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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RAISING THE ROPE

A few years ago, a friend of mine accepted my invitation to guest lecture in my Introduction to Psychology class at St. Philip's College in San Antonio, Texas. Like every dedicated professor, I had already exhausted an arsenal of information in an attempt to demystify the subtle differences between classical and operant conditioning. However, unlike similarly dedicated professors, my best efforts were not enough.

In desperation, I shared my frustration with my friend, the vice president of animal training at Sea World—and he, who had spent the better part of his professional career applying these principles (albeit with a variety of marine life, including two-ton killer whales), agreed to share his experiences with my students. Perhaps some concrete examples would provide the missing link and enlighten their learning.

True to form, his presentation was inspired. Proud as I was of my own ability to captivate and inform simultaneously, he was better. My students were attentive and left the class as experts in the finer distinctions of the formerly confusing concepts. Later that afternoon, I praised his natural talent for clarity and enthusiasm, and—for the second time that day—he told a story from his experience that has remained with me ever since.

Early in his tenure with Sea World, he oriented himself to his new position by taking walks through the park to observe the trainers and the animals in their training elements and watch their interactions. He recalled one afternoon when he happened by the training pool—a large, rectangular tank filled with water—where, to his surprise, a small circle of trainers were gathered in the shallow end of the pool, deep in an animated exchange. He approached them cautiously, wondering what might be so wrong that their normally rigorous training schedule had been interrupted for what appeared to be an impromptu gab session. Nearing them, he heard bits and pieces of their conversation.

"These dolphins just aren't as smart as the ones we had last year," one remarked, arms folded across his chest.

"My dolphin just isn't motivated by anything," said another.

The remaining trainers weighed in on the matter, adding, "These dolphins are lazy. They'll never get it." And finally, "Maybe they're tired of this kind of fish."

When he had heard enough, my friend slid into the pool, approaching the trainers. Pointing to the other end of the tank where a half dozen or so dolphins bobbed aimlessly in the water, he asked the obvious question: "Those dolphins would rather stare at the blue wall at the other end of this tank than interact with you," he observed. Then, he asked, "Who's got the problem? Do they or do you?"

At the conclusion of his story, we both laughed—not for the hilarity of it, but rather at the simple poignancy of its inherent message.

"Do you know how we get a killer whale to perform?" he asked.

All I could do was guess. After hearing his presentation to my class, I knew it had something to do with the application of conditioning, but I had heard no specific examples about the whales although I had seen their performances a number of times as a guest in the park.

He shook his head patiently, as all good teachers do when their pupil fails to see the obvious. Leaning forward, he continued.

"That's part of it," he began. "But not all of it. Our trainers put in a lot of time with the animals. They virtually live with the animals, interacting and practicing so often—and so routinely—that their presence becomes part of the regular training experience for the animal. That time spent together—one-on-one—eventually develops a level of mutual trust and consistency that allows us to train the animal to demonstrate behaviors which might not be a part of its natural repertoire."

I leaned forward, anxious to hear how killer whales learned to nod in agreement to a trainer's prompt, use their fins to splash an audience on cue, and—miraculously—leap up and out of the water with such tremendous grace and ease.

"I'll ask again," he said. "Can you guess how we get them to do these things?"



By this time, he was teasing my curiosity to the limit. I was, uncharacteristically, silent.

"It's simple. We work backwards from the behavior we want the animal to learn," he began. "And we never, never, ever assume that the animal is incapable of doing it—for any reason."

"We start from the most basic demonstration of that behavior we are looking for," he explained. "And we shape the training from there. For example, if our objective is that the animal learns to jump into the air, we begin by working under water with it, teaching it to swim over a rope."

"Every time it does so successfully, we reward that behavior. And over time, the rope is raised, bit by bit, and the rewards continue as the animal continues to meet the challenge. Finally, the animal is leaping into the air in order to get over the rope. When it can do that without fail, we remove the rope, and it still remembers the behavior."

"But there is one last—and critical—element," he added. "We never, never, never acknowledge behavior that is incompatible with our training objectives. We ignore it—when and where it happens—on purpose. We stay focused around the goal and ignore everything else because that is where our energies pay off." He smiled as he concluded, "And, as a result, the animal does, too."

The parallels of his story are like all good tales that are told to convey simple truths. To my mind, my friend and I are more alike than different in what we do and how we do it. Both of us believe in accepting our rightful share of responsibility for the learning that occurs as the result of our interactions with our learners. We both believe in their potential to achieve. And we both understand the value of staying focused around the goal.

As to our differences, they're fairly obvious. I've yet to don a wetsuit to teach a psychology class, and he's only spent a single pleasant spring morning lecturing in a community college classroom. But we've both learned an important lesson from a ragtag group of once uninspired dolphins. Perhaps others will, too.

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