

Henry Vilas Zoo - Empathy Field Trips Presentation Transcript

Jess Thompson (Henry Vilas Zoo)

All right, thank you for joining us, everybody. We are Henry Vilas Zoo. And we'll be talking a little bit about our project to create some activity guides around field trips that normally happen here at the zoo, as well as some companion docent training modules.

Jess Thompson (Henry Vilas Zoo)

First, we can tell you a little bit about who's presenting today we worked with education, conservation education consultant, Beez Kneez creative, Nette Pletcher, and my name is Jess Thompson. I'm the conservation education curator. And you'll also be hearing from Courtney Cordova, who's our education specialist and did the implementation of these of this project.

Jess Thompson (Henry Vilas Zoo)

So Henry Vilas Zoo is unique in that it's one of a few free AZA accredited zoos in the country. There's only about 10 in the country. And we're pretty proud to be one of them. We are small in size in land area, but we are one of the bigger zoos out there or medium to big sized zoos in terms of visitation. So we do get just loads of buses that come in and drop their kids off in a normal field trip season. Because we don't have ticketing, they don't have to check in. And usually, these school groups will just come with their own activities that the teachers have thrown together, whether that's a bingo card or some questionnaire, and we estimate because they don't check in it's an estimate that we have about 700 classrooms that come through our gates every single year. So definitely an untapped group of us of young learners that we wanted to connect with. We also, like many zoos, have discovery cart docents who have interpretation stations throughout the zoo and interact with 10s of 1000s of these visitors every single year. So we went really wanted to pair those two pieces to enhance our empathy work.

Jess Thompson (Henry Vilas Zoo)

Of course, this is not a normal year, we are not having hordes of field trips coming through our gates. So we still wanted to work on creating these activity guides and training modules. But we wanted a way to, to pilot them. And fortunately, we have been able to test them out on a unique opportunity, which is a childcare program we created for COVID-19 for high need students to actually come into the zoo, we have two different classrooms, and they take their zoom classes online in their classrooms. And then they also get to go out throughout the zoo and have some animal encounters. We also provide the internet, breakfast, lunch and snacks for these kids, and that school support.

Nette Pletcher (Beez Kneez Creative)

Thanks, Jess, that's great set up. This project was super fun to work on with Henry Vilas Zoo staff. We structured it as the beginning of a larger overhaul of all of their educational initiatives. The zoo chose to kind of start by targeting teachers who bring their students on these field trips, as you heard, and the volunteer docents who interact with Zoo guests, because these are audiences that have such great potential to engage a lot of people in the empathy best practices. So for the teachers, we designed these different empathy based activity guides across three different elementary school grade bands. The activity guides us of course, the animals and the exhibits that are at the zoo, to help the kids make connections in ways that promote the development of empathy for the animals. Each guide includes

activities that incorporate some of the empathy, best practices with specific suggestions for the teachers and their chaperones, on how they might use correct framing, how they can model the empathy behaviors, how they can activate the kids imaginations in ways that spark empathy. The content, of course, also increases knowledge about the animals, and gives lots of opportunities for the students to practice empathy behaviors on the zoo grounds. And these guides were developed very intentionally around the techniques that are known to enhance empathy. It's an excellent example of theory being applied to practice. These guides are now available online for free on the zoo's website. And they'll be promoted, along with information about the zoos, field trips for teachers. Once that is a thing happening again.

Nette Pletcher (Beez Kneez Creative)

For the docents, we also did develop a series of training modules that go a little bit in depth into what this empathy work is, it offers up the definition of empathy and the three empathic abilities. It provides opportunities for the trainees to practice interpreting the animals and the exhibits, again, those that are unique to Henry violet zoos, zoos, exhibits in ways that highlight the four different characteristics of animals that we know elicit empathy, that agency, the activity, coherence and continuity. So these are modules that are set up in PowerPoint, they have a complete script with them, they can be delivered have been delivered through zoom, and ultimately can be delivered also in person. And, again, the training modules are such a great example of Henry Vilas whose commitment to incorporate empathy into its education programming. It's, I think, such a neat initiative for them to involve the docents in being partners in education, really offering them the opportunity to play the role that they have. They do in terms of being important educators, and are deserving of the training that is kind of reflecting the most current understanding of conservation education.

Nette Pletcher (Beez Kneez Creative)

As far as evaluating these materials, as you heard without the school field trips being actively running during the project period, not having docents available in the normal way. We used a set of Zoo school students to stand in for the regular school groups. They're about 20 of them, and they provided us with a great sort of pilot test for the products. We attempted to evaluate the formal outcomes using two separate tools. The first is a version of semantic differentials you might be familiar with. Instead of just being a worksheet with words, we printed cards of animals photos of animals, and the students placed the photos into various bins that represented kind of a five point Scale between two opposing paired words things like friendly or not friendly, similar to me, not similar to me. And this evaluation was looking at the question of how much does the program change the kids attitudes towards animals.

Nette Pletcher (Beez Kneez Creative)

Ultimately, the results we gathered did not show any statistical significance between the pre and post, likely, due to a very small sample size, we had fewer than 10 students from the program who were actually able to participate in the evaluation. There was also some confusion on the part of the helping instructors who were monitoring the assessment. That's okay.

Nette Pletcher (Beez Kneez Creative)

There's another tool, understanding animal needs, that's going to address a slightly different evaluation question. Namely, does participation in the program develop the child's understanding of animal needs,

and we're hopeful that, you know, we'll be able to administer that tool in the coming weeks. Again, the sample size is going to be quite small. But it's really great that we can use the zoo school students to pilot these materials, not just the guides and, and the activities, but the actual evaluation tools that will then be able to be applied on a wider scale later.

Nette Pletcher (Beez Kneez Creative)

So although the data we've collected thus far on the evaluation side hasn't answered our question exactly of whether the program outcomes around the attitudes and everything is being met, the experience of just testing out this tool has been really valuable.

Nette Pletcher (Beez Kneez Creative)

And as with the field trip guides, the docent modules, were piloted with a small group of volunteers, through zoom. And after participating in the training sessions, they offered some very helpful, honest feedback on the experience. Overall, they were really pleased they found the material interesting and well presented. They felt it might be improved by offering even more opportunities to practice the techniques, and maybe some additional slides to review material from the previous sessions. So those are some changes we'll be making prior to delivering that training again, again, really helpful to have that small team volunteers willing to be guinea pigs. And let us practice delivering the content. I'm now going to turn it over to Courtney, she herself has been a very brave and beneficial guinea pig through all of this, she's facilitated so much of the on the ground implementation, and helped to shape these products for the maximum effectiveness.

Courtney Cordova (Henry Vilas Zoo)

So like Nette said, I helped facilitate these activities. So it started with that pre assessment using the semantic differentials using animal photos. And being able to participate in that and give feedback helped us better that tool, which was great. And I then facilitated each of the different activities for the three different activity guides. So we went through them over the span of about two months, based off of the kids Virtual Learning schedule, there were some days where we could do more than one at a time, and other days where we just did one. On average, they took about 10 or 15 minutes per activity.

Courtney Cordova (Henry Vilas Zoo)

I also facilitated the docent training modules with that test group of volunteers. And I was able to get some great feedback for that, and then communicated with Nette so that we could alter both of those projects based off of the feedback of what actually happened on grounds with people and guests.

Courtney Cordova (Henry Vilas Zoo)

So I do have some stories of what happened when we were going through the field trip activity guides. So my first story is about the lemur activity that was in the second and third grade activity guy. And in this activity, the kids are focused on kinesthetic empathy. And what was really fun is that as soon as we kind of stepped into the primate house, one of the kids noticed that Datu was walking on his knuckles, which is our male orangutan. And they already started kind of following that. So it didn't feel like I was like, okay, kids gather around, let's do this thing. But instead, I was just encouraging that natural curiosity and that natural mimicking that already happened as we moved around the primate house as the different types of primates. And then we got to the lemur exhibit. And in the Activity Guide, it talks

about how lemurs have this stunning pose and how it's similar to yoga. And can we move our bodies like the lemurs. So very conveniently, there was a lemur sunning himself in that perfect yoga pose. So we took a look at him. And then we did some yoga poses ourselves. And then we ended with the lemur yoga pose, where we just sat quietly and took some deep breaths. And I thought this was really interesting because this mindfulness and deep breaths is something we encourage the kids to do all the time. But generally, it's in a context of, oh, you're feeling overwhelmed, or this is frustrating, or it's not going your way. So take some deep breaths, and they're not always very receptive to that. But this was in the context of, let's be like the lemur. Let's feel the sunshine on our fur and just sit and take deep breaths and every single kid was engaged and one of the kids even after I dismissed, everybody, He sat there in that yoga pose for another five minutes, just super calm and super engaged and practicing those mindfulness techniques that will eventually help them in the future. So that was really cool to see.

Courtney Cordova (Henry Vilas Zoo)

Another activity we did, from the kindergarten, first grade field trip Activity Guide, was focused on the seals. And I found this one really interesting as an educator, because the beginning talked about something I talk about every single group of kids who comes to the zoo. Why don't we tap on the glass, right? This is going to be conversation, any teacher who's going to a field trip at the zoo with kids is going to have one and have a conversation with them about but it put it in an empathy perspective. So imagine yourself as the seal, how do you think it would make them feel? But we had a really good discussion, these kids have already been to the zoo. So they already kind of knew like, yeah, we don't tap on the glass. But it was less of, "hey, please don't do that." And instead of discussion we had and more real connection with empathy, and taking perspective, those seals, we also had a great conversation of "what do you think it'd be like to be the seal" or "do you like swimming in the water and blowing bubbles?" they like that, too. And they just really were engaged with this one and really seemed to love it. And we stayed in watch the seals for quite a while. And at the end, I asked them, "How do you feel when you're watching the seals?" and their response was peaceful. And that's not often a feeling I think these kids get every single day in the world that we're living in and with everything going on. So it was really great to see them take that perspective. And just feel that calmness from watching the seals and engaging, taking something that I already would have talked about with them and turning it into an empathy activity. And overall, that's what I feel like I learned a lot about in the field trip activity guides as an educator, this wasn't anything that I had to do a whole new thing. But just intentionally asking certain questions or framing things in a different way that would allow for empathy to happen.

Jess Thompson (Henry Vilas Zoo)

So in terms of next steps, we're really excited to be able to take all of that great information that we learned in the development, and piloting this program with our zoo, school kids, and reach out to those teachers get some feedback from the teachers that will be leading these field trips in the future, get some more docents involved in the training, we've talked about having in our new virtual world, we have the opportunity to actually include docents from other zoos. So it's something that if you have docents at your organization that may be interested in sitting in on some of this training, this is the perfect time to try that out. We also are really excited to incorporate these activities and trainings into our other education programs, like our camps in our our more traditional programs, as well as with our non education staff. So those folks that do see guests coming through on those one off conversations,

and being able to apply some of those those techniques that, as Courtney indicated, can be in really small tidbits. So lots of exciting ideas going forwards. I can, I can put the link in the chat here. So if you're interested, those those activity guides are up and live on our website, which is exciting. And then we're happy to share the docent modules as well, once we have incorporated a little bit more of that feedback. So the docent modules are still in draft form, but happy to share those also. So thanks, everybody, and we're excited for any of your questions.