The Influence of Environmental Issue Investigation and Action Skills Training on Teens’ Beliefs Concerning Their Level of Environmental Control

December 2011
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Abstract

Research indicates that environmental knowledge combined with training in issue investigation and action skills provides the best chance at eliciting behavior change, yet this has not translated into curricular changes in most traditional school settings. Zoos, where more time is available for hands-on learning, may be able to fill this programming niche. The goal of this study was to measure whether environmental issue investigation and action skills training in the informal setting of a zoo teen program could influence teens’ beliefs concerning their level of environmental control, with anticipated results being an increase in teens’ feelings of empowerment. Zoo Crew teens at Cleveland Metroparks Zoo were administered pre- and post-surveys surrounding their participation in action skills training activities conducted September-November, 2011. Although results showed positive gains in 6 of the 9 skill assessment questions, none proved to be statistically significant. The post-survey will be administered again in late summer 2012, following the completion of the action components that resulted from the training, to test for significance at the culmination of the environmental action projects.

Introduction

Cleveland Metroparks Zoo’s Zoo Crew program, a youth volunteer program for students ages 13-17, has a definitive goal of training youth to become conservation advocates and leaders, but to date the program design doesn’t fully live up to this objective. Hands-on conservation work is currently planned by the program coordinator and community partners, which on Roger Hart’s ladder of participatory education is the ‘assigned but informed’ rung, the lowest level of participation (Hart, 1997). This type of social mobilization is not uncommon among teen programs in American zoos. A survey done by the Zoo and Aquarium Teen Program Assessment Consortium (ZATPAC) indicated that teens could readily cite “other-directed” actions as solutions to environmental problems but weren’t as confident in expressing ideas that they themselves could take as solutions to the conservation problems that concern them the most (Owen et al., 2009). The teens will mobilize to participate in conservation action, but given the state of the environment today, it will be necessary for them to adopt environmentally responsible behaviors that will last into their futures.

Considerable research over the past several decades indicates that instruction focused on knowledge of environmental issues can change behavior (Dispoto, 1977; Ramsey & Rickson, 1977; Young, 1980). But ownership and empowerment comes from combining this knowledge with training in issue investigation and action skills (Ramsey, 1993; Culen & Volk, 2000). Without effective skills training, the opportunity exists for people to feel incompetent in adopting new behaviors for the environment, despite their genuine concerns and strong personal feelings towards taking environmental action (De Young, 2000; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Action skills training can provide a sense of competence. Despite the abundance of research demonstrating the benefits of such training as part of the environmental curricula, the length of time for such studies and handing considerable control and decision-making over to students can be difficult to implement in a traditional school setting (Covitt, 2002). Zoos and their informal programming, which have more flexibility than school districts, thus can fill a necessary niche in the environmental education of program participants of all ages.
The desire for Zoo Crew is to move up Hart’s ladder, to a more participatory model combining the ‘adult-initiated/shared decisions with children’ and ‘child-initiated and directed’ rungs (Hart, 1997). Throughout a series of trainings, teens will not only air their environmental concerns but will initiate projects of their choosing to address those concerns. They will participate in the projects from conception to final analysis. Adult guidance in the form of zoo staff will be available to them along the way, to provide support and mentorship. The purpose of this research is to investigate whether environmental issue investigation and action training increases teens’ beliefs concerning their level of control over solving environmental issues. The prediction is that if teens are given the opportunity to choose projects that they find meaningful, they develop multiple solutions towards addressing that project and they determine the final direction that action takes, they will feel more empowered regarding their roles as environmental stewards. Not only could the skills learned from such a process prove valuable to the environment but they could also provide life lessons to the individual teens.

**Methods**

Participation in Zoo Crew is highly competitive, with approximately 1/3 of applicants each year getting a position on the crew each spring. As evidenced by their application essays, these teens enter into the program with considerable environmental knowledge and a high conservation ethic. Zoo Crew teens, at the end of each summer, are given the opportunity to continue in the year-round portion of the program, which requires monthly meetings, various levels of animal handling training and opportunities in hands-on conservation work within the community. Of the 95 teens each summer, approximately 45 teens each year choose to continue in the program during the school year. Action skills training was officially rolled out as part of the year-round monthly meetings in September 2011, although a preliminary training was made available to all Zoo Crew teens during the summer.

All training sessions were designed to use higher-order thinking as designated in Bloom’s revised taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2000). As such, when students are given the freedom to engage in the construction of their own knowledge, the instructional process is fluid and uncertain and outcomes of the process are not predictable. Zoo staff guided the process with a general plan in mind, yet adjusted their interactions with the students based on the progression of the students’ discussions. Each step of the training was created to complement the one previous and move the process towards the final end of goal of having students select a project for which they will development a conservation action plan. At various times throughout the training process, teens were shown video clips of young people across the country who have become change agents for various environmental and conservation problems, to illustrate the point that teens indeed can make a difference.

An introductory, five-hour voluntary training session related to issue investigation was held on July 12th and August 5, 2011. Teens were guided through concept-mapping exercises to see where their reasons for wanting to join Zoo Crew overlapped the mission of the Zoo. After the map was created, they were challenged with “Six Degrees of Wanting to Make a Difference,” an activity designed to get them thinking in terms of specific, measurable actions as opposed to their
general response about wanting to make a difference, that would address the hot spots on their concept map.

All other trainings were conducted during the Zoo Crew year-round program meetings. The two-hour training on September 10th was kicked off by watching an inspiring YouTube video clip of the young founder of the online youth organization, Kids vs. Global Warming (YouthGlobalWarming 2008). The remainder of the meeting revolved around having small groups of teens work on identifying environmental or conservation problems in Northeast Ohio that they are concerned about. The two-hour training on September 24th focused on brainstorming conservation actions that could address the environmental problems the teens developed in their previous training. As part of their brainstorming, teens were asked to note not only the action, but resources needed to complete the action and questions they would need to research before proceeding. At the two-hour training on October 5th, teens focused on the specific conservation actions, examining the pros and cons to each and narrowing down the list to only those actions they believe could be accomplished by Zoo Crew in the course of a year. On November 5th, teens watched a video news clip highlighting a conservation action project focused on reducing the amount of plastic drinking straw waste, which was started by a 10 year old boy (kmbctv 2011). They then voted anonymously on their own conservation actions to determine which action they were most interested in pursuing. Once the results were tallied, they discussed how many of the top vote-getters they thought they could accomplish within the year. Teens then organized themselves into action groups based on their interest and began working on their plans and task assignments.

The program coordinator administered the teen pre-survey (Appendix 1) at the beginning of the first year-round training on September 10th and the post-survey (Appendix 2) at the end of the final training on November 5th. Surveys were designed to gather data on the teens’ attitudes towards environmental issues and responsibility for these issues. These ranking questions were examined to determine importance of the selected items to the teens. Surveys also included a skills self-assessment at effectively taking conservation action. These skill assessment questions, scored on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree, were examined using a t-test to compare for statistically significant differences between the pre-tests and the post-tests.

**Results**

Pre-survey and post-survey data was returned from a total of 38 Zoo Crew teens. Pre-survey data for teens not returning a post-survey was excluded from this study. Mean and standard deviation were calculated for each skill assessment question using the scale 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Pre-and post-survey data was compared for each question to determine significance in any of the observed levels of change. Although there were positive changes indicated for 6 out of the 9 questions, not one of those proved to be statistically significant (Figure 1). Two questions showed no change and one question showed a negative change, which did not prove to be statistically significant. Full data details are found in Table 1.
Figure 1: Zoo Crew teen perceptions of their skills at taking environmental action, both prior to and after training in issue identification and action skill building.

(Assessment questions scored as: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree)
Data was also examined based on the number of trainings, ranging from one to four, the Zoo Crew teens attended. Since the number of responses within each category was small, the mean was calculated for all skill assessment questions combined rather than calculating 9 questions independently. Negative growth was observed in the cohort attending only one training and slight positive growth for those attending 2 or 3 trainings. No growth was indicated for those who attended all 4 training sessions (Figure 2).

**Discussion**

Data from the Zoo Crew teen survey does not support the prediction that teens taught about environmental issues and shown the skills on how to take action will feel more empowered regarding their roles as environmental stewards. Although responses to 6 of the 9 questions do show positive growth, these results are not considered statistically significant. The scope of this research project was limited to the designing, constructing and planning portion of the teens’ conservation projects and does not include producing any products or taking part in the actual actions. This may be a limiting factor in the development and progression of the teens’ skill assessment. One question, “I can be a change agent for my issue,” is the closest to becoming statistically significant. It may be that enhanced belief in one’s skills in this arena may lead the way for development in other areas as well. The slight decrease in response strength to the question “I already know a good deal about my issue” may indicate that once teens began to delve deeper into the planning and talked more to others, that they realized there was still much

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1: Student Pre/Post-Survey Skill Assessment Data Comparison [n=38]</th>
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Survey data sorted by training attendance holds some interesting information. One training may well prove to be actually less effective at influencing teen empowerment than no training at all, as teens become confused by the process and overwhelmed by the complexities of planning for effectual action. Attendance at 2 or 3 trainings indicates that students may be gaining confidence in their abilities as they begin to understand the process and work towards an action plan. Attendance at 4 trainings showed no change in skill self assessment. One possibility is that 4 trainings are more than necessary before getting to the actual action planning step. Another possibility, given that all teens in this cohort rated their skills higher than their peers in the pre-test, is that these teens began the process with a good deal of confidence in their ability to take conservation action and the training in and of itself was not progressive enough to effect any change.

While statistical data does not support the prediction, observational data may imply differently. As the training series progressed, teens became more engaged in their discussions and ventured off-topic far less often. Brainstorming by the teens early in the process brought 8 issues of environmental concern to the table: zebra mussels in Lake Erie, irresponsible ownership of pets, palm oil issues, deforestation, wetlands loss/ destruction, invasive species, protection for native species and waste/pollution. As the students ‘speed-dated’ their way through coming up with initial action ideas to target these issues, overheard conversations frequently revolved around
weekend plans and who was hanging out where. Ten minutes of conversation, the length of time spent discussing each individual issue, was too long to remain focused. At the end of the process, after teens had voted to work on actions related to deforestation (planting trees), palm oil and pet abuse awareness, 1 ½ hours of action planning time was wholly dedicated to the task at hand save for minimal conversations about why a teen here or there had to leave the meeting early. Keeping teens focused on the task at hand for that length of time is indicative of their interest in the topic.

Initial formulations of their Zoo Crew action plans are found in Appendices 3, 4, and 5. The onus of taking these projects to completion lies with the teens themselves. Based on the types of activities they are planning, it is assumed that the culminating action for their conservation projects will occur in spring-summer 2012. The final actions may not appear as they do in the current plans as the teens negotiate how to plan such projects within the political and non-profit entity that is Cleveland Metroparks Zoo and Cleveland Zoological Society. The program coordinator will monitor the notes kept by the action teams, jotting down suggestions for them as they proceed. She will meet with each group as necessary to clarify her suggestions and provide support and guidance to keep teen frustrations to a minimum as their projects advance.

**Conclusions**

Despite the lack of statistical significance found in this portion of the study, longitudinal data will continue to be collected for this group. The post-test will be administered again in late summer 2012, at a point when the Zoo Crew teens will have carried to completion any conservation actions that are to date just plans. If significance were to be measured at this time, it would indicate that either the projects need to be carried to completion to make a difference or that it takes time for attitudinal alteration to occur in teens or possibly a combination of both.

Even if statistical significance is not measured on the future survey, if the Zoo Crew teens work through their projects and observational data indicate they take pride in their actions, they will be challenged in the fall of 2012 to take their ideas even further. Rather than just focusing on projects related to Northeast Ohio, a long-term goal is to have the teens plan a conservation action that will reach across the globe. Action skills training will still be a necessary component of the program but it is hoped that teens who have been through the process this fall will be able to model action planning skills for new Zoo Crew teens, thereby shortening the initial training time and allowing the training to progress to the next level.

Results of the longer-term study will be shared with the zoo community through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ Conservation Education Committee. Many zoos have programs for teens, although not all are geared to such long-term, continued contact with individual students. Many zoos are striving to get past basic science education, focusing on the increasing needs of our planet to have a growing corps of environmental stewards in our communities. It is hoped that sharing the results of this study will provide a resource for other zoos looking to strengthen their own individual programs.
Bibliography


kmbctv (2011, August 23). Boy, 10, Starts Anti-Straw Campaign [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5TgtuEtJIg


Appendices

Appendix 1  Zoo Crew pre-survey  pages 11-14
Appendix 2  Zoo Crew post-survey  pages 15-16
Appendix 3  Zoo Crew tree planting plans  page 17
Appendix 4  Zoo Crew palm oil plans  pages 18-19
Appendix 5  Zoo Crew dog walkathon plans  pages 20-22
Evaluating Programmatic Changes -- Zoo Crew Survey 2011

Environmental Concern

1. Which member of your family is most concerned/involved in environmental issues?
   ______ Me
   ______ My parents
   ______ My grandparents
   ______ My siblings (brothers and sisters)
   ______ Other ______________________________

2. Do you consider yourself to be an environmentalist?
   ______ Yes   ______ No   ______ Not sure

3. What environmental issues do you try to influence your parents on:
   ______ Recycling
   ______ Buying environmentally responsible products
   ______ Saving water
   ______ Saving energy
   ______ Using renewable energy options
   ______ Protecting habitat for wildlife
   ______ Extinction of animal and plant species
   ______ Climate change/global warming
   ______ Other ______________________________
   ______ None

4. What environmental issues do you try to influence your peers on:
   ______ Recycling
   ______ Buying environmentally responsible products
   ______ Saving water
   ______ Saving energy
   ______ Using renewable energy options
   ______ Protecting habitat for wildlife
   ______ Extinction of animal and plant species
   ______ Climate change/global warming
   ______ Other ______________________________
   ______ None
Environmental Responsibility

5. Take a minute to think about an environmental issue or problem that you personally are concerned about. The issue I am concerned about is:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

6. Who is most responsible for creating this issue? (Please select all that apply and number them according to responsibility. 1= most responsible, 2= second most responsible, etc.)
   ______ World community
   ______ Government (federal, state, local)
   ______ Companies and businesses
   ______ Environmental organizations (zoos, conservation groups, etc)
   ______ Local communities
   ______ Adults
   ______ Me
   ______ Other

7. Who is most responsible for solving this issue? (Please select all that apply and number them according to responsibility. 1= most responsible, 2= second most responsible, etc.)
   ______ World community
   ______ Government (federal, state, local)
   ______ Companies and businesses
   ______ Environmental organizations (zoos, conservation groups, etc)
   ______ Local communities
   ______ Adults
   ______ Me
   ______ Other
Environmental Control

8. Keeping your issue in mind, how much do you agree with the following statements?

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Demographics

9. Why did you decide to become involved in ZooCrew? (Please select all that apply and number them according to importance. 1= most important, 2= second most important, etc.)

_____ I really like animals.
_____ I really like nature.
_____ I wanted to learn more about animals (including wildlife, marine life, etc.).
_____ I wanted to make a difference for the environment.
_____ I wanted to teach other people about wildlife and conservation.
_____ I wanted to meet people and make some new friends.
_____ I needed service learning credits for school.
_____ A friend of mine was joining/was already involved in this program.
_____ A parent encouraged me to join.
_____ I thought it would be fun.
_____ Other ______________________________

Gender

_____ Male  _____Female

Age  ______

In order to see how your feelings change while we make these changes to the Zoo Crew program, your responses need to be tracked…..BUT we want your responses to remain confidential.

Please enter only the following information about yourself:

Enter the second letters of your first and last names and the month and day you were born in the boxes below.

Example: D’Edra Thompson born July 3rd, 19?? (I’m not telling the rest) would write EH0703.

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<th>Second letter of your last name</th>
<th>Month of your birth</th>
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Evaluating Programmatic Changes -- Zoo Crew Survey 2011

Environmental Responsibility

1. Take a minute to think back to the first survey. The environmental issue or problem I thought about then was:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Who is most responsible for creating this issue? (Please select all that apply and number them according to responsibility. 1= most responsible, 2= second most responsible, etc.)

_____ World community
_____ Government (federal, state, local)
_____ Companies and businesses
_____ Environmental organizations (zoos, conservation groups, etc)
_____ Local communities
_____ Adults
_____ Me
_____ Other

3. Who is most responsible for solving this issue? (Please select all that apply and number them according to responsibility. 1= most responsible, 2= second most responsible, etc.)

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Environmental Control

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I attended Zoo Crew meetings/trainings on the following days (select all that apply):

_____ July 12th
_____ August 5th
_____ September 10th
_____ September 24th
_____ October 15th
Planting Trees
- Budget: $973
- Cleveland Metropark path (already existing or a city park)
- Plaque with donor's name on it
- During the spring (Earth Day/Arbor Day)

Cleveland Metropark contacts
* Planning
  216-635-3237
* Permits
  216-635-3200

Events
* Sell the plots
  - 200 trees at $5 each
  - Give option to have donor help plant

* Advertising
  * Newspaper & flyers & posters

- How much are trees
- We can make 1-sided flyers at Zoo for free
Palm Oil (No "Petitions")

- Petition schools/local areas

Research: who are the problem causers?
- Alternatives

- Letters (sustainable ID)
- Cookbook
- Bracelets

Letters
- Find out who is sustainable/unsustainable
- Write letters urging sustainable identification or becoming sustainable
- Online form letters that people can sign + send to companies/gov./etc.

Information @ Orang enclosure
Cookbook

fundraiser - palm oil festival
YouTube and Facebook

Cookbook
have a cookbook with palm oil free dishes

Form letters

Festival to raise funds
All food served at the festival are recipes from the book and palm oil free companies

Meet your best friend at the zoo have palm oil free dog food

have our schools put our cookbook in their libraries
11/5/11

- Metroparks area - about domestic pets, but mainly dog
- Ask donations
- Sometime in May
- Crafts for kids
- Box 4 donations for walk outside of pet store
- Posters/advertisements - sell candy
- Central area for meeting outside of pet store
- Give out treats
- "Goody-bag" for dog (sponsor needed)
- Possible + mobile sponsorship (Alex Kraus)
- Dog show/competition in beginning
- Local pet store sponsorships/promoting
- Stands for center area
- Posters of abused animals
- Speaker (vet of abused
- Speaker or visitor of APL
- Break stations w/water on trails w/inf on abused animals
- Sell hoodies/-shirts @ & before event w/sponsors on back
- Ads in newspaper/signs at schools
- Use part of & made to groups like APL
• ask for donations/sponsorships
  ~ Alex, Izzy, Ali
• write letter to APL, ASPCA
  ~ Christine
• crafts for kids/snacks
  ~ Arlene / Lexi
• dog show competition
  ~ Arlene, Izzy
• posters/advertisements
  ~ Nikki, Meghan, Lexi
• flyers
  ~ Meghan
• write letters to companies looking for funding
  ~ Shawn, Ali, Christine, Erin
• where
  ~ Arlene

- 7th, 14th, 21st, 28th
  12 - 3:30ish
Dog Walkathon for pet abuse awareness