

RESEARCH IN REVIEW

Approaches to Humane Education: Can Television Make a Difference?

by Bill DeRosa

Increasing knowledge about and improving attitudes toward animals have always been primary goals of humane education. In order to realize these objectives, it is important for humane educators to be on the lookout for new, more effective teaching methods or ways of improving existing strategies. Television is an approach we may want to consider. Because television has become part of our daily life and has been shown to have a tremendous impact on children, it would appear to have great potential as a tool for promoting humane values.

Rosanne Fortner, assistant professor of environmental education at Ohio State University, recently investigated the impact on students of a Jacques Cousteau television documentary, "The Warmblooded Sea: Mammals of the Deep." Fortner's study was extensive and attempted to answer several questions, including: How does watching the television show affect children's knowledge of and attitudes toward marine mammals? Will the same information (as contained in the documentary) presented in a classroom by a science teacher have an equivalent impact on students' knowledge of and attitudes toward marine mammals? To what extent are knowledge and attitude changes retained two weeks after the television program or classroom presentation?

To help find answers to these questions, Fortner used ninth grade classes from the Columbus, Ohio, area as her treatment and control groups. Three of the classes were taught the contents of the Cousteau program by their regular science teacher. The teacher's other two classes were told to view the documentary at home but received no

classroom instruction. Ninth grade classes of a different science teacher in the same school served as the control group. They did not watch the television program nor receive classroom instruction.

Both the treatment and control groups were given a survey designed to assess knowledge of and attitudes toward the content covered in the Cousteau documentary. The test instrument included thirteen true-false and multiple choice knowledge questions, as well as eight attitude items presented in Likert scale format (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The knowledge questions dealt with marine mammal characteristics, evolution and communication, and interactions with humans. The attitude questions addressed such issues as the hunting of harp seals, the capture of dolphins in tuna nets, and methods for protecting marine mammals in general. The survey was administered to students prior to viewing the program, immediately after the program, and then two weeks later to assess knowledge and attitude retention.

What were the results? Knowledge scores from pretest to immediate post-test increased significantly for the classes that had viewed the documentary. The classes that received only classroom instruction showed an equally significant increase in knowledge. However, on the attitude questions, although the classes that watched the program demonstrated significant improvement from pretest to immediate post-test, the classes that received classroom instruction did not improve significantly. What could account for this difference in attitude scores? Fortner suggests that the impressions created by the television program through visual images, music, and poignant narration may have stimulated more of an affective (emotional) response than did

simply listening to information read by a classroom teacher.

The results of the delayed post-test were, in general, less favorable. The knowledge scores of both classroom-instructed and television-viewing groups decreased from immediate post-test levels, although these scores for both groups were still significantly higher than pretest scores. On the attitude questions, however, the gains shown by the viewing classes on the immediate post-test did not appear on the delayed post-test. In fact, students' attitudes toward issues depicted in the program deteriorated to the extent that delayed post-test responses were not significantly different from pretest responses.

Fortner's findings suggest that a single television program can be an effective means of increasing knowledge about animals. In addition, television can be effective in changing attitudes in the short term, especially when compared with more standard methods of classroom instruction. As the results of Fortner's study demonstrate, however, changes in attitudes evoked by a television program may be only temporary. As humane educators we may want to consider using certain television programs as part of, or as a supplement to, existing humane education programs. But it may be unwise to expect that the viewing of a single isolated program will produce lasting changes in knowledge and attitudes.

Reference

Fortner, Rosanne W., "Influence of a Cousteau Documentary on Knowledge and Attitudes About Marine Mammals: Three Studies." (mimeographed.)