Formative evaluation report for project funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (formerly Carrick Institute)
Trevor Heath, Independent Evaluator

Project title
Title in application:  
Curriculum development and assessment to enhance communication skills for veterinary students

Changed in Evaluation Brief and Project Plan to:  
Curriculum Development and Assessment of Methods to Enhance Communication and Life Skills in Veterinary Students (ECALS)

Chief Investigator
Murdoch University:  
Jennifer N Mills, BVSc, Dip Clin Path, PG Dip Ed (Tertiary & Adult), MSc, PhD.

Collaborators
University of Queensland  
Glen Coleman BVSc, GradDipBiotech, PhD
Michael Meehan, BVSc, B Psych (Hons)  
with contributions from Dan Schull, Trish Clark and Nancy Pachana

University of Sydney  
Imke Tammen, DVM, Dr Med Vet, M Ed.
John Baguley BVSc(Hons) MACVSc MBA
Christine Hawke BVSc (Hons) BVSc (Vet) (Hons) PhD MACVSc
Susan Matthew BVSc (Hons) BVSc (Vet) (Hons)

Project Manager  
Linda Butcher, ALTC Projects Co-ordinator, Murdoch University

Independent Evaluator (IE)  
Trevor Heath OAM, BVSc, MA(Ed), MHPEd, PhD, FACVSc, FAIBiol  
Emeritus Professor, The University of Queensland

Aims of Project (from final Grant Application)  
This project aims to develop student competencies in professional communication, through the development of innovative learning and teaching strategies throughout the curriculum and to enhance the understanding of the Human-Animal bond. Communication skills are part of the generic skills of professional graduates and include aspects of personal and social/emotional intelligence and collaborative team skills. Assessment of both the curriculum and student competencies will be an essential part of the project, with a collaborative sharing of experiences and outcomes with staff at all Australasian veterinary schools. Whilst the initial focus would be on the undergraduate curriculum, there is clear scope for this work to be extended to postgraduate awards and/or concurrent awards in Leadership for Health Professionals.
Formative evaluation report
This report has been developed after considering comments from participants at the meeting held at Murdoch University 28 May 2008 and presentations at the AVA Conference (Perth 27/29 May 2008), together with discussions with participants (March-May 2008). These have been considered against statements of aims and objectives in the original application, as well as the Evaluation Brief and Project Plan provided by the Program Manager, and statements from each School. It contains some general statements, comments on the components from each School, and some conclusions.

Significance This project is directed at improving a major deficiency in veterinary education, not only in Australia but world-wide. The deficiency results from a misunderstanding of the way veterinarians work. In most cases they depend heavily for diagnosis and treatment, control and management on their ability to communicate effectively with a person - the client. Despite this, virtually all veterinary education had been directed at providing knowledge and skills for working effectively with animals, and the skills for communicating with clients have often been ignored.

The Chief Investigator and her collaborators have been working towards overcoming this deficiency. At each of their Veterinary Schools, they have fostering the introduction into their curricula of modules designed to help students understand factors that affect people’s ability to communicate with one another, and to improve their own performance as communicators.

In the past these efforts have been limited by two main factors. The first is a reluctance by colleagues to accept the need to help students refine these skills, and to make teaching time available for this purpose. The second is a paucity of valid, effective tools to help students become more effective communicators.

Contributors and components The leaders of this project have made significant inroads into each of these problems. At the Murdoch, Sydney and Queensland veterinary schools they have succeeded in having teaching time made available at appropriate times during the course, and have been developing teaching/learning programs appropriate to each stage of the students’ development. Although these programs have been moulded by the philosophies of each school, they have benefited from the strong sense of cooperation between the leaders of this project.

Funds provided by this project have enabled that sense of cooperation to develop into active collaboration, and this has happened in a most encouraging way.

The skills of the participants in education and psychology as well as aspects of communication have been harnessed in such a way that the project will yield:
• objective new and highly relevant information about important aspects of veterinarian-client interactions, and
• a range of tested techniques and approaches tested to help students understand and improve their interpersonal skills in professional settings.
Although the components undertaken at each of the three Schools have been dictated to a large extent by local skills, needs and opportunities, they link together to cover the overall topic in an impressive way. This has been helped by a strong spirit of willing cooperation, and given effect by free and open communication between participants. It has been facilitated mightily by the commitment and foresight of the Chief Investigator, who has played such a central role in gaining the grant and implementing the project. In this she has been aided by the Program Manager, who has oiled the wheels of university and ALTC (Carrick) bureaucracies and helped so willingly in so many ways.

The longer-term value of the project will depend to a large extent on the extent to which the relevant outcomes from these components can be promulgated and taken up more widely. This will be helped by high-quality presentations at local, national and international conferences and through papers published in appropriate journals. Another valuable vehicle will be the ‘Integrated Workbook on teaching modalities and assessment of communication and life skills’ mentioned in the ECALS Project Plan (LB 15.10.07), and elsewhere.

Progress Observations of progress to date lead to a most optimistic projection, and the expectation that the project will yield significant material of considerable practical value to teachers and students in veterinary schools elsewhere in Australian and in other countries.

Murdoch University The objectives of this segment, as provided by the Chief Investigator in May 2008, are:

1. Improved student communication skills using simulation clients and case scenarios of varying degrees of difficulty, scaffolded into the curriculum with particular learning objectives. (currently only 5th yr)
   a) medical visits - student selects two cases from 40 clinical cases discussed in Rotation, for consultation with two clients. Task: to communicate effectively with clients and involve them fully in planning and management
   b) wellness visits – students prepare to discuss basic procedures (heartworm, flea control, vaccination). Task: to develop rapport with a client while conducting a clinical examination on a dog
2. Student-directed learning through the use of detailed rubrics as global ratings scales for formative, peer and self-assessment of skills.
3. Facilitate development of student skills through the creation of instructional material and learning tasks, such as critical incident analysis, expressions of empathy, condolence.
4. Develop an electronic portfolio facility for students to store reports, record evidence of professional skills and develop a reflective learning journal. The portfolios can be used for review and showcase purposes.
5. Improved facilitation of student’s formative experiences in consultation training by veterinary colleagues in the development of a module to ‘Train the Trainer’, including ‘Offering and Receiving Feedback’.

This represents a very heavy commitment by the Chief Investigator, especially with her responsibilities for the project overall (as so many other tasks at the workplace). Despite this, it has been undertaken with great enthusiasm and diligence and has progressed in an impressive way.
The development of materials to fulfil objective #3 has been especially noteworthy, though some are still undergoing refinements. Similarly, the work being done with 'wellness' and 'medical' visits (#1) and on educational value of the various aspects of these exercises, is most noteworthy.

With so many separate components, it is not surprising that one or two are not proceeding as hoped. Specifically, it may be seen as disappointing that #5 above may not be able to be completed fully because of a lack of enthusiasm by practitioners. Also the slow uptake of e-portfolios (#4 above) is also a bit disappointing especially as prizes are available. It is to be hoped that there will be more enthusiasm for it amongst the students as its value becomes more evident. As significant progress is being made on so many other facets, the slow movement on these two should not be seen as a major problem in relation to the project overall.

I will be happy to help in any way possible, especially with analysis of student feedback, critique of any materials including manuscripts, and to make myself available for discussion at any time.

The University of Sydney As reported by the participants, this “component of this project utilises the framework of emotional intelligence to develop communication and life skills in veterinary students. There are three components to this project:

1. Exploration of attitudes towards animals. The purpose of this component of research is to enable students to develop a greater understanding of self awareness, self management, social awareness and relational competency within a suitable context for veterinary practice; attitudes towards animals.

Objectives
• Students to develop a greater awareness of their individual attitudes towards animals
• Students to develop a greater awareness of the range of attitudes towards animals within the veterinary profession and the public
• Students develop skills in managing their approach to conflict and ethical decision making
• Students develop skills to assist in developing relationships with clients and staff that promote the human animal bond
• Contribute to the literature regarding the potential influence of veterinary studies upon attitudes towards animals
• Contribute to the literature regarding the role of emotional intelligence in the development of communication skills in veterinary professionals

2. Introduction to communication skills in the veterinary consultation. The purpose of this component is to provide an opportunity to apply the Veterinary Calgary-Cambridge Consultation Model to a standard annual health visit and subsequently to difficult communication scenarios provided by final year students. These will be delivered using WebCT and the Faculty’s Case Builder framework to first year students.

Objectives
• Students develop awareness of the structure and function of the veterinary consultation
• Students develop skills in planning for and responding to difficult situations that may be presented in veterinary consultations through the framework of emotional intelligence
• Contribute to literature in the area of teaching veterinary consultation skills in using online tools
3. Reflections on difficult communication scenarios in veterinary practice

The purpose of this component is to enable students to be debriefed regarding experiences and approaches to handling difficult communication scenarios during final year and to facilitate sharing of experiences and peer group learning. Small group tutorial format is used, with emphasis on self reflection, social awareness, self management and communication skills within the context of ethically difficult clinical scenarios.

Objectives

- Students to develop self awareness of their readiness for difficult professional situations in final year
- Students to apply communication skills to achieving social awareness and shared decision making in difficult situations in clinical situations (including dilemmas concerning ethics and welfare, medical treatment and scarcity of resources)
- Students to apply principles of emotional intelligence (self awareness, social awareness, self management and relational competence) to dealing with conflict in other professional situations

This component seems to be moving at a commendable rate towards providing a greater understanding of the role and application of aspects of emotional intelligence in veterinary education. It is hoped that by making this understanding available to students through a range of educational exercises, they will be better able to understand their own actions in relation to animals and other people, and to communicate more effectively with their clients.

The first segment, designed to elicit information about students’ attitudes towards animals, is apparently moving along at a satisfactory pace: the online questionnaires have been completed and are now with the statistician. Discussion of the results with students will be a most interesting phase of the project, as it has the potential to give them a much better understanding of the divergence of attitudes towards animals, and of some factors that affect these attitudes. This should develop into a most interesting story which, when disseminated, will be valuable for educators in this and related fields.

The second segment, in which the Veterinary Calgary-Cambridge Consultation Model is used to help students develop their skills in the consultation process, is also most impressive. The approaches used have the potential to increase their understanding of their own thoughts and actions in relation to consultations, and their ability to deal with difficult situations involving clients and their animals. The value of these approaches will be even greater to the extent that students see this model being used by the veterinarians who act as role models for them, either at the Veterinary School or in private practices.

The third segment involves further development of personal and interpersonal skills related to clients and their animals. By discussing their experiences with peers in groups led by an experienced veterinarian, students are helped to understand their own actions and responses, and to realize that others are experiencing similar problems to them. This a most valuable approach, though it does depend on the extent to which an environment is created within which the students feel that they can be honest and open about what is happening in their heads. It will be most interesting to read feedback from the students, and an analysis of the effectiveness of the segment.
The University of Queensland The main aim for the University of Queensland’s component of the project was given as ‘to improve veterinary students understanding of the human-animal bond and provide them with the skills to use this knowledge in a veterinary clinical consultation.

This will be achieved by:

1. Investigating the expectations of highly bonded clients; in particular whether the strength of bond a client has with their animal influences client expectations of communication within a veterinary consultation.
2. Determining whether an on-line learning module and experiential learning activities enhances veterinary students’ knowledge, skills and aptitude in evaluating the human-animal bond.
3. Evaluating the effects of teaching an elective human-animal bond and communication skills workshop to final year veterinary students.

This has already yielded valuable data. In particular, the results of a questionnaire to clients of two clinics in Brisbane have provided confirmation of the importance of nontechnical skills in determining the attitude of clients to a veterinarian. It is expected that this survey will provide much useful information on how the strength of bonding between owner and animal is related to the effectiveness of different approaches to communicating between veterinarian and owner.

In relation to #3 above it is evident that workshops at Royal Brisbane Hospital have been most effective in encouraging final year students to explore and enhance aspects of their own communication. The use of colleagues and, later, actors, as simulated clients, coupled with the realistic setting provided by the hospital facilities and the emphasis on maintaining a low-threat environment, have all been important in the success of this segment. Although it is clear that almost all students engaged in these exercises with enthusiasm and focus, it will be most interesting to see data on the effectiveness of the program in enhancing their communication skills.

As an aside: it is not yet clear how well the physical and interpersonal conditions of this project can be replicated elsewhere. One potential challenge is that of recruiting and retaining (a) simulated clients and (b) facilitators with suitable personalities and training. However, given the importance of the skills involved, it would be most valuable to have a complete description and analysis of this component available to other potential users. Although this may be in the form of publication(s) and conference presentation(s) it could be included in the Integrated Workbook described in the ECALS Project Plan (LB 15.10.07) and elsewhere.

It will also be most interesting to see data on the use and effectiveness of the web-based module for learning about the human animal-bond that is referred to in #2 above. This too has considerable potential in helping students and veterinarians gain a better understanding of the bond, and of its importance in communicating with clients.
Conclusions
The project overall, and each of its components, is seen to be progressing in a commendable way, and to be on schedule to yield an impressive array of data and insights.

This is due to the ability, enthusiasm and productivity of the Chief Investigator and all the participants, and the cooperative and collaborative spirit that exists between them.

Already the participants in this project have created much better conditions for students to enhance their personal and interpersonal skills than anything that has gone before.

The real challenge for the longer term will be to create conditions such that the momentum that they/you have generated will continue, and the principles developed though the project and elsewhere will form a continuous and positive thread throughout each veterinary course over the years ahead.

Two final comments
1. Projects of this type depend heavily on the interest, enthusiasm, sensitivity and understanding of those responsible. One example, a threat-free environment is essential if students are to reveal and discuss their thoughts and actions openly with their peers. This requires considerable understanding and sensitivity on the part of the supervisor.

A major value of the ECALS project is the involvement of a group of concerned and able people from each School, who are able to create a suitable learning environment with their School. The challenge will be to ensure that the momentum provided by the ECALS grant and its people is maintained. Two approaches that may help ensure that this challenge is met include the recruitment of key others at each school, and the creation of a Workbook encompassing the key findings and teaching/learning implications of the ECALS project.

2. The effectiveness of teaching/learning these personal and interpersonal skills will enhanced to the extent that their importance is re-emphasized at intervals throughout the rest of the course. Conversely, the effectiveness is likely to be diminished if other role models either denigrate the approaches taken, or reflect an alternative approach that may seem at variance with the those taken in the project.