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## TEXAS SCIENCE TEACHER EMPLOYS HUMANE EDUCATION TO ENERGIZE STUDENTS

By Nancy Kellum Brown

I was excited about the opportunity to educate students about this incredible world we inhabit. I have the greatest job in the world! I get to teach really interesting topics, work with remarkable young minds, and be a part of many educational journeys. Most importantly, I hope to have a positive influence on these valuable future innovators. However, with my job comes the struggle of balancing traditional scientific teaching methods with the desperate need to teach students compassion, respect for all living things, and the importance of being an advocate for change.



I teach at an elementary school, Children's University, that emphasizes its science program. We believe in hands-on learning in a collaborative environment, which I strongly advocate for science. The students have traditionally been introduced to

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dissecting animal organs in the fourth grade. I knew this when I accepted the position and thought I was willing to continue the practice.

As the months passed, I noticed myself procrastinating when it came to dissecting. I constantly struggled with how I could teach the students about conservation of life, and yet continue to dissect animals. Several questions kept going through my mind: Is the life of that animal less valuable than the lesson I have to teach? What is this teaching my students about the value of life? Will my students really gain more knowledge by dissecting instead of an alternative activity?

I felt strongly about my beliefs and decided to talk to my principal. I explained how I was feeling about the lessons and asked if I could stop dissecting and use alternative teaching strategies. Thankfully, she agreed and has allowed me to replace the lessons. With the progression of technology and the desire to protect animal welfare, new tools—such as digital dissection software—can be used in the classroom to achieve these goals. The software provides a very realistic dissection experience and allows the steps to be repeated digitally for teaching exercises. The software can also be used for focused individual work or in a group setting.

Our sixth grade class has usually dissected sheep brains during the Life Science unit about the brain. Now, each student makes a model of a human brain out of salt dough, paints and labels each section of the brain, and creates a key to correspond with the model that explains the function of each section. The students enjoy the project!

Students also love having animals in the classroom. Last semester, we received two little frogs from a student who wanted to donate his pet frogs to our Science Lab. He knew they would be well cared for. These cute little frogs were African Dwarfs and were about an inch long. The student had them for a couple of years, so I figured we had two or three more years to enjoy them. Unfortunately, within a few months, both frogs died. My students were very upset about the demise of the frogs so we used this as a learning opportunity.

The students were asked to research the African Dwarf frogs and their natural habitat. They were surprised to learn that they were primarily from the Congo region of Africa, can live up to twenty years and grow up to 2½ inches long. We researched their diet in the wild and compared it to the diet we could provide from the frog pellets sold in stores. The students also researched their predators and members of their food web.

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At the conclusion of the research and class discussion, I attempted to split the class into two groups for a debate on whether animals should be removed from their natural habitat for science classrooms. I knew it would be an uneven debate, so I planned to join the least popular side and play the devil’s advocate. I was delighted to see that I was standing alone! I remained on the unpopular side and challenged the students to a heated debate. I found myself flabbergasted at the creative and thoughtful answers they provided on alternative ways to observe and study animals. They were so fervent about their feelings and concerns for the affected ecosystem and food web members. One student asked, “Whose idea was it to take two little frogs from the forest of Africa and put them in a 6” x 8” aquarium in Arlington, Texas?”

I hope my students are learning to consider the lives of the animals we so easily obtain at the local pet store and science supplier. For our little African Dwarfs, it was potentially 18 years of life in the wild, 1½ inches of growth, numerous offspring, health of other animals, and much more.

In the science classroom, the commonly utilized tools of animal dissections and the removal of animals from their natural habitats are a staple of the learning environment. However, I am on a mission to replace the traditional practices. My mission is to teach compassion, conservation and the importance of all species in this miraculous world!

Children’s University signed AWI’s “Race to Stop Dissections” pledge, committing to discontinue all animal dissections for the next five years. In exchange, the school received free licenses for Digital Frog International’s “Digital Frog 2.5” and “ScienceMatrix: Cell Structure and Function” software. There is still time for your school to take the pledge! For more info, visit [www.awionline.org/STOPdissections](http://www.awionline.org/STOPdissections) (<http://www.awionline.org/STOPdissections>).



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