

APDT 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Educational Conference and Trade Show

# Better Teacher, Better Trainer

By Rachel Brix, CPDT-KA

*Presented as a Short at APDT's 24th Annual Educational Conference and Trade Show, Richmond, Virginia*

**As trainers we, of course, spend a lot of time training dogs, but more than likely we spend most of our time training people to train dogs.** Now teaching people isn't easy, but it's paramount to what we do. Essentially, our training success is largely based on how effectively we communicate with our two-legged clients. Because at the end of the day, we can be good trainers—even *great* trainers—but if we can't connect with those who are spending the most time training the dogs—their caregivers—our efforts aren't nearly as effective.

We know all dogs don't learn in the same way or within the same time frame; people don't either. Just like we vary the rewards for dogs to keep learning interesting and fun, the same goes for people: we need different stimuli and we need to feel reinforced that we are making progress. Like veterinarian, behaviorist, dog trainer and founder of APDT Dr. Ian Dunbar says, "When I'm training a dog, I develop a relationship with that dog. He's my buddy, and I want to make training fun." It should be the same for our clients. Not only should we develop a relationship with them, but we should have fun with them, too.

Whether first-year trainer or seasoned professional, all trainers can benefit from making educationally sound and constructive improvements to the ways they teach and communicate with human clients. Ultimately, by forming better relationships with pet parents, shelter/rescue staffs and other clients we can improve the lives of the dogs in their care.

After spending more than a decade in the public education classroom, I developed a rhythm. I knew what worked and what didn't and was always looking for ways to improve; looking for better ways to reach my students and help them enjoy the process. By organizing your classes using simple constructs for a basic teaching lesson plan, you can build on your own rhythm and help pet parents know what to expect while maximizing engagement and learning. Structure and flow also fosters confidence and cooperation—the same things we want from our dogs.

## Organizing a lesson/class - *What will you teach?*

As a starting point, your classes should be set up based on an objective/s and how you will go about making sure your students/clients understand the objective/s so they can put them into practice on their own.

The basic parts of a lesson plan/class include:

- Identifying objectives—*What will you teach?*
- Teaching/modeling objectives—*How will you teach it?*
- Checking for understanding of objectives—*How will you know they learned?*

First, pick your objective/s, or main ideas, for the class. For example, let's say the objective for class is to teach pet parents how to teach their dogs the sit cue using both verbal and visual cues. Next, decide what you want your clients to know/accomplish by the end of the class for the specified objectives. For example, they should be able to teach their dogs to sit by using both visual and verbal cues and also know troubleshooting strategies. All clients will come to class next week and demonstrate sit. So, this then becomes your complete objective.

Your classes might have multiple objectives each week and objectives may overlap from week to week. For example, I teach come/recall and loose leash walking in steps, repeatedly and in different ways over a span of most of my six-week classes.

## Teach and Model - *How will you teach objectives?*

Oftentimes it seems we, both as teachers and trainers, tend to take for granted that if we tell people how to do something they will learn it and do it correctly. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Just as there is an art to successful dog training, there is an art to successful teaching. So *how* will you get your clients to learn how to get their dog to sit? *How* will you get them to use both visual and verbal cues? *How* will you get them to troubleshoot if their dog doesn't respond? And what methods will you use to accomplish all of this?

Start by using techniques you already know are effective to train dogs:

- Establish routine
- Be patient
- Be consistent
- Use repetition
- Encourage and monitor practice

Now some people might say I'm advocating treating people like we treat dogs. And I absolutely am.

We've all but moved away from corporal punishment, punitive measures and authoritarian ways of teaching children and adults. Similarly, we're in the process of moving away from aversive equipment in dog training like prong and shock collars, positive punishment techniques and physical manipulation to force dogs into a desired posture. We know fear and intimidation don't produce the results we want. It shouldn't be surprising that presenting choices and engaging stimuli and using positive reinforcement would work for both dogs and people.

### Learning Styles and Motivations

We are always looking for ways to encourage and motivate dogs. We know dogs love yummy food and toys, and sometimes we have to use different techniques to show dogs what we want them to do. Similarly, you'll want to consider the different ways people learn (often called learning styles) and also what motivates them. Then you can create ways to appeal to those learning styles and motivations to maximize your teaching and training.

Here is a breakdown of some of the most common learning styles:

- Aural: sounds, music
- Visual: images, pictures
- Verbal: words, speech and writing
- Physical: using hands/body, sense of touch
- Logical: reason, systems, logic
- Social: groups or with others
- Solitary: individual, self-study

People tend to have a mix of learning styles, so it's not necessary to have every class appeal to every learning style. While ideal, it's not always practical. Just try to change it up and don't always model/teach in the exact same way.

For example, in one class you might use/do:

- Videos/pictorials (spatial/aural), brief story of examples (auditory), individual guided practice (solitary, verbal, aural)

- Demonstrate with clients' dogs (spatial/aural), have them demonstrate with their dogs (physical, verbal, social, solitary)
- Have clients explain challenges with sit cue (i.e. objective/s) (verbal, social) and then have them explain how they remedied those challenges (solitary/verbal/social) or have others provide suggestions (verbal, social)

Many styles overlap, too. You may already be doing many of these kinds of things—that's great! Let this be an inspiration for new ways to reach clients and their dog. Be creative!

You'll also notice a lot of repetition—one of the keys to successful training, right? The same will go for your stellar lessons. Just remember, the more you involve your clients in the process, the more effective your teaching will be.

I love this quote from Confucius: "Tell me and I will forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand." We all remember those teachers who just "told" us and expected we'd remember. They usually sat very stoically behind a lectern and in a monotone voice proceeded to tell us everything they knew about their favorite subject, stories about their favorite subject and why we should care about their favorite subject. And we usually left these classes not knowing much of anything about that subject. Conversely, the teachers we probably learned the most from either showed us what was so great about that subject or better yet, involved us: they prompted our enthusiastic engagement in that subject and made it fun.

Finally, you'll want to consider what makes your clients tick. In other words, what are your clients' motivations? Their "lures?" What do they enjoy? What types of positive reinforcement can you use with them? Most people respond very well to complimenting them on doing things correctly, encouragement and praise. What other ways can you motivate? How can you establish common ground and show clients you are a team working toward the same goal/s?

### Check for Understanding. *How will you know they learned the objective/s?*

Asking "Are there any questions?" has its place, but should not be the only way you're checking for understanding. Making sure clients understand what we are teaching helps ensure these concepts also reach their dogs so they, in turn, become well-trained. That's the main goal, right? After all, the hour or so on average we spend with clients and their dogs each week is only a fraction of the overall training process. Therefore, it's critical we know that they "get it"! There are many fun ways to accomplish this important part of your lesson/class.

► This shot of Justin and Fred the dog shows mutual respect, relaxed body language, cooperation and positivity. What would a snapshot of you and your clients reflect?

For example, ask them to demonstrate how to perform the sit cue with both visual and verbal cues with their dogs or someone else's (appeals to solitary, social, verbal, aural, logical and physical learning styles). Here are some other examples:

- You can model “incorrect” behavior and have them a.) identify it or, b.) say what to do instead (social, verbal, logical) and, as an added bonus, have them all click/give the marker when appropriate (social, verbal, logical)
- Have them perform and/or explain the sit cue (verbal, physical, solitary)
- Ask them to point out positives of performances of others (verbal, logical, social)
- Show pictures or videos, and ask for pointers (aural, verbal, logical, social or solitary)

**Time Management - How will you accomplish your objective/s in a one-hour class?**

How many times have you run out of time in class? Or had too much time left over? Careful planning avoids these situations, both of which are detrimental to your overall purpose, which is to maximize teaching/training time and effectiveness.

- Organizing and planning are key
- Stay focused on objectives
- Plan a beginning, a middle and an end

Example one hour class template:

- 5-10 min: Previous lesson review, questions
- 5-10 min: Introduce objective, make connections to other concepts taught or real world situations/ examples
- 20-30 min: Teach/model, guided practice of objective
- 10-15 min: Check for understanding of objective
- 3-5 min: Final questions, distribute handout/assign homework

A lot of times teaching/modeling and checking for understanding will overlap. Just be sure to always make sure you are doing both in a variety of ways to maximize efficacy.

It's always important to keep track of time. I strongly suggest using a wall clock or wearing a watch because checking your phone can be too distracting. Even if you don't respond to that email or phone call you see pop up on the screen, it disrupts your rhythm and detracts from your main purpose: to teach and lead. Stay focused and stay on track.



In the end, keep in mind that for many of our clients most of what we teach is new to them, even in the advanced classes. So it's worth noting research shows the average person reads at a middle school level: any lectures, supplementary materials, handouts, emails, etc. should be written at a level everyone can easily understand. Remember: we want to set them up for success!

**Final Thoughts**

By constructing a solid and organized class, your ability to reach your clients will increase exponentially. Here are some final thoughts for how to be an effective teacher and develop a good working relationship with your clients/students.

- Consider having a syllabus for the complete course. It helps to establish routine from the very first class and lessen any fears or apprehension about what to expect.
- Try to always assign “homework.” This also gives you an opportunity to challenge clients while reinforcing concepts and ideas and further reaches clients with regard to learning styles. For example, ask them to increase distance, distraction or duration for any given cue instead of just asking them to “practice”— give them a specific goal (logical, physical, solitary). You can also distribute links to appropriate videos that reinforce lesson objective/s, provide supplementary professional articles, books, book excerpts, pictorials etc. and ask them to have responses ready for next week; for example, they review a video on teaching a dog to sit and explain what was effective/ not effective about the methods—again asking for a specific response (visual, logical, solitary then social, verbal, aural) for the next week.



◀ Shelter dog techs enjoy seeing the dogs they have trained “graduate”, which is both rewarding and motivating. Here Apache feels the love from his tech trainers and a record of his training goes into his adoption file.

not just spell check! I can’t emphasize enough the importance of reading over your stuff **aloud**: this way you’re sure to catch all the errors, not just some.

- Most of all, praise, praise, praise! Keep it light, fun and interesting.

We know training a dog isn’t easy, and clients may already be exasperated or even desperate by the time they get to you- simplify, simplify, simplify and set them up for success!

Being a good trainer, or even a great trainer, isn’t enough. We need to be good teachers as well to make the most positive impact on dogs’ lives. Ultimately, these key concepts highlight how to better communicate with your clients on a deeper level, facilitate understanding and, at the end of the day, grow the bond between them and the dogs they love.

Good luck and happy training, teacher!

- Practice being an effective communicator: speak clearly, audibly, slowly. Try to limit “ums” and “likes.” Be confident, make eye contact. And feel free to move around the entire space. Walking around my classroom when I was a teacher instead of standing at the front of the room always helped me keep chatter to a bare minimum and kept everyone engaged and on task. It still works in my training classes.
- Be available 15 minutes before and 15 minutes after class to clarify or answer personalized questions. Direct to email, text, or phone if it’s going to take longer. We expect them to work with their dogs a lot, right? We need to engage with *them* a lot. Show the same commitment to them you expect them to give the dog— MODEL the behavior.
- Send an email mid-week, either reinforcing what you did or introducing what you will do the next week, such as: a credible video/s, article/s, your own recap or directives, quotes from other professionals regarding what you’re working on (be sure to verify credibility of resource), etc. This is another great way to continue to hit learning styles and reinforce objectives!
- Have a culminating activity for the six-week course that gives them the opportunity to “show off” what they know/learned and allow them to celebrate their bond. For example:
  - Graduation ceremony
  - Outing to a dog park or park
  - Go to a dog-friendly eatery for a snack as a class
  - Walk about town, farmer’s market or festival
  - Make sure to proofread all handouts, materials, emails, etc.,



**Rachel Brix, CPDT-KA**, is a veteran high school teacher who decided to switch gears to pursue a full-time career with dogs. “Be A Better Teacher; Be A Better Trainer” was presented by Rachel as a Short at the 24th Annual Educational Conference and Trade Show in Richmond, Virginia on Oct. 21, 2017. She has been Lead Trainer at Petco, opened her own grooming and training business and managed two animal shelters. Rachel is a Canine Good Citizen Evaluator and currently teaches group classes and offers consulting and training to animal shelters. She also spearheaded the effort to build Carroll County, Arkansas’ first and only dog park. Her passion is rescue dogs and all animal advocacy, her most recent campaign resulting in a wild animal circus ban in Eureka Springs, the first and only one of its kind in Arkansas. Rachel lives with her husband and six rescue animals in Eureka Springs.