

Common misconceptions in dog training and behaviour

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Abstract

In this article I examine and discuss the experience of delivering a presentation on common misconceptions in dog training and behaviour for the University of Lincoln's Summer Festival of Learning. The use of a wide range of media such as photos, videos, and a live training demonstration made the lecture accessible and effective for the audience. Overall, the experience was one of great value and one that I would recommend to other students; not only to develop their public speaking skills, but also to consolidate their knowledge in an area of particular interest and potentially open doors for further study.

Keywords: Dog behaviour, dog training, dog guilt, dominance theory, online delivery

Introduction

In July 2021, I participated in the University of Lincoln's Summer Festival of Learning by delivering an online lecture on common misconceptions in dog training and behaviour. My experiences both as a student of animal behaviour, and as a dog trainer working with the general public inspired me to produce a presentation that would be accessible and beneficial to those living or interacting with dogs. The lecture covered canine body language, dominance in dogs, whether dogs feel guilt, and socialisation of puppies, and also included a live dog training demonstration.

Background for the session

As a final year Zoology student with a great enthusiasm for animal behaviour, when I learnt about the Festival of Learning I felt inspired to run a session. Alongside my studies I have been running my own dog training business, and I felt that a presentation of common misconceptions relating to dog behaviour and training would not only be of interest to my peers, but would also aid what I have often viewed as part of my 'mission' as a dog trainer: to help people understand their dogs.

One topic in particular that was of great importance to me was canine body language. As a trainer I have frequently witnessed this being grossly misunderstood, and as a student I became aware of trending videos on social media that perpetuated further the misinterpretation of dog communication. For example, the classic 'guilty

dog' videos that are shared widely and found amusing by many, actually portray anxious dogs that are responding to their owners' emotional state, rather than the 'bad' behaviour they performed previously (Horowitz 2009, Ostojic *et al* 2015).

Another key part of the lecture was explaining how dogs learn. I have seen many owners failing to communicate effectively with their dogs, often due to a lack of understanding of how their pet functions. Including a section on how to train a dog and why various training methods work was, in my mind, imperative.

Lastly, I wanted to talk through 'dominance theory' in dogs. This is an area that is much debated both among behavioural scientists and dog trainers (Bradshaw *et al* 2009, Schilder *et al* 2014). The theory is often misinterpreted by trainers and owners, resulting in dogs being handled aversively, which means using stimuli that the dog finds unpleasant to elicit certain results (Bradshaw *et al* 2016). This was one of the main reasons that I wished to talk through the topic; to dispel misconceptions, and also to encourage listeners to consider that not everybody who calls themselves a 'dog trainer' holds qualifications or has studied behaviour.

Review of literature

Owner awareness of dog body language is often poor (Mariti *et al* 2012), with appeasement signals such as lip licking and an averted gaze (Firnkes *et al* 2017) often going unnoticed. Human communication tends to rely on talking and touching, thus resulting in miscommunication between owners and their dogs (Kuhne *et al* 2012). An extreme example of this occurs when owners misinterpret their anxious dog to be a 'guilty' dog (Horowitz 2009, Ostojic *et al* 2015): this is indicative of how humans tend to anthropomorphise (apply human characteristics and emotions to) dogs (Brown and McLean 2015).

Anthropomorphism extends beyond body language: it plays a role in how owners train their dogs as well. Operant conditioning is whereby the dog learns about the consequences of its behaviours (Staddon and Cerutti 2002) and forms the basis of how dogs are trained. The use of a clicker, which is a device producing a distinctive 'click' that functions to mark desired behaviour, relies on operant conditioning (Chiandetti *et al* 2016). There is little scientific evidence to suggest that the use of a clicker accelerates learning, but its use as a secondary reinforcer (a stimulus associated with something that the animal finds rewarding, such as food) is popular with many animal trainers (Feng *et al* 2016).

There are many misconceptions surrounding the socialisation of puppies, even amongst trainers themselves (Hargrave 2017) and there is evidence to suggest that current puppy classes are not enough to result in long term behavioural improvement in dogs (Seksal *et al* 1999). Puppy classes often cover basic training and socialisation with other puppies of a similar age, but socialisation in classes should comprise more than just meeting other dogs and people. Exposure to handling procedures (such as those carried out by a vet or groomer), loud noises, and novel

tasks (such as walking through a tunnel) should also play a role (Hargrave 2017). The emotional health of dogs relies heavily on the experiences they have while puppies (Hargrave 2014), which is why this stage in the dog's life is so important.

Another common misconception regarding pet dog behaviour is that dogs will try to 'dominate' humans, despite there being very little research to suggest that this is the case (Bradshaw *et al* 2009). Humping, jumping up and barking are all commonly misinterpreted as signs of dominance in dogs. In some cases, dominance theory, the concept that dogs seek to gain control and 'lead the pack', is considered a useful framework for the assessment of relationships between dogs (Schilder *et al* 2014), and while this may be the case, it does not constitute part of the dog's personality (Bradshaw *et al* 2016).

Methodology

Due to the pandemic the lecture was delivered online, which presented limitations in terms of interaction with the attendees. The inclusion of listener directed questions aimed to encourage some engagement from the audience (for example, 'how many people here have heard that you should 'dominate' your dog?'), however people appeared to be less forthcoming due to the online format, which limited this aspect of the session.

As I was anticipating the session to take around an hour and a half, I ensured that I provided an outline of how it would run and what would be covered at the beginning of the presentation, to provide the audience with an approximate schedule. The topics covered in the lecture were: dog body language, socialisation, training techniques, dominance theory, and guilt in dogs. Halfway through the session there was a ten-minute break: this was advised by the staff running the Festival of Learning to maintain listener engagement.

The session prior to the break focused on training and body language, while after the break I talked through two more complex behavioural topics: dominance theory and guilt in dogs. After the interlude I also performed a live clicker training demonstration with my own dog: the break provided me with opportunity to set this up and I aimed to teach a behaviour that the dog had never done before.

Key areas of development from the experience

Creating and delivering the lecture allowed me to consider how I explain certain concepts to clients. When there is a lot of ground to cover in a behavioural consult or class, it is sometimes challenging to include the necessary level of detail to help a client understand the how and why of the training method. As my ethos is based upon helping owners to understand their animals, it is imperative that I provide a concise, clear explanation. Compiling these topics into a presentation developed my skills in highlighting the most relevant information for discussion and delivering it in a manner that is both engaging and understandable.

While writing the lecture, I realised that while some reference to the literature is useful, the majority of people are not interested in understanding the science behind it. Creating the presentation allowed me to consider what would be most relevant for dog owners and how to find a balance in which a technique can be shown to be backed up by science, but the main focus is on making sure the handler is comfortable using it.

Challenges

The live demonstration of clicker training was a definite risk. The dog used had not long come out of rescue kennels and had a history of biting people: I was confident that there would not be an incident during the session, but I did have concerns about the dog losing focus or becoming stressed during the training. Had this happened, I would have talked through the dog's body language and why I would no longer be able to continue the demonstration.

Fortunately, the demonstration went very well, and I was able to show the audience how to use a clicker to train a dog. The dog learned the new trick in about ten minutes, while the audience watched. I felt that this part of the presentation was well worth the risk as it allowed people to see positive reinforcement training in action, and revealed how effective clicker training can be. Had the session been in person I would have liked to give attendees the opportunity to practice clicker training themselves, but this was not possible with the online format.

At the end of the lecture, I asked the audience if they had any questions. I had felt that I was well prepared for this and was ready to delve into each of the discussed topics in greater detail should it be required. I was therefore surprised when people began asking very specific questions about their pet dogs, such as how to rectify particular behavioural issues. This was a challenge, as I did not feel comfortable advising on dogs I had never seen and knew very little about: I explained why I could not comment in detail and gave very general advice in response. If I give similar talks in future, I will be clearer from the outset about not being able to advise on dogs that I have not observed.

Lessons learnt and what might be done differently

Producing and delivering my presentation helped build my confidence and made me realise that I would like to give similar talks in future. The experience also left me feeling more assured in my role as a dog trainer, as the talk felt like a consolidation of a number of common topics that I encounter in my work: compiling them and explaining them to my peers was a valuable experience and one I would seek to repeat.

The audience responded well to the use of pictures in the presentation, particularly in relation to dog body language where a description was not sufficient. In future I would

use more images and spread some of the text out more, so while there would not be less writing overall, there would be fewer text-heavy slides, which I felt were a bit difficult for some audience members to process at the speed I was presenting them.

I also found embedded videos were an incredibly useful tool for demonstrating training techniques and I would definitely make more use of this in future presentations. The videos made some of the content more accessible for attendees, particularly those who learn more by watching than by listening. Had I been able to deliver the lecture in person, I would have created exercises for small groups of people within the audience, in which they could practice clicker training and gain a better understanding of learning theory.

Conclusion

Producing my presentation for the Summer Festival of Learning was a rewarding and valuable experience for me, providing opportunity for me to develop both academically and as a business owner. The lecture I gave was well-received by the audience and I hope it makes a positive impact on those people and the dogs they interact with. I will take many positive lessons in creating and delivering lectures away from this experience, especially in terms of using a diverse range of media for the content to be accessible to everyone in the audience. I look forward to giving more talks on dog behaviour in future.

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