



ThinkDog! Practical Course

Coming on a practical course often raises lots of questions for students, so we have endeavoured to cover them here so you get the most from your course, and have a great time on it. Of course, please do ask if you have a specific question.

Course curriculum:

Please note – we cover all this in a learner-friendly and non-jargon way!

1. Learning theory (Operant conditioning and the use of a conditioned reinforcer in practise)
2. Refining timing in positive reinforcement (and the delivery of the primary reinforcer)
3. The difference between luring and the use of a conditioned reinforcer (short term and long term)
4. Frustration and the role of dopamine
5. Building neural networks with repetition
6. Common mistakes in using positive reinforcement
 - a. Reliance on the primary reinforce as a 'lure'
 - b. Speed of delivery of the primary reinforcer
 - c. Confusion between the conditioned reinforcer and the cue
 - d. Why the dog needs a conditioned reinforcer
7. Motivation and assessing individual dogs' reinforcement preferences
8. Assessing behavioural risk (safety SCAN), including observational assessment of dogs' ages, sociability, response to human contact and other risk factors
9. Cognition versus emotion
10. Common behavioural mistakes:
 - a. Reliance on desensitisation alone
 - b. Relying on counter conditioning without teaching an incompatible behaviour
 - c. Failing to establish an incompatible behaviour away from the crisis and other distractions, the importance of teaching sub-threshold, managing owner common misconceptions (such as believing the dog needs to learn this outside in a distracting environment)
 - d. Building solid generalisation before introducing distractions
11. Stimulus control – adding the cue (rules) and the salience of cues
12. Practical implementation of impulse control
13. The influence of diet on training and impulse control
14. Transferable skills – how to use team training in operant conditioning
15. The basic exercises – proficiency in establishing rapport, motivation, use of a conditioned reinforcer, timing skills, delivery of primary reinforcers, establishing stimulus control and dealing with frustration, as well as implementing toy play and handler/dog bonding.

Please note, we are flexible within this curriculum, as we endeavour to illustrate these topics by reference to the actual dogs we have in for training.

Structure:

We have a maximum of 14 participants on the course as stated on the booking form. We also have one, sometimes two assistants in the room. We teach using experiential learning, observation, coaching, and discussion. There is no written work and you are not required to submit work after the course.

We train with dogs which are waiting for new homes in the rescue centre. We do this on an individual basis - this is far from being a dog training class and the dogs all have individual needs so we prefer to focus on them one at a time. (Please note, training multiple unknown dogs in the same room, with students of varying abilities is highly problematic, increases stress and arousal and can create behavioural issues.)

We generally train indoors as there are fewer distractions for the dogs (and students!) although we do sometimes train outside, weather and individual dogs' needs permitting.

You will be invited to train individual dogs (with help from demos, an explanation of outcomes, protocol, safety and ethics etc, so you are confident in how to approach the training). Taking part in the training is voluntary, although we strongly suggest that you do actively participate – you will learn a lot by doing so and gain confidence from the experience.

Everything that you need for the training is provided – including clickers, toys, treats etc. You just need to bring an open mind and a sense of humour!

During the practical training, other participants can observe (often the most powerful way to learn) and your instructors will coach you individually. This is gentle and fun – please be assured that we use positive reinforcement with our students as well as the dogs! Feedback tells us that students love the opportunity to be coached while they train and that they really (really!) enjoy it.

How do we train?

Stella and Sarah are both well known for their use of clicker training, and this is a method with which you may well be familiar, or have already used. We will discuss why this method is preferable to the rather old fashioned use of lure/reward, and we will teach you how to use 'clean clicker training' – utilising conditioned reinforcers (these do not have to be the actual clicker), operant conditioning and classical conditioning in training and behaviour work.

Please note: we do not use punishment-based methods, startle devices or aversives, nor do we ever intentionally put dogs in situations that trigger behavioural issues.

What do we train?

During the two days we try to ensure that we cover all the seven essential exercises that most pet dogs need, using a variety of dogs that are awaiting new homes in the centre, and training using clicker training principles (although not always using the actual clicker).

We also assess each dog according to its individual needs and ask you to make an assessment of what you think the dog needs in the way of training – often this takes us away from formal exercises and introduces ideas around behavioural management, the use of classical conditioning, environmental cues and how to predict and prevent behavioural problems from occurring.

Nature of the course:

This course is fun and friendly, with lots of student interaction and chances to ask questions relevant to the practical training we are explaining, observing and doing. We work through the curriculum, but not in a regimented way, so if you are someone who likes to sit and be taken step-by-step through power-point theory, this is not the course for you!