

Making It Stick: How to Provide Memorable Class Instruction

by Eileen Udry, PhD, CPDT

The vast majority of instruction in the pet dog realm focuses on how dogs learn. Obviously, it is vital to have in-depth knowledge of canine cognition, but the importance of understanding learning from the human end of the leash is at least as important. This article is designed to give pet dog trainers a more complete understanding of how human memory and learning works. I will discuss principles of human learning that can be used by trainers to increase the chances that the information they provide in class and during consultations will remain with students well after the session or class has ended.

I Thought You Had It

Suppose as a dog trainer you've given one of your students a demonstration of how to put an Easy Walk Harness® on his dog. After you demonstrate, you give your student the opportunity to practice putting the harness on and removing it while you observe and give feedback. First, good for you for realizing that your student will need to actually practice the skills you just showed, not simply see you demonstrate them! Your student, however, may still have trouble remembering how to put on the harness several days later when he wants to walk his dog. Why? The concept referred to as overlearning may be relevant. Overlearning refers to additional practice time above and beyond what it would take to achieve basic mastery of a skill.¹ One rule of

thumb says that if it took someone four trials to learn how to do a task, to store the skill in long-term memory, the person should practice the skill at least another 50% or, in this case, two more times. The more steps there are in the skill, the more likely this principle will be relevant. Thus, as a pet dog trainer, to help students retain more of what was practiced in class, it is suggested that you give your students multiple opportunities to

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practice a newly acquired skill. Of course, you'll want to make sure you are not creating boredom by including too much repetition.

Wait Just a Moment, There

Let's again turn to the example of teaching a client how to put a walking harness on her dog. When you demonstrate this skill you might be tempted to get two dogs with you, putting the harness on one dog (your demo dog) while your student simultaneously watches you and puts a harness on her own dog. This is what motor learning specialists refer to as "concurrent imitation" or in

more vernacular terms, "monkey see, monkey do." What research has shown, however, is that using what is termed "delayed imitation" is actually more helpful in terms of long-term retention of how to complete the task.² With delayed imitation, as the instructor, you would give a brief demonstration and then pause for a short time (i.e., three to ten seconds) before having the student attempt to recreate the movement. In this brief pause, the student will be more likely to be actively engaged in storing the information in long-term memory rather than simply copying you. It can be noted that having to make the effort to store the information in long-term memory generally takes a bit longer and takes more effort on the part of the students. Sometimes students will start imitating the movement as a demonstration is being given, in which case, it can be helpful to let them know that you first want them to observe the demonstration and then there will be opportunities to practice.

Practice, Practice, Practice

As pet dog trainers, when we think of demonstrating a skill for our students, we often think of having them physically practice the skill shortly after we've demonstrated it. As it turns out, there are several forms of practice and to maximize long-term learning, we should really think about involving all three forms of practice when possible. Practice

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can include: physical practice, mental practice, and verbal practice. Let's look into each of these in more detail.

Physical Practice

Most instructors are well aware that physical practice—or giving students the opportunity to kinesthetically practice a skill—is a powerful form of learning. Most of us would not dream of only explaining and demonstrating loose leash walking, for example, but never allowing students to actually practice this skill in our time with them. However, a common mistake is for instructors to give too much information to students before giving students the opportunity to practice the skill; in other words, students don't get physical practice soon enough after the demonstration. Research has shown that in the early stages of learning, learners are simply “getting the idea.”³ As a result, in the early stages of learning students benefit from *brief* demonstrations followed by practice opportunities. More specifically, due to limits in short-term memory capacity students tend to benefit the most from having the one to three most critical components of the skill explained and demonstrated and having additional demonstrations and refinements provided as their mastery of the skill increases. It can be noted, however, that when instructors shift back and forth between explaining/demonstrating and allowing students time to practice, it can appear a bit chaotic. This is okay. The key is to remember that when relatively

short practice sessions are intermingled with demonstrations, long-term learning is enhanced.

Mental Practice

This form of practice is sometimes referred to as mental rehearsal, visualization, or imagery. Mental practice is simply using the mind to create or recreate an experience in the mind in the absence of physical practice.⁴ Research has shown that the use of mental practice, in addition to physical practice, is superior for learning as compared to physical practice alone.⁴ Additionally, mental practice has also been shown to help individuals overcome performance anxiety and is often used by elite athletes for this very reason.² Helping students incorporate mental practice in the context of dog training instruction doesn't have to be complicated or time consuming. Using phrases such as “before we begin this exercise, I'd like you to run through it in your mind” can be helpful. This can be particularly useful if you have one or more students in your class who are waiting for another student to complete an exercise.

Verbal Practice

Verbal practice—which refers to having students verbally rehearse information—can be useful in a number of ways. First, you might use it as a way of checking for understanding after you have just described or demonstrated a skill.⁵ For example, in the pet dog classes that I'm involved in, we practice an exercise called “Come

to the Center.” This exercise involves having the handlers and dogs in class form a large circle and gradually bringing the dogs in closer proximity by tightening the circle. As this happens, the principles of classical conditioning are used so that each dog's experience of being in tight quarters with other dogs is a good one. Handlers are instructed to: (a) keep their dog on a short but loose leash; (b) praise and treat their dogs as they move in closer to the other dogs; (c) take only the number of steps designated by the instructor (usually two to four steps); and (d) when signaled by the instructor, to move back to their original spot and remain quiet and neutral with their dog. Because of the number of steps involved in this exercise and the need for students to execute them appropriately, it is one where verbal rehearsal may be especially valuable. Thus, before beginning this exercise, we may ask three to four questions to make sure that all students are aware of the steps and to maximize the chances that the exercise can be done without, shall we say, incident.

Research has shown that verbal practice can be especially helpful for certain individuals. First, we know that information processing abilities can be compromised when anxiety and arousal levels are elevated.² Some examples of when anxiety levels might be elevated include: the first night of class with dogs, when someone's dog has a history of being reactive with other dogs and the person is embarrassed by this, and/or when

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students are not confident about their ability to work their dog in front of other students. Also, from a developmental perspective, we know that children under the age of ten and older adults often have a more difficult time getting information stored into long-term memory. So, using verbal practice is one more strategy you can use to help students get information loaded into long-term memory.

Finally, verbal practice can be a way of cueing students to what their body should look like or feel like during an activity. For instance, students often tend to tighten up on their leash when they are walking a dog, especially if their dog has a history of being reactive. I like using the cue word “cooked spaghetti” as way of encouraging students to relax their

arms (or move their arm from being like “uncooked” to “cooked” spaghetti) when their dog is walking appropriately. Experiment with finding cue words that are easy to remember and can easily be repeated by students and you’ll improve your chances of providing memorable instruction.

In closing, overlearning, delayed imitation, and the three types of practice (physical, mental, and verbal) can be used to make your lessons stick!

References

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Eileen Udry, PhD, CPDT, has a doctoral degree in human performance and learning. She is involved with pet dog training through Doggone Connection in Indianapolis, IN and is Director of Training and Client Services for Indiana Canine Assistant and Adolescent Network IN. In her free time Eileen likes to spend time with her dogs who are not shy about letting her know when her lessons don't make sense. She can be reached at eileenudry@mac.com. 

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