

Real Life Group Classes
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I have a dream. I envision a future of creative and effective group classes that address the actual needs of the dogs and humans whom we serve. In this article I would like to present a new concept in group class formulation. I am sure that somewhere out there others have thought of and already implemented this concept. I have yet to hear of it but I will not presume I am the first to think of it.

What do clients and dogs need? Clients need to learn how to teach their dog how to live within the bounds of human society. They need to learn how to help their dog adjust to and live in the real world home and community. They also need to be motivated to continue training their dog after class is over. Training needs to be as simple as possible and relevant to real life.

Premise #1. Animals perform better when they learn a task in a context that is similar to that which they must perform.

Premise #2. People are motivated to train when the training is fun and relevant to real life and their needs.

Imagine a hall with couches, chairs, a TV, a front door and other usual household furnishings and objects. Imagine coaching clients to teach their dog to greet visitors at the front door. Imagine coaching people in how to go to and come from places such as their own mat or a crate. Imagine coaching people in how to teach their dog how to be patient for getting their leash put on. Imagine coaching your clients in how to actually live with their dog—teaching them how to handle actual issues that they are facing. Perhaps some want to teach their dog to get on and off of the couch on cue (perhaps some don’t). Certainly “sit”, “down”, “off”, “here”, “look” and other basics can be covered in this environment. It does not have to be so cluttered that it is distracting. Perhaps loose leash walking and recalls can be done where the dog will actually have to use these skills. Perhaps short field trips are possible, even if just around the block for a “walk” or into the parking lot to get in and out of cars easily. What if instead of training the “basics” and giving handouts for such hugely important things as housetraining and bite inhibition we actually cover it in class, showing owners how to teach these vital skills.

But that’s not all. Dr. Ian Dunbar’s notion of classes taught using games is revolutionary! This is not a new concept so I will not delve into it except to say that the real life class could incorporate this and coach people in how to teach their dogs not only in a real life-like environment but also through games and fun.

The important thing here is that people be coached in how to train their dogs in the real world, how to address actual needs and of course how to have fun doing it. The fun and the relevance will motivate the owner to continue training. Imagine a giant living room and owners learning how to “live” with their dog in the real world.

Now for reality. The reality is that it can be expensive to buy a couch or two for class and it must be of a material that can be cleaned properly. Consider love seats made of Vinyl (or perhaps leather) from Ikea or some similarly affordable source. It also takes up room so if you have a very small space it will reduce the number of students you can fit into a given class. Customizing classes to individual needs can be problematic if not handled well. The trick is to balance customization with maintaining control of the curriculum. The handouts are necessary but they should be explained and perhaps practiced.

Dreams can become realities but logistics can make this difficult. Balance and creativity (and little experience) will help you reach a more fun and effective group class.

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