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# Obedience School Or Private Trainer. What Is Best For Your Dog?

*An analytical look at Canine Learning Styles By Richard J. Atkins, Ed.D.*

Everyone has a different way of learning. Some of us cram the night before the big exam, others absorb information over a long period of time. Some of us respond well to discipline and a fear of failure, others need a guiding hand and reassurance. So is it right to assume that all dogs, of all breeds will respond to one generic teaching style or is the one on one training style the way forward?



All domesticated and working dogs have one thing in common; each was taught and trained to a level of acceptability for its owner. In fact, an animal that does not learn, will not survive. Any animal must be capable of learning. If not, evolutionary selection takes its course. The animal falls victim to its own mistakes and unfortunate results follow.

One thing, of many in common between dogs and humans, is learning. Through formal education, humans are taught to reason and develop a system of living that moves them forward to their own definitions of success. Schools supplement that formal process by facilitating the mastery of human socialization skills. Dogs too, undergo a somewhat formalized education process. If the canine is to be domesticated or put into service, its education takes on different methods and modes.

Current research suggests that humans learn in different ways from each other. Each person's learning style is unique. By logical extrapolation, one would expect that dogs also have different learning styles. By identifying what trainers perceive as some of their learning strengths, the training of dogs can be approached in different ways.

Determining the ways in which canines prefer to learn, according to trainers' perceptions, may ultimately provide numerous benefits to the research community in its effort to increase trainer efficiency and to capitalize better on canine productivity.

Animals were studied in the nineteenth century to provide better insight into the morphology and physiology of humans. This early research satisfied the need to understand the forms, structures, and functions of animals, but did not provide information concerning how animals learn; how they acquire knowledge. Explorations of the ways in which animals obtain learning came later in the twentieth century.

Extensive research had examined the linkage between personality traits and learning-style preferences (Davis, 1985; Given, et al., 1999-2000; McPherson, 1998). It is possible that the personality traits of canines also might reveal some connections to learning-style preferences. Informal preliminary questioning revealed that any owner who had had more than one dog

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described the ways in which each differed from the other when learning. Therefore, this study was designed to determine whether certain breeds of dogs shared similar learning-style characteristics or, if differences between and within breeds were as prevalent as they appeared among human beings and whether the finding had implications for schooling.

Four decades ago, researchers began to investigate possible explanations for students' academic successes and failures. They found that few people learned in exactly the same way and that wide variations existed between parents and their children and among siblings. Those differences then were analyzed in depth by various pioneers in education and psychology.

The design for this study was a survey. Ultimately, answers culled from the survey questions were subjected to a content analysis. Because the questions were open-ended, respondents answered in whichever ways were most convenient for them.

The rationale behind developing this study was to open a field of inquiry and initiate an, as yet, unexplored analysis of how dogs appear to concentrate on and process new information. Although an extensive body of research exists for humans and learning styles, as well as canines and learning, the interactions between the human learning-styles model and canine learning had not yet been examined.

One respondent stated: "I try to suggest to people that they do not join a group class because that teacher is basically standing in front of a group of 20 people instructing them all simultaneously with the exact same instructions and doesn't take into account any individual dog's learning style or learning-style preferences... It's definitely important, I think, for us to realize that there is individual learning style characteristics [sic]. That's probably been the downfall to many, many dogs that have ended up in shelters—because some trainer chalked them up as being untrainable or stupid or stubborn because that dog couldn't learn the only way that that trainer knew how to teach".

As one result, these findings may have applications for educators and trainers in that they may bring awareness to educators who work with students and are not achieving the results they desire. This research may remind educators that if animals, such as dogs, exhibit some preferences for learning—and perform more effectively when those preferences are accommodated—other beings who do not perform to desired standards may need the accommodation of their learning styles to ensure greater success. It may be possible that this study serves those in the education community with a reminder to consider the individual nature or both learning and instruction.

Of all the different techniques mentioned by respondents, Lure and Reward was the most frequently utilized training method and Modelling was the practice least employed. Training professionals relied on numerous strategies (classical, clicker, collar, compulsion, correction, drive, food, lure-reward, modelling, motivated, negative reinforcement, operant, positive reinforcement, praise, punishment, repetition, shaping, and variety) to achieve results with the animals they educated. This shows that, because dog trainers used different techniques, these dogs required different approaches to get them to perform. This reinforces or further validates the belief that dogs and other animals do exhibit learning-style preferences.

More than 66 percent of the sample indicated that canines did exhibit different learning-style characteristics. The findings revealed a perception that certain dog breeds exhibited distinctly different learning-style profiles from those of other breeds. The data that supported this hypothesis revealed a number of these preferences.

Sporting, Herding, Terrier, and Miscellaneous breeds were seen as highly Motivated, Persistent, Responsible, and Sound-Sensitive. Conversely, they seemed somewhat likely to prefer warmer Temperatures and had Time-of-Day preferences for training or learning at night.

Non-Sporting and Working dogs were perceived to prefer cool Temperatures, were Persistent, and receptive to Sound. They also were somewhat likely to be Team workers. However, Non-Sporting and Working dogs were highly unlikely to be Visually oriented or highly-Motivated and had little preference for learning at Night.

Hounds and Toy Dogs were classified as Visual learners and demonstrated high Persistence. These dogs preferred warm Temperatures and were sensitive to Sound.

It is worth noting that certain breeds of dogs that were thought to demonstrate these learning-style preferences were bred to perform different tasks. This may

provide a partial corroboration for the different strengths each breed exhibited.

More than 66 percent of the sample affirmed that individual canines often were unique in their behaviours while either learning or being taught. This demonstrates the individuality of learning-style preferences among canines. These respondents indicated that learning styles were, in fact, individual to each canine. They supported the concept that canines, like humans, require instruction that is best suited to their needs. This demonstrates that canines are, in fact, individuals. Each canine has its own distinct learning-style profile as an individual—outside of similarities found within its breed.

Participants in the study confirmed that specific breeds preferred specific clusters. Three breeds (German Shepherds, Labrador Retrievers, Border Collies) and five learning-style characteristics (Sensitivity to Sound, High Motivation, High Persistence, High Responsibility, and High Visual) were most highly linked in this response. Fifty-two percent of trainers were aware of canines' preferences for clusters of selected learning-style variables. Identification of these learning-style strengths may not be surprising to many dog trainers and breeders, precisely because many of these canines have been bred to perform activities utilizing these very assets, which may or may not previously have been formally recognized as breed characteristics.

This research has highlighted that canines learn differently from each other. It has demonstrated that, to some extent, dogs require some individualized instruction. The expert trainers and handlers who participated in this study acknowledged that these members of the animal kingdom have preferences for certain ways to learn.

Certainly, dog trainers will benefit from the work presented, as this research has indicated the need to examine the instructional requirements of the animals being trained to maximize their efficiency and trainability. In turn, this will increase trainer effectiveness. An important consideration here is that trainers' and trainees' learning styles may profit substantially from arranged compatibility.

Educators will benefit from the findings presented in these chapters because it will confirm for them that individualized instruction serves individuals well. A logical extrapolation to follow the recognition that humans learn better when their learning style is accommodated would be that other beings respond similarly. It is a call to the research community to delve further into the potential educational increases that might be experienced by those who have hitherto been denied the chance to excel in their fields because they have not been taught in a style that is beneficial to them.

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