

Turning the Tide
By John Rogerson
APDT Conference 2010

As a dog lover/dog trainer I travel the world trying in my own small way to further people's education on the way that dogs are trained. This has been my full time job since 1980 when I turned away from a career in engineering to devote the rest of my working life to having fun with dogs and their owners.

What I am becoming increasingly concerned about is the provision of dog training in today's society and whether the training classes and one-to-one lessons are still as relevant today as they were in the days of the late Barbara Woodhouse. As dog owners we have to face up to the stark reality of the situation that we are faced with in the UK at the moment. More and more councils are introducing dog control orders to remove dogs from more and more public places. If the present situation continues then the whole of the UK will eventually become pet dog free zone. The sad fact that we dog lovers have to accept is that the majority of people who live in the UK actually do not care for dogs! Add to that the fact that we are slowly but surely segregating children from dogs (take a look at many animal charities policies on re-homing a dog with young children) and my concern is that the days of the dog as a family companion are numbered.

We already have breed bans, public access bans and more and more legislation which discriminates against us dog folk. So what can be done to turn the tide that is at the moment running against us?

Well for starters there are dogs that are trained by various organisations that are not only tolerated by our communities but are actually admired. The dogs that I am writing about are Guide Dogs, Dogs for people with disabilities, Search and Rescue dogs and therapy dogs.

So what makes these dogs different from other dogs in our communities? The answer is obvious, the selection and training of these dogs.

One inescapable fact is that dog ownership has changed dramatically over the last twenty years with the vast majority of dog owners now having a pedigree dog for companionship and this trend is increasing at an alarming rate (57.9% in 2009 compared to 75% in 2008*)

In the late 60's when I started to become involved in dog training the majority of dogs that attended my classes were mixed breeds, mongrels, Heinz 57's with recognised pedigree breeds being in the minority.

This now means that many owners are not actually bringing dogs to class that were developed and bred in their communities as pet dogs. Most are bringing breeds to class that were never developed to be household companions! This calls for a complete rethink in how training exercises are approached to give the owner the opportunity to get the best out of their chosen breed.

So if we take a look at some elements of our training class curriculum you can start to see where there is a massive opportunity for change.

Teaching a dog to come when called is often trained by teaching the dog to sit and stay and then leaving it before halting a short distance away and then turning around to call the dog to come and sit in front. Now while this may make perfect sense when training a dog for competition it makes little or no sense in training a pet dog to return to it's owner when off lead in the local park!

Heelwork is also often trained using the command "heel" and the dog is made to look up at food held in the left hand. Again this is a great way to train a dog to do competition heelwork but worse than useless for a pet dog owner who simply wants to be able to take their dog out for a walk. No food is required as the walk IS the reward for the dog.

Our National kennel club are to be applauded in introducing the canine good citizen test but is the test really designed to show which dogs are trained to a standard that make them ambassadors for the dog world! The test is so easy to "fake" so that the instructor gets the dogs to pass. The question that we must ask is if the dog passes the recall as described in the test, does this mean that it is safe to be let off the lead in a public place bearing in mind that the "test" often takes place in the local church hall?

Now don't get me wrong, I am in favour of the tests as a starting point but they have never moved on with the times and count for nothing other than a certificate, rosette and badge.

One of the situations that prompted me to organise a meeting at the Dogs Trust in Darlington in June was an incident that had happened a couple of months before. I visited a local beach with my grandson for his first ever fishing trip and took along one of our dogs. We set up our chairs by the edge of the sand and started fishing. Our dog was lying quietly by the side of our chairs and then it started. In the 90 minutes that we were present we counted 35 dogs that were totally out of control walking along the beach. Dogs came over uninvited despite the call of their owners to return. Some eventually returned to their owners as they slowly disappeared along the beach while some simply ran from dog to dog. Now the point is that I like dogs but if I didn't I would now be running a campaign to have dogs banned from being on this beach! No one picked up after their dogs and were even bothering other "fishermen" who did not have dogs with them as we did.

The sad fact is that if any of the owners had gone to the top of the steps leading to the beach and walked three hundred yards, a dog training club has been in existence for over twenty years! This begs the question as to why most training classes are run behind closed doors and not where they are needed, in this case on the beach.

So thanks to Karyn Brown, a one day event was planned at the Dogs Trust, Darlington, to see if there was any interest in other trainers to meet up with a view to trying to make some changes and make dog training classes more meaningful to owners and their communities. I was delighted when 35 people, all of them involved in educating the public on dog training attended.

The question that I wanted to raise was, "Do dog training classes really serve our communities and are the exercises relevant to pet dog owners?" The resounding answer that I got from the trainers assembled on the day was a resounding "no" to both.

Some of the ideas that we discussed were the possibility of a **public access test** that would be meaningful where passing the test would allow the owner access to public areas that they are currently banned from such as beaches and parks. Such standards are already in existence and are the standards required of Assistance Dogs International for certification.

We all hate to see dog poop left by irresponsible owners and this is a major reason that dogs get banned from parks etc so the good citizen test currently requires the owner to produce some means of picking up after their dog. Of course what we should be teaching in class is how to train your dog to eliminate on command in an appropriate area BEFORE it is taken out in public. Guide dogs have managed this in the UK since 1927!

Service dogs, when they are being tested are not permitted to initiate interactions with other dogs or people while they are working in public. Hmmm... is that what we are training in dog and puppy classes at the moment? Dog lovers love a friendly dog, people who do not like dogs want to be left alone and do not want a dog to initiate an interaction when in public - remember the fishermen on the beach who had to quickly gather their bait and ward the friendly dogs off that came to say hello.

We also discussed the need to get dog training back in public places and stop hiding away behind closed doors. A dog training class on the beach or in the park is what is needed where it is needed.

We also need to take a close look at exercises that are important to owners - training a dog to fetch your slippers when you get home from work is far better than teaching it to retrieve a competition dumbbell.

When was the last time you saw a dog carrying a newspaper home with its owner.

The only stays that are really relevant for a pet dog is either to stay on a lead in a public place with either (a friend or stranger holding on to it or the lead being fastened to a fence and yet owners are often instructed on how to train their dog to do an off lead stay. I know of no one who has either a working trials champion or obedience champion that would ever leave their dog in a public place off lead, tell it to stay and then go out of sight. And yet they do this regularly when they are competing. I think that most of the problems that we have in dog training in the UK are because that many of our exercises taught in dog training classes are based in the world of competition and not in the real world of dogs in our communities.

The way that we make change is by education and this needs to be carried out at all levels. The 35 trainers present at my presentation were all 100% committed to doing everything that they could to start the ball rolling. Are you willing to take up the challenge???