

Obedience Training vs. “Invited Learning” or Homeschooling Goes to the Dogs

by Donn Reed

Invited Learning,” as I understand it—and I’m sure some homeschool theorists will be quick to say I don’t—seems to mean that children intuitively know what they need to learn and when they need to learn it, and no one should presume to offer them information about anything at all until they ask for it. If they ask for it, of course, it’s really Invited Teaching, but more people than you might suppose (unless you’re one of them) get purple in the face over this, insisting that “teaching” is doing something TO someone else, and is therefore a form of aggression—unless the students ask for it, and then it’s okay, because then we can call it Invited Learning.

To Jean and me, the entire debate is slightly more exciting than the afternoon soaps or taking out the garbage, but “Invited Learning” is an intriguing concept, whether we understand it or not, and sometimes we like to play around with it and see what we can discover about it.

One of the things we’ve discovered about Invited Learning is that it often results in excessive barking, muddy paw prints on the sofa, missing or mangled shoes, and late-night festivities involving a mouthful of porcupine quills and a pair of pliers. With dogs, that is. Invited Learning with children is another story, most of which can be told in polite language, but which isn’t a part of this report.

We’ve had a few smart dogs over the years (usually one at a time), but we’ve never given much thought to leading them into any sort of Higher Education. Or even Lower Education. With our dogs, as with our children, we lean (not too firmly, I admit) toward a sort of Invited Learning, the biggest difference being that with the children it’s usually more from conviction than laziness.

With dogs, it usually seems easier to brush mud off the sofa before sitting than to teach them to wipe their feet at the door, so we tend to excuse their poor manners by muttering, “Dogs will be dogs” (just as people used to say, “Boys will be boys”—another truism which, according to recent news magazines, is no longer the certainty we once thought it was; but that is also another story).

About a year and a half ago, Gus came to live with us, and almost immediately began challenging many of our favorite educational theories and convictions, including our smug assumption that dogs will be dogs.

Gus is about 90% German Shepherd and 10% something else. We found him (or vice versa) in January, at the SPCA sixty miles away, where he was being held in solitary confinement as a vagrant. He was a puppy, only eight months old, but already weighed 62 pounds, and it cost us more than a dollar a pound to spring him. When I brought him home, sitting beside me in our ’84 pickup, he had the familiar dazed look of most ex-cons who have been in stir too long, and didn’t say much, but several times he expressed his gratitude by cleaning my right ear very thoroughly. He also made a few mechanical adjustments when my attention was elsewhere, and I finally had to explain to him—after the truck suddenly lost its oomph and nearly coasted to a stop before I found the cause of its unusual

behavior—that he could move the rearview mirror all he liked but I would be in charge of the gear shift. He apologized by cleaning my ear again, and we got home with no more surprises.

Jean and I showed Gus the doors that connect Inside to Outside, and he signified his understanding by testing them all. We showed him his food and water dishes in the little nook in the hallway, and he tested them, too, giving no indication that the arrangement was less than satisfactory. We introduced him to Big Guy, our ferocious feline mouse-killer, and said we hoped they would be friends. Gus, very pleased, offered to clean Big Guy's ears. Big Guy, who had once been chased up a very small tree by a very large dog, offered to clean Gus's clock, then ran upstairs to hide in the rafters until spring. (That turned out to be another lesson in Invited Learning because for the next three months, at least once a day, we had to risk being torn to shreds by inviting Big Guy to go for a little walk outside, dog or no dog, and he soon learned to hide from us in places we couldn't reach.)

One evening about three weeks after he had come to live with us, Gus barked at the door, then at me, then again at the door. Making a natural assumption, I opened the door for him, but he stood and barked at me again. He wanted me to go outside to play toss-and-chase with his empty plastic milk jug.

“You're out of your mind,” I told him. “It's ten below zero out there, with two feet of snow.”

He still refused to go out by himself, so I shut the door and went back to my book and chair beside the wood stove, pretending to ignore the disgusted look he was giving me.

Just when I thought he had given up, Gus went to the hall closet and ran back with one of my snow boots in his teeth. He dropped it beside me, then returned to the closet for the second boot, which he dropped next to the first one.

“Gus,” I managed to say, “dogs do this only in the movies.”

He put a paw on one of the boots and barked at me.

“Okay, okay,” I said, pushing my foot into one of the boots. “You've made your point. But you should know that real dogs don't do this.”

Putting the other boot on, I said to Jean, “Did you see what Gus just did? He's really smart!”

“It's a good thing one of you is,” she said, as I went to the closet for my jacket and mittens.

Women tend to say things like that sometimes, so I pretended I hadn't heard her; but on the way out the door, I whispered to Gus, “See what I'm up against? You don't have to make it worse.”

A squeaky rubber football, about six inches long, became Gus's favorite indoor toy. Sometimes he just chews on it, enjoying its squeak. Sometimes he steps on it, enjoying its squeak. Sometimes he steps on it, daring it to squeak, then grabs it in his teeth and flips it into the air, then runs after it. Occasionally he loses it, and then spends twenty minutes or more searching for it—behind furniture, under pillows, down the hall, wherever a tricky rubber ball might be hiding. Usually he finds it, but sometimes he gives up, and barks at Jean or me to find it for him—which eventually gave us the brilliant idea that he was inviting us to help him Learn something.

I called him to the end of the hall, then told him to sit and count to ten while I hid the ball. “Ten” is a very large number for a young dog, but I managed to get the ball behind a sofa cushion before Gus came galloping after me into the living room.

“Find the ball,” I said, in that tricky way parents have of enlarging their children’s vocabulary. “Find it.”

Gus sniffed the air, which didn’t help, then began searching, pushing chairs, poking his nose under magazines and into armpits, and flipping cushions around until he finally found the ball. He tossed it into the air, jumped and caught it, then dropped it in front of me and barked. This time, there was no doubt: he was definitely inviting me to help him learn something. (Some people might say he was inviting me to learn something, and others might say he was just inviting me to play a game, but I know better.)

We did it several times that evening, and it became a daily game. I hid the ball in different places each time, and Gus always kept searching until he found it. At the same time, his vocabulary grew. Besides find and ball, he soon learned sit, wait, stay, come, sofa, other sofa, chair, bed, wrong way, down, higher, and behind the pillows. Some of the concepts seemed pretty abstract to us, but abstract was one of the words Gus hadn’t learned.

One day Gus took his ball into our bedroom (which is downstairs, near the kitchen), stayed a few moments, then came out without it and barked at me. It had been quite a while since I had dismissed Gus’s barking as mere random noise. If he was bright enough to tell me something but I wasn’t bright enough to understand him, I’d have to fake it.

Stalling for time, I asked, “Lost your ball?”

“Woof,” he said, wagging his tail.

“Is it in the bedroom?” I asked.

“Woof,” he said again, still wagging.

“Can you find it?” I asked.

His tail stopped wagging. Gently but firmly, he took my hand in his mouth and pulled me toward the bedroom door. Releasing my hand, he said, “Rowrrf!” and waited expectantly. Sometimes he seems to think I’m Learning Disabled.

Searching my mind for possibilities, I made a wild guess. “You want me to find the ball?” I asked him, not really believing it.

“Rowf!” Gus exclaimed, wagging his tail again.

Feeling ridiculous, I went into the bedroom to look for the ball, which I quickly found on the floor beside the bed. Gus grabbed the ball from my hand and raced excitedly down the hall, then back to the living room, then back into the bedroom. He came out—no ball—and barked at me.

“Right.” I said, still not believing; “Gotcha.” I found the ball in the same place beside the bed. Gus grabbed it, ran around with it to celebrate, then hid it in the bedroom again. We went through the whole

thing several times, and Gus looked at me with approval each time I found the ball. I hoped he could see that I may be slow sometimes, but I'm not Learning Disabled.

"Jean," I said, "is this possible? Is Gus really hiding the ball for me to find?"

"You said he's smart," she reminded me.

Lucky for me," I said, "he's not smart enough to put the ball in different places. He always hides it in the same place."

I shouldn't have said it when Gus was listening. The next time he told me to look for the ball, it wasn't there. I finally found it on the bed, under my pillow. The next time, it was under Jean's pillow. "Gus," I told him, "this Invited Learning is going to your head. You're forgetting you're just a dog." It's hard to tell with dogs, but I think he laughed at me.

Gus likes Flavor Snacks—crunchy, bone-shaped dog biscuits—which I keep on the back of my desk so I can bribe him to go away when I'm working and he wants me to play with him. As usual, he's a step ahead of me. Bounding into my office, he bumps my elbow with his nose and says, "If you give me three Flavor Snacks, I won't bother you for a while." I don't know why he wants three. If I give him two, he demands another. If I give him four, he accepts them, but doesn't care much about the fourth one. So I give him three, and he goes away.

"Impossible," I told myself the first few times it happened. "Numbers are too abstract for a dog. Even a smart one. I'm going to prove it."

I broke a Flavor Snack in half, held one piece up for Gus to see, and asked him, "How many?"

He woofed, once, but that didn't prove anything because in Dog Talk "woof" is a homonym; like many English words, its meaning must be deduced from its context. It can mean "Please" or "I want to go out" or "I'm hungry." I wasn't convinced that it could also mean "one."

I gave Gus the Flavor Snack, then held up two pieces, one in each hand, and asked him, "How many?"

"Woof," he said, eyeing the piece in my right hand. When I didn't give it to him, he looked at the piece in my left hand and said, "Woof."

"Coincidence," I said. I waited. He waited. We both waited. Finally, suspecting that his attention span might be longer than mine, I gave him the Flavor Snack, and waited for him to eat it—crunch-glumph, like a boa constrictor. Then I held up two pieces, one in each hand, and asked, "How many?"

He woofed at the one in my right hand, then at the one in my left hand. I gave them to him. We did it again and again that evening, and several times in the next few days, always with the same result: a woof for each hand. I still didn't know if Gus was counting them or had only decided that I wanted him to woof for each one.

About a week later, when I held up two Flavor Snacks and asked Gus, "How many?" he hesitated.

He looked at one, then the other; then at the first again, then back to the second. Back and forth, several times. Then he looked at me and very distinctly said, "Woof-woof." Two syllables; one word.

Had he finally said “two?” We did it several times, sometimes with one, sometimes with two—and he answered correctly every time. He wasn’t as certain, at first, about “two” as he was about “one”—he always took time to consider very carefully before saying “two” (“woof-woof)—but he obviously knew the difference. Gus could count!

So far, he hasn’t mastered “three,” a quantity which often excites him to the point of saying, “Nine! Fourteen! Six!” although he is always insistent on exactly three Flavor Snacks. Apparently he knows the quantity of three, but doesn’t have a word for it. I’ve read of an aboriginal jungle tribe, purportedly unchanged since the Stone Age, whose entire numerical system is “One, two, three, plenty,” meaning that any quantity over three is too much to count separately. Gus’s numerical system—“One, two, plenty”—is only one digit short of Stone Age man’s.

Since then, we’ve continued to be impressed by Gus’s intelligence, but we’re seldom surprised by it. When he’s hungry, he brings his food dish into the kitchen. If he wants one of us to go out with him, he brings our boots (dirty sneakers, in the summertime), and then goes back to the closet to pull a jacket (usually the right one) off the hanger. If he wants his chest scratched, he pulls someone’s hand down and leans against it. If we ask him to whisper, he makes a very soft, barely audible, huff sound. When he’s riding in the truck and sees a Stop sign or hears the click of the turn signal, he sits down and braces his front legs.

Early one spring, a sign in town announced registration for Obedience Training, bringing us face-to-face with the unexpected question of formal education. We discussed it. We hadn’t wanted it for any of our kids, and all four of them have done very well without it, but maybe it would be different for Gus. “Different how?” we asked ourselves. Well, socialization, for one thing; he’d get to meet other dogs, learn to interact meaningfully with his peers. Broaden his cultural horizons by showing him part of the world beyond our rural homestead.

Gus said he wasn’t sure what we meant by “obedience” or “socialization,” but anything involving a ride in the truck was okay with him. We still weren’t sure. Having devoted so much of our lives to homeschooling, it just didn’t seem right to enroll our dog in public school.

On the other hand, we homeschoolers are a strange, perverse lot. I don’t mean “we” meaning us, Jean and Donn Reed, personally; I mean we homeschoolers in general; generic homeschoolers or the homeschooling masses. We reject the standards and methods and results of public schools. We say we don’t want our kids to meet public school standards, because those standards are empty and false. We say the world would be better off if public schools had never been invented. And then whom do we choose as our homeschool heroes? John Taylor Gatto, honored as “Teacher of the Year” three times before he quit the public school system after twenty-six years. David Colfax, described on another author’s book jacket as “father of three homeschooled Harvard graduates”—not even mentioning his fourth son who was also homeschooled but hasn’t gone to Harvard. Grace Llewellyn, described on the cover of her book as “a former middle school English teacher.”

We’re like dying atheists asking a priest for absolution—not really believing in it, but hedging our bets, not taking any chances. A stamp of approval from professional teachers who have quit the public schools after ten or twenty years seems to mean more to us than the opinions of people who got out before they got in—that is, who never got involved in public schools at all.

Perverse or not, Gus and I registered for the course. Each Tuesday evening, for eight weeks, we drove to the community recreation center and, along with about 30 other dogs and their owners, received instruction from a member of the American Kennel Club. Every day, at home, Gus and I diligently did our homework, most of which he thought was dumb and boring, but he was a good pupil, and more than willing to put up with such nonsense if it meant being outdoors with me. He even brought my boots and jacket to me two or three times a day, plainly inviting me to help him learn more.

We learned to Heel on Leash, which included Stopping or Starting on Command, Right- and Left-angle Turns, About Face, and promptly Sitting (Gus; not me) without command at each Stop. Gus didn't see the point of it, but he mastered it quickly and didn't argue about it.

Then came Heeling on Leash in a Figure 8, which Gus thought was one of the stupidest exercises he had ever heard of. At school, he wanted to make it a Figure 6 or 99 or 54, anything but Figure 8; and when we practiced at home during the week, he wrapped his paws around my ankle and chewed my foot.

The Long Sit (sitting and staying in place with minimal movement for at least a minute) and Long Down (lying down and staying in place for three minutes) were easy because he had already learned them at home when he was waiting for me to hide his rubber football.

Recall—sitting, staying, then coming on command—was also easy, for the same reason.

The final lesson, in preparation for exam night, was Stand for Inspection, and Gus thought it was dumber than the Figure 8. The idea was that he would sit beside me in Heel position, I would tell him to stand, and he would promptly stand; then I would walk away to the end of the leash, and he would stay, still standing, while the instructor walked up to him, ran a hand along his back, and walked away; and would remain there until I returned to his side. The whole exercise was a snap for him—all except the first part. Gus refused to stand on command. I had to nudge his belly with my toe, tug forward on his leash, and repeat the command several times, and then Gus would very reluctantly stand. Once he was standing, he did the rest of the entire exercise without a hitch, but after two weeks of practice he still refused to stand on command.

Graduation Night arrived. Gus and I discussed our test-taking strategy, and I told Jean before we left not to expect too much. Neither Gus nor I had taken the course very seriously, and I honestly expected us to score about 28th in a class of 30.

We started off with 100 points. On the Heel on Leash, we lost 3 points out of 20, for holding the leash too tight. On the Figure 8, we lost 1 point out of 10, for the same reason. On the Long Sit, no points lost, out of 20. On Recall, 1 point lost out of 15, for “handler error” (I tugged on the leash once when I shouldn't have). Gus was nonchalant, and I was amazed. But the worst was yet to come, and I knew it would be our downfall.

“Stand your dog for inspection,” the judge said. “Stand,” I commanded, knowing he wouldn't, and getting ready to sneak my toe under him. He stood immediately, without a nudge, and didn't move as I walked away from him. The judge walked up to him, ran his hand along Gus's back, then walked away, and Gus stood still as I returned to him. No points lost, out of 15.

Total points lost, 5. Final score, 95. Second Place!

The next day, at home, I asked Gus to Stand. He yawned at me. I made it a command, and he chewed my foot.

There's a lesson in there somewhere, but I'm not sure what it is. Probably Gus was way ahead of us again, and just wanted to make a point about learning. Maybe about Invited Learning.

Gus has interrupted me several times while I've been writing this. He hid his football in the bedroom, then came to my office and told me to look for it. I knew he wouldn't leave me alone until I did, so I went to the bedroom. It wasn't beside the bed. Not under the pillows, which he had rearranged (probably just to mislead me). I finally found it under the covers, which he had pulled back, then pulled up over the ball. I told him to stay on the bed and count to 10 while I hid the ball. He's still not very good at numbers over 3, but I got the ball hidden under a pile of sofa pillows before he came charging after me. He pushed pillows all over until he found the ball, then went to hide it again. Came to tell me to look for it. I went. Nowhere in the bedroom this time. I finally found it down the hall, just inside the bathroom door. Gus was laughing at me. Smart alecky dog. My turn; I hid the ball under a folded blanket on the other sofa. Gus flipped pillows around with his nose, then checked the other sofa, lifted the blanket with his nose, and got the ball. Hid it in the bedroom again, told me to look for it. I told him I'm busy writing a serious article about education. He sighed and looked out the window and woofed.

"Not now," I said. "Maybe later."

He woofed at the box of Flavor Snacks on the back of my desk. I took two out of the box and showed them to him. He counted them, then looked at the box and growled softly. I got another. He accepted all three, one at a time, and cleaned up the crumbs on the floor.

I went back to work. Gus jumped upon one of the sofas, rearranged the pillows, then lay down and looked at Jean, who was playing De Visée's "Suite in D Minor" on her guitar. I don't even know what D Minor means, but Gus does, and he doesn't like it. He always growls—a very low rumble deep in his throat—whenever Jean plays anything in D minor. He growled and muttered, so Jean switched to Bach's "Gavotte in A Minor." Gus sighed contentedly, and went to sleep.

He sure is smart.

It's a good thing one of us is.

The late Donn Reed was author of The Home School Source Book, a collection of resource reviews, essays and advice from a secular point of view.