

Why Dog Trainers Should Train Chickens 2012

Let's pretend you're going to Chicken Camp – Terry Ryan

Terry Ryan's Bio

Terry has been coaching people to train their dogs since 1966. She trained her own dogs for various performance events and was an AKC obedience trial judge for many years. She built and operated a large training complex in Washington State. Legacy Canine Behavior & Training, Inc. promotes humane and effective dog training techniques for a variety of pet, working dog, and competitive applications. Terry maintains a busy national and international workshop schedule. Most frequently teaching instructor's courses, chicken training workshops, and training games events. Terry is a faculty member of the Karen Pryor Academy, teaching several classes a year in the USA and overseas and she is on the staff of Clicker Expo.



Terry Ryan was my mentor and instructor as I went through the Karen Pryor Academy and graduated as a professional dog trainer. I then attended 4 separate Chicken Camp. This begs the questions: What is Chicken Camp, Why Did I Go, and What Did I Learn?

1) What is Chicken Camp?

As a Positive Reinforcement dog trainer, I train using operant conditioning, which is a theory formulated by BF Skinner in the 1930s. This is tied in with Applied Behavior Analysis, the science of behavior. There are 4 different weekend training opportunities of Chicken Camps available, all covering different aspects of training and behavior. I've been fortunate enough to attend all four.

BF Skinner and his colleagues studied animals (mostly rats and pigeons) and discovered the basic principles of behavior; most importantly that positive reinforcement could increase behavior in all animals, including humans.

Beginning in the 1960s, Karen Pryor began using operant conditioning principles with animals and developed a technology called Clicker Training. With Clicker Training, a clicker, whistle, or bell is used to audibly mark a behavior as correct and is immediately followed with a reinforcer.

In the past decade, TAGteach (clicker training for humans) developed out of Karen Pryor's Clicker Training, which is an excellent technology for teaching both children and adults a variety of skills. This training is currently being used with autistic children, in correctional facilities,

with many professional industries from corporate business managers to commercial fishermen, the FBI, and many others, including many different types of professional athletes, from gymnasts to football players, to improve performance and much more. TAGteach is part of my Karen Pryor Academy education credentials.

Terry Ryan, an internationally recognized expert in the field of animal training, runs Chicken Camps. Chicken camps are 2 or 4 days long and are held either at Legacy Canine Training Center in Sequim, Washington or on site around the world when Terry is brought in to speak to small groups of about 20. Terry doesn't travel with chickens though so for the training opportunities outside of Washington, the hosts need to work with local 4-H Clubs or farmers to supply the chickens.

Terry has worked and continues to work closely with Karen Pryor and is also TAGteach certified. Many people attend chicken camp to get better at training their dogs, but increasingly managers and human trainers have been attending to sharpen their people-training skills

2) Why did I go to chicken camp? Why you should train a chicken?

Trainers do not have bad (or good!) chicken training habits because it's not likely they've ever trained a chicken before. There is no library full of chicken training books to influence them. Therefore, chicken camp students don't bring the baggage of conflicting advice often taken to dog training workshops. No prior experience is needed for chicken camps.

Training a chicken is a stretch and a boost to mechanical skills. The average chicken is faster than the average dog, providing the opportunity to improve coordination and timing. Unlike dogs, you will know immediately if you are taking advantage of a chicken or pushing too hard or too fast. Chickens don't give their trainers second chances as often as our dogs do. Chickens will freeze or fly away if they don't like the way they are being trained.

Like chickens, dogs don't understand complex human language. After reading "Reaching the Animal Mind" by Karen Pryor, I have become convinced that the key for me to become a better trainer of any animal and to also teach people more effectively, was to learn more about the science of animal training. What better way to do this than with Chicken Camp!

3) What did I learn?

About the class: We practiced mechanical skills with special attention to timing and eye-hand coordination. Lessons include observing and recording behavior, systematic desensitization, capturing a behavior, shaping a behavior, and the use of targets. Students worked on discrimination tasks and trained their hen to negotiate obstacles. Effective coaching techniques to aid your training partner were addressed.

The classes included slide presentations, videos, live discussion and Q&A sessions. Here are some of the things we talked about;

- Why chicken training? (history)
- Pre camp – selection and conditioning a hen for a "table ready" partner
- Chicken needs to be emotionally ready to learn
- Classical conditioning table ready exercises for the hens

- Mechanical skill drills for the trainers, exercises you will be able to practice with Terry live in the class
- Making training equipment in a stay-at-home-got-no-money world
- Operant conditioning
- Shaping a target stick peck, light target peck
- Moving behaviors (tunnel, beam, racetrack and figure-8s around cones)
- Chaining
- Discrimination among color discs, toys, etc.
- And more...

My chicken camp experiences were excellent! Here are a few specific things I learned and were reinforced during the 2-day camps:

1. When teaching people, it is important not to jam too much information in every minute. During chicken camp we took a 10-minute break every 50 minutes. When we took our first 2 breaks (50 minutes after we got started and then another one hour later), I was thinking that these constant breaks were excessive. By the afternoon of the first day though I became to appreciate the frequent breaks.
2. Reinforce early, not late. This is especially important for new/difficult behaviors. When we were first teaching our chicken to peck the red chip, for example, we were instructed by Terry to click as soon as her beak was going toward/almost touching the chip. This is extremely valuable information in working with a new or inexperienced learner, whether animal or human.
3. Don't assume you know what the extraneous variables are to which the chicken, your animal or another person may be responding. Since returning from chicken camp, I feel that I am much more aware how difficult it is to evoke target behaviors and reinforce immediately since we work in uncontrolled settings with multiple variables operating at all times.
4. If you suddenly are not getting target behavior, the animal may need to rest, may be full, or may need to lay an egg. As a trainer and instructor of people, I am keenly aware that dogs and people may get distracted, have preconceived ideas or a variety of other reasons why they 'are not getting it'. As Terry says, "Be a splitter, not a lump".
5. Short sessions are best to keep everyone on his or her toes. In addition to the humans taking breaks every hour, we also were careful not to overwork the chickens. With the chickens, we targeted a behavior for 30-60 seconds at a time, then picked up our chicken and re-grouped. We only repeated the short intervals for about 10 minutes then the chickens were put back in their cages for a drink and a rest. The chickens were not the only ones who needed a break every 30-60 seconds, since the instructors needed time to analyze what went right/wrong and to plan for the next interval.
6. Don't over-prompt by physically trying to move the chicken or by "luring" or "baiting" the chicken to do the task. For instance, to get the chicken to go around a cone, don't put the food out so the chicken just moves for the food. Instead, reinforce head or leg movements in the right direction with a click (indicating the behavior was correct) followed by a food treat. In general, most dogs are physically prompted and "lured" too

often. Since camp, I'm more aware that reinforcing successful approximations is a much better way to go!

7. If the chicken is making repeated errors, the skill is too high and/or the reinforcement is too low. If the chicken/dog is stuck on a program, he or she doesn't have the prerequisite skills or you haven't figured out how to teach the skills he/she needs. If you are not getting the target behavior, increase the reinforcement, reduce the field size, give a better prompt, or somehow look to make the task easier. Once the chicken/dog is successful, you can ramp up from there. The idea that the chicken/dog/trainee is never wrong was heavily reinforced during our 2-day chicken camps. If they don't "get it", you are not "teaching/training" them correctly.

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