

## Ethnographic explorations of games and bricolage in detection dog teams' training

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In this article, I examine how dyadic communication between the service dog and the human unfolds through play and games. The prevalent view of nonhuman animals' entanglement in work frames them as mere resources or tools to serve the anthropocentric purpose of their use, rendering them as mere representatives of their species without acknowledging their distinct personalities. In my attempt to challenge this, the article describes the reciprocity and co-becoming of canine teams by tracing how state authorities' professional development intertwines with and depends on the cultivation of dogs' sensory abilities and an emphasis on communication with them. My analysis draws on participant observation of canine teams at the beginning of their training, supplemented by the course curriculum and the materials on which their teaching relies. Bridging curricular knowledge with the pursuit of excellence combines the behavioristic and animal rights perspectives in detection dog training for use by Eurozone state authorities. All in all, the article provides novel insights into how human-dog working dyads play games in their efforts to become the state of the art of professional canine teams in safety-producing work.

KEYWORDS: bricolage; co-becoming; detection dogs; professional development

### Introduction

From a sociological perspective, the routine relations in work, organisations, and management focus mainly on the human perspective, even when these relations involve nonhuman animals. The dynamics and relations between employer and employee, doctor and patient, and, regarding the 'animal turn' in the humanities and social sciences, between human and animal, tend to highlight more or less anthropocentric understandings

of work in contemporary democratic societies. The animal turn deconstructs how we socially construct (other) animals' experiences of the world and of their encounters with humans. In their way, animals can be enabled to 'speak back' in ways that may reshape their lives. (Adams 2020a; Giraud and Hollin 2016; Goffman 1972; Hollin et al. 2017; Sacks et al. 1974; Shapiro 2017.)

However, adding or including a nonhuman animal member to dyads<sup>1</sup> familiar to mainstream sociology of work would provide valuable insights into ethical and methodological complexities of our work as researchers in the field and in contributing new understandings of how different relations in work life are carried out, at the very least, when animals are framed as mediums in professional development. Lately, some sociologists have explored animal involvement in care work, emotional work, organisational agency, and professional roles. Despite the variety that different kinds of nonhuman animals are already mingled in our work and professionalism, their agency has been merely a part of 'hidden curriculum'<sup>2</sup>, also raising a question whether their part in labour in general is becoming a new frontier to interspecies justice. Therefore, this article attempts to add a dynamic and interactive layer to practices that typically translate dogs as objects or species representatives and their acts as mechanisms and responses. By centring nonhuman animals within informal worker relations, this article contributes to the sociology of work. This field has yet to fully integrate animals as co-constitutive actors in meaning-making processes. (See Blattner et al. 2020; Charles and Wolkowitz 2024; Coulter 2016; Hobson-West and Jutel 2020; Laaser and Karlsson 2022; Motamedi Fraser 2024; Sayers et al. 2019.)

This article aims to describe how detection dogs are involved in dog handlers' professional development as their working partners, and the handlers' attempts to become canine team instructors for the international job market or to take part in standardising detection dog training in their homeland. One intriguing twist in this change is embedded in the curriculum their learning draws from, a novel contribution to detection dog training itself, because it attempts to merge the objective aspects of learning theory and work performance with animal rights – dogs' abilities and opportunities to have and change their interests. The human workers in question participate in the canine team instructor course as state authorities in the member states of the European

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1 The social structure of the dyad, as a dual formation, a bond or a union of two individuals or groups (e.g. friends, lovers, or societies), is dependent on the pure individualities of its single members that makes them (and therefore, the dyad also) supra-personal (Cantó-Milà 2016, 87; Simmel 1908, 83, 87).

2 Hidden curriculum refers to Helena Pedersen's (2004) notion on philosophical issues in education that sidelines animals' right to have interests of their own and enforce animal objectification.

Union. In the course, their professional roles consist of being either a student or an instructor, the latter serving as an instructor for student-dog working pairs and representing meritocracy-like educational leadership.

In the analysis that follows, the curricular training schemes are contrasted with activities in the training field. With novel ethnographic materials, I introduce the reader to structured human interaction with dogs and surrounded by them, thus making space for animal agency in cooperative work. I also explore the workshopping practices as hermeneutical games, designed for and sensitive to interpretations of dog knowledge. I ask: How does dyadic communication between the dog and the human unfold through play and games in the context of detection dog teams' training? And how do these forms of interaction change and oscillate in detection dog training practices?

## **Unifying detection dog training**

Equipped with hundreds of millions of olfactory reception cells, more different kinds of olfactory cells than we, and thus reinforcing even the sense of taste to be more cultivated than ours, the dogs' super-sensitive ability of smelling adds up to utilising them to work for health, safety, and conservation, and to involve them in international politics in the process ambiguously. The methods of detection dog training may therefore be subordinated to its purposes even when dogs themselves don't discriminate between people or their occupation by uniforms or organisations they represent. As we speak or read of detection dogs in social and natural sciences, the human-controlled 'biosensors' and 'dogs-as-technologies', we may easily reproduce the vague assumption that, in the end, the highly-trained detection dogs, like any other human-trained higher animal, too, are unique personalities thriving in their lives simply by being privileged to live close to us. (Adams 2020b; DeGreeff and Schultz 2022; Holland 2022; Motamedi Fraser 2024; Ramos and Williams 2024; Włodarczyk 2018.)

For over a century, the colourful history of detection dog training has included teaching them a wide variety of inherently meaningless scents from plant and animal species to specific drugs and explosives, as well as human cell metabolism during illnesses (e.g. COVID-19 infection). The primary purpose and rationale behind detection dog training has been its unrivalled effectiveness compared with other monitoring techniques. All in all, this human-governed activity is based on the belief that, as a species, dogs, with their histories as a species and through co-domestication with humans, are easy and accessible to breed, train, and relocate. (See Grimm-Seyfarth et al. 2021; Van Sittert and Swart 2008.)

Our conceptions of the universal and timeless dog have evolved across generations and have constituted a powerful order that defines our relation to them (Motamedi Fraser 2024, 87). Despite detection dogs having been used for a long time, the sociology of work has just scratched the surface on this topic, as Mariam Motamedi Fraser (2024) argues. The instinctive olfactory sensibility of dogs and its cultivation into intelligent detection work with/for humans also raises questions of dogs' knowledge about work within different professions. As researchers, our understanding of 'the social' in human-detection dog interaction as an active exchange is sparse and partly shaped by professionals with various backgrounds, who may prioritise the understanding of individuals' behaviour but highlight it as an exemplum<sup>3</sup> for the value of the species, and who, most of all, tell their roseate stories on dogs' behalf. (See Ahto-Hakonen and Hakonen 2023; Coulter 2016; D'Souza et al. 2020; Holland 2022; Motamedi Fraser 2024; Oliva and Cobb 2024.)

Despite the relatively long history and both ambitious and ambiguous initiatives in detection dog training for various purposes, designing a curriculum that encompasses both human and human-nonhuman animal communication is still a novel effort. While animal welfare legislation against prong collars and electric shock collars has been gaining ground in the 2020s, and the social acceptance of the use of aversive, coercive, or punitive methods in working dog training is slowly diminishing, the question of curriculum knowledge is topical for ensuring both professional development and nonhuman animal well-being, which is entangled with it. Thus, even if training detection dogs is reward-based in writing, the material evidence of happenstances, what rewards are balanced with, or how the value of the reward is maintained, remains in the shadows. To shed some light on this, the tools recently equipped with training detection dogs may include both rewards and electric shock collars. (See D'Souza et al. 2020; Heiderstadt et al. 2000; Holland 2022; Konno et al. 2025; Phillips 1971.) The aforementioned examples also highlight the need for curriculum-based knowledge and coherence in detection dog training, and the need to recognise its interdependence with the concurrence of detection dogs' performance with their rights and opportunities to well-being without exception.

From a pragmatic viewpoint, the curriculum defines the goals of education and

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3 Roman poet Valerius Maximus (around 25–30 CE) represents exempla as ethical stories for sharing moral ideas with the balance between abstract theory and demands of moral reasoning in a certain situation (Langlands 2011, 101; Maximus 2000). At present, humans may describe the inimitable heroic deeds of outstanding dog individuals in perilous conditions to underpin social license and the sustainability for the public.

the access it provides (see Annala 2023, 1). Curriculum- and reward-based detection dog training could create new standards that teach and motivate professionals to concurrently take care of their own occupational well-being and that of their service dog. By learning to lead their own developmental processes, professionals must still excel in their work performance to influence their career paths at home and abroad, arguably making the dog an essential mediator for the meaningfulness of their work. However, the relationship between self-leadership and meaningfulness of work is sparsely studied or detailed in the literature (see Sjöblom et al. 2022, 3). What it has sidelined are also the material nuances that make canine teams' detection work an active dyadic exchange with the nonhuman animal. The detection work, as a practical and carefully designed craft, may be done successfully, but also to no avail in futile, dangerous, or inflexible conditions. As a social researcher, I focus on the multisensory aspects of exchange between dogs and humans in places where it happens. (See Boonman-Berson and Van Bommel 2023.)

The data for this study were collected from the European Border and Coast Guard Agency's (also known as Frontex) European course for canine team instructors in the field of product scent in 2023 and 2024. The course is designed for the continuing education of Eurozone state officials, and it follows a curriculum developed in the early 2010s to move transparently towards higher standards of detection dog training in the EU and away from legacy systems<sup>4</sup>. Here, counterintuitively from the perspective of legacy systems, dogs are trained to be both obedient (able to follow commands reliably) and creative (able to solve problems by themselves). Thus, the training system intermixes cooperation with independence, and the behavioristic knowledge with contemporary cognitive sciences (see Arluke et al. 2022, 69). I compiled data from 13 months of participant observation, including field notes, course curriculum, lecture slides, and nine transcribed interviews. Video recordings of working groups' training sessions total 50 hours of supervised coursework. All human participants provided informed consent for observation after a representation of the project and the researcher conducting it, and their consent was ensured separately for video/audio recording. The dogs' expressions of consent varied from playing with me to neutrally accepting my presence. For this article, I delimit the data by providing descriptions from the indication training phase, which constitutes one-third of the revised training system<sup>5</sup>.

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4 By legacy systems, I refer to service dog training programs consisting of now outdated methods and tools, e.g. food deprivation, corporal punishment, or non-scientific training approaches, and their commensuration of animal performance as an indicator for their well-being.

5 I call it the ISC system, abbreviated from the successive order of training phases of Indication, Search, and Conditioning.

During the indication phase, the dogs are taught to “tell” the handler where the target scent precisely is by pointing it out with a frozen gaze.

In my fully anonymised data, the dog handlers who participate in the course with their service dogs are students who aim to extend their professional skillset and knowledge to become canine team instructors, the trainers of dog handlers. Trainers on the course are instructors who have already completed the canine team instructor course with their service dogs and are now competent to train future colleagues themselves. Instructors set practical examples to assess canine teams’ abilities, and they must be able to apply the curriculum knowledge for each canine team creatively. Moreover, what they teach must be demonstrated with their own service dogs – these illustrations are quite helpful since participants are not native English or Dog speakers. Assessors, experienced and renowned instructors, act as supervisors, facilitating learning for both students and instructors. The social structure of the course enables the mixing of the three roles in further co-developing the training system. Also, it should be noted that students may already work as national instructors in their homeland, and assessors’ overall work experience, measured in years, doesn’t always differ much from students or instructors, making the training system rely on the competence of dog-human dyads.

### **Meaning-making games**

The work of national authorities, such as border guards and police officers in the Eurozone, is formalised and follows professional standards. In the context of this study, their work is also affected by recent changes in animal welfare legislation, the emergence of reward-based animal training methods, and advances in understanding the abilities and personalities of other animals. Therefore, the Common Core Curriculum for service dog training was developed by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in 2012 to navigate through the processes and complexities that emerge from the multiplicity of conflicting understandings, values, priorities, and ultimately worlds. The curriculum is also grounded in the recent shift in political projects that attempt to qualify as mutually beneficial and non-exploitative in contexts that entangle animals with security-related conditions. (See Fougner 2024; Frontex Training Unit 2012; van Dooren et al. 2016, 11–12.) As the Common Core Curriculum attempts to unify the standards for detection dog training, it also affects students’ activities in dog training, providing more space for creative decision-making than following rigid processes that aim to achieve expected results.

Here, radical behaviourism<sup>6</sup> plays an essential role in the curriculum for highlighting the quantified measures and objectification of canine team performance. Typically, in dog training, human professionals learn to use positive reinforcement or reward (the ‘what’) as a primary tool to teach service dogs the skills required from them in various operational contexts (see Konno et al. 2025). However, solely adopting somewhat infamous behaviouristic measures in service dog training does not encourage dogs to respond to humans, as it is thought to focus more on the apparatus than on the learner (see Motamedi Fraser 2024, 165). Moreover, the curriculum intermixes quantitative and qualitative measures (the ‘how’ and the ‘when’) and explicitly affirms that the dog should be considered in all legislation as a living creature and thus treated with full respect (see Frontex Training Unit 2012; UNESCO 1978).

The traditional use of dogs as interchangeable objects and production tools, similar to the exclusion of other animals’ (entanglement in) work in sociological research, overshadows dogs’ opportunities and power to make choices for themselves, acquire new knowledge, and learn ways to communicate (their consent) successfully. Their success has been possible only in terms of economy and efficiency, but above all, and with no qualms, these terms assume that the things the dogs do in work are natural (and therefore enjoyable) for them. The dialectic tradition of prescribed work and the actual work with animals raises at least some suspicion when put against the well-known fact that the performance of the animal does not directly indicate their well-being. All in all, the status and success of a service dog have always been unattainable for the vast majority of dogs. (See Adams 2020b, 124; Jones 2024, 57–58; Lainé and Porcher 2023, 52–53; Motamedi Fraser 2024, 142–143.)

Among few sociologists who have been interested in animal work, Arnold Arluke and his colleagues (2022, 131) have concluded that people who do their actual work with and in presence of animals, and among their fluids and excrements, constantly define and redefine their work as meaningful, rewarding, and requiring special skills, therefore transforming and buffering also the degrading elements of work into dignity (see Coulter 2016, 32). As the Common Core Curriculum guides the understanding, interpretation, and application of the dog’s performance in concurrence with their rights, its requirements provide a somewhat similar mixture of objective work tasks and subjective workplace values. Values, then, could be seen to gain their form as

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<sup>6</sup> Radical behaviorism was founded by B. F. Skinner in the 1930s and evolved into applied behavior analysis in the 1950s. To date, its methods are widely adopted to animal training with the attempt to increase the degrees of animals’ freedom to choose, and to define success in animal training as functionally effective training affecting overall animal well-being. (See Fernandez 2024.)

games, depictions of informal worker relations and practices at work, that have independent meaning systems from the formal organisation and its demands (Laaser and Karlsson 2022, 804). As Ruth Yeoman (2014, 160) writes: 'Subjective appropriation depends on one's meaning making capabilities upon the objective dimension of work and is centered in actions that are considered worthy'.

The part of human work that is done with the dog creates premises and openness for the occupational community to understand each dog as an individual with their intrinsic value, and to use this understanding for establishing a relationship and (more compassionate) modes of interacting that are meaningful for each dog with their handler (Arluke et al. 2022, 69). To add, the curriculum explicates the knowledge requirement to build and maintain 'good, strong and trustful relationship with the dog' (Frontex Training Unit 2012, 32). For German sociologist Georg Simmel (1908, 128, 315), trust serves to support the multiplicity of individual relations, as the hypothesis for future behaviour, and as a necessary part in overcoming exceptions and imperfections that may lead to ignorance instead of gaining knowledge of the other member of the dyad. For the dogs' part, making choices for themselves is thought to build trust with the people in their lives (Jones 2024, 40, 57). In this context, then, the choices and the knowledge of the other member of the dyad that is rendered as trust in the dyad's relationship are mediated through the games they play together (Simmel 1908, 106). Many human-animal scholars have been familiarised with the game of agility by individuals called Donna and Cayenne, and also with the way of thinking about how dyads' body-minds entangle together so tightly that one may hear a sound like Velcro ripping when they come apart (see Haraway 2008, 230).

Gadamer (1975, 360) writes about openness to others as 'fundamental for recognising that a person must accept some things that are against them'. This self-knowledge Gadamer refers to involves the application of a new understanding attainable only by a person being liberated from their history (Gadamer 1975, 342). This can be extended from his human-only or human-object relations into lively tapestries of multispecies ties with the help of Vinciane Despret's (2016, 30, 128) depiction of training games between humans and primates: '[e]veryone plays along in the game' (of sociality) that holds role inversions, meaning that, in animal training, we can't always tell who is the trainer at the moment. Additionally, for dog trainers, the most valued dogs are the most motivated to play the game of training (Włodarczyk 2018, 22).

'To move as someone new of whom neither can be alone', writes Haraway (2008, 176). In her line of thinking, humans and dogs are players in dog training, making each other up in the flesh, building up the intensity and balancing with the panic it causes.

Similar to Despret's characterisation, the human play, according to Gadamer, has the special quality of human freedom to 'the intentional self-restraint that goes along with any effort to accomplish *something*, do *something*, play *something*' (Vilhauer 2010, 51). 'Everyone' playing in or being played out by the game also creates premises for 'being-a-participant' inside a community, the game represents a recognisable function for a community to make meanings (Gadamer 1975, 92; Vilhauer 2010, 52). When humans are unified through the curriculum change to play games with service dogs for their professional development as dyads, it is also a game of self-presentation, putting a person dependent on the make-believe goals of the game – goals made to present *something*, e.g. the historical understanding of our relation with dogs, work, and security.

Some explanations of how games differ from play should be given some thought. Johan Huizinga (1938, 39) defines play as a voluntary act that complies with strict rules, but for the joy of playing itself. To add, Roger Caillois (1958, 7–8) defines play also as an uncertain act that is played only if and when and as long as one wishes to, therefore its meaning is to be intrinsically unpredictable. For Huizinga (1938, 228–229), play is not serious, but with similarity to Gadamer's insights, it has a relation with seriousness, or moreover, a tendency to become something serious, like work or competition – something one cannot opt out of whenever they wish (see Otterspeer 2010, 107).

In an attempt to describe how curricular games are played out in practice, I'll draw on the concept of *bricolage*<sup>7</sup>, an activity that develops a creative understanding that embraces individual choice and transcends natural ways of knowledge production and interpretation (see Johnson 2012; Kincheloe 2001; 2005). Bricolage refers to orchestrating a plethora of diverse tasks to self-monitoring and intrapersonal understanding, making bricoleurs respect specific rules without following any strictly pre-determined plan (see Louvel 2013, 670; Steinberg 2015, 113). Thus, bricolage serves here as a creative counterpart to radical behaviourism, highlighting the multispecies aspect of the exchange in my data. As Gadamer (1975, 324) writes about bricoleurs' choices, they create 'a curious tension between a *techne*<sup>8</sup> that can be taught, and one

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7 Etymologically, the French word *bricoleur* refers to a kind of professional do-it-yourself person 'who makes use of the tools available to complete a task' (Kincheloe 2001, 680). Originally, and in contrast to its current definitions in the literature, bricolage has its relation to unsung nonhumans through the historical human practices of hunting, shooting, and riding. As a term, it was used with reference to extraneous movement of '...a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle. And in our time, the *bricoleur* is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman.' (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 11.)

8 Being a first part of Aristotle's practical thought, *techne*, translated also as art, refers to technical/practical knowledge 'of how to produce or make something under the guidance of reason'. Experience is automatically acquired in using *techne*, objective skills in practical applications. (Gadamer 1975, 324; Vilhauer 2010, 143.)

acquired through experience', or a distinction between moral and theoretical knowledge. Aristotle (1831, 6–7) developed this distinction and its human-centred relation to objects through the expression of 'self-knowledge', the *phronesis*<sup>9</sup> to choose the reasonable means to the situation one always already lives (see also Vilhauer 2010, 142–143). Bricolage, as an attempt to understand, interpret, and apply, unfolds in a strategic mix of compliance and self-determination, seeing and doing. The bricolage incarnate is a sort of *techne* and *phronesis*.

Therefore, the bricoleur's relation to the object is not a relation to the dog but to games played with them. This leads to the application's involvement as an integral part of the bricoleurs' hermeneutical process among understanding and interpretation. Curricular knowledge is taught to be applied in situations, using the tools defined in the curriculum, and therefore, it expands intrapersonal understanding to multispecies relations. As bricoleurs learn to thrive on low functional fixedness of resources, makeshift criteria paths, and assemblages following specific set of rules and promising offers to a solution, their double role is then merged along the course into becoming 'artificers' who are acquainted with the causes of the things that are being constructed and thus competent to convey instruction (see Aristotle 1831, 3–4). Additionally, Gadamer (1975, 319) gives a dynamic approach to becoming an artificer by considering the tension between the object and the changing situation in which it must be understood. The applications of bricoleurs and dogs together play in a stage of their shared understanding, reproducing an interpretation that deciphers the individuality of the nonhuman animal. In other words, the dog is not supposed to be like-minded with the human.

## Game-time

Let us proceed to the training activities. In this subsection, I describe two consequent events from the training game of indication at the beginning of the course module. These vignettes represent the guidance on the meaning-making process that course instructors compressed into one rhetorical question: "Are you training obedience or indication?"

Firstly, I'll introduce the reader to an occasion in which the goal is to reward the dog for maintaining a stationary position while staring at the toy. The student, quasi-

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<sup>9</sup> *Phronesis*, being the other part of Aristotle's practical thought is "practical wisdom", a (moral) knowledge how to deliberately act to become good. It challenges the concept of application by adding ambiguity for the design and decision-making. Therefore, *phronesis* can be explained as adaptation to the imperfection of application. (Gadamer 1975, 326; Vilhauer 2010, 143.)

physically connected to the dog with a leash, holds a toy (for playfighting) in their hand while a similar one (for indicating) is placed in front of them. In what follows, the dyad playfights with the toy while the assistant adjusts the target object behind the holdall on the ground. During the play, this catches the dog's interest, leading to glancing at them, and at the same time, the student shares a couple of words with the assistant:

“Aus!” [the German word, meaning ‘let go’, used generally with working dogs], says the student, resulting in the dog spitting the toy out of their mouth and immediately rushing towards the box on the ground. The leash tightens, and the dog gets stuck staring towards the target. The student stands still like a tree, and after some seconds, the dog sits down, looking back and forth between the student and the target. Then, with a clear hand signal, the student sends the dog to indicate the target, and, with a thud, the dog circles around the box and seizes above the target, indicating it closely for the handler with a frozen stare while slowly crouching down with their hindlegs in anticipation. The assistant approaches, leans toward the dog to see what they're doing, and lifts their thumb as a signal for the student to go ahead. We hear a clicker making its metallic click-clack sound and see the dog flying towards the student for more playfighting. (Jirka Vierimaa, Field diary, June, 2023, private collection.)

Even a layperson should be able to distinguish among all that is *something* that the dog does when they freeze to indicate the target. Typically, these exercises make dogs aroused, or “willing,” and agile in their movement, because playtime is tenfold compared to indication. Conveniently for its name and the arousal it creates, playfight has a special relation to, or even contains its own, seriousness. Dogs' interest in play is subjectively valuable for detection dog trainers, even more than their friendliness towards humans (Konno et al. 2025). In training games as world-building activities, students rely on pre-existing meanings of how dogs are to be trained, while also being responsible for generating new meanings for service dog training (see Goffman 1972, 25–26).

Huizinga (1938, 10–11) notes that, biologically, play has been thought of as a need to satisfy and relax oneself, or also a method for learning serious things. It also goes to training with dogs as the playfight ‘[...] binds and releases. It baits. It beguiles, bewitches’ (see Otterspeer 2010, 89). Dogs can thrust at the toy held by the student and bite it with full power, and the student can pull hard on the toy and wriggle while the dog bites it. To note, both of these acts would be severely harmful to players without the toy as a go-between. Playfighting is neither a complete pattern of fighting nor just playing but is somewhat altered in certain respects when it occurs between humans and dogs (Goffman 1986, 41).

With the occasion the excerpt above shows, we may find cues to how the game of training balances between obedience and play. Contrary to the view on the fringes of sociology where animals are seen as beings able to transform strips of fighting behaviour as play (with their conspecifics), the curriculum rationalises play as a dog's predatory tendency harnessed to function as a reward, not a skill practised for survival (see Jerolmack et al. 2024). This resembles Huizinga's (1938, 103–104) view that play's restrictive rules must be acknowledged by the players, thereby underscoring the mediating role of the toy. Play won't fulfil its purpose without players losing themselves in play, and with the student opting out with the verbal command "Aus!" and the tightened leash, the voluntary rhythmic movement and its harmony are broken (see Gadamer 1975, 134).

With the object of interest between the dyad's members changing, the sudden emergence of new rules for the dog is a novel 'key' to perform the tasks proper to the game (see Jerolmack et al. 2024, 581; Vilhauer 2010, 51). As a keying signal, the clicker meta-communicates to the dog that episodic playfighting is play as long as the toy remains accessible, giving them an equal chance to participate (see Goffman 1986, 254). But when there are two similar toys, another on the ground, the players' interests affect and limit what the novel key signals. Moreover, the tightened leash is one of the game's unambiguous keys, functioning as a corrective signal for the dog to do *something* else until the student approves the action the dog is offering. In this way, obedience relies on tradition. It serves as an attempt to find an 'island of stability in the flux of becoming' for the student, as it is supposed to bring back the 'reliable regularity in our relations with nature' (see Pickering 2017, 140).

The kind of freedom of movement in games is fundamentally dynamic yet more limited in one direction than the other (see Vilhauer 2010, 50; Włodarczyk 2018, 22–23). The game itself is something to be learned, and, conducted through obedience, it lacks the preferred in-between movement of players, hindering their actions from becoming mechanical choices where the dog cannot just opt out. Similar to Goffman's (1986, 120) view, it resembles his depiction of the cheater in a card game, not inflicting the game itself to be untenable, but the player. Expanding this to multispecies relations and the curricular activities in question, the sudden turn to obedience gives evidence that reciprocal play is impossible to fake.

To elaborate on the idea that training games occur and oscillate along a continuum between play and obedience, I provide one instance of how the session continued. After a few successful repetitions, the crowd around the dyad speak out their observations on the session's good progression so far. They agree that the dog had stopped rushing

towards the box and is now focusing on the indication as planned. However, the next attempt happened as follows:

The assistant hides the target again, now entirely under the holdall. The dog looks sidelong at the assistant's actions while playing with the student, but stays during and after the play, with and close to the student without rushing towards the box anymore. After the play, the dog sits down in front of the student, maintaining eye contact. After being sent to indicate, the dog now walks to a holdall, circles around it, but this time is unable find the target with sight. They start sniffing and perceive its scent coming from underneath. They move closer to the source of the scent, push their muzzle under the box, first carefully, then suddenly with more force to lift the holdall and snatch the toy in their jaws. (Jirka Vierimaa, Field diary, June, 2023, private collection.)

“And now we got the limit”, someone from the crowd utters – meaning they have just witnessed important information for the forthcoming practices. Following the dog's actions, it resembled what it might be like to read Braille, with the feature of getting physically closer to the heart of the scent and the very end of a chemical message it sends. With the tactile sensation of different surfaces and the olfactory sensation of the turbulence of molecules in the air, the dogs, by sniffing in and out through their nostrils and being in direct contact with surfaces, attempt to get as close to invisible objects as they can.

The seemingly obedient dog made choices with the (see Despret 2016, 18–19). The kind of movement to-and-fro in relation to the goal is essential to play and makes play recreate itself, but it also renders the play of forces. What forced the movement is the association of learning to follow the dog's passions and letting oneself fall off the stable, but treacherous, island of obedience (see Crawford and Brock 2024, 3; Włodarczyk 2018, 25).

## **Bricoleurs**

The dog training sites are so lively that they teach students to refrain from making flimsy expectations about future events, even when everything has just played out smoothly. In an attempt to provide a sense of how students' problem-solving mindset manifests itself in role inversions, I'll introduce the reader to two excerpts from a training session with a 100% success rate. However, from a purely behavioristic standpoint, there would be no problem to solve.

The first excerpt draws a vignette when the dyad arrives at the building's front porch with the invisible small target hidden under the windowsill:

The student stops to stand in front of a door and a window at the corner of the building. They call the dog to sit next to them, who seems to know already what's coming. The dog sits, glancing back and forth between the student's face and the wall in front of them. Then their gaze shifts and keeps passing between the student's face and the palm of their hand, leading the student to lean forward and point out the starting point of the search, and to utter the magic word to begin it. The dog immediately glues their nostrils to the wall, their head and tail circling to zoom in on the target scent. The nose goes under the windowsill, the paws jump on it, and with undulating movement, the dog drops down, and there it is. With an insignificant-looking gesture of withdrawing the muzzle back just a few centimetres, the dog freezes to indicate, and the student clicks to signal the moment of reward. (Jirka Vierimaa, Field diary, December, 2024, private collection.)

The excerpt above resembles a textbook example of indication. It has been acquired with the precision of a clicker as a key that bridges the short delay between the desired goal behaviour and playing. Its (time-saving) effectiveness has recently been studied, demonstrating that even a single key in dyadic communication between dogs and humans can result in faster acquisition with better precision of the indication (Lazarowski et al. 2025). While the behavioural research that uses a marker signal as a *techne* is founded on century-old principles, the communication between two species is arguably broader than one (Pavlovian) conditioned response. But, in this sense, the clicker is used as one foolproof tool in the bricoleurs' toolbox.

With the will to click the clicker, the student knows that their dyadic relation to the target object is constantly saturated with a variety of paths. This unavoidable variety serves as a background for students' attempts to improve their *phronesis*, learning to create new game plans on the fly without strictly predetermined paths (see Gadamer 1975, 326; Louvel 2013, 670; Vilhauer 2010, 143). By adopting the curricular knowledge that governs bricoleurs' activities and choices, students gain a sense of *phronesis*, requiring them to navigate the tension between the object and the situation, the need to improve their intrapersonal understanding by expanding it to include the dog's understanding, and the fluctuation that makes a *techne* somewhat relational. As Gadamer (1975, 400) put it: '[t]he horizon of understanding cannot be limited either by what the writer originally had in mind or by the horizon of the person to whom the text was originally addressed'. In terms of having a horizon for forthcoming events, students' expectations for the dog are blurry when their make-shift paths are repeatedly confirmed without new and unexpected directions.

Moreover, perfect performance references a sort of emptiness, as a caveat to

the comfort zone that may lead to practising unlearning. In this sense, bricoleurs' projects can only become more detailed as they gather resources to create new paths from the various combinations which they try out. (See Baker and Hoon 2024, 7; Louvel 2013, 673; Motamedi Fraser 2024, 164.) Here I find it convenient to cite Serres (1985, 77): '[n]one of these paths [...] run in a straight line, none remains in the same dimension, all twist and curve'. By following Serres's thoughts, the multiple and the overlapping dimensions of the indication behaviour<sup>10</sup> the dogs are learning arm them with several ways to exert their freedom – one that 'teaches [...] a rigour different from that of a wooden automaton' (Serres 1985, 78). Thus, the games dyads play to achieve something represent finding the right paths to tie knots between the objective dimensions, also from the dog's point of view.

The previous excerpt showed a fluent beginning for the game of indication. Moreover, the whole session progressed almost perfectly, but during it, the student said, "Maybe...ehh...one more time..." quite indecisively and then repeated the same task four times. On the fly, it would be impossible to understand the reason behind this remark, wherefore we now need to take a closer look at how the session proceeded. The session is carried out in the front porch of a small building, and in this instance, the small olfactory target object is hidden in a bundle of soft blanket on the terrace floor:

During the session, the dog finds the target easily and every time, as planned, sidelining the assistant who hid the target whilst the dyad played, and indicates the target precisely, with their tail rotating wildly in a figure of eight. Before the first repetition, at the very beginning of the session, the handler guided the dog into a basic position, leading the dog perform it proactively in the second repetition. Still, in the third repetition, the handler, fortuitously, guided the dog to find the target immediately after releasing the toy from their jaws. This evolved into tension between the dyad, with the dog rushing towards the blanket in front of the student and the student struggling to send the dog to indicate the invisible target hidden under the blanket on the floor, only on cue. Eventually, the dog investigates the blanket, touching it only slightly and indicating the target with precision where the scent comes out underneath it. (Jirka Vierimaa, Field diary, December, 2024, private collection.)

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10 The four dimensions representing the cognitive radar and the use of olfactory sense by the dog; Orienting towards and getting as close as possible to the target scent, indicating it immediately after detection, and with long duration without touching the target scent (see Lazarowski et al. 2025).

Being such a lightweight object, the blanket would move even when it is softly touched. Also, the voluntary and proactive acts the dog performed during the session add up to *something* new being transformed into an integral part of their play, making the bricoleur slacken their claim for the dog's obedience. In this regard, this resembles what Haraway frames as becoming available to events when engaging in a relationship (2008, 207). However, the student's uncertainty about whether and how they should revise their plan confronts the constraints of bricolage. If the worst-case scenario occurs, this dog, too, could lick or bite the target object. As bricoleurs may only reproduce new assemblages from rules, patterns, and elements on the fly with extreme difficulty, the student decided to repeat the same moves of the game, resembling a wish to see the dog do *something else* in relation to it.

The product of bricolage is hardly ever replicable, and thus, bricoleurs attempt to combine new assemblages 'with the remains of previous constructions or destructions' (see Johnson 2012, 361; Louvel 2013, 673). By hiding the target scent, students create multispecies learning environments in which the dog must compensate for the lack of vision with their ability to smell while experiencing some difficulty finding the target. In this respect, the student's choice is focused on the individual, with the significance of particularity affecting the dyad rather than diminishing their choices into mechanisms of how dogs supposedly respond as a species (see Motamedi Fraser 2024, 206). However, the crude categorisation of senses is experienced differently by the dog, whose sense of taste is highly dependent upon smell (Rooney and Parr-Cortes 2023, 208, 216). Serres (1985, 153, 175) refers to this kind of denunciation (or of talents) of taste and smell with the metaphor of double tongue, one speaking and the other tasting: '[w]e know how to build machines that talk, we do not know how to build robots that can drink or taste'. Dogs who work in sensory gardens are thought of as beings with a tendency to fall spellbound by hidden scents and, therefore, expected to do *something* differently. As bricoleurs constantly need the dog to 'stray' to find in detail how to improve their game, it seems quite riddling for their problem-solving mindset when the dog knows the rules and plays by them (see Lévi-Strauss 1962, 11).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have described the oscillation between obedience and play in the game of indication to underscore the role of the human as a bricoleur in the training of canine teams. By narrowing the scope of this article after 13 months of participant observation, the analysis provides readers with insights into the nuances of contemporary

service dog training. The indication phase represents the first stage of the revised training system and, for the bricoleurs, serves as a basis for every subsequent practice. In its part, the training process is as hermeneutical for them as it has been for my sociological imagination, the understanding constantly building on new ways to construe the curriculum.

Lévi-Strauss's (1962, 14) depictions of the bricoleur speaking not only with but also through the medium of things allow for the detection dog to act as the bricoleur's companion. The target scent is the medium, and during the indication games, the dogs will most certainly offer 'extraneous movement' in relation to it. The imperfection of interaction I described in two subsections highlighted how these games swirl in a constant flux, even when attempts are made to tame, plan, and formulate them into patterns. With this, the article contributes to discussions of our own meaning-making practices and the retelling of dog's species story by animating the interactive and multispecies aspects of professional development within the demands of formal organisations (see Arluke et al. 2022; Laaser and Karlsson 2022). Following the compelling ideas of Motamedi Fraser's (2024) thought-provoking book, I have touched on this topic within the sociology of work by bringing in the dogs with their own ever-changing interests.

In contrast to the multispecies aspect of bricolage, the typical connotations attached to it tend to be anthropocentric regarding their object relations. It is usually referred to as a DIY activity of artists and craftsmen who build birdhouses from odds and ends. Still, bricolage also has its roots in the study of (higher) education and curriculum studies. Nevertheless, the scholastic effort is done with things only – the curriculum. Therefore, this article may also contribute to the curriculum studies by extending the concept of bricolage into multispecies relations, partly as a return to its source.

From an anthropocentric perspective, dogs are seen as exceptional in the ways humans use them. By the open-ended flexibility of exempla that bolsters the characteristics given for dogs, their possibilities are framed as something wondrous instead of ordinary, with the practicable opportunities provided for them by humans only. Framed as 'whole-animal-biosensors', dogs have gained a special status for their features in many contemporary societies. The thought of them being easy to breed, train, relocate, interpret, and interact with is a big part of their species story, as told in scientific literature and reinforced in work life. What is relevant in the attempt to retell the dog's species story is the possibility of telling it otherwise. Recently, their exceptional role and status as flagship species<sup>11</sup> in detection work have been expanded to, e.g., health

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11 A well-known and easily identifiable species with a particular hotspot and cultural and/or economic value (Malone et al. 2014).

and conservation work in Sub-Saharan African countries with African giant pouched rats' similar features (see Agizew et al. 2024; Szott et al. 2024). Even when taking the well-being and perspectives of animals seriously in a work context is an endeavour to be studied carefully, it helps us merely to curtail anthropocentrism that preoccupies our millennia-old thinking. On their part, flagship species are framed as catalysts for raising human awareness of both their own endangerment and other crises in which they are involved (Malone et al. 2014).

Notwithstanding these dependencies in work, crises, and our complex relations with animals, dogs do still affect the meaning-making processes in professional development and mediate the emergence of *phronesis* to produce safety more humanely in their line of work. With their 'double tongue, one speaking and the other tasting', detection dogs are entangled in work by following their own interests in the process of co-becoming canine teams (Serres 1985). However, the to-and-fro movement in the game of indication, with the arrhythmia caused by obedience and play recreating itself on the go, ensures that bricoleurs may never complete their purpose. Still, they always put something of themselves into it. All in all, our mingling with dogs' senses may shape their own and other species' stories. By becoming more aware of nonhuman animals' interests and parting ways with human exceptionalism, we may yet stand a chance for a more playful animal turn. Our co-becoming with them can serve as a turn towards *homo ludens*, playing again with *something* that sets our sapience back on track to be just for animals.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Note on the use of AI:* I used an AI-assisted writing tool (Grammarly) to refine grammar and improve style, accepting its suggestions where appropriate. The ideas and content, however, are entirely my own.

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