

**Generating Understanding in Action:
Reconstructing Novice Dog Owners' Expectations, Knowledge, and
Empathy through Participatory Design Events**

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Abstract

In recent years, the number of first-time dog owners has risen significantly, while rates of abandonment have also remained high. Existing research suggests that abandonment is not simply a matter of moral failure, but is closely related to unrealistic expectations, knowledge gaps, and weak empathy. This study argues that a more subtle structural rupture is taking place: many owners form a set of pre-experiences before they even start living with a dog, shaped by social media, other people's narratives, and visual culture. These pre-experiences appear to be "one's own understanding," yet they have never been embodied or tested, and therefore often fail in real situations.

To address this rupture, the study adopts constructivism, interpretivism, and posthuman ethics as theoretical foundations, framing human–dog relations as dynamic networks jointly generated by multiple actors in specific contexts. Understanding is not treated as possession of knowledge, but as participation in the world. Building on embodied phenomenology, this study emphasises that knowledge only becomes effective through action, interaction, and situated practice. Thus, the focus is not on "how to deliver the correct knowledge," but on "how understanding can appear in practice."

Methodologically, this research employs Participatory Design and structures the study as three progressive design events: a critical reconstruction of expectations, embodied

experiences of knowledge, and a shift in bodily perspective. Through narrative, re-enactment and mediating artefacts, each event enables participants to re-experience their expectations, observe the limits of knowledge in action, and sense interspecies relations at the bodily level. These design events are not intended to generate solutions, but to create conditions for understanding, enabling novice owners to re-see their role and responsibility within relational networks.

The study contributes an embodied, situated, and relational analytic framework for interspecies co-existence, demonstrating how expectations, knowledge, and empathy interact in practice. This framework provides a foundation for future design interventions that may reduce abandonment risks and support better shared living between humans and dogs.

Keywords: Participatory Design; Companion species; Embodied practice; Co-existence; Human–dog relations

1 Introduction

Why do many first-time dog owners, despite acquiring a great deal of “correct knowledge”, still struggle to live well with their dogs in everyday life?

This paper argues that the issue is not a lack of information, but a more subtle misalignment. Before bringing a dog home, many owners have already formed a set of pre-experiences about “how to live with a dog”. However, these pre-experiences are often shaped by social media, other people’s narratives, and visual culture rather than by embodied practice. They create a sense of confidence, yet they frequently fail in real-life situations, leading to emotional frustration and, in some cases, the reluctant decision to give the dog away.

In recent years, the number of pets has continued to rise, while abandonment rates have remained high (RSPCA Cymru, 2025). This suggests that the problem is not simply individual moral failure, but is closely related to structural factors within human–dog relationships. Schneider and Bräuer (2024) propose that human–dog relationships are constituted by three interrelated elements: expectations, knowledge, and empathy. This framework provides the analytical foundation for this paper.

From the perspective of expectations, existing research has already demonstrated a significant association between unrealistic expectations and the risk of rehoming or abandonment (Powell et al., 2022). Holland et al. (2022) further indicate that when the initial motivations for getting a dog (such as emotional support, companionship, or increased physical activity) cannot be fulfilled in real life, owner satisfaction decreases and abandonment risks rise. Many owners enter dog ownership “with a set of expectations already formed”, and when reality deviates from this script, disappointment and rehoming become more likely.

In terms of knowledge, new owners are often underprepared. Information is mostly obtained from websites, forums, and friends or family. Nearly half of owners did not actively search for information before getting their previous dog (Mead et al., 2023), which can create unexpected challenges for shared living. Anderson et al. (2024) argue that more comprehensive knowledge of care, behaviour, and costs is positively associated with more realistic expectations. A lack of knowledge can lead to inappropriate owner behaviour (such as inconsistent training), which in turn results in behavioural problems in dogs—the primary cause of abandonment (Philpotts et al., 2024).

Empathy also plays a crucial role. Empathy enables deeper emotional connection and effective communication between humans and dogs. When empathy is weak, relational bonds become fragile (Schneider & Bräuer, 2024).

This paper does not treat these findings as three isolated variables, but proposes a different analytical lens: pre-experiences appear to be “one’s own lived understanding”, yet they are not tested through real situations and embodied practice. Owners “do” many actions, but lack situational sensitivity, rhythm negotiation, and emotional regulation, which leads to relational breakdown. Understanding is not the possession of knowledge, but something that is gradually generated through interaction in time, space, and bodies. Participatory Design offers a way for such understanding to emerge: through embodied activities, owners can become aware of where expectations come from, reorganise their knowledge, and consider how to co-exist more effectively with their dogs in specific situations.

Based on this perspective, the paper asks two research questions:

- 1. How do expectations, knowledge, and empathy intertwine and generate tension in the everyday practices of first-time dog owners?*
- 2. How can Participatory Design function as embodied reflection to support expectation adjustment and shared living, thereby reducing abandonment risks?*

The aim of the study is to propose an embodied, situated, and relational analytical framework that explains how expectations, knowledge, and empathy interact in the practice of living together, and to provide insights for future design interventions.

2 Philosophical Foundations

This study seeks to address a structural problem: the systemic disconnection between abstract knowledge and real embodied experience. In order to understand how such ruptures are produced, and to design practice in response, it is necessary to first clarify the philosophical foundations of the research. The study adopts a constructivist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology, and a posthuman ethical stance. Together, these form the logical starting point for the research perspective, the formulation of the problem, and the selection of methods.

2.1 Ontological Position: Relations as the Mode of World-Making

This research adopts a constructivist ontology. Constructivism holds that reality is constructed through human perception and reinforced through interactions with others and with things (Denscombe, 2009). In other words, the world does not pre-exist as a fixed objective entity; it is generated and sustained through relations. Traditional approaches to dog training and knowledge transmission often treat humans and dogs as two separate entities and reduce the problem to “how humans acquire knowledge” or “how humans educate their dogs”. This viewpoint reflects a human-centred dualism that overlooks the complexity of interspecies co-existence and fails to explain why “knowing” does not necessarily translate into “doing”. Haraway’s notion of “companion species” argues that humans and animals are not separate entities, but continuously shape and constitute each other through living together (Haraway, 2003).

Latour's Actor–Network Theory (ANT) further reinforces this understanding: action does not originate from a single subject, but is co-produced by networks of humans, animals, spaces, objects, rules, and emotions. Failure is not the failure of an individual, but the result of a rupture in the network. Seen from this perspective, my own experience of having to rehome my first dog was shaped by multiple factors: the dog's separation anxiety, neighbours' low tolerance, poor sound insulation, ineffective online advice, our lack of experience, and expectations shaped by social media. All of these formed a network. When the network could no longer sustain the relationship, stepping back became the only possible choice.

This demonstrates that living with a dog is not a simple individual behaviour, nor is it something that can be achieved through the efforts of the owner alone. It requires the coordination of a situated network. This is the core of the ontological stance in this research. The question I seek to address is not “how can owners better understand dogs?”, but “how can humans and dogs live well together?”

Embodied phenomenology extends this stance. Merleau-Ponty emphasises that knowledge is not the result of abstract reasoning, but is generated through the body's participation in the world. We understand not only through thinking, but through our bodies. This research therefore focuses on the production of knowledge as embodied: being present, acting, perceiving, rather than merely reading texts or watching videos. Participatory Design is adopted precisely because it supports this mode of inquiry.

2.2 Epistemological Position: Interpretivism

This research adopts an interpretivist epistemology. Interpretivism assumes that social reality is subjective, constructed and interpreted by individuals. It is a social creation, formed in the mind and reinforced through interaction between people (Denscombe, 2009). This means that understanding is not the discovery of a fixed truth, but an ongoing process of negotiation, adjustment, and emergence.

Building on interpretivism, the study further draws on Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger argues that understanding is not a cognitive activity, but a mode of being (Heidegger, 1962). We always live within understanding, bringing with us prior experiences that shape how we interpret the world. This resembles the situation of first-time dog owners: the process of acquiring knowledge leads to certain pre-understandings, and when they enter real situations with these preconceptions, they may overlook actual conditions, resulting in unmet expectations.

The central dilemma of dog ownership is this: owners "know", but cannot act in specific situations. From the perspective of interpretivism and hermeneutic phenomenology, knowledge that remains cognitive cannot be directly converted into embodied action. Living with a dog is not a predefined template; inevitably, owners enter the relationship with a pre-formed way of doing things and must continuously adjust and learn through encounters. Interpretivism does not require eliminating bias; rather, it asks us to reflect on how bias shapes understanding (Holmes, 2020). My research provides a space for such reflection for first-time dog owners.

Interpretivism assumes that understanding is uncertain. Denscombe (2009) notes that interpretive explanations are often messy rather than tidy; they may be open-ended rather than complete. In my research, every owner–dog pair may face different issues. This directly implies that the research approach must be qualitative and negotiated. The aim is to work with new owners to observe how they interpret their experiences, identify relational influences, and adjust their behaviour as new insights emerge.

Interpretivism is sometimes criticised for lacking rigour. Yet rigorous interpretivist research requires systematic and disciplined methods, even if research questions are allowed to emerge during the process (Denscombe, 2009). Participatory Design does not deliver knowledge, but creates conditions for understanding to emerge in embodied ways. It focuses on process rather than solutions: when owners re-experience their expectations, observe the limits of knowledge, and sense the

rhythms of the dog, understanding is not handed over but appears through action. For this study, interpretivism is essential because it provides a theoretical foundation for asking how understanding is generated.

2.3 Values: Posthumanism

This research adopts a posthuman ethical stance. Within this study, dogs are not treated as objects that need to be trained, nor are first-time owners seen as people who have “not done well enough” and need to be educated. The focus is on how two different species can co-create better lives in real contexts. Posthuman ethics reminds us that life is not controlled unilaterally by humans, but is jointly generated by multiple actors. Therefore, my value position is gentle and non-judgemental: it does not demand perfection, nor prescribe a single method, but acknowledges the complexity of everyday life and recognises that both humans and dogs are constantly understanding and adjusting to one another.

Haraway’s (2003) notion of “companion species” emphasises that humans and animals do not exist as separate entities, but are co-generated through relationships. This stance shapes the aim of my research: it is not to offer solutions, but to provide a more generous perspective, enabling first-time owners to see that difficulties are not personal failures, but a natural part of relational life. This requires that Participatory Design creates a safe and non-judgemental space—one that encourages honest sharing and embodied reflection, and that maximises participants’ trust in the research process.

3 Research Positionality and Reflexivity

This section critically examines the researcher’s positionality. The researcher is not a neutral observer, but an actor within the research setting (Holmes, 2020). Positionality

is not a bias, but a condition of research: it shapes what I can see, what I overlook, and why certain interpretations are produced. This section therefore explores how my positionality influences the research, and how reflexivity becomes a methodological guarantee.

3.1 Fluid Identities: Insider and Outsider

In qualitative research centred on human–nonhuman relationships, reducing the researcher’s identity to either “insider” or “outsider” is an oversimplification. It ignores the contextual fluidity and dynamic negotiation of identity (Holmes, 2020). Bukamal (2022) introduces the notion of “insider–outsider ambivalence”, emphasising that a researcher may hold both proximity and distance at different moments. This concept helps me reflect on my own positionality.

In some respects, participants may view me as an insider. I have been a first-time dog owner who experienced frustration, and I have personally lived through the rupture between abstract knowledge and embodied experience. Such bodily and emotional experience enables me to develop immediate empathy with participants and to sense the pain points of structural disconnection. This insider position helps create trust and safety quickly, allowing participants to enter conversations more naturally and share their experiences of living with dogs. This supports the acquisition of key data.

At the same time, I am from another country, with a different cultural background and life history. This naturally gives me an outsider position. I am also a researcher, equipped with theoretical tools and analytical distance. It is precisely this situational shifting of roles that allows me to be emotionally present during interviews while remaining critically reflective during analysis. As Holmes (2020) and Yip (2024) remind us, researchers are never transparent. Our worldviews, experiences, and values participate in the construction of data. I therefore acknowledge that the “I” within the research is one of its conditions. At times I may be an insider, at others an outsider.

This fluidity of identity runs throughout the study.

3.2 Power, Risk and Ethics

Emotional involvement brings understanding, but it also brings risk. Empathy arising from shared experiences is one pathway into dialogue, yet my own strong empathetic capacity requires caution during interviews to avoid over-identification. Excessive empathy may lead me to interpret phenomena prematurely on behalf of participants. An outsider perspective during data analysis helps me step back from emotional resonance and apply theoretical tools to explain the structural mechanisms behind “practical failure”. At the same time, I must remain alert to the possibility that the researcher’s theoretical language may overshadow participants’ narratives (Yip, 2024). I have previously been a participant in another researcher’s study, and the researcher’s empathetic interpretation of my interview content made me uncomfortable, giving me an immediate sense of being “defined”. This experience reminds me to be attentive to the same risk in my own research.

To balance this risk, I adopt two strategies. The first is empathetic neutrality: allowing emotions to be present, but not letting them dominate the analysis (Holmes, 2020). The second is member checking: returning part of the interpretive authority to participants, to confirm whether my interpretations accurately reflect their experiences. This approach is not in pursuit of objectivity, but in pursuit of ethics. In this research, the task of the researcher is not to define participants, but to co-generate understanding with them.

3.3 Reflexive Journaling as Method

Within an interpretivist framework, reflexivity is not a personal habit, but a methodological tool essential for ensuring the trustworthiness of interpretivist research (Holmes, 2020). Its core function is to transform the researcher’s biases and

emotions into analytical resources. This requires me not only to document emotions and processes, but also decisions and the reasoning behind them.

Throughout the research, I will maintain a continuous practice of reflexive writing to build an audit trail (Denscombe, 2010) that demonstrates the rigour of the research. I will focus in particular on the following questions:

- *Have I assumed a particular interpretation?*
- *Have I unintentionally taken on the role of “expert”?*
- *Has my theoretical framework obscured certain phenomena?*

I will maintain ongoing records of observations, analyses, and reasoning in the field, and I will continually examine my emotions and preconceptions. This transparency enables the reader to trace how interpretations are developed. Throughout the study, I will continually identify and reflect on my own biases.

4 From Philosophy to Practice: Participatory Design as a Research Method

The methodology of this study emerges as a necessary extension of its philosophical stance. Constructivism, relational ontology, interpretivism, and embodied phenomenology all point to a central proposition: the world does not pre-exist as a given, but is generated through relations. Participatory Design (PD) is therefore not only a method built upon these premises, but also a way of understanding the world: meaning appears through action, rather than being determined in advance.

4.1 Participatory Design

Participatory Design did not originally aim to collect opinions; rather, it sought to create a shared practice in which different actors can participate in the generation of meaning (Spinuzzi, 2005). This study approaches human–dog challenges as relational

problems within an actor–network. PD emphasises that participants are co-designers (Dindler et al., 2020), which aligns with relational ontology’s view that knowledge and relationships are jointly generated through action (becoming-with). PD provides a meta-design framework, not to produce a final solution, but to design environments and tools that allow first-time owners and researchers to reconstruct their understanding of relationships together.

Interpretivism requires that knowledge is situated and negotiated. PD’s emphasis on co-production returns the authority of knowledge generation to participants, allowing meaning to emerge through embodied interaction rather than through one-directional instruction. This enhances the credibility of the research. PD’s practice orientation resonates with embodied phenomenology’s emphasis on “learning by doing”. At the same time, the decentralisation of PD helps reduce researcher authority, which is consistent with the posthuman ethical stance of this study.

4.2 Embodied Practice: Understanding Through Interaction

The PD activities in this research are organised as a series of Design Events. A design event is not the activity itself, but a space where understanding can occur. These events are intentionally designed to be embodied, situated, and relational: participants discover meaning through action rather than discussing it beforehand. For example, in Event I, we work with first-time owners to identify moments of frustration: the dog refuses to move, the leash tightens, or neighbours complain about noise. These are not abstract problems, but experiences composed of bodies, rhythms, spaces, and social rules. Actors are not stable individuals, but nodes within a network: the dog, family members, the doorbell, neighbours’ routines, advice from social media, weather, furniture arrangement—all participate in generating the relationship. The issue is not a lack of knowledge, but knowledge that lacks contextualisation and embodiment. PD does not provide answers; it allows understanding to emerge within situations.

4.3 Designing the Research Through the Structure of Expectations–Knowledge–Empathy

Schneider and Bräuer (2024) propose the “Expectations–Knowledge–Empathy” (E–K–E) framework to understand three key dimensions of human–dog relationships. Although this framework is not introduced by this study, it provides a useful structural entry point. Instead of adopting it as a theoretical model, the framework is translated into a design structure that enables understanding to emerge through practice. Each dimension therefore becomes the thematic focus of one design event:

1. Event I: Critical Reconstruction of Expectations
identifying where expectations come from, how they are formed, and where they conflict with lived experience.
2. Event II: Embodied Experience of Knowledge
transforming abstract rules into bodily rhythms, such as leash tension, spatial distance, pauses, and pace.
3. Event III: Change of Bodily Perspective
experiencing how a dog encounters the world through images, space, and movement.

Although the three events focus on different aspects, they share three core features. First, narrative and identification: participants tell stories of failure, frustration, repair, and effort, and name the elements involved. Second, embodied re-enactment: the body becomes a tool for sensing tension, resistance, hesitation, and rhythm. Third, making and mediating artefacts—such as network diagrams, route maps, and video fragments—carry understanding into the next event. These strands are interdependent and develop gradually, converging when understanding moves from cognition into the body, and from abstraction into everyday life.

This pattern resonates with experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984) argues that learning does not begin with knowledge, but with experience, and develops through a

spiral of “concrete experience–reflection–conceptualisation–experimentation”.

Learning is not a linear accumulation, but a continual return to situations, a re-adjustment of understanding, and the generation of new attempts. Concrete experience provides material; reflection organises discrepancies and tensions; conceptualisation offers structure; experimentation tests understanding in new situations. The cycle has no endpoint—it is a continuous process through which knowledge is generated.

Morris (2020) extends this model by emphasising situational richness and practical enactment. Experience is not an abstract event, but a multi-layered condition involving space, bodies, emotions, materials, and rhythms. Learning is not the acquisition of “facts”, but participation in situations. Knowledge becomes effective in practice, especially in moments of uncertainty, disagreement, and failure. The core of learning is therefore not “solving problems”, but continuously re-understanding how relationships are constituted, disrupted, and repaired.

The design events in this study align closely with this logic: experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and action do not occur sequentially, but are interwoven. Each event is both a site of experience and a site of reflection: participants tell stories, draw network diagrams, re-enact bodily movements, and engage in dialogue. Concepts do not precede action; they emerge through action. When participants feel the tension of the leash, notice unease during pauses, or see perspectives they had not previously perceived through first-person video, understanding appears in situ, rather than being formed in the abstract. Experimentation occurs when participants revisit the tensions in their relationships. These are not “technical exercises”, but relational negotiations. Participants do not learn “correct behaviour”, but develop new ways of sensing and acting in their own lives.

In this process, small conflicts can become critical resources. Frustration and misalignment are not obstacles, but entry points. It is in these cracks that reflection

occurs, experience is reorganised, and concepts are generated. The design events provide generative conditions that allow these cycles to happen, to be seen, and to be discussed. Understanding is not delivered, but emerges in relation. PD does not aim to solve problems, but to protect the possibility of emergence, so that shared living can be sensed, negotiated, and continually re-created.

5 Ensuring Research Quality

This section discusses how the study understands “research quality” and how credibility, transferability, bias, and ethics are addressed within an interpretivist epistemology and posthuman ethics.

5.1 Credibility and Reliability

In interpretivist research that seeks contextual knowledge, credibility and reliability are not achieved by eliminating subjectivity, but by making the researcher’s positionality transparent. The researcher cannot be a neutral observer, and I do not pretend to be one. Instead, I will present my own moments of disruption, confusion, and hesitation within the design events, and explain why I made particular decisions. This is not a weakness, but a form of academic rigour: it enables readers to understand where my interpretations come from rather than treating them as “correct answers”.

To enhance credibility, I will use several strategies:

- Transparency of process: including recruitment, activity design, data handling, and decision logic.
- Member checking: inviting participants to confirm whether my interpretations reflect their experience.
- Retention of materials and interpretive paths: allowing readers to trace how interpretations were built.

These practices are not intended to prove objectivity, but to show how interpretive knowledge is generated.

5.2 Transferability

This study focuses on a specific context: first-time dog owners, a particular cultural environment, embodied practice, and interspecies relationships. The aim is not to produce universal models, but to offer deep understanding of how structural ruptures are generated in particular contexts. To achieve this, I will use thick description (Geertz), providing detailed accounts of Design Events, including:

- physical space and rhythms
- participant backgrounds and emotions
- behaviours, sounds, bodily postures
- unexpected events and disruptions
- the role of artefacts and mediating tools

Thick description is not an attempt to reconstruct “what really happened”, but to reveal the conditions through which understanding emerges. This enables readers to judge whether insights may apply to other contexts. Transferability is not generalisation, but provision of a referential framework.

5.3 Bias and Standpoint

In interpretivism, bias is not a flaw but a resource for knowledge generation. However, bias must be monitored. Through reflexive journaling I will track my own preconceptions, particularly my desire for certainty. Whenever I form an interpretation, I will ask “Does this interpretation simply reflect my need for a definite answer?” My standpoint includes: compassion for first-time dog owners, emotional concern for dogs and sensitivity to failure and vulnerability.

These help me enter the field, but may also obscure other perspectives. Therefore, in analysis I will compare narratives across participants, actively seek fragments that do not align with my standpoint and make uncertainty visible rather than eliminating it in writing. Reflexivity is not self-exposure; it is a way of making the path of knowledge generation visible.

5.4 Ethics

This study adopts a posthuman ethical stance, which means ethical concerns include both human participants and companion animals:

- no judgement of participants' choices
- no treatment of dogs as experimental materials
- prioritising safety and emotional wellbeing
- respect for privacy and anonymity
- freedom to withdraw from activities at any time

Design events do not require dogs to be present, to avoid potential stress. The dog's perspective is presented through mediating artefacts, such as video, environmental sounds, leash tension, and movement trajectories. This is not a substitute for the dog, but a simplified way to re-sense bodily rhythms and relational constraints. Ethics is not a procedural checklist, but a mode of research: a gentle, non-judgemental space where neither humans nor dogs are harmed.

Conclusion

This study began with a seemingly simple question: why do we often know what we “should” do, yet still feel powerless in the practice of living with a dog? The analysis suggests that the issue is not a lack of knowledge, but a structural rupture: expectations across species, abstract knowledge, and embodied practice do not fully

connect. Knowledge exists, but does not enter the body, does not transform into action, and does not continue to operate within relationships.

To address this rupture, the study established a philosophical stance that understands the world not as something that pre-exists, but as something generated through relations. Understanding is not the result of abstract reasoning, but an experience of being-in-the-world. From this perspective, daily life with a dog is not a matter of behavioural correction or technical execution, but a matter of relational generation: humans, dogs, spaces, objects, rules, and emotions together constitute the network of everyday practice.

Participatory Design (PD) was adopted not because it produces solutions, but because it creates the conditions for understanding to emerge. Through a series of design events, participants re-experience their expectations, observe how knowledge fails in practice, and sense bodily rhythms and emotional tensions. Minor misalignments become entry points for understanding; failure and confusion are no longer hidden, but become sources of insight. Participants cease to be “failed dog owners” and instead become actors within a complex relational network.

This shift is the beginning of empathy: not identification with the other, but seeing how conditions living together are made. In this sense, understanding is a relational practice. Through embodied action, narrative and mediating artefacts, the study seeks to reopen space for interspecies relationships and make shared living possible.

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