This is something Marian and I wrote for a class in 1992 or 93

WHY WE BELIEVE IN BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS OR OPERANT CONDITIONING
by Bob and Marian Bailey

BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS is an academic term for the scientific study and changing of behavior using both operant and respondent conditioning. We will use the more popular term, OPERANT CONDITIONING, rather than the broader and less common BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS. Operant conditioning is NOT a theory; it is a scientific, naturalistic account of how behavior changes.

OPERANT CONDITIONING WORKS FOR US - The primary reason we believe in and use behavior analysis is empirical - IT WORKS. It has worked for both of us for a combined total of more than 100 years of shaping the behavior of more than 15,000 animals representing over 140 different species – from cockroaches to killer whales. We have controlled animals over great distances; e.g., seagulls and dolphins over many miles, dogs and cats over hundreds of yards. We have trained using sophisticated electronic equipment; e.g., lasers, radar, global positioning systems (GPS). But we have also trained wild raccoons simply by the timely throwing of pieces of baloney sandwich. We have never experienced animals being “bored,” or “willful.” We have never experienced a failure of the principles of operant conditioning, those principles discovered by B. F. Skinner in his laboratory.

IT WORKS FOR OTHERS – Where operant conditioning has been effectively used, it has worked. That includes not only training animals and non-verbal humans, but also changing complex human behavior – verbal behavior, education, business, safety, mental health, sports training, the arts, and the list goes on and on. We have gathered on videotape the operant conditioning experiences of hundreds of scientists of many stripes - physicists, chemists, zoologists, biologists, physiologists, and even “cognitive” psychologists. We have also interviewed teachers, bankers, business people, engineers, manufacturers, and others. Not once did any of them report that operant conditioning principles failed them. They did find that they sometimes failed to correctly or appropriately apply the principles. In a complex behavioral program, such errors are understandable.

NON-REASONS FOR BELIEF - We do not consider B. F. Skinner, nor any other person, infallible. Our reliance on operant conditioning does not depend on blind loyalty or on the commandments of others. Our belief is not based on our speculations, nor the speculations of others. Our belief is not based on anecdotal evidence, though we find significant casual observations (our own and others) very interesting, and sometimes useful.

OPERANT CONDITIONING IS BASED ON SCIENCE - We are biased. We believe that behavior is determined. While behavior and its causes may be very complex, they are not mystical or beyond understanding. Neither humans nor animals are machines. Humans and animals make decisions based on past experience and their internal and external stimuli. We believe in data, and the objective and cautious data analysis and interpretation of those data. Our adherence to the scientific method does not preclude us from speculating, nor from acting on our speculations. However, when we speculate and we make a mistake, we are prepared to pay the price of wrong guesses, and not resort to rationalizations to explain our failure. Also, our application of science and technology is not perfect. Human error is always a factor in any application or endeavor.

WE ARE CONFIDENT OF THE POWER OF OPERANT CONDITIONING – Some might confuse our confidence in our technology with an attitude of smugness. We do not feel that we are superior to others. We believe we are using the best technology to shape behavior. When we teach, we teach confidence in operant conditioning. We do not use any other system for changing behavior. We do not teach any other system for changing behavior.

WE WILL USE THE SYSTEM SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN BEST TO CHANGE BEHAVIOR - Operant conditioning has been scientifically tested and demonstrated to work. We will change to another system for altering behavior when a better system is found. We feel no special loyalty towards operant conditioning. The new system for changing behavior must be proven scientifically that it is faster, more precise, and at least as safe for the practitioner and the subject.

WHY DO SOME TRAINERS HAVE PROBLEMS WITH OPERANT CONDITIONING? All technologies have limits. Any method for changing behavior is subject to human error. An operant conditioning practitioner must know the limits and the powers of the technology. He or she must be proficient in operant conditioning knowledge and mechanical skills. Operant conditioning must be used exclusively, and not as “just another tool.”

WHY DOESN’T EVERYONE USE OPERANT CONDITIONING? We don’t know. We can only speculate. Perhaps many practitioners are content with the results of their training methods. Maybe there is a feeling of loyalty, either towards their methods, or towards some person or an idea. Some say operant conditioning is too strong; that it is “mind control.” Others say it is too “soft;” that there is not sufficient behavioral control. Still others bring up negative and obscure ethical issues. None of these judgments are correct, in our view. Perhaps an individual should not judge until he or she has mastered and used operant conditioning skills.