The animal’s right

For many years, Harry Burns Hutchins Professor of Law Joseph Vining has invited students, if they choose, to hold class meetings in his home. The practice, which Michigan Law has formalized into scheduled course offerings (see adjoining box), brings both a refreshing setting and a special energy to class meetings. It also offers insight into the subject matter that may not be available elsewhere, as Vining’s wife Alice Williams Vining relates in this vignette about an Animal Law seminar held in their living room. Anyone who knows Vining, including students and colleagues, also knew his border terrier, Puck, who becomes Vining’s “co-teacher” here. Puck died last March.

On Wednesday afternoons Joe teaches at home and serves tea at the break. Thirteen to 15 law students, joined from time to time by a prominent visitor from the outside world, sit in a circle in our living room and discuss the seminar issue of the day. Corporate crime one year, human experimentation another, this year animal law. Sometimes when it’s cold there’s a fire in the fireplace. Always the tea is served in porcelain cups and saucers, never mugs, and is accompanied by triangles of cinnamon toast, slices of buttered pound cake, or cucumber sandwiches with the crusts off.

Joe’s faithful Puck, now stone deaf and a grizzled 12 years old, greets each law student at the door with wriggling joy bordering on ecstasy. “Where have you been, my best friend you, these many long days since last week?” his fully-packed body language says. In turn the students reward him with pats and tummy rubs and all over body massages; none in this group, thank goodness, is allergic to dogs. Probably they miss their own.

When he’s satisfied with the quorum, Puck’s work is done; he curls up in the center of the living room rug, a furry circle within a circle. Since Joe has put Puck’s basket of tennis balls out of reach, what else can he do but wait while these visitors sit around for two hours, writing or moving their mouths, until the professor, alpha-person in his pack, stands up to signal that it’s time to go.

Last week in mid-seminar, something was amiss, and Puck knew it. He got to his feet, quivering with certainty, desperate to interrupt and convey his message. “I can smell it. My best ball is missing, and now I know where it is.” He stared beseechingly at the professor, who made no eye contact and kept on working his mouth.

Without a glance at the cause of the interruption, Joe pushed his little dog away with his toe, on the assumption that this example of animal communication was about a full bladder at a most inconvenient moment. “Down,” shouted his peremptory hand signal, “and stay.” Palm forward, for emphasis.

Puck was intent on overriding the command, like a seeing-eye dog who knows when not to cross the road. Pointing like a bird dog, he took his stand by the desk with his nose to the floor, but danced from one foot to another. His toenails clicked as predictably as a heartbeat.

The professor continued what he was saying, and tried vainly to ignore the tap dance by talking louder—“In this case, do you think it’s the person speaking in court or really the companion animal who has standing?”—but the concentration in the room had been broken.

Fifteen minds and 15 pairs of eyes were fixed elsewhere. Professor Vining gave in, got to his feet, then knelt beside the desk, and looked under it—while continuing the Socratic dialogue. He was as non-plussed as the legendary day in 1969 when, as the story goes, he kept on lecturing and calling on students in a Criminal Law class of 100 while pursuing and finally picking up a very frightened mouse in his handkerchief and gently setting it free outside. Good lawyers must ignore distractions.

“Fetch it. Puleeze,” tapped four little paws in staccato tattoo.

“Is there any legal precedent that should apply in the court’s considerations here? Ms. Parker, your paper alludes to this. What do you think?” Vining continued, stretching out full length to peer into the cobwebs under the desk.
Classes go to professors’ homes

This academic year, Michigan’s Law professors are offering a host of mini-seminars being taught at their homes. Topics range from the New Supreme Court to China and Constitutionalism to Baseball and Law and Chamber Music.

Here is the list of classes and their teachers as available in late summer but subject to change:

Full 2007-08 Academic Year

- Race, Poverty & Access to Justice, Clinical Professor Alicia Alvarez and Clinical Assistant Professor Vivek S. Sankaran, ’01
- Baseball and Law, Clinical Assistant Professors Edward R. Becker and Thomas H. Seymour
- Food Issues & The Law, Kirkland & Ellis Professor of Law Omri Ben-Shahar
- Civil Justice, Professor Steven P. Croley
- Chamber Music, Professor Edward A. Parson and Assistant Professor Jill R. Horwitz
- International Law and the Middle East Conflict, Professor Steven R. Ratner
- Law and Popular Literature, Assistant Professor Gil Seinfeld

Fall term only

- Gay Marriage, James E. and Sarah A. Degan Professor of Law James C. Hathaway
- Women in Prison, Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs/Clinical Professor Bridget M. McCormack
- The New Supreme Court, Francis A. Allen Collegiate Professor of Law Christina B. Whitman, ’74

Winter term only

- China and Constitutionalism, Assistant Professor Nicholas C. Howson
- Religious Liberty and Cultural Wars, Yale Kamisar Collegiate Professor of Law Douglas Laycock
- Law, Medicine & Ethics, Assistant Professor John A.E. Pottow (with Assistant Professor Jagsi Reshma of the U-M Medical School)