



Improving riding instruction through better teaching techniques. Emphasis on group riding and on the learning styles of different levels and ages.

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Teaching techniques are a collection of instructional methods and ideas to help enhance riding lessons. Each instructor has their own teaching style and areas of strength. Regardless of the level of the class, or private versus group lessons; each instructor essentially uses a similar format to effectively communicate the concept of the lesson.

Due to individuality of horses and people, the group dynamics are unpredictable. Since riding lessons are often in a group setting, there are many entities and interactions that are occurring simultaneously and clear communication is the key to being effective in your lessons. There are different reasons why people ride and customers will seek out the best match for their needs.

When choosing an instructor, customers may focus on the experience, teaching and horsemanship ability of the instructor along with their people and risk management skills. Instructors are role models who play an essential part in helping riders achieve their goals. In the role as a mentor, instructors promote good safety practices, allow for skill development, and instill confidence to encourage and engage their riders. This positive experience helps reinforce concepts and material, to give all riders a good foundation and promote effective learning.

COMMUNICATION

Having several horse and rider combinations within a group setting plus an instructor means there are a lot of different communication pathways to consider. Communication is a two way street. It involves the sender relaying the information, and then the acceptance or understanding from the receiver.

Consider a group riding lesson with 4 students, 4 horses and an instructor. There are several communication pathways open: the individual teams of horse and rider, the instructor and each rider, the instructor with each horse, and the group collectively. That means there are lots of things to keep an eye on and keep straight!

The Instructor

The role of the instructor is very important as they are essentially riding the horse through the student. They help facilitate the partnership between the rider and horse. Timing is very important in teaching since you must be ahead of not only the rider, but the horse too. The challenge comes from working with both people and horses, and instructing is more of an art than science. A good instructor displays kindness and empathy, and can read their audience of both students and horses.

Instructors also play a huge role in training and management, by offering consistency in fitness and training. They also manage the horse through the rider, for example, finishing the lesson on a positive note, which helps improve both the rider's and horse's confidence. Proper management is a key to the longevity of horses, and a happy horse is a healthy horse.

The Rider

Execution of timing and the ability to feel the horse's subtle responses are keys to achieving

successful communication. What, when and how you ask your horse to do will affect the outcome. Whether under the guidance of an instructor or not, the horse will only go as well as they are being ridden.

Your body is a tool to communicate with the horse, and how you use it affects the response you receive. Since horses are non-verbal animals, we use some of our primary aids (voice, hands, legs and seat) to send our message out, and it is essential to remember the sensitivity of horses.

The Horse

Horses may not speak to us in words, but they use body language very well. We read the horse to gain insight into their mood and personality.

It is also important to keep the horse's natural instincts in mind. By nature, horses are creatures of flight, and if frightened their first defense is to flee. If they cannot get away, they will fight, which they can do by striking, kicking, biting, or anything else in order to protect themselves. The age of a horse can also influence their behavior, since young horses do not have the mental capacity, attention span, and maturity that can develop with age. Personality traits also can be a factor; just like every human is different, so is every horse. Being able to adapt to each different horse is important, since each situation is unique.

PROGRAMS

Every skill program requires justification, and often riding programs require intensive capital and resources to initiate and maintain them. People ride for a variety of reasons and understanding needs helps with short and long term goal setting.

Physical

Riding is excellent physical exercise, which combines both aerobic and anaerobic work outs. It promotes large muscle motor coordination, develops balance and coordination and requires body awareness, by the rider being able to isolate individual muscles at will. When a rider gains enough skill, they are able to use the primary aids of seat, legs and hands independently. It is good for core strengthening and the leg, abdominal, shoulder and back muscles are highly engaged.

Mental

As a rider progresses, there are always questions and problems and even the most experienced rider can always learn something new. It helps with develop problem solving capabilities and keeps your brain exercised.

Emotional and Social

Riding offers support from interaction amongst horses and other people. Many people find companionship in their horses, and enjoy spending time with other like minded people.

LEARNING

People learn in different ways. There are visual, auditory and kinaesthetic/tactile learners. When each lesson encompasses each type of learning every student will be more apt to learning and progression.

Visual (Seeing)

The characteristics of this type of learner are that they think in pictures, have vivid imaginations and typically learn best through visualizing the skill or seeing a demonstration.

Auditory (Hearing and Talking)

This type of learning gains the most from hearing an explanation of the topic, which is great for horseback riding teaching environment because instructors speak most often than demonstrate. However, they can also listen while performing the task.

Kinesthetic or Tactile (Touch and Feel)

This type of learner prefers a “hands on” approach, and is very interested in touching and feeling. They learn best by doing the skill or in the application phase of the lesson. Sometimes it is difficult for this type of learner to sit still and wait for an explanation. They typically need to get on the rail and do it!

AGE CHARACTERISTICS

Understanding age characteristics can help gearing lessons appropriately in order to maximize learning.

Four & Five year olds

They are aware of only their point of view, tend to lack balance, have little hand-eye coordination and fairly short attention spans. This age group will benefit from short segments and require a one-on-one teaching style performed on a lead or lunge line.

Six & Seven year olds

This age group is developing large gross motor muscle groups and coordination is becoming better. They will typically accept rules, but may not understand them. This riding group does best when presented with fun and simple ways to get basic control of their horse.

Eight & Nine year olds

At this stage of development gender differences emerge. They are more self sufficient but quite sensitive and need recognition. They like to ride for fun and enjoyment.

Ten & Eleven year olds

Ten and eleven year olds perceive adults as role models but are influenced by their peers. They are starting to master physical skills, and are becoming competitive and more responsible. They understand more abstract concepts of horsemanship such as a horse’s balance.

Twelve to Fourteen year olds

These children are often tired, moody, emotional and self-conscious. They are prone to hero worship and begin processing how important horses are to them personally.

Fifteen to Eighteen year olds

Development is reaching that of a physical adult. They struggle with both wanting and avoiding responsibility. Waiver between displaying intense respect for adults and resentment. They are usually headed in a specific direction in their riding and need more time to figure things out on their own.

Adults

Tend to be goal oriented and enjoy theoretical lessons. Have more inhibitions and greater life pressures. They have a need to feel secure on top of a horse.

THE TEACHING PROCESS

Below are the components present in each lesson:

P= Preparation

E= Explanation

D= Demonstration

A= Application

C= Correction

U= Understanding

R= Repetition/Review

E= Evaluation

(Encouragement)

THE LEARNING PROCESS

Progressive Skill building

It is advisable to start with the simple and move to more complex concepts. As an instructor, you are constantly taking difficult concepts and breaking them down into manageable, simply put terms to set the student up for success. Usually there are holes in a student's knowledge and it's a good idea never to assume they know. Teaching the theory behind the skills is important and will build a good foundation of all around knowledge. Teaching the "why's" of what they are doing gives them a purpose and explanation that will make sense to them so they can justify the skill. A good rule of thumb is: Ability = Skill + Knowledge.

Consider the following example, teaching the posting trot. It is a physical skill that they can practice at the halt to begin with. The cognitive skill (facts) is that the rider needs to use certain muscles to post. The reasoning behind the posting trot, which is conceptual for them, is that trotting is a two beat gait. The affective reasoning could be that posting won't hurt the horse, and can be more comfortable for extended periods of trotting. However, it is also a good time to introduce empathy for your horses by stating that moving your hands up and down while posting may hurt the horse's mouth. Problem solving is introduced as it can be related to trying to sit on a rough horse, this is an alternative.

Teaching tips to ease presentation

By using the name of person rather than the horse's name helps personalize them and makes them feel like you took the time to consider them as an individual.

Clear, simple directions along with the use of preparatory commands, such as "prepare to reverse" you are setting them up for success by giving them the organizational time to perform the maneuver properly.

Encouraging discussion and asking the students questions will engage them in the lesson and give them ownership of knowledge that you helped them gain. Engagement is important as they will retain much more of what is taught. If you are considering teaching a theory class as a lecture, try to think of creative ways to involve them so they feel less like a "school" type of environment. Age appropriate games can allow them the opportunity to practice a skill set while having fun. Some games to consider are Simon Says, Red Light/Green Light, Sit-A-Buck, Egg-N-Spoon, a walking race or water race. Visual aids such as leg wraps to demonstrate diagonal pairs, cones, dressage letters etc, can enhance the material being taught, as a "picture can be worth a thousand words". Schooling figures like circles, reverses (tear drop/or half circle, center line, long and short diagonal or across school), serpentines, and figure 8's can be somewhat challenging and help in goal setting while promoting good horsemanship.

With more advanced riders you can give them the task of being the demonstration for the concept. Then involve all in repetition, give correction and allow them to participate in the review.

Instructor position and class set up are paramount for safety and being effective to maximize learning for all. You can control the horse's by your position and body language very effectively. Voice projection can be impeded outside by the elements, so little things like positioning yourself with your back to the wind can help carry your voice to the students, rather than having your words "blown away".

Rider positioning also is important, and typically a single file line of horses allows you to keep the riders in your sight. When moving up in speed for the first time, the use of lining up in single file while the first horse plays catch up to the end of the line is a great way to have the others observe the skill and allows you to have them do it one at a time to maintain maximum control. Other set ups include the class in center with the individual rider on rail, the class at one end of

arena (example, in a jumping lesson), or all riders on rail.

Safety

It is important to correctly assess rider and instructor qualifications to avoid having students over mounted or instructors teaching “over their heads”. Consider instructor to student ratios and it is recommended that ratios be 1 instructor to 6 students, or 1 instructor and 1 assistant to 10 students. Of course, you must also consider the size of the arena you are working in to ensure you allow enough room for all horses to move safely. Remember to maintain safe spacing. Instructors should be at least 18 years old, and assistants 16 years old. When assessing suitability of horse and rider, try to match skill level of the rider to the horse. Consider a weight allowance of 20% of the horse’s weight, and to be fair to them, they should never be asked to carry more than this.

The use of assistants can be a great aid. They can aid you with positional corrections, put out cones, poles, and other equipment, assist with removal of mounting blocks or jackets, help with safety checks, fix stirrup length or other tack issues, work with individual rider, keep the line in control. Define the role clearly though, so that the assistant does not overpower the instructor, as ultimately the instructor has the responsibility for the group.

Having knowledge of emergency procedures and plans in place are a good idea. More and more riders are seeking instructors with certification and First Aid/CPR training. Adequate staff training in emergency preparedness for not only the arena, but whole facility will help ease stress and confusion if an unfortunate situation was to arise. Other emergencies to plan for are Weather emergencies, natural disasters, a fallen rider with or without injuries and runaways, fractious horse

Remember to perform thorough safety checks of the environment, arena, rider and horse. The most common things that appear are:

- Tack that is in weakened condition - it’s a good idea to check your tack for wear every ride and when cleaning – check all points of connection for wear and Chicago screws, stitching and ties.
- Ill fitting tack - bit adjustment, saddle fit, girths on backwards, uneven D-ring placement on cinches.
- Ill turned out riders - appropriate footwear, gum chewing, chin straps undone, bulky coats, even stirrups and correct stirrup length.
- Soundness of horses. Assessment of the horse’s age, training and temperament. Are they suitable for the rider’s goals. Think about what to do if the horse is totally unsuitable.
- The environment, such as gates being left open or other hazards in the arena. Riders should have appropriate physical and mental abilities for the level of the program, and have the right attitude and behavior to participate in riding.

EQUITATION

Good equitation is the framework for any riding and should be a continuous work in progress. Encouraging the balanced position and maintenance of the ear-shoulder-hip-heel alignment along with correct hand and arm positioning of a straight line from the horse's mouth are good places to start so not to overwhelm students with a lot of technical language.

When considering equitation problems, try to identify the “root” problem that is causing the effect. Fear, weak or tight muscles, body shape or proportions of the rider, failure of rider to be centered, locked joints, or saddle fit, stirrup length, horse size & shape can all influence mounted rider position.

The Upper Body

If the head and neck are not in the proper place, the rider's chin may jut forward. If the shoulders are raised or rounded this puts the rider at a disadvantage with their balance. Collapsing of the sternum drops the ribcage onto spine. Some tips to correct this are to tell the riders to touch their neck to shirt collar or keep their nose behind their belt buckle. Encourage them to breathe, and then have students lift their shoulders as high as they can then drop them as they exhale.

Hand and arm position can greatly influence the upper body. When a rider is novice, they typically lean on the reins for balance. Encourage a visual image of where their hands should be, or provide a demonstration and help correct each rider individually. Have them hold their wrists straight and thumbs up. Riding without reins on lunge line or in a round pen doing different motions with arms will help rider to gain an independent seat and will discourage problems such as broken wrists, hands too far back, too low or too high which can cause the rider to pull the reins downward instead of towards their hip.

Back and Pelvis

Ideal pelvis position is open, and the back flat. A common positional fault is to arch the lower back and close the pelvis. When the pelvis is too closed, the lower back is locked which causes the rider to bounce. Stiffness in the rider creates stiffness in the horse. Coaching students to rotate their pelvis back by pulling their belly button towards their spine such as Sally Swift's example of grabbing a cat tail and pulling it up to their chin.

If a rider is fearful, they may resort to the instinctual fetal position.

Legs

The lower leg position of heel under hip seems to be the most challenging for the majority of riders. Checking for correct stirrup length can eliminate a “chair seat” which is caused by

stirrups that are too short. Encouraging the rider to roll their leg forward and bringing their lower leg underneath them while “lengthening their leg” can help them correct this problem. Stirrups that are too long can lead to lost stirrups or bracing. Bracing is caused by the rider getting their leg too far forward, “reaching for the stirrup” and pressing on the stirrup causing the heel to come up and the rider to come forward out of the saddle. Once the stirrup length is corrected, rotate the rider’s leg back from the hip and encourage them to keep contact with their inner thighs but not pinch with their knees. Coaching them to stretch into their heels, and not jam them down will eliminate the problem I humorously call “fence-post-itis”. Some exercises that can assist with lower leg problems are riding without stirrups, and on the ground, marching and leg lifts.

SUMMARY

By developing an educated eye for safety, horse and rider problems and with experience teaching, lessons can become very effortless. When communication is open and effective, goals can be attained with greater ease, and results can be very rewarding. By striving for effective communication and being aware of the learning process, successes will be maximized! This can aid in eliminating communication “blocks” and can strengthen relationships between the horse, instructor and rider.

