



## Topic of the Month

# Barriers to Learning

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As horse people we really want things to go well when we ride. We feel it is important that there is progress and improvement, for the horse as well as for ourselves. We take lessons, perhaps we read good books about riding, we

watch videos and we use many other means to learn as much as possible. But even so, things don't always go as we wish. It is not enough to take lessons, read books, and so on. It is also important to understand the reasons why we do not always succeed. Because I find this so important, I want to tell you about what I have learned during my many years of teaching, and give you some suggestions that you may find useful.

We are all different, which is a good thing. I'm sure you will agree. And as individuals, we think differently and perceive things differently. Let me give you an example...

I once held a symposium where the students learned classroom theory, participated in discussions, and then watched riders demonstrate what we had worked on in the classroom. I spent a lot of time explaining and discussing the horse's frame. I made drawings on the blackboard and gave the students written material with a detailed explanation of each subject. In short, the participants had it all in front of them in print as well as in pictures. We spent time out in the arena watching each demonstration rider develop the horse's frame step by step. After covering the subject so thoroughly from every angle, I was sure that,

by that point, the participants must have been thinking as I was, visualizing the same pictures in their minds.

Later in the day the students worked in groups to answer a question that I assigned to them. I decided to try something new and I gave three of the groups the same question about the frame of the horse. I had never done that, especially with a subject that I had just spent so much time covering. Actually, I thought what I had done was a silly idea, and was convinced that we would get, more or less, the same answer from all three groups, resulting basically in direct feedback of what I had said earlier in the day.

I am very happy I did what I did. I learned a lot from it! The groups had about half an hour to discuss their subjects. When we returned to the classroom, each group in turn gave their answer. This is when I got a real surprise! Not only were their explanations different from the one I had given, but they also varied quite a lot from group to group.

This experience taught me that when people think very much the same as the instructor, they understand and hear what the instructor is saying. In other words, the information goes straight in, is understood and accepted. But when people think and perceive things a little differently, they take the information they hear and, quite subconsciously, change it around so that it will accommodate their own way of thinking. They believe they understand the idea behind what was said - that they understand the whole philosophy - when actually they do not. This is why, as instructors, we must understand how the student thinks so that we can modify our approach and teach

each individual student in a way that helps him better understand. In addition, it is also important to consider how much information each individual can take in at one time. Overloading a student with too much information can send them even further down the wrong track.

Finally, there are the people who think in a way that is far different from the way the instructor thinks. They can easily become a bit suspicious, raise their hackles, and in the end even go so far as to say, "You never said that!" In this case, what the instructor said went straight over their heads and could even have had a negative influence. The way we hear and understand things depends on the way we think. This reminds me of the saying: **"He who only has a hammer sees everything as nails."**

### **Control is good, but how do we achieve it?**

When we first became familiar with horses, we looked at the horse as a kind, yet big and strong animal. This is true. We must be safe, avoid falling off, and maintain control over this big animal, all while we ride specific movements, etc. So that leads to the question: How can we achieve this kind of control without restricting the horse, so he won't feel that we are working against him?

Reacting to situations more by reflex than anything else is unavoidable until we have spent enough time in the saddle, and become more experienced. As long as there is a question of staying in control and a reflexive reaction to it, we tend to want to keep things within a short radius. Consequently we try to hold the horse in place (often by using too much rein aid) and tend to shorten the pace by holding the horse in a tight frame, which gives us a feeling of being in control.

The first priority for every living thing is to

stay alive, and for the horse, this means he must be able to run free and flee from danger. Therefore, it is not so strange that he fights it when we try to maintain control by holding him in. The perfect situation is to be able to keep the horse in place while at the same time making him feel free. To understand how to achieve control without restricting the horse, read the chapters [Harmony](#), [The Frame](#), [The Aids](#) and [Psyche of the Horse](#).

### **Knowing our Horses**

To feel that we know our horses well can be both positive and negative. It is far too easy to develop preconceived notions that when things go wrong, it is because either the horse, or we ourselves, have limitations. Or perhaps we become set in our ways and begin to think that there is only one way to do things. It is important that we clear those kinds of thoughts from our minds and think only about the horse that we are sitting on at that moment.

We must base our thoughts and decisions on how the horse is working and what we are feeling at that moment in time. We should be reacting to the information we receive rather than acting on past experiences. In order for the horse and for us to develop and move ahead in our work, we need to learn to be forward-thinking and positive. This doesn't mean we need to look happy all the time. It means we must visualize and ride our horses as if they are further along in their training than they are. We need to believe in the horse as well as in ourselves. This is easy to say, and much harder to do, but nonetheless something worth thinking about.

There is no question that the way we think has a strong influence on our riding. When we think correctly, we ride correctly. When we think incorrectly, well then we ride incorrectly. And, of course, our way of thinking is influenced by what we hear and experience, and

how we perceive it.

### **Understanding the Expressions we Use**

There are certain expressions that may create incorrect images or ideas in our minds. For example, “stop the horse”. It is quite impossible for us to stop a horse we are riding! If we are to physically stop the horse, we would have to jump off and stand in front of him. And no one is strong enough to do this so we might as well forget it. It is the rider’s signals that elicit a reaction from the horse to do something with his body to makes him stop. This is explained in depth in [The Positive Riding System](#).

We also say that the horse should “move off the rider’s leg”. It’s perfectly acceptable to say this as long as we understand what this expression really means. No rider can physically move a horse with his leg. You could compare this to attempting to lift your own body up by your hair!

Then there is the expression, “the basics”, which for most people brings to mind something for beginners or young horses. There are very few riders who understand what the basics really are. This is unfortunate, since a thorough understanding of the basics is not only what leads to advancing to higher levels with our horses or our own riding, but also what gives the most pleasure.

### **Lack of Knowledge**

Since this article is about why we don’t always succeed, I want to mention a few more reasons. We have to be honest and admit we are not always disciplined about taking the time to read and understand theory. We can buy an expensive horse, spend lots of money on tack, trailers, lessons, etc., but when it comes to sitting down with a book on theory we are not so interested.

Many riders waste a lot of time due to a lack of understanding of the theory. Without a foundation of basic riding theory, an hour-long lesson can actually end badly, or at the least, will lead to nothing other than some exercise for the horse and rider. On the other hand, if the rider understands the theory behind what is taught in the lesson, chances are, the lesson will end with something positive being achieved. Horse and rider will both learn something. The same amount of time will be spent, but the results can vary widely depending on how the time is used. By setting a realistic goal and working with a plan, using a systematic approach, the time will be used well. The end result depends very much on how we think, and this is really what should guide our riding. If we don’t have a goal and a plan, it will be the horse that influences the rider instead of the rider influencing the horse.

I have often asked myself what is more important: that I am a good instructor, or that the student is good at receiving instruction. Today there is no doubt in my mind that it is much more important for the student to be good at accepting and understanding the instruction. With the experience I have today, and years of teaching behind me, I often think that a lesson I just taught was worth a thousand dollars, and if only I had had the same lesson when I was a young rider, everything would have been much easier. But often, the student doesn’t understand much of it.

Was it my instructing that was not good enough, or did the student have too many barriers? The barriers I am thinking of could include the following:

- The student is nervous or even afraid.
- The student feels limited.
- The student is in a completely different world.
- The student is not motivated.
- The student lacks confidence.
- The student has not accepted his part of the

responsibility by learning the theory.

- The student has not thought about what we worked on in the previous lesson or has not practiced it.
- The student is so busy thinking his own thoughts while I am explaining, that he neither hears nor understands what I am talking about.
- The student is not positive.

Of course the instructor must take responsibility for some of this, but a big part of it falls on the student's shoulders. In order for the relationship between student and instructor to be

successful, both must invest in it.

To be successful in our riding we must have an idea and an opinion of what it is all about. We must develop a way of riding our horses that suits us of course, but we have to be careful not to develop tunnel vision which prevents us from seeing and understanding. We must be open-minded, first and foremost toward the horse, but also for what we see and hear. This means we need to remove those barriers that cause us to feel we are on a plateau. There is no question that common sense and a positive attitude produce better results.

**If you are unhappy with the results that you and your horse have achieved perhaps you will find the answer in the drawing below.**

