Chomping at the Bit: How Equestrian Athletes Use Literate Activity

Ella Bickerman

Ella Bickerman discusses equestrian literacies, especially the tools and activities through which horses and humans learn to *read* each other, and how they learn to communicate and collaborate with each other to achieve specific goals and outcomes.

I've been riding horses since I was 10 years old, and for as long as I can remember, I have loved these four-legged creatures. I am currently riding at a barn in Princeville, Illinois, that specializes in reining and cutting horses, and I have been riding for around 10 years. Since I've been involved in this community for a long time, I've become part of a discourse community of equestrians (please don't say horse people). **Discourse communities** are defined by the ISU Writing Program as "collections of people or groups that work toward collective goals through specific genres" ("Genre Research Terms"). The "Genre Research Terms" page goes on to say that, "Often, when we talk about discourse communities, we describe their communication practices, shared knowledge and language use, and the power structures that shape community features both to people who participate within the discourse community and others." The equestrian community is global—it's made up of people all over the world who share common goals, including becoming better communicators with their horses, developing their riding skills, and sharing different riding and training techniques. Equestrians also form into a huge range of sub-groups revolving around owning and riding different breeds of horses, participating in different disciplines of riding

According to the ISU Writing Program's "Literate Activity Terms" page, "**literate activity** is a way to describe the complex activity involved in people producing and using texts across spaces and times, in ways that are shaped by our histories, tools, social interactions, resources, bodies, emotions, and relationships with the world." By examining the knowledges, tools, communications, and texts involved in the activity of riding horses, we can analyze it as such.

and competing in horse shows, or learning a particular type of training or riding (the one I've showed in most is called western pleasure, which I'll explain more about in a bit). In becoming part of this community, I've had to learn a lot about the tack (gear and equipment) used in riding, and I've also had to learn how to move my body in particular ways, navigate specific spaces (like horse stalls and arenas), and participate in new kinds of interactions with humans (working with different trainers and understanding how judges make their decisions in placing classes). But one of the primary aspects of my learning has involved interacting and communicating with horses. Throughout my life, I've had to learn to communicate with many different horses and use different communication techniques to do so.

Whenever riding comes up in conversation, I notice that a lot of people have the misconception that riding horses is just sitting there, on top of a horse, while it moves around. But riding horses is a lot more than that—it's a complex **literate activity**, and in this article, we're going to examine some of the kinds of knowledge and tools a person needs to become an equestrian. I'll particularly focus on how horses and riders learn to communicate in order to partner in this activity.

Communication Tools for Equestrians

The first tool for communication between the rider and their horse involves the tack. If you're unfamiliar with the word tack, it means the saddle, bridle (which includes the bit and reins), saddle pad, and other equipment that goes on the horse. The tack is important not only because different styles of riding have different histories and traditions, but because the gear's design is influenced by the different kinds of goals people have for interacting with horses. Depending on the discipline of riding you're doing, you ride with different tack. For example, I ride in the western-style riding discipline, so I ride with a western saddle, saddle pad, and bridle (Figures 1 and 2). For people in the US who are just starting lessons, the differences between English and western style riding and tack are some of the first things they learn. Basically, a key difference is that western-style tack comes from a tradition of practical kinds of riding activities from when horses were regularly used for labor and pleasure activities, like "trail riding, rodeo and cowboy work"

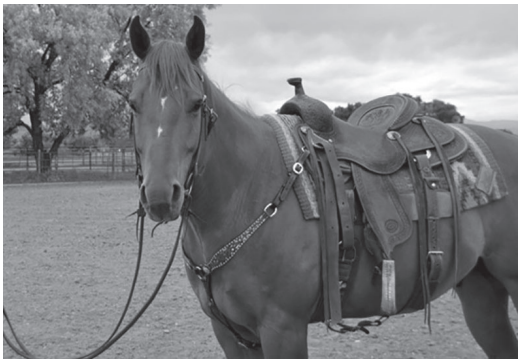

Figure 1: This is a western saddle, part of the tack for the kind of riding I do ("How to Saddle a Horse").

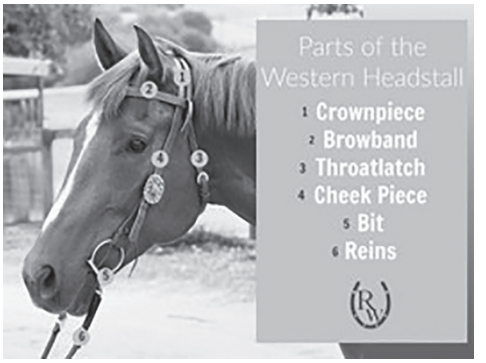

Figure 2: This is a photo of a horse wearing a western bridle (also called a "headstall") with the parts of the bridle labeled ("Western Bridles & Headstalls").

("Riding Tack"). Western saddles typically have a larger saddle horn with a larger cantle, which is the back part of the saddle that helps to keep the rider in the saddle. An English saddle has an almost nonexistent saddle horn and smaller cantle as well as thinner stirrups that allow for a more "correct" position ("Riding Tack").

The type of tack also influences the way a rider communicates instructions and how the activity of riding feels to the horse—meaning that decisions about which tack to use might also depend on a horse's experience. For example, a stable might want to allow a horse to stay with the kind of tack they are comfortable with rather than asking them to switch between different kinds of tack. In my own experience, I have only ever ridden in western tack. Most of the barns I have ridden at had western tack because the western saddle offers casual riders extra support and comfort.

All parts of the tack, because they have contact with a horse, act like a mediator in the communication between a horse and rider. But the bit and bridle (see the diagram in Figure 2) are perhaps the most important communication tools because horses' mouths are so sensitive, and you have the most direct contact with the horse while using the bit. The bridle refers to the whole piece of tack surrounding the horse's head while the bit is the thin metal piece that goes in a horse's mouth and rests on top of their tongue. The bit is attached to the reins that the rider uses to convey instructions to the horse. While this might sound painful and extreme, it doesn't harm the horse when used correctly. While there are always people who misuse or aren't careful about how they use the tack, in this article I'm going to focus on riders and trainers who are using the tack correctly and who work to communicate with their horses in ways that don't cause unnecessary pain.

Using the bit, bridle, and reins, I can give the horse different cues, telling them to move right, move left, move backward, move forward, spin in a circle, or only move their front end or their hind end. This communication is vital while riding.

Another piece of tack that is used to communicate with the horse is the stirrups. The stirrups are the parts that hang down from the saddle and are where you put your feet while riding. The stirrups help the rider to position their body weight correctly in the saddle and to help maintain a rider's balance while riding. The rider needs to keep the balls of their feet where the band is at the bottom of the stirrup to make this an effective method of communication. As a western-style rider, when asking the horse I'm riding to stop, I'll bring my feet in the stirrups forward and lower my heels as well as sit deeper in the saddle. The horse will pick up on the change in my positioning and stop.

Physical Communication: The Rider's Posture

Another form of communication that occurs between horse and rider is the posture of the rider: the way the rider moves her body is often something that the horse can sense. This kind of communication can be intentional, but it can also be conveyed without the rider even realizing it. Horses are extremely sensitive to a rider's weight, which includes the position of your legs, how your weight is distributed in the saddle (otherwise known as your *seat*), and the position of your spine. While riding, your whole leg should be in contact with the saddle, especially your lower legs. Letting your heels float at the same height as your stirrups or keeping your heels down helps keep your weight distributed and keep your feet in the stirrups. Your seat is crucial to riding, and for most equestrians, it's something that develops over time, although some people naturally have a well-balanced seat. In different kinds of riding competitions, judges will award (or take away) points based on the way your body looks as you sit in the saddle.

To prevent injury to your horse, you must stay balanced in the saddle. If I am up there bouncing around, my horse is more likely to be off-balance, especially during faster gaits. (Gaits are the different types of movement a horse can do, like how humans walk, jog, run, and so forth.)

When a rider is learning to ride, they'll learn about all of these techniques and tools, and they'll begin to understand what to do with their body in order to try to communicate the appropriate messages to the horse. However, from the horse's perspective, even subtle differences can have a huge impact on the messages they receive. Depending on how the horse

you're riding has been trained, the way you hold your weight in the saddle can also be used for different commands. For example, in the western-style riding discipline, the majority of horses pay the most attention to messages they get from your seat and legs. So, if I were to sit deeply in the saddle (which is when you try to get the back pockets of your jeans to the saddle), I'm telling the horse that they need to slow down or stop. Recently, I was told by my new trainer, who trains reining and cutting horses, that a lot of riders he coaches keep their heels down too far. While this is acceptable and even taught in many western and English disciplines, horses who are trained in reining and cutting techniques understand the messages you're sending with your heel position differently. When riding in western pleasure, you keep your heels down for your whole ride. This can't be done with a reining or cutting horse because you're essentially riding your brakes, which means the same thing as if you were doing it in your car. This confuses the horse. After all, the position of your heels is telling them to stop or slow down, while in other ways you might be telling them to go faster because you're unaware of what your body posture communicates to the horse. Also, my trainer mentioned that if you continually ride your brakes, they will eventually burn up. This means that your horse will no longer respond to the communication of your heels asking them to stop.

Reining & cutting

In western-style horse shows, reining and cutting are both types of competitions where a rider asks the horse to do a wide range of very complex movements, either in a predetermined pattern (reining) or as part of a process of "cutting" a single cow away from a herd of cattle. Both require very nuanced and intricate communications between horse and rider ("Western").

When I'm riding, the slightest bit of pressure from my legs will tell the horse to go faster, while the absence of pressure communicates that I want them to keep the same pace or slow down, depending on the pressure I'm putting on the bit. In terms of understanding riding as a form of literate activity, this is a great example of how a horse and rider have to develop their communications over time, but it's also an example of how subtle miscommunications can impede the goal of the activity.

Another way that riders communicate with horses is through oral commands. A clicking or clucking sound is asking for a trot, while a kissing sound is asking for a canter. These are used with leg pressure to enforce communication. Another command is saying "whoa" when asking for a stop as well as sitting deep in the saddle and rotating your heels down in the stirrups. In most cases, giving oral communication is a way to enforce the physical communication you are giving the horse. The physical act of communicating is most important because that has multiple aspects, such as pressure on the bridle, distribution of weight in the saddle, and stirrup

positioning. While leaving out oral communication doesn't usually influence the horse, using only oral communication is something that can be achieved but that takes much more training. Only using oral communication is uncommon because if you have multiple horses in the same space, like an arena, using different oral cues could confuse your horse.

Texts of Riding

If we look at learning to ride as a particular kind of literacy, then we can also study (using **literate activity research** methods) the many different texts that riders have to learn to use and interact with as they learn to work together with their horses. In this situation, a text isn't necessarily some kind of document that uses alphabetic letters to communicate—after all, horses can't read. Instead, a **text** might be any kind of digital or material object that is used to make meaning. According to the ISU Writing Program, this way of thinking about texts is "meant to help us think about the kinds of things we write in the world that aren't just written documents, the kinds of things we create beyond word processing applications" ("Genre Research Terms"). To perform in equestrian competitions, a rider definitely needs to learn to read the horse, just as the horse needs to learn to read the rider. In addition, both need to learn different kinds of tools and materials that mediate their communication. The tools used might help and support communication in different ways, but they might also create barriers—it depends. From a literate activity research perspective, it's important to think about how these tools might end up impacting and influencing communications in different ways. For example, as I mentioned earlier in this article, the bit, a tool which goes in the horse's mouth, creates a link between the rider's hands and movements and the horse. This makes the mediated communication very different than if the rider were to put their hands directly on the horse. In turn, all of these tools and communications are combined when a horse and rider are working to reach particular goals or outcomes, which we might understand as another text—one that the horse and rider are producing together. For example, in the style of western pleasure riding, the text that the horse and rider produce is a slow, smooth gait that looks extremely comfortable to ride. According to the American Quarter Horse Association website, "When showing western pleasure, your horse should

Literate activity research

Leslie Hancock explains that in literate activity research, the central focus for researchers is "the production and use of texts, as well as how these texts mediate activity" (4). Hancock also uses the work of Paul Prior to explain that literate activity isn't just about "transcribing words," but can also include "many streams of activity … [such as] reading, talking, observing, acting, making, thinking, and feeling" (18).

be a pleasure to watch and a pleasure to ride—no matter what your skill level. All of your efforts when showing western pleasure should be aimed at making your horse look smooth" ("Showing Western Pleasure"). The goal of the communications between horse and rider in this style of riding is to be extremely discrete and hard for the judge to see. This means that the rider is using the lowest possible number of cues and the smallest possible shift in weight or change in positioning in the stirrup. This subtlety is designed to show the extremely high level of communication present between the horse and rider. The goal of having these buttons (communication cues explained more later in the article) is for the rider to communicate as little as possible while communicating as effectively as possible. These so-called buttons are created by trainers pouring lots of time into communicating with their horses and the horses creating muscle memory ties to this communication.

Western pleasure classes can be either a rail or pattern class, meaning that the horse and rider could be in the arena with all their competitors at once going around the perimeter (rail), or they could be competing one at a time, each horse and rider following a pattern given to them by the judge (pattern). A trail class is a patterned class where a series of obstacles are laid out for the horse and rider to overcome. These include mailboxes and gates to open, wooden logs to walk over, and bridges to cross. In order for a performance to be seen as successful, the horse and rider have to maintain clear, concise communication and work as a team. In cutting competitions, where cattle are released into the arena and the horse and rider must cut or pick one out from the herd and keep it separate, the horse has to be able to read which way the cow is going to go (a term coined as "catty") and stop them from rejoining the herd. This takes extreme athleticism from the horse and quick communication from the rider. In reining competitions, the horse and rider must execute patterns that require different kinds of very fast-paced maneuvers. The gaits of reining horses are faster than those of a pleasure horse, because this class is supposed to showcase the ability of a horse to do actual work (things a working horse on a ranch might do). The patterns involve large circles that split the arena in half to show the difference in gaits. Also included in this kind of riding are spins, where a horse will plant one hind foot and spin itself around to show how collected and supple they can be in their communications with their rider. Sliding stops are another aspect of reining techniques (Figure 3). This is where, while running, the horse will drop its hindquarters and lock their back two legs to

Figure 3: Scan this QR code to watch a video of a rider and horse taking part in a reining competition ("2022 Ford AQHYA World Reining").

slide. They have special shoes on their hooves called sliders to ensure they don't become injured.

For each of these styles, different training techniques and equipment and goals are involved, and different kinds of communications evolve between the horse and rider. Within equestrian communities, these different skills and patterns of communication are often valued differently. For example, a western pleasure show horse is usually referred to as a push-button horse because of all the commands the horse must learn that are given with very discreet cues. The idea is that the rider is pushing buttons (making small movements or giving short directions) and the horse needs to be able to make corresponding movements very smoothly for an effortless, almost automated look. On the other hand, a horse trained for reining needs to be able to move very quickly and change their body and movements in a more dramatic fashion. This is one of the reasons why a reining horse pays more attention to the rider's seat than an average horse because small movements of the rider's body must be interpreted quickly. This is also why a reining rider has to be very careful about how their weight is distributed and how they adjust their weight while riding.

Humans and Horses: Uptake and Antecedent Knowledge

Two Writing Program concepts that can help me talk about what it means to train a horse, or perhaps train with a horse, are antecedent knowledge and uptake. Being able to constantly learn, and use what you learn, is a crucial skill to have as an equestrian. The ISU Writing Program explains that **uptake** refers to what we "do or experience as we take up new ideas, terms, and/or practices," while **antecedent knowledge** refers to "the facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us writing situations" ("Uptake Terms"). When it comes to humans and horses, the process of uptake requires active engagement from both humans and horses, and there are different kinds of uptake going on as they learn. There is the uptake involved in understanding generally how to work with each other (different riders and different horses), but there is also a specific kind of uptake that happens when a particular horse and human begin to work together. This uptake involves transferring antecedent knowledge that a horse or rider might have from past experiences, and making new knowledge as they get to know each other and ride together.

I saw this a lot while taking riding lessons at my old barn. A lot of the horses have little kids that ride them, which allows the horse to get away with a lot of bad behavior. This bad behavior, better described as poor listening, is due to the antecedent knowledge and uptake the horse gathers

from their usual riders. As the small children are learning to ride, they might not be as confident in their communication with the horse, or they might not have enough muscle in their legs to communicate effectively. The horse, not receiving clear signals, might develop an uptake where they disregard the rider's signals and just make their own decisions—for example, abruptly stopping during a ride because they don't want to listen anymore.

Antecedent knowledge, antecedent experience, & uptake

When we talk about antecedent knowledge and experience, we're referring to all the prior knowledge and skills we carry with us, as well as the feelings and embodied responses we have from prior experience, which also influence our learning and behaviors in new settings. Uptake focuses more on the moment of action, when new information is incorporated (successfully or not) into a situation, and it also focuses on how that new information shapes subsequent action (how what we learn in a particular situation changes how we understand what we're doing, and what we might do next).

In this article, both humans and horses are engaged in uptakes, and these uptakes are also definitely impacted by their antecedent knowledge. A key part of learning to ride successfully is remembering that your uptakes, as a rider, have to incorporate the horses' uptakes and antecedent knowledge into your actions and choices.

If these "non-listening" behaviors are part of the horse's antecedent knowledge, then when I get on them, I'll have to do a lot more work to keep them on task, gain their respect, and communicate effectively. Most people don't realize that horses are extremely discerning—they pick up almost instantly on what kind of rider you are. For example, if you aren't confident in your riding abilities and aren't going to make the horse you're riding listen to you, the horse will realize this. They might then start to do whatever they want because they know you aren't going to stop them. This behavior could include randomly stopping during a lesson, slowing down to a walk while you're trying to get them to speed up, or always trying to head toward the entrance of the arena so they can go back to their stall. How all of this relates to uptake is that I (the rider) need to anticipate what the horse is going to do next by reading their body language and physically feeling the way they are moving beneath me. I use the antecedent knowledge I have from years of riding to recognize the body language of a horse. I can feel when they begin to slow down and aren't driving through with their hip. This leads to them slowing down when I'm not asking them to and breaking gait, which will lose you points if you're showing. I can also feel the horse gathering their hind end to collect and make it easier to sit a certain gait, like a bouncy trot.

One horse that I rode at my former barn is named Rhonda (Figure 4), and she's a cool former western pleasure show horse that knows a lot of buttons. One thing that she likes to do is try to trot when she should be walking. I could always tell when she was about to do this because I could

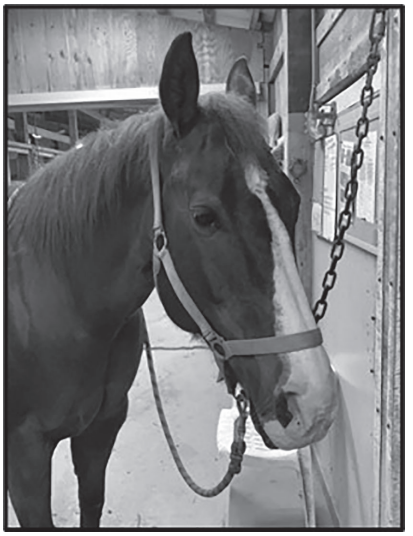

Figure 4: Former western pleasure show horse, Rhonda.

feel her gather up her hind end and start to move faster. When this would happen, I would put pressure on my reins and sit deeper in the saddle to remind her that we're supposed to be moving slowly. Other times she would move from the outside of the arena by the rail toward the center, which isn't what you want. My former trainer would stand in the middle so she could see, so it was dangerous for her if my horse didn't stay at the perimeter of the arena. To tell Rhonda to move back toward the rail, I would apply pressure to my inside rein, bring my outside rein out to the side, and apply pressure with my inside leg to ask her to move her shoulder sideways to the rail. When I ride, I constantly assess the horse's movements to see what they are going to do next, and I use this uptake process to allow me to make corrections to their behavior. This is crucial because a horse that doesn't listen to their rider can be dangerous.

Another horse I used to ride was a gelding (a castrated male horse) named Brady who was usually ridden for English-style riding lessons, a different discipline than western riding. Since he was trained in a different discipline than Rhonda, he has very different uptakes, even when you give the same cues. For Brady, he is a lot more of a forward mover with longer legs, which means that he drives forward with his hind end, so his gaits are a lot harder to sit because they are bouncier and faster. While this is desirable in the English discipline, many Western horses simply don't have gaits like that. Most horses that I ride have smoother gaits due to their breeding as smoother gaits are an optimal trait in the western style of riding. In addition, Brady will sometimes engage in a type of poor communication that is also due to his antecedent knowledge: pulling the reins out of his rider's hands. He has learned this from the small kids taking beginner lessons who usually ride him. These kids often hold the reins really loosely. Brady has learned that if a rider isn't holding the reins firmly and he pulls his head down and forward, he can pull them out of their hands. What Brady is communicating with this move is that he'd like to stop and have a break, which he gets to do when the reins are no longer communicating messages about how the rider wants him to move. He could also pull the reins out of his rider's hands and then begin to walk toward the entrance of the arena, communicating that he wants to be done for the day. When I'm riding Brady, it is crucial that I use my antecedent knowledge of his learned habits (knowing when he's going to

try to get me to drop the reins) to make corrections to my own actions (how I hold the reins). In this way, I can adjust our communications so that we're moving together correctly.

Final Thoughts

Riding and training to ride, and riding in competitions, are all situations that include continuous, flowing, two-way conversations between horse and rider. The rider uses their body and weight distribution to correspond with the horse and give guidance. The horse responds to that guidance with their movements, and then responds to the rider with their own body language. During one ride, the difference in how the horse and rider read each other and move together can be astronomical. Although the horse and rider may both be communicating as well as they possibly can, sometimes wires can still be crossed and misinterpretations can happen, just like between two people. Both horse and rider must have minds willing to learn and be able to react and change behavior based on the other. Because of this, riding different horses can make you a better rider because you're forced to learn to communicate more efficiently and become more adaptive to the horse you're riding. I couldn't be more grateful for all the horses I have had the privilege of riding and communicating with. To Mimi, Grace, Rhonda, Brady, Toby, Pipi, and Burney: I wouldn't be the rider I am without you, and I owe you everything.

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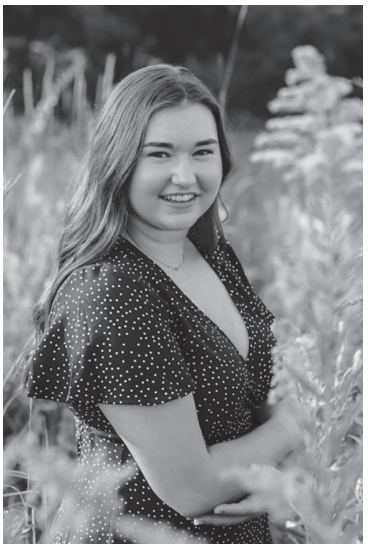

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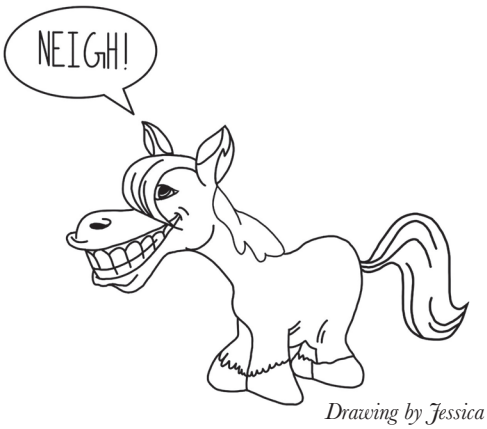

Drawing by Jessica Kreul