

Using Horses as Teaching Tools: An Equine Guided Education Clinic

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

Equine assisted activities are gaining popularity as a modern, alternative form of human therapy, teaching and learning, and personal development. Research has shown that equine assisted learning can improve academic performance, life and social skills, and strengthen teams and relationships (Aduddell, 2003; Cole, 2005; EAGALA, 2014; Hutchinson, 2009; Klontz, et al., 2007; Luckner & Nadler, 1997; Shultz, 2005). With regard to innovative approaches in experiential learning, using horses as teaching tools has gained popularity in non-formal and academic educational settings in recent years. It has been documented that “working with horses can create positive changes in adolescents and possibly even improve basic life skills of young adults” (Antilley et al., 2010, p. 7). Horses have been used to promote life skill development not only in 4-H, but also in equine-assisted therapies for mentally and physically disabled individuals and educational programming (Evans, Jogan, Jack, Scott, & Cavinder, 2009; Gibbs, Potter, & Vogelsang, 2003; Saunders-Ferguson, Barnett, Culen, & TenBroeck, 2008; Smith, Swinker, Comerford, Radhakrishna, & Hoover, 2006). Mandrell (2006) identified the advantages of using horses in teaching as follows: “Horse activities provide a visible metaphor for life experiences and relationships. These metaphors are used to teach people valuable tools for success in life. Participants learn about themselves and others through horse activities... related to feelings, behaviors, and patterns. (p. 23). Those who work with horses not only gain the benefits of learning horsemanship and care of a large animal, but also develop important life skills that can be used in their day-to-day lives. As Antilley et al. (2010) reported, “Those participating in horse-related activities can experience beneficial improvement in self-motivation, responsibility, confidence, and self-esteem” (p. 7) that transcends to all life situations. Cavinder et al. (2010) evaluated the educational value of a summer horsemanship clinic over a period of three years and found that a high percentage of individuals expressed improved knowledge of horse awareness and training as well as greater thinking skills. Smith et al. (2006) concluded that “...horse programs should continue to develop and support programs that focus on the development of horsemanship and life skills” (p. 92). Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA, 2014) offers a standard model and structure for using horses as a framework for creative and adaptive teaching and learning. This model includes instruction using a team-based approach focused on experiential and solutions-based learning that is applicable to many environments and audiences.

How It Works

An agricultural education professor partnered with a local equine instructor to develop a half-day on-the-ground equine guided education (EGE) clinic for youth. With our combined backgrounds and foundational knowledge learned from the EAGALA model, non-formal and outreach education, equine therapy research, psychology, and positive youth development, we developed our own learning sessions. The clinic used a co-facilitation team approach to teach life skill development and personal growth as an intricate component of the horsemanship program. Youth gained first-hand experience with innovative teaching and learning using horses as a venue for building leadership, teamwork, communication, and goal setting skills. Clinic design encouraged youth to explore the emerging world of equine assisted activities and their application to personal situations. The fundamentals, model, and structure of EAGALA and non-formal education were used to guide curriculum development. The equine instructor provided the facility, horses, professional horsemanship and psychology knowledge, while the agricultural education professor provided guidance in overall program development, positive youth development, non-formal education, and experiential teaching and learning strategies. The

overall goal of the clinics was that participants would increase knowledge, awareness and understanding of EGE in the areas of personal growth and development. An example clinic agenda with topics and teaching methods can be seen below.

Topic	Teaching Methods Employed
Introduction to Equine Guided Education	
Trends in Horse and Human Connections; Using Horses in Experiential Learning Settings	Brainstorming and Self-Awareness Exercises
Introduction to Equine Terminology, EAGALA Model, and EGE Programs	
The Connection of Horses to Personal Development	Role Play and Reflection
Hands-On Activities and Reflection: Applying Leadership, Team building, Communication, and Behavior Principles	
Leadership 101: Natural horse interaction, behavior assessment, and leadership principles	Think-Pair-Share, Arena Observation, Drawing
Communication: Verbal and Non-verbal	Horse-Horse, Horse-Human, Human-Human Discussion
Well-Being: Emotional, Social and Physical Safety	Creative Writing and Safety Scenarios
Setting Individual and Group Goals	Obstacle Course Development
Colorful Communication	Scenarios and Painting Activity
Application of Concepts into Personal Situations	Group Discussion and Individual Reflection

Results to Date/Implications

Based on observations and feedback, the team found it most effective to teach about responsibility, relationships, communication, leadership, and teamwork through horse safety and care; haltering, tying and leading a horse; horse behavior observation; horse anatomy; and on-the-ground horsemanship activities. The team has further developed modified clinics for a variety of community groups based on their specific goals. All workshops focus on the utilization of horses for building teambuilding, communication, and leadership skills.

Future Plans/Advice to others

The inclusion of a qualified, knowledgeable team of educators was essential to the success of the clinic. At this time, requests are growing from student organizations, 4-H clubs, girl scouts, FFA chapters, and health care professionals. The equine instructor has contacted EAGALA to host a national certification training at the facility within the next year. A conversation has been started to develop an interdisciplinary course for agricultural education, equine science, and nursing students. Finally, a grant was awarded from AQHA for further clinic development.

Costs/Resources needed

In addition to knowledgeable instructors, suitable, safe horses and facilities are necessary to deliver these clinics. Equine guided education books, training programs, and continuing education workshops offer valuable content and ideas. Fees may include facility fee, horse use, arena props, and horse equipment (\$250/day), educational supplies (\$25), and journals. Due to the partnership of the instructor and equine facility, no costs were incurred.

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