As a recent college graduate, Mollison Ryan considers the significance of her experience as a horseback riding instructor and writing major in her development as a student, teacher, and young professional.

By Mollison Ryan

# Writing on Riding: The Value of Experiential Learning and Multidisciplinary Experience

I ATTENDED TWO CAMPUSES AS AN undergraduate. I chose one campus intentionally when I was in the 10th grade. The other campus I chose quite unintentionally at the age of six.

I knew I wanted to attend Virginia Tech the moment I walked into Shanks Hall the first time. I was a sophomore in high school, and I was attending the undergraduate English conference. I read my poem during the session panel featuring students from Blacksburg High School with trembling hands in front of professors who would later teach me when I enrolled as an undergraduate. That day defined my path to college—there was no doubt in my mind that I would attend Virginia Tech to study writing.

The other campus is slightly different. The other campus does not have a building of classrooms. There are no desks, no computers, and no projectors. Mountains fill the back row of classes, which are always held outside. The student body ranges in age from 4 to 75. To attend a lecture, a helmet is required, and some of the teachers have four legs and do not speak English.

I have been a professional horseback riding instructor for five years. I am currently employed as the assistant trainer at the same farm where I took my very first lesson, over 15 years ago, at the age of six. Although I've dabbled in many different equestrian disciplines, my primary specialty is in dressage. Unlike local horse shows, my competitions are recognized nationwide and contribute to my professional record. Every score and placing I receive is recorded, much like an academic transcript, except my equestrian transcript is available with a quick Google search for anyone to see. Country-wide rankings, regional and national championships, and other honors all gild my equestrian resume. For me, riding and competing is not a hobby or an extracurricular. It is not just a career. It is a life rhythm, an inherent part of my daily experience and my education.

In my traditional undergraduate experience, I would describe myself as a dedicated, attentive student with a passion for learning. I assumed a quiet confidence in myself in my classes, seeking to develop relationships with my professors and to glean as much knowledge as I could. At the farm, both during my untraditional undergraduate experience and now, I am an authority figure. I am outspoken, confident, and knowledgeable. When I step into the riding arena, the clients know I am someone to look to as a leader.

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One of the reasons I believe in equestrian sport is that I know firsthand the value of spending *time* with horses. The physical benefits—including better stability, muscle strength, and cardiovascular fitness—are great, but personally, I think that the greatest advantages of equestrianism are the holistic benefits. Riding is a discipline of healing, growth, and character. When I was growing up, it was at the farm that I learned the true meaning of personal responsibility, self-discipline, and compassion. A 2017 study by Nobuyo Ohtani, Kenji Kitagawa, Kinuyo Mikami, and others published in *Frontiers in Public Health* argued that horseback riding helped children to perform appropriate actions and self-control and even benefited their performance when solving arithmetic problems, in addition to increasing their sympathetic activity. I believe that horses are natural healers—they have a deep investment and connection to the people they interact with, which allows them to develop such a beneficial relationship with their riders.

Teaching horseback riding defined much of my undergraduate experience. Every afternoon of every semester, from 3 P.M. on, I was at the barn. The time I spent teaching and riding didn't allow me to join many clubs or participate in extracurricular collegiate events. From a traditional point of view, it could appear that my focus on riding limited me; for me, however, the skills and experiences I gained through my entrance into a professional equestrian career as an undergraduate student were invaluable.

Surprising to most people, I didn't major in Equine Studies or Agriculture. Instead, I majored in Professional and Technical Writing and Creative Writing. Since middle school, my passion for writing was certainly just as strong as my passion for riding. As a child, I was fascinated by the idea that story telling could be done in so many different styles—that a single bookshelf could contain hundreds of individual worlds and realities. I started writing fantasy because it was limitless. Over time, I began to enjoy it because it revealed what I, the writer, care about and, perhaps more importantly, what I am afraid of.

One of the greatest challenges of having such varied interests was synthesizing the meaning behind them. Often as an undergraduate, I felt that my different callings were so diverse, it seemed impossible for them to ever intersect—and, therefore, why was I spreading myself so thin? Did my dual dedication as a student and an instructor matter in the scheme of the real world? As I was on the cusp of graduating and moving into the roll of a full-time professional, I wrestled to define what exactly I had gained from this duality. Building a resume involved untangling the web of skills I'd learned through my practice, and I found myself wondering how many other graduating students were in my position. How many graduates had experience coaching soccer, or swimming, or track, or riding, and wondered if their teaching and the skills they'd gained mattered to a graduate program or a potential employer? Did they struggle to articulate why their experiences mattered?

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What I realized most profoundly was that teaching riding was not a simulation or a classroom exercise: it was a very real and immersive style of experiential education. It was not quantifiable academic credentials that I'd gained from being a riding instructor—it was an inherent system of real-world values that defined me as a student and a young professional. Those values, distilled from the subject matter, applied to my readiness to enter the professional world.

## The Meaning of Experiential and Multidisciplinary Learning

**MY UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE CAN BE** defined as both experiential and multidisciplinary: I was actually out in the world, away from the

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classroom, immersing myself in a study that had little to do with my primary academic discipline of writing. The balance between my writing and my riding became a unique form of a double major.

In a 2016 interview with the Columbia Business School's newsletter *Graham and Doddsville*, Shane Parrish, the writer of the knowledge and understanding blog Farnam Street, used the following analogy when asked about the power of multidisciplinary learning: "If you were a carpenter you wouldn't want to show up for a job with an empty toolbox or only a hammer. No, you'd want to have as many different tools at your disposal as possible… If we have a lot of mental tools and the knowledge of how to wield them properly, we can start to think rationally about the world" (33). If I had stepped away from teaching as an undergraduate and focused exclusively on my English studies, I have no doubt that I would have many tools that would allow me to write beautifully and engage with literature in a way an untrained eye could not. However, I know that my interpersonal skills, my work ethic, and my practical knowledge would be lacking without my experiential learning. Perhaps I would be capable of writing a lovely novel but incapable of engaging with publishers and marketers to sell the book.

In the 2009 Kurt Hahn Address, published in The *Journal of Experiential Education*, Professor Clifford E Knapp stated the following on experiential learning: "These unmediated experiences, combined with a reflection or a processing element, could be called a transformation method of teaching because experiential educators help students take what happened to them and transform that experience into meaningful memories and applications for later use. I believe that both types of knowledge are important, especially when they are presented in conjunction with each other, because they contribute to a deeper understanding of life" (278). I believe that what made my undergraduate experience so worthwhile is that presentation of two types of knowledge in conjunction with each other—just as my experiential learning benefitted my traditional education, my traditional education benefitted my experiential career as a riding instructor.

Jason R Wingert, author of a study titled "The Impact of Integrated Student Experiences on Learning" published in *The Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, emphasized that this process of integrating experiential and traditional learning "provide[s] for more holistic ways of identifying problems and strategizing solutions. They create more flexible thinkers in our students" (55). The emphasis in my English classes on analytical thinking, creative processing, imagery and learning styles, effective research methodology, and professional development gave me skills that set me apart from other riding instructors.

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Many of my clients have commented on my ability to integrate visuals and storytelling into my lessons. Without my English background, I know I would not be as effective of a communicator.

## Values Gained from Experiential Learning

### Adapting to the Rhetorical Situation

When I think about the most important, life-centric skills I gained from my experiential learning, I first think of the necessity of adaptability. As someone drawn to organization and plan making, I know from personal experiences that when working with horses, very little goes according to plan. Horses are not machines. They are prey animals who naturally see humans, with our front-facing eyes, sharpened teeth and claw-like fingers, as the predator. They have surprisingly small brains and surprisingly large personalities. I insist to my students that, unfortunately, in riding there is no perfect formula—riding is quite literally a process of rhetoric.

When I communicate with my horses, I emphasize the rhetorical values of argument, persuasion, and motivation. Obviously, one of the most unique aspects of the sport is the necessity of communication and partnership between the horse and rider. Because my horse is a living, breathing creature with a mind of his own, I have to adapt every minute to his own process of rhetoric with me, the trainer. For the horse, the rhetoric is all in the body language. Are his ears facing forward (interested or happy), sideways (listening, relaxation), or pinched (frightened, angry, or pained)? Is his back tight or relaxed? Is his eye soft or dilated?

Keeping all of the horse's cues in mind, I adjust my own cues. I rhetorically engage with an older, lazier horse much differently than I do with a younger, more sensitive horse. I watch that my body language is appropriate so that I can assert myself as non-threatening but also supportive leader. This is what I encourage my students to do. I ask that they think outside the box and look at the obvious and subtler signals their horse gives them at every moment.

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Of course, the virtue of adaptability applies even more obviously to me, the instructor. I do not communicate with the horse in the same way I communicate with the rider. I have to adapt quickly to the learning style of my student, not only so they understand the lessons but so they can remain safe on their horse. I have learned to teach visually, linguistically, and logically. I have learned to teach images that work for all ages. For example, I teach my adults to stack their abdominal muscles like bricks. I teach a preschool girl to sit up tall like her favorite princess or superhero.

Such an emphasis on adaptability in my life has made me a better student and a better writer. I am able to think more creatively in my own writing, opening myself to genres and a sometimes overwhelming stream of ideas with ease. In my undergraduate experience, I was also able to quickly adjust to different types of classrooms and teaching styles, often switching from professional writing to creative writing classrooms in a day, both on campus and virtually. My adaptability has also made me more positive, relaxed, and attentive in my professional life.

## Learning to Fall and Coping with Fear

When I was taking lessons as a child, my first instructor repeated the mantra to me that in order to become a good rider, you must fall seven times. Falling is an inevitable part of riding horses, and it becomes a sort of private language and even point of pride among riders, to the dismay of spectators.

Safety is always my first priority as a teacher. I triple check the equipment, and I make sure students understand the risks. No matter how well-trained the horse is, no matter how safe the activity is, there is always a chance they will fall. Often, the falls are mild and without injury, but my first thought is always the same: What could I have done to prevent this from happening?

Of course, there is nothing I could have done. Horses are unpredictable, and sometimes, the communication fails, even for the best riders in the world. It is not predicting the fall that is important but the response to the fall. When a student falls, I walk to them, never run, and I never show my fear. If I show my fear, they will learn to be afraid. I assess the rider, catch the horse, and help the rider get back on if they are able. It is always important that they get back on. If the student is unharmed, falling is a moment of learning. They are either learning from their mistakes, or they are learning about the unpredictability of the sport.

Educators certainly understand that students are going to fall. Students, however, often don't want to know or don't believe they are going to fall at times in their own education—and, more importantly, it can be good to do so. Students are going to make mistakes, they are going to miss opportunities, and sometimes, if they are applying for an internship, a graduate program, or a job, luck simply will not be with them, no matter how qualified they are. Some of my students have cried when they've fallen, and others have hopped up and laughed. In those moments, I'm there

to lean on, to analyze with, to cry with, or sometimes to laugh with.

In my education, I have been in the strange position of taking the fall and also knowing what it's like to be someone who picks students up from the fall. Falling off a horse or taking a metaphorical fall in a class is scary, frustrating, and disarming, but it is important. There were times as an undergraduate that I missed an award nomination, or received a grade lower than I expected, or felt like I simply wasn't writing well enough. When I "fell" or struggled as an undergraduate, I went to my professors, and I realized the beauty in rising from perceived defeat.

When I first started teaching lessons, I was reaching an interesting point in my own mental development—when, in the late teens and early twenties, mortality becomes profoundly real. Increasingly, I found myself rattled by fear in my riding. My horse's spooking or athletic antics were not so funny anymore. At the same time, I was exiting the riding days of my teens, where competitions were just for fun, and credentials didn't really matter. Suddenly, everything mattered, and I wasn't in the position where I could fail without consequence.

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Inevitably, every rider reaches that point—where for reasons obvious or not, they feel a profound sense of fear. It is part of my job to understand my students' fears and where they come from. Are they afraid of falling, or are they afraid of *failing?* Coach Daniel Stewart, a well-known equine sports psychologist and former coach of the US Olympic team, who I am lucky enough to have worked with for a number of years, frequently speaks about that exact concept. In his book, *Pressure Proof Your Riding*, he says the following: "It's been said that up to 80 percent of all riders and athletes experience *fear of failure* at some point in their careers. What makes it really interesting is that we were only born with two fears: the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises. All the others, including the *fear of failure*, we've learned" (75).

So, perhaps the fear of falling off the horse is natural, but the fear of failing is something we have learned from our own individual experiences. I was afraid of failing when I became an instructor because I perceived that I didn't have enough experience compared to others in my field or because some of my peers thought I was too young or didn't have enough credentials.

And while I didn't have decades of experiences, my other perceptions were largely created by my own fear of failure.

The frequency of fear in riding has made me realize the frequency of fear in higher education. As an English major, I experienced daily fear in my own work. What if I am not a good enough writer for this assignment or even this field? What if my ideas are not original? I made an effort to dismiss my fears in my undergraduate education, taking classes in as many different genres of creative writing that I could. I sought to make myself uncomfortable, so I could grow and expand my writing ability. There were times I was uncomfortable with writing in general. The amount of freedom writing provides promotes vulnerability, which is frightening. But out of fear comes beauty and a greater understanding of self. In my experience, the raw process of rising from the ashes often creates the most beautiful work.

## The Pursuit of Imperfection and Rising to the Challenge

I understand that there is no perfect ride, and there is no perfect essay, just as there is also no perfect instructor and no perfect professor. Writing and riding are arguably two of the most imperfect disciplines possible to be involved in.

My involvement in imperfection has taught me, however, that perfect *moments* exist. They are very rarely in the form of a fantastic grade or a great prize. One of my equestrian disciplines is riding at liberty, which means there is no saddle or bridle on the horse. Recently, I succeeded in riding a canter pirouette, similar to a pirouette in ballet. It is one of the most difficult movements to ride with a saddle and bridle, let alone at liberty. In that moment, when I could feel every muscle of my horse under my legs and all the

power I could create without a single piece of leather, the world around the two of us faded away. Our communication was so organic and pure, I was brought to tears. That moment for me was worth more than any prize.

The same happens in writing. In one of my senior capstone courses, the professor often talked about when the characters would "take over" in the writing process as if they were living, breathing people. This is a great victory as a writer because it means the characters and their story are strong enough to flourish and live on their own without the constant nurturing of their creator. It is the best kind of loss of control.

In the riding world, one of the biggest losses of control of any instructor is the act of teaching a student to canter. Teaching riders to canter always makes me nervous. It is the first time the rider's skills are really tested and the first time their security in their own ability is confirmed. A step below galloping, it feels fast, even on the laziest horse. But I've seen the confidence learning to canter instills in young children and the sense of freedom it gives older adults. Every time I raise a jump pole higher, every time I teach a new advanced skill, I have to relinquish my urge for control. I must let my students rise to the challenge and ignite their passion. When I do, those elusive moments of perfection often manifest.

As an aspiring writer, the most valuable lessons I learned as an undergraduate were the ones that were difficult to hear. I appreciate the professors who required me to try a new genre, to push my thematic content further, and completely rewrite pieces that I thought were strong. I am grateful for the professors who provided support through the messy drafts to uncover a beautiful final draft. If I did not challenge my riders, they would never improve and never grow. Stressing the small victories is essential in higher education. In English, the best professors I have learned from have not emphasized writing for a grade as much as they have encouraged writing for the pursuit of the art. Winning and "A" grades are, of course, wonderful. But as a student who has succeeded in classes without truly investing myself, I know that the most meaningful experiences of my undergraduate career were defined not by grades but by the work and process—and moments—behind those finishing results.

## The Secrecy of My Second Experience

**MY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING WAS SOMETHING** that I frequently felt like I couldn't talk about in the collegiate environment. When I told my professors and peers in my department that I taught riding lessons, I was usually met with confused scowls and uncertain nods. I understand, of course, that my choice of career was unconventional, but I expected a reaction of interest, perhaps, "why teach riding lessons?" Instead, when I told faculty or peers that I competed on the weekends or that I wanted to stay in this area after graduation because of my job, I was usually discouraged and told that I needed to diversify my environment. What they didn't know and what I would've said, had they asked, was that my career in horses had taken me all over the country: that I'd attended and spoken in conferences in Florida, California, Louisiana, Tennessee, and more. That I'd had the opportunity to interact with presidents of companies, Olympic athletes, and the leaders of some of the biggest horse organizations in the country.

There were exceptions of course. I remember sitting in a meeting with my advisor, who stressed heavily to me that I must continue my riding to be good at writing. She noticed what I was doing and was not only receptive—she suggested how my career opened up a wealth of opportunities in the online and nonfiction writers' markets.

**Credit is available for students who sign on to internships or independent studies, which is important—but for students who work in a fast food restaurant, or teach riding, or seek out any other less conventional real-world experience, they are left with unquantifiable experience. Valuable, but more difficult to define.**

There was no opportunity for me to incorporate this wildly different style of experience into a format for college credit or recognition. Credit is available for students who sign on to internships or independent


MOLLY COMPETING IN DRESSAGE ON BIG BEAR'S ROYAL FINNEGAN, WINNER OF A 2016 USEF HORSE OF THE YEAR TITLE. PHOTO COURTESY OF: PICSOFYOU.COM

studies, which is important—but for students who work in a fast food restaurant, or teach riding, or seek out any other less conventional real-world experience, they are left with unquantifiable experience. Valuable, but more difficult to define.

I would not expect to receive class credit for outside employment, but the dialogue surrounding my chosen experience could reflect less doubt and more interest. Instead of insisting to students who share my experience that they need to diversify their horizon, educators and professionals should instead analyze the possible benefits and what skills the students are learning from stepping outside the box—or inside the ring.

The 2013 Gallup-Lumina Study of the American Public's Opinion on Higher Education and U.S. Business Leaders Poll on Higher Education asked business leaders what higher education institutions could develop in their students to prepare them for workplace success. The answer, as reported, was that internships and on-the-job experience were the best tools to provide for successful graduates. Furthermore, the list of skills values by employers who participated in the study included: work ethic, discipline, motivation, leadership, adaptability, and more (30). I was able to gain those values through my experiential learning, but my higher education institution didn't know, and most of those who did didn't seem to care. Any time students put themselves out into the world in search of knowledge and experience, whether they're coaching a sport or flipping burgers in a restaurant, there is educational value. They are learning and gaining experience and enhancing their pedagogical journey. It may be unconventional and not so obvious, but the benefit is absolutely present.

## The Everyday Meaning of my Experience

**I CAPTURED THE LAST MONTH** of my undergraduate experience in a series of moments. Receiving a 90% on my second accounting class exam. Hiding my tears behind my sunglasses as one of my youngest students rode one of the most beautiful dressage tests I've ever seen. Sitting around the table at my internship with the best editorial team I could hope to know. Cantering down the centerline at the first dressage competition of the season, debuting at a new level, to earn the first score towards my United States Dressage Federation silver medal. Achieving a new record page count and writing 40 pages in a single day in a chapter of my book.

**What gave me the ability to do all of those things? Formal and informal education combined. Because of my experiences—unconventional, experiential, and traditional—I finished my undergraduate education a better writer and a better rider.**

What gave me the ability to do all of those things? Formal and informal education combined. Because of my experiences—unconventional, experiential, and traditional—I finished my undergraduate education a better writer and a better rider. I finished my education with a job that I love and hope for the future. I realized that my undergraduate experience meant so much more than just a stepping stone to a graduate program or a career. I hope that other students who embrace unconventional learning can realize this as well. I hope that educators and other professionals in student affairs can see the beauty behind embracing the unconventional in their students.

If I ever get the privilege of teaching an advanced creative writing class, I'll proudly tell my students about the value of the untraditional experience. My teaching journey, for instance, began in a dirt arena, with horses at my side.

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