

I truly believe that a horse trainer's first and most pressing duty is to understand the horse. This starts with learning about their anatomy and physiology, understanding what constitutes a species' appropriate environment and lifestyle, and developing a feel for how horses communicate with one another. Fulfilling this responsibility can be a challenge when you likely have years of information floating around in your mind that was passed down to you from your trainers, and to them from their trainers, about how things ought to be done with horses - information that has entered into the canon of horsemanship, such as "Your horse needs to know you're the leader" (because we've all been taught that horses follow a hierarchical herd scheme).

When such principles are transmitted as truths throughout generations, it's natural that we would rarely have occasion to question them. It makes sense to accept and believe in the way things have always been done. But perhaps inconveniently, and perhaps miraculously, this complacency is not what the horse demands of us as trainers. Horses, not tradition, are indeed our greatest teachers, and listening to them and getting to know them inside and out as individuals is the utmost service we can do for them, our students and the industry as a whole.

Dressage4Kids has always done a wonderful job of encouraging its members to advocate for their horses. As I've grown older, I've come to appreciate this simple mantra more and more. However, although simple in theory, I've also learned that this is not an easy creed to practice. Especially not as a young person, when experience rules supreme in our equine endeavours - be it vet care, farriery, riding or stable management. I've often found myself struggling to step into the role of primary advocate and guardian for my horse when faced with a differing *professional* opinion. These are tricky waters to sail because it can often feel like you're stuck straddling the line of doing what you feel is best for your horse and potentially insulting an 'expert'.

Well, I can tell you right now that if you commit and devote yourself to learning about the intricacies of horses you empower yourself to be able to navigate those murky waters with more grace and ease. (Chances are it will still feel awkward though!). That's where having someone to encourage you on this path of self-exploration and education can be immensely helpful. After all, we could all use a little support from someone we trust in these emotional moments.

That is why I felt very passionate about using my Training4Teaching scholarship to enrol (for the second time!) in Alexa Linton's Whole Horse Apprenticeship. I want to be a pillar for my students when it comes down to making the most informed calls on their horse's health, well-being and training. Alexa's 6 month immersive course is broken down into 4 interwoven modules: Physical, Energetic, Emotional and Spiritual. With guest speaker webinars, on-line courses and weekly curated educational articles and videos, apprentices are guided through a deep examination of their way of showing up in the lives of their equine counterparts.

Today I'll be reporting on what I garnered from the first 6 weeks of my experience, the Physical Module. As it is my second time being in the Apprenticeship, it's been wonderful to re-digest and expand my understanding of the material in the course.

Hoof care has been an especially interesting topic for me this year, as I have recently transitioned my shod D4K donation horse, Ike, to barefoot. In the webinar by hoof care practitioner Jana Hunter, I not only learned about the 3 key elements of promoting healthy

hooves (trim, movement + management and diet) but was also taught how to look for common hoof pathologies that, believe it or not, often go unaddressed in many horses. For example, central sulcus cracks (a frequent concomitance of thrush) need to be treated like an open wound. Depending on the depth of the crack, it's possible that it could be open all the way to the live tissue inside the hoof capsule. This is a particularly prevalent issue in horses with contracted heels and small, undernourished frogs. These two conditions are often seen on horses who are shod. Shoes prevent the frog from contacting the ground, which inhibits blood flow to the region and eventually leads to a frog that cannot perform its role of shock absorption and acting as a second heart, pumping blood and fluid back up the limb.



Digestion was also a pertinent piece for me this fall, as I've been battling minor recurring colics with my horse, and am of course always keen to learn more about good old pesky ulcers! One of my favourite resources was a simple palpation technique you can do on your horse if you suspect ulcers. You can find it on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fr05hMmLCY4>

Among both of these topics, we also discovered natural balance dentistry, building a track system for your horse (a.k.a Paddock Paradise), looking beneath the skin at the horse's fascial network, CranioSacral therapy and saddle fitting tips.

I know in my heart that all of the wonderful information in this course is going to build the foundation I need to truly help students and their horses. As I said earlier, horse-friendly training begins with being dedicated to building an awareness of each horse as a unique being, and honouring their feedback (whether it be physical symptoms or behavioural indications) in order to carve a path forward together. What better to support this journey than to immerse oneself in a program whose mission is to promote the health and well-being of the whole

horse! I am incredibly grateful to D4K for providing me with the funds to pursue this opportunity that so aligns with the work I want to contribute to our equestrian community. Thank you!!