

Thinking Outside the Box

Tips on capturing, shaping and getting your horse to offer behavior using +R

This article is the third in a series on understanding how clicker training uses the quadrants of operant conditioning to train behavior. In the first article, I discussed the 4 quadrants of operant conditioning and their place in my toolbox as a clicker trainer. In the second article, I discussed how to use positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement together to train behaviors in such a way that the spirit of positive reinforcement training was not affected by the use of potential aversives such as pressure. In this article, I want to share some ideas for how to train with positive reinforcement as the main training tool, as opposed to intentionally combining it with other quadrants.

I originally titled this article "How to Train Using +R Alone," but that title never worked very well for me. For one thing, I think it's pretty hard to be sure that you are using +R alone and somehow the topic brings up various debates about what methods can be used if the training is still going to be labeled as +R. Referring to training as only +R also seems to create some divisions between people and leads to moral and philosophical debates over which quadrants they are using. I didn't want to get sidetracked by those issues because which quadrant you use is not the point of this article. This article is just a closer look at what training strategies you can use if you choose to train with +R.

By focusing on +R in this article, I am not pretending that a horse working on its own to get a click and treat is not under some kind of pressure, because it is. And I am not saying that only using +R is better. For some horses, the absence of input from the handler is actually very frustrating and an approach using only +R in a training session creates frustration. But there are times when I do want to train using only +R as much as possible, and if I want to do that, I need to have a +R toolbox of ways to get behavior started. Just as I have a toolbox of ways to use pressure and release to jump start behavior without creating an uncomfortable training situation, I need to spend time developing my +R toolbox.

So for the purposes of this article, I am going to concentrate on getting behavior where the only quadrant the trainer is actively using is the +R one, and the goal is to get the horse freely offering behavior based upon what is being clicked. When I train with the intent to use positive reinforcement alone, I am going to set up training situations where the horse is likely to offer some behavior I can use as the starting point for my training. This means I am focusing on reinforcing behavior I like and I am purposely not integrating negative reinforcement or punishment into my training plan. For many of us (including me), it is easier to add clicker training on to what we already know (traditional horsemanship) so placing the emphasis on +R forces us to explore other options.

Learning to use +R better is a good exercise for both horse and trainer and exploring +R options will help you become a more flexible and creative trainer. These skills may come in handy because there may be times when +R is your only or best option. I might develop a training plan that uses +R because I have a shutdown horse and since +R creates a different training environment and approach, it can help a horse become an enthusiastic and willing partner. Also, I might choose to use +R because there are some behaviors that are more easily trained with +R. Setting up training with the emphasis on +R is important for horses that are fearful or overly sensitive because of past training experiences, and makes me less likely to tap into previous training that has a negative emotional response since I am using a novel approach. Training behaviors with different consequences and in novel ways can avoid triggering avoidance or escape behavior. With some horses, training with +R is an important step in building their confidence and encouraging them to think instead of react. I also think training with +R is a good way to keep the trainer's skills sharp and it provides good feedback on what the horse really understands and is willing to freely offer. I often recommend that trainers teach a few behaviors with +R alone as a way to compare it with the horse's behavior under other training scenarios. This is a good way to sort out if you have any poisoned cues.

Writing about developing a +R toolbox sounds simple, but it was not until I started writing this article that I realized it was going to be difficult to define the scope and content of it. In most +R approaches, the behaviors are taught through capturing and shaping. An article on how to train using only +R could end up being a whole book if I wanted to go into the details of how to do it, or it could end up being a one-liner and I could just say "Capture or Free-shape it." These options are at opposite ends of the spectrum and I was looking for something in the middle. What I wanted to do was give people a better idea how clicker trainers get behavior with +R using capturing, shaping and other compatible tools. Even though capturing and shaping are the basic tools, that doesn't mean it is always immediately obvious how to use them to get the behavior you want. So what I have done is grouped ways to get behavior into

common strategies that rely on capturing and shaping and in the description of each strategy, I have included a few examples.

The examples range from straightforward ones to more creative ones. For some of the strategies the list could be very long as there are endless behaviors that can be shaped and captured and I have not attempted to list them all. For other strategies, I have included all the examples I could find as these are the ones that are really about thinking outside the box and the more of these, the better. My hope is that the strategies and examples will help you think about how you could train the behaviors you want with +R. Hopefully they will give you some ideas about how you can come up with creative ways to use +R in your regular training. This will make you a more versatile trainer and it will also help you out in those times when a +R approach is the better or only option.

Before I get into the details of training using +R, I want to mention that since most of us are used to doing something to get our horses to do behavior, it can take a mental shift and a bit of imagination to come up with new ways to train that encourage the horse to initiate the behavior. This may seem discouraging, but it is very common and just requires some practice in learning to think about training differently. In addition to the trainer needing to make a mental shift, the horse can have the same problem. Crossover horses (those that started with traditional training and are now being clicker trained) can be slow to offer behavior because they are not used to thinking or having permission to think. So it is good to have a variety of ideas for how to train the same behavior. The more ways you can think of to get a behavior, the more likely you are to find one that works for your horse. Once you and your horse get going, it will get easier and easier to get behavior started.

The strategies listed in this article are designed to provide a framework for a new way to think about training so that clicker trainers of all levels can start to think differently about training and the ideas and examples will help them come up with their own +R solutions. When I first started clicker training, I relied heavily on other people's ideas for how to get behavior. I think this is how most of us start because we need some recipes to follow since we are new to shaping behavior. Then once I had trained a few different behaviors, I found I could come up with my own ideas for how to train new behaviors. Some of these were variations on what I had already done and some were new ideas. The process of shaping behaviors helped develop my own creativity so once I got going, I had more and more new ideas. All these strategies are based on capturing and shaping which are a clicker trainer's most important tools, so I am going to start there.

THE BASIC TOOLS: Capturing and Shaping

Capturing

When I am clicker training, my main tools are capturing and shaping. I can "capture" a behavior by clicking and reinforcing the behavior when it happens. Capturing can be very fast and easy if your animal is clickerwise and offers the behavior in a predictable way. Usually when I refer to capturing a behavior, it means that I clicked and reinforced a behavior in its final (or close to final) form and the animal learned to repeat the whole behavior to get clicked.

For example, I have a miniature horse that lies down on cue. I captured that behavior by clicking when he laid down, so I can say I "captured" him lying down. I happened to be working in the barn when he laid down for a rest and I clicked and reinforced him for going down. I think he was surprised when I did it and not sure what I clicked, so he didn't do anything right away. But 5 minutes later, he decided to lie down again as it was something he wanted to do. I clicked and reinforced again and I was lucky in that he was very clickerwise so he immediately thought "what did I just do?" After that he started experimenting with what I wanted and within three sessions, I had the behavior and I had it on cue. Things don't always go this fast. In this situation, I had a few things going for me. I was able to capture the behavior because he kept returning to it after I interrupted him. This gave me a chance to reinforce it again. I think it also helped that he understood about cues so I had a way to both capture the behavior and associate it with something I did right away.

Capturing can be this fast, but it is not necessarily so. There are a lot of factors that affect how quickly the horse identifies the behavior and repeats it. The advantage to capturing behavior is that if you can do it, you are usually reinforcing a big piece of behavior and this can be faster than training it from scratch. If a horse has to go through steps A-F before he lies down and I click him for step F, he will have to repeat A-E each time he wants to do behavior F, so I get steps A-E as well as F. This is faster than training a horse to lie down by starting at step A and building from there.

Shaping

Shaping is when the trainer gets a behavior by starting with a tiny piece of a behavior and selectively reinforcing some (better)

efforts until the trainer has changed the behavior over time into a new behavior. Some people make a distinction between shaping and free-shaping. When I refer to free-shaping, I mean shaping using only +R (no luring, prompting, -R) so this is a "hands-off" method of shaping where the trainer is passive during the session and the animal is using the click for information without any additional hints. When I free-shape, I am going to set up the environment so that the behavior I want is more likely to happen, but I am not going to "help" the animal during the session. In contrast, when I am shaping, I am still training by reinforcing small steps toward the final behavior, but I might be taking a more active part in the session. I can shape a behavior using a lure, prompt, other body language cues, or pressure and release. A lot of the groundwork I learned from Alexandra Kurland is using pressure and release to shape behaviors. I still consider this shaping, but it is not "free-shaping" because I am guiding the horse and providing information through the rope or my body language. Alexandra Kurland calls this shaping on a point of contact or directed learning.

Going back to the lay down example, I have another horse that also lies down on cue, but in his case I shaped it. I taught him to walk in a circle with his head down by reinforcing him for dropping his head and moving his feet in a circle. Then I shaped bending his knees and lowering his front end until he was lying down. There were many steps from the first "drop your nose to the ground" to the final "put your body on the ground." I do want to point out that whether you are capturing or shaping a behavior, both are about clicking and reinforcing a behavior you like. In capturing, you are clicking and reinforcing the final or almost final behavior (you can further refine a captured behavior), whereas in shaping, you are clicking and reinforcing a smaller behavior that serves as a building block.

Both capturing and shaping only work if you can find something to reinforce. And I think this is where some people get stuck. One of the challenges for most people is training themselves to see how to train a behavior with +R when it doesn't seem to exist at all. One criticism I sometimes hear about clicker training is that it doesn't work because you have to sit around waiting for the behavior to happen. But what you really have to do is train yourself to recognize the little bits of behavior that are building blocks, learn to see possibilities in unexpected places, and learn to set up situations where the behavior is more likely to happen. This means learning to think outside the box and being creative about ways to use what your horse already does as a starting point for more complicated behaviors.

I want to note here that one of the difficulties of shaping any behavior (both free-shaping and shaping) is that sometimes we don't know where to start because we don't know enough about the behavior we want to shape. Just because I have a picture in my head of the final behavior, it doesn't mean I know exactly how the horse has to move to do it, or all the pieces I need to train that can be put together to get the final behavior. If I get stuck when I am shaping something, I think it can be valuable to go find a video of a horse doing the behavior and really analyze it. To shape well, you need to know all the little steps and we often don't look at behaviors in that kind of detail when we are just casually observing.

The following is a list of strategies to use when training with +R. There is some overlap between them and they are just meant to be guidelines for different ways to get behavior with +R. I think they provide a framework so that using +R doesn't seem like a random procedure. I provided some examples and a few tips for using each one successfully. Most of the examples are ones that I have read about or used. If you want more information, there are books and resources out there that give more detailed explanations of the steps to train the behaviors.

STRATEGY 1: Capture the behavior when it happens - take advantage of behavior patterns and environmental cues

To capture behavior, I click and reinforce the horse when he does a behavior I like. Sometimes this is easy and obvious and I can just start capturing the behavior. Other times I might have to observe the horse for a few days. Horses are doing behavior all the time and I am limiting myself if I only observe the horse during training sessions. When I am working around the barn, I can pay attention to environmental cues or patterns of behavior that often precede the behavior. The more easily I can predict when he might do a behavior, the easier it is going to be to capture. Sometimes I want to train something and I have no idea how to start because the horse doesn't seem to be offering the behavior or anything I can use to start the behavior. At times like this, I have found that it is useful to put the idea in the back of my mind as I work with and watch my horses for a few days and then I will usually start to see some possibilities.

I might see something that I can use as a starting point or get an idea about how to set up a training session so that the behavior I want is more likely to happen. Part of why this works is because thinking about a certain behavior gives me a better focus and I become better at observing little pieces of behavior. Becoming a better observer is a huge part of developing your skills as a clicker trainer. Clicker trainers who have trained many behaviors see things that other people miss. Some of this is because they know what to look for, but some of it is because they have trained themselves to be more observant in all their interactions with their horses and they are quick to notice patterns of behavior that can be put to good use.

Some behaviors can be captured when they happen, even if they only happen once. A very clickerwise horse may immediately repeat the behavior. However, it often takes multiple instances of capturing the same behavior before the horse catches on. So if I want to capture something, I am going to look for patterns of behavior that set the horse up to offer what I want. If I can get a few repetitions within one session, the horse is more likely to figure out exactly what I am capturing. Getting a few repetitions in a row is a good sign because it means the animal is consciously offering the behavior.

I do want to point out that there is an interesting phenomenon in capturing which can make capturing a behavior difficult. It seems to have something to do with the horse (or other animal) switching gears into "training mode" when you click. So I might click for one behavior but instead of repeating or trying to figure out what I just clicked, the horse now starts to offer me other behaviors out of his repertoire because my click meant that reinforcement was now available. This is frustrating because he does not offer any variation on what was just clicked, so I have lost the opportunity to work on that behavior within that session. This has been observed by trainers working with other species and can make it very hard to capture the behavior because you only get a chance to reinforce it once in each session.

I'm not sure what is going on, but my best guess is that the animal is not consciously thinking about what it is doing, so it can't repeat it. You have probably had the same thing happen in your own life. You are going about your business doing things that don't require conscious thought and someone asks what you are doing. You might not be able to answer this unless you stop and look at your own actions or think about it. I find this happens a lot with physical tasks that have become second nature. I also notice this happens when I want to teach someone to do something and I have to do it myself and think carefully about what I am doing instead of doing it automatically. I know horses are not people (although sometimes I do wonder about that distinction!), but perhaps something similar happens with horses. I know that I can train a horse or person to do something without the trainee being totally aware of what is being trained, but I also know that if the trainee is deliberately repeating the behavior, it is going to be learned more quickly and be stronger.

Having said that, if you capture something enough times, even in separate sessions, you increase the odds that the animal will offer it during a training session. This is not a horse example, but I wanted to teach my daughter's puppy to lie down on cue. I had done some clicker work with him and he understood about repeating behaviors but he was not offering a lot. He is a Shih-Tzu and his preferred behavior is to sit and watch people. He sits and watches things more than any dog I have ever known. Of course, I am comparing him to our other dogs which are border collies so perhaps this is not fair. But in any case, he doesn't offer a lot on his own. I had tried various ways of shaping down and he would eventually lie down, but he didn't really get that I was after a down. It was as if he ended up in a down but didn't know how he got there.

So one week I just reinforced him for lying down every time I noticed he was doing it. I didn't click him, just fed him if I saw him lying down. I didn't make any attempt to capture him going down either, I just wanted him to understand down was a good position to be in. Then I had a clicker session where he was just sitting and I wasn't reinforcing anything and he clearly "threw" a down at me. The term "threw" means the animal consciously offered a behavior (this term comes from Gary Wilkes.) Since he deliberately "threw" the down at me several times, I was able to capture it and over the next week, we got it on cue. This is just an example of how you can help the animal develop a more conscious awareness of what behaviors you like, even if you don't do it in a formal training session.

You can do the same thing with horses. Just start reinforcing behaviors you like whenever they occur, even if you are not seeing them in your training sessions. With my horses, I don't usually hand feed without clicking so I would click and treat even if I was only going to be able to click and treat once. I find that horses are creatures of habit and if you reinforce a behavior enough, it will start to pop out in a more predictable fashion or at other times when it might be easier to encourage the horse to repeat it. It helps if you carry your reinforcers with you so you can capture the behavior whenever and wherever it happens.

Examples of Capturing

There are some behaviors that people seem to have good luck capturing. Some of these are lying down, stretching (morning stretch which can become a circus bow/curtsy/obeisance), ears forward, changes of gait, backing, nickering, and feet and head movements. Some tricks such as smiling can be captured (smiling can also be shaped). You don't have to think only in terms of big behaviors, you can capture some really small stuff too once both you and your horse have a better awareness of what is being clicked. A lot of early clicker behaviors are captured. If you think about teaching a horse not to mug, the early stages are often started by capturing moments when the horse looks away.

I taught one of my horses to nicker on cue by using the fact he would nicker when I walked into the barn if he had been in his stall for a while. So I had sessions where I just went in and out of the barn, reinforcing him for those times when he nickered when I came

in. He caught on to the idea I was reinforcing nickering and I was eventually able to put it on another cue so I didn't have to go in and out of the barn to get him to talk. In all honesty, I have to say that I also got some interesting superstitious behaviors when I did this, so it required some further training. . Superstitious behaviors are behaviors the animal thinks are part of the behavior you want, but have just been accidentally reinforced along with your desired behavior. I think the problem was that I could not see him when I went out the door so I was accidentally reinforcing a chain of behaviors instead of just nickering. Perhaps it is best to keep your horse in sight while training!

A member of the clickryder list wanted to teach her horse to canter in the arena without pressuring him. She found that her horse always cantered when he got to a certain spot in the trail. She reinforced cantering in that location, then got it on cue and then took the cued behavior to the arena where her horse had previously not understood that cantering was something she might want. This can take time. I think it took her 6 months to get a reliable canter in the arena but she ended up with a horse that understood cantering would be reinforced and was happy to do it in a new location.

STRATEGY 2: Free-shape the behavior (no objects, just you and the horse)

While capturing behavior is useful, a clicker trainer's main tool is shaping. If you remember from the introduction, the type of shaping where the handler is passive is called "free-shaping." Free-shaping is one way to generate behavior and dedicated free-shaping sessions can be set up to teach your horse more about offering behavior and to improve the horse's ability to process the information it gets from the click. These sessions can be used to train behaviors to completion and also used to generate behaviors that become building blocks for future behaviors. Learning to free-shape is a skill that both handler and horse have to learn. The more you do it, the better you get, and the quicker you see results. Your success at free-shaping is going to vary, depending upon what types of behaviors you have to start with and how motivated and creative your horse is. Some horses catch on quickly and offer lots of behaviors, others are more passive.

If I am working with a more passive horse, I will start with some free-shaping sessions where I don't have a behavior in mind and I will just click anything the horse offers (with some considerations for safety.) In a typical free-shaping session, I will put the horse in a stall or small area, sit down or lean against the wall and just watch the horse. The horse gets no input from me. I want to see what the horse does and I start clicking for things I like. Often a horse will offer something that has been reinforced in the past and I will use that as a starting point. My goal is to encourage the horse to experiment so the horse gets to choose behaviors that are part of his repertoire if that is what he feels comfortable offering. Even if I start with a behavior he already knows, I can then use free-shaping to change it into a new variation or a new behavior.

If I am doing a free-shaping session and my horse is not offering anything or not paying attention to me, rather than trying to make something happen or get the horse's attention, I just find something to click. You can click all sorts of unlikely things such as the horse looking for food on the ground or getting distracted by something. if you keep clicking and treating, the horse's focus will find its way back to you. Just remember that for this strategy, I am talking about free-shaping which is shaping with no input from the handler, except the click.

I don't want to say that any behavior can be free-shaped, but I don't want to put limits on it either. Horse and handler teams who do a lot of free-shaping are very good and the horses really pick up fast on what is being clicked and are very creative about what they offer. However, if you don't do a lot of it, it can be slow going as there is no other input besides the click. I do some free-shaping with all of my horses as I think it is good for both of us. It makes us think, improves my timing, and encourages my horse to keep trying things. I will say that free-shaping is often not the fastest or most efficient way to clicker train, but it has its place and there are some behaviors that can only be taught through free-shaping.

Examples:

Some behaviors that are often free-shaped are various postural behaviors involving the head and neck such as head lowering, Alexandra Kurland's Pose, lateral flexions. Alexandra Kurland also uses free-shaping to teach horses to activate certain muscles for her Equine Pilates and back exercises. Horses can be shaped to lift their withers, rock back and engage their pelvis through free-shaping. This is an awareness and strengthening exercise that is like doing physical therapy on your horse. Teaching a horse to pay attention to the handler can be free-shaped as can coming to the handler. The tricks "yes" and "no" can be taught without props by reinforcing head movement.

One winter I did a lot of free-shaping with my horses. Rosie's favorite trick was she learned to spin or walk in a small circle in both directions. I taught this by reinforcing her for taking her nose to the side and then following with her feet until she was turning in a small

circle. This behavior started when I reinforced head down which was a behavior she already knew. She wanted to do head down so I reinforced it and then looked for variations to see what I could do with it. I noticed that sometimes she took her nose slightly to the side so I went with that and turned it into a spin.

Peggy free-shaped a mini-donkey to pick up her feet by clicking and reinforcing the donkey for picking up a foot as she delivered food. Instead of the foot pick-up remaining a by-product of the feeding position, the donkey learned to offer it so she could get clicked and fed. She has shared the details of this training with me and I have included her story in the section titled "Some Stories" at the end of the article.

STRATEGY 3: Free-shape or shape the behavior with objects

So far I have been writing about dedicated free-shaping sessions where it is just me and the horse in the training area. But free-shaping can involve objects because I can free shape a horse to interact with an object by adding the object to the environment. I would still consider it free-shaping as long as I am taking the same passive approach and letting the horse interact with the object entirely on its own. But often we encourage the horse to interact with the object or assist in some other ways, still in the spirit of +R, but with a more active approach on our part. I am calling this shaping (as opposed to free-shaping) with objects and including both together in this section because they are so similar, just with a slightly different role by the trainer. One of the reasons I am combining both types of shaping is that sessions can combine both and sometimes we are using body language even when we think we are being passive. Rather than try to separate them out by going into fine detail, I will just say that when you shape with an object, you can use free-shaping, shaping, or some combination.

I do want to point out that a horse that while the difference between free-shaping and shaping may seem trivial, there does seem to be a difference between animals that have done a lot of free-shaping compared to those that have done less, or none at all. Free-shaping seems to magnify the advantages of clicker training. The animals learn to think more, get better at experimenting, get braver about offering things and about trying new things, develop better body awareness, and have a keener awareness of what was clicked. Alexandra Kurland told me once that animals seem to really "own" behaviors that have been free-shaped and they offer them more freely. So while I am combining free-shaping with objects and shaping with objects in one strategy here, I want you to realize that it is worth experimenting with how your horse does when you give him varying amounts of input.

Examples

I am including in this section behaviors that involve objects where the horse is free to interact with the object and the object is part of the final behavior. This includes tricks such as picking up and/or retrieving objects, flipping hula hoops, playing games with cones, mat work, crossing bridges or trail obstacles. This also includes haltering, bridling, saddling and any other behaviors related to equipment or husbandry. With some of these, you can reinforce "acceptance" which I will talk about below, but you can also free-shape your horse to be a more active participant as in teaching a horse to take his own bit, put his head in the halter and so on.

One winter when I was doing a lot of free-shaping, I shaped Rosie to go to a target at a distance, play the piano, spin a pinwheel, and pick up small objects and put them in a bin. I taught Willy to flip a hula hoop, stack cones and do various other tricks.

I am including mat work in this section because I often free-shape mat work. Mat work can also be trained using other strategies, but free-shaping it is powerful. Depending upon the size of your mat, you can free-shape front feet on, back feet on, or even all four feet on. Sometimes horses will offer variations on the mat work you are doing, and it can be a way to get some new variations on the basic mat work. Heike noticed her horse wanted to put all four feet on the mat so she changed her set-up so that she used a mat that was big enough for all 4 feet.

Cindy wrote that she free-shaped her horse to stand on a mat. She said it took 3 15-minute sessions and writes, "She was 15 and has always been anxious about changes in footing, whether damp ground, dirt to pavement, even changes in soil from something light to dark. It was her first experience with free-shaping and with clicking her for body movement where she didn't know what was being clicked. It was a very good learning experience for both of us. She has become "empowered" about footing, and rather proudly marches up to changes in color or texture, steps on deliberately, pauses and then moves on. It is such an improvement over the past that I've never worked to change it further. I feel she deserves that little moment of triumph."

You can also free-shape behaviors that are more passive such as standing for the vet (as long as there is no restraint), clippers, bathing or being hosed, worming etc.. I call this training for "acceptance" and I do want to say something about these kinds of

behaviors in particular. While you can stick with using only +R for these training issues, I think you have to carefully evaluate the situation. If I want to train them using only +R, then I must make sure that the horse has room to leave and go to a distance where he is ok, if it chooses to do so. Most of us would say that it is obvious a tied horse is not being trained only with +R as we have limited his options. But a loose horse can be just as limited if the space available is small enough that it prevents him from putting the distance he needs between himself and the handler with an object of concern. This means you need to be good about reading body language and make sure that the horse is having a positive training experience.

With some horses reading body language can be hard because they will seem ok even though they are not, and this is because they have learned in the past that they have no choice. For this reason, I don't like to train a horse to just stand still in the presence of the object. I will either encourage the horse to interact with the object or I will train alternative behaviors so that I know the horse is not frozen in position. You can ask the horse questions such as can you touch the clippers? Can you touch a target while I run the clippers? and so on. This article is not about desensitizing so I am not going to go into details here, but I bring this up because it is not always enough to just click and treat and assume a quiet horse is an ok horse.

I also want to suggest that for some horses, an approach that tries to use only +R might not be the one that is most successful or least stressful for the horse. If the horse is very concerned about an object, removing the object is actually more reinforcing to the horse than being clicked and treated. So for example, if I have a horse that is afraid of a hose, I can reinforce the horse for standing while I approach with the hose by clicking and treating. I can also reinforce the horse for standing by removing the hose and giving the horse distance which would be using negative reinforcement. When I start out, removing the hose might actually be a greater reinforcer than the treat and I need to recognize that. Usually at some point, the balance shifts and the horse is more motivated by the treat. Being aware of this means I can move back and forth between reinforcing the horse by removing the object (-R), removing the object and clicking (-R and +R) and just clicking and treating (+R).

STRATEGY 4: Shape or Free-shape the behavior with Objects or Props to be faded later

In the previous section, I wrote about shaping and free-shaping using objects that were part of the behavior. If I want to train a behavior that involves an object, using the object from the beginning makes perfect sense. But adding an object or prop to the training set-up can also be useful even if the object is not part of the final behavior. If I am trying to train a behavior and not making progress, perhaps there is a prop or object that I can use to jump start the behavior. This is similar to strategy 3, but the distinction I am making is that, in this case, the object is faded out when I get to the final behavior. The idea is that I can use an object to generate a response involving a specific body movement or position and then once the horse learns the body movement, I don't need the object anymore. Some uses of targeting fall into this strategy. I am going to cover targeting in more detail in strategy 5, but there is some overlap and some uses of targeting could be included here.

Examples

Some common examples of using objects as props are using cones or poles as markers or to get different body movements. I have used poles to get changes in gait or to teach horses to step sideways. Tanya used a pole and clicked her horse for "trotting" over it instead of pacing. He learned she was clicking the gait "trot" and started offering trot without the pole and then in other locations. He also started trotting on his own out in the field. I used a pole and/or raised pole in the same way to teach Rosie to canter. I had her trot over the pole and reinforced her for any change in gait as she went over it. She started to pop over it a bit and this became a canter stride which I reinforced. Soon she was cantering as soon as she reached the pole and eventually she started cantering as soon as I started to set up the pole. The presence of the pole itself became the cue to canter and I was able to replace the pole with a canter cue.

People get very creative with this. Yvonne uses a cone to encourage lateral movement in horses by asking the horse to walk next to her so that the cone is in its path and it has to side step. The sideways step can be reinforced and used to teach lateral movements. To teach a horse to push with his nose, Heike rolled a treat up in a carpet and reinforced the horse for unrolling it. She wanted to train the horse to use his mouth and nose differently and used the carpet to encourage a different head movement.

Sometimes you might need to train a behavior that involves an object, but the horse has already developed an unpleasant association with the item due to previous training. Rather than start out with the item which creates a negative emotional response, you can train the same behavior using a neutral item and then transition to doing this new, well-reinforced behavior under different situations including the one that previously caused anxiety.

Doris taught a horse to stand in a bucket by teaching her to put her feet in the middle of a tire first. The tire exercise was a fun game

and got the horse used to the idea of putting her feet in something. This was a cross-over horse who was suspicious about previously taught behaviors and she already knew she didn't want to put her feet in a bucket, but a tire was something new. Doris started by reinforcing her for sniffing it, and then built up to putting one foot in, and then two.

My pony Stella was anxious about bits and bridling so I taught her to pick up and hold a dog toy in her mouth. Learning to pick up the dog toy taught her that she was in control of how she opened her mouth (she opens her own mouth, I don't do it for her) and that it was her choice to open her mouth and hold something. Once she was comfortable picking up the dog toy, she understood that I wanted her to open her own mouth and take the bit and it became an easy behavior for her to do.

STRATEGY 5: Use Targeting to train the behavior

Targeting is a very useful tool for clicker trainers. It provides direction and information to the animal but without luring or pressure. It helps animals work toward behavior. A target tells the animal what it can do so it encourages animals to offer behavior. I use both hand-held targets such as a target stick and stationary targets such as cones or mats. Targeting is initially taught through free-shaping but once targeting is learned, it becomes a valuable tool in its own right.

Examples

Animals can learn to hold or station on targets, move toward targets, and move body parts in response to targets. Hand held targets are useful to teaching body movement or asking a specific body part to move in a specific direction, or to stay still. Some common examples of ways to use targets are to teach going forward and backing, leading, head positions (up, down, flexions), lunging (following a target), loading into a trailer or going over obstacles such as bridges, trail obstacles, and jumps.

Stationary targets are useful for teaching horses to stand still or hold their position. I can use a mat (a foot target) to ask a horse to keep his front feet still and stand. I can also use a mat to mark the location for the front feet and ask the hind feet to move if I want to teach a pivot or turn on the forehand. Mat work can start as a free-shaping exercise, but then becomes a way to get other behaviors. I can teach a horse to go to a target if I am training a horse at liberty and want to send him to a certain location. Targeting can be useful for dealing with horses in groups. Some people teach horses to go to targets for feeding when they are in group situations. I have a horse that crowded the gate, so I taught him to target the fence post next to the gate while I got another horse out. He goes to his spot and waits while I take the other horse out. I click and feed him in his target position while I latch the gate and then he goes off.

Teaching free forward movement is often a problem for many people. Horses can be sticky about going in certain directions and while a traditional pressure and release approach can work, it can also make some horses more resistant. Targeting offers an alternative way of teaching forward by asking the horse to go toward something good instead of away from something bad. On the ground, you can start with a hand held target and then progress to using your closed fist as a target if you want. Under saddle, people can use stationary targets to give the horse some direction. I often use cones or mats to help teach steering or whoa to young horses in their first lessons under saddle. I can also use cones to encourage them to explore the arena by setting up cones and riding from cone to cone.

Cynthia taught her mini-donkey to lead with targeting. She writes " My mini was always very pokey ... taking her for a walk was like walking with a toddler, and her demeanor was rather pathetic ... head down and no enthusiasm. That was before I discovered CT! She has now turned into a "ven" animal before my eyes and I have taught her to pick up her pace and to trot very willingly, ears forward, attentive and keen. You'd never know it was the same little donkey! I accomplished this with targeting. She has learned to touch and track a target and has transferred this to my fist (so I don't have to carry a target on our walks.) We have increased duration gradually so that we now can walk on for a long way before I need to reward her. She is a lot of fun to walk with now - a keen partner. She will also jump over a cavaletti, taught by following a target too."

I can use a target to direct the nose so I can click and reinforce some other body movement that is a natural result of the position I have set up using the nose target. One way to teach a horse to yield his hips is to take his nose the other way. If the nose goes one way, the hips will go another and I can reinforce that. I have used a target in a similar way to teach bowing. The horse follows the target with his nose and I can click and reinforce touching the target for starters, but then when I get a drop of the shoulder or rock back, I can start reinforcing that too. Sometimes I use hand held targets to ask the horse to hold one body part in one position while it learns to move another independently. I have taught horses to hold one foot on a target while moving another foot forward or back but without advancing or backing up.

Targeting is not limited to noses and feet. Lottie taught her horse to target a sponge with his eye. She writes that she has taught her horse to put his eye to a sponge so she could wipe the skin clean. She trained it by holding the sponge up and clicking him, first for not moving his head away, then for putting his eye closer and closer. In a similar way she taught him to let her rinse his eye with salt-solution.

In addition to hand-held targets and stationary targets, you can use things such as balls to encourage movement and behaviors. I taught a yearling to trot in hand by teaching him to chase a ball and then chasing it together with him on a lead. Eventually we could run together to the ball and he learned to trot in hand. Brenda Buja taught her mare to trot in a round frame by having her target a ball and dribble it around the arena. The position of the ball encouraged her to round her back and arch her neck.

STRATEGY 6: Shaping using your own body language as a cue.

Horses are very responsive to our body language and most forms of horsemanship take advantage of this fact. In many cases when we use body language, we are using negative reinforcement and the horse is responding to some kind of pressure which easily crosses the line into being aversive. This is not what I am talking about here. When I talk about using body language here, I want to specify that the handler is only using body language to put a suggestion out there. Body language used in this way is more about inviting the horse to join you and falls more into the category of modeling or mimicry. The idea is to show your horse what you want it to do and then reinforce the horse for copying your movement.

We can use our body language in this way when we encourage our horse to run and play with us. If I go over a jump and my horse follows me, he is not doing so because he has to, but because I have suggested it might be fun and he has decided to join me. Similarly, you can use your energy to encourage the horse to raise his own energy. Energy can be perceived as tension or pressure so it is important how you raise your energy. Increase your own energy in a playful way and see if the horse will match it. Jane found that she could encourage her yearling to trot by bringing her energy up and jogging in place instead of running with forward movement and putting pressure on him to catch up. One suggestion for using energy in a positive way came up on the [click_that_teaches](#) list and this was the idea of using music or the feeling of being energized by music to encourage our horses to join us in playfully increasing our energy levels.

Horses can also become good at mirroring what we do. Like free-shaping, this is a skill that develops over time. Barb writes "... I've been working on what you are talking about with mine this winter. I've just been working on them moving with me during ground work. I step forward and they step forward, I step back and they step back, then increasing the distances. They would start to follow me and at first I just captured the tiny efforts and CT, then it went to a step and then several steps etc. Now I'm trying the crossovers with the front legs. Just to get them to read my movements and mirror with theirs. I've been working in a small space due to winter but am hoping we will be able to extend this to outside come spring like I've seen others do."

I often see people teach or cue Spanish Walk by walking with higher leg movements themselves. Horses will also see changes in our own gaits as cues. When Rosie learned to canter during groundwork, she cued off a change in my gait from running to galloping.

Any discussion of using body language has to address using negative reinforcement. I stated above that one way to avoid the possible aversive effect of negative reinforcement was to think of using your body language as an invitation to the horse and not about directing the horse with pressure. And at the beginning of this article, I excluded negative reinforcement because I wanted to concentrate on approaches that are primarily +R and not a combination. A conservative approach would be to limit the use of body language to anything that could end up stifling the horse's enthusiasm or directly manipulates the horse.

However, I want to mention that another kind of body language can be used as +R and this is when we are training behaviors through physical feedback that is more like using tactile cues or physical feedback as part of the shaping process. I realize this is a gray area, but I think it is unfair to label all physical contact or body language cues as aversive. Some advanced riders and trainers are experimenting with using tactile cues that seem similar to negative reinforcement, but are offered more as information and guidance. As long as they are used in this way, I would consider them to be in the "spirit of +R" so I am going to mention them here. Tactile cues and guidance can be used in games such as Magic Hand (Alexandra Kurland) where the horse targets your hand with his body and stays connected through groundwork patterns.

STRATEGY 7: Create Building Blocks

Is this really a separate strategy? No, this is the essence of clicker training. The essence of clicker training is if you aren't making progress, break it down into smaller pieces. So this strategy is a reminder that great things come out of collecting many small pieces of behavior and that whether you have a specific behavior in mind or not, there is value in working on small pieces of behavior. If you can't train the one you want, start training other ones that you can train and see where it gets you. Maybe you will find ways to combine those other behaviors and use them as building blocks. Maybe your horse will combine them for you.

One of the keys to efficient training is to identify useful behaviors that are the foundation for your training, and then learn to use them to get more advanced behaviors. Sometimes when I do this, I am systematically training some foundation behaviors. Other times I am looking for little pieces I know I need for the final behavior and just training them separately. Sometimes I am just exploring pieces that I think might be useful later. I might spend time teaching my horse to have a better awareness of foot placement or how to access different muscles. These are fun projects in themselves but also have value because they can lead to other behaviors.

Examples

One of the easiest examples is the idea of training one behavior and setting the horse up to combine that behavior with another one to create a new variation. I have found that I can work on a specific behavior at a halt and then send the horse into motion and see if the horse tries to offer the same behavior but in the new gait. This works very well with behaviors such as head lowering. I might reinforce head lowering a number of times at the halt and then ask the horse to walk and see what he offers. If he has just been reinforced multiple times for head lowering at the halt, he is more likely to offer it at the walk. I think of this as priming the horse to offer a learned behavior in a new location or in a new context. I should also point out that many (probably most) behaviors that we identify as "single behaviors" are combinations of other behaviors, so having lots of separate building blocks means you can make lots of different combinations.

Here are two other examples from other clicker trainers:

Dorothy: "I started off shaping "the pose" when he was standing still. I taught him to walk beside me separately. I asked him to combine the two by asking him to pose and then take a step forward. Once he could walk beside me holding himself nicely, we just played with that for a while until we happened to get a windy day - when he surged into a lovely trot, still in perfect self-carriage. It only took one click, and he'd got it! The next day, I was riding out along the same trail, and when we got to the spot, he spontaneously picked himself up and started trotting beautifully. Since that first day, I have not needed any rein cues for self-carriage - I just trained in a seat cue when I knew he was about to offer the behavior, and we are now working on building duration."

Tanya : "Another pacing TWH, my project horse, Charmer. He had a lovely trot at liberty and an anxious pace under saddle. I had him at liberty in the round pen, walking, and captured head down. When he consistently offered head down at a walk, I gave another forward cue, and he went into a lovely trot, click and treat. Here, I relied on head down and a relaxed topline to facilitate the trot. He caught on in two short sessions and started offering it under saddle."

SOME STORIES:

When I was collecting ideas for this article, I got some great stories about how people used a +R approach in various situations and successfully worked through emotional issues with horses. Some of them are about training a specific behavior and some of them don't really fit into any category because they were more about reconnecting with a horse, not about training a specific behavior. I wanted to share them here in more detail, because I think they show creativity and how you can use +R to get through to a horse that is not sure it wants to or is able to listen to the handler.

[Peggy and the mini-mule](http://www.thebestwhisperisaclick.com) (Peggy's website is www.thebestwhisperisaclick.com)

Peggy Hogan shared this story about a mini-donkey with me. She writes, "I had a call from a woman who wanted help with her miniature mule; it seems she was having difficulty having her feet trimmed. When I came to visit this mule I learned very quickly that not only was she difficult, she was dangerous. If a person went near her front legs she would quickly bite; if a person went near her hind legs she would go on a "seek and destroy" mission with both back legs kicking. I learned that previous farriers would heavily restrain and force her, not train her to have her feet done. I also learned that she was "disciplined" for bad behavior by having her front canon bones

“hit.” Given her need to protect herself from both ends made for an interesting training situation.

The first thing I did was train in protected contact. I taught her targeting, moving her feet to touch the target and an auto-back. These things were trained through shaping entirely. I trained with a rapid rate of reinforcement and in short training bursts. The next thing on the list was putting her head into the halter (she targeted the halter first). I did this from the front of the gated area so I could walk in after she offered an auto-back, then work with the halter, then leave. We progressed through to the point I could stay in her space for a few minutes without triggering an aggressive response.

At this point I introduced the mat. Shaping her to go to the mat was the most profound “aha” moment for this mini mule. She became very calm on the mat and offered going to the mat with real enthusiasm. She was willing to station on the mat for up to two minutes while I moved around her paddock and near her body. I still could not touch her anywhere near her legs at this point but I was ready to begin the process.

I began by dropping a treat on the mat, behind her left front foot so that she would have to take a step back to get the treat. As she stepped back, I clicked/treated as well as letting her pick up the treat I had dropped. We did this cycle many times and she began to offer a higher “lift” motion as she backed up. One she offered this behavior I began shaping the lift. I would still occasionally drop the treat to start the backup of the left fore.

As I shaped her left fore to hold up longer and longer, I began to move my own body closer and closer to her. My goal was for her to stand with the leg up while I moved around her. I finally touched her leg (under the canon bone) but I didn’t “hold” it at this point. It was a quick contact. We stayed at this stage for several days. I then began to offer my hand, palm up and near the back of her left fore, as a cue to lift the leg. She would lift her leg and put it in my hand. Up to this point in the training I had shaped almost all of our contact and I did very little “directing” of the process. Then I started to introduce more contact like touching her hoof with my hand, tapping her hoof, touching the rasp to her hoof and other things she would encounter from the farrier.

I repeated the whole process with her hind legs (with some slight variations for shaping the lift of the leg). Finally I introduced another person to the situation, since she was pretty reluctant to have more than one person in her space. The whole process took several weeks but I was very pleased with how the situation turned out."

Tanya and Two fillies (Tanya's website is www.equinoxhorse.net)

Tanya writes "Here is another recent experience that might be useful. I work with a very skittish filly who has not been exposed to the world outside of her stall and paddock. We've been making good progress in the arena, but I had a nagging dissatisfaction with the quality of her attention. She was doing the behaviors, but always keeping an eye out for all the imaginary dangers. One day, after a short tune-in session of going through known behaviors, I turned her loose. She went careening around, snorting, spooking, bucking, between the periods of standing frozen, with her eyes on the horizon, poised for flight. I watched her and clicked for anything that seemed to be a sign of relaxation: a sigh, a blink, a momentary glance at me. She ignored the clicks and the offered goodies, but I ignored her ignoring and kept on with my agenda. Eventually, she started flicking her ear towards me when she heard the click. Then she went as far as looking at me. Then after one of the clicks, she came over to claim her reinforcement. In that session, I gave myself the freedom to click for anything I liked. Once she started paying attention and eating her goodies, I clicked for staying with me. Then delayed the click and clicked for leaving (which brought her back for her goodies). This evolved into clicks for investigating scary things. By the end of the session, she was a lot more comfortable with her surroundings and was staying with me at liberty without being on the lookout for the monsters. I keep doing these sessions with her, and she is becoming a lot of fun, being inquisitive and trying various ways of interacting with objects. I guess, this is a pretty obvious example of free shaping, but I had to think out of the box of my frustration with her spookiness to be able to change things around.

Another filly. We had been doing good ground work, up to WWYLM with the saddle on and the mounting block lesson, when it occurred to me that most of our work included my close guidance through pressure and release. She knew targeting. I had her target a ball on the ground, then, without moving from my position, took her halter off. She was absolutely lost. She went through every

behavior she knew, carefully watching my body language and ignoring the ball right under her nose. Eventually, she had a breakthrough. In one session she went from being at a loss to walking away from me to touch the ball and coming back for her goodie. Once she got the idea that all she had to do was to touch the ball regardless of what I was doing, it had a wonderful ripple effect in her work. There is more confidence and less anticipation when my hand slides down the rope. Not to speculate too much, but it seems that our sessions on free shaping "play ball" gave her enough of a sense of self that she is much more comfortable with work in hand."

Shirley shares about the power of positive reinforcement with her horses

Shirley writes: "First one was nearly two years ago my horse Ben told me in a very gentlemanly manner that he did not like the old way of training and much preferred clicker and positive. I was in 'old' mode get the job done and quickly, marching out to lunge him in his head collar. He even got a small hurry up of the whip next to him to keep up with me. We did some stop and start are you listening to me on the way to ménage and he did as he was asked, but no spark!! In the ménage sent him away and he kept going, pulled the lunge line out of my hand with just very precise and sufficient power as not to hurt me , but make his point. At this point exploded my anger and he was having none of it. It was not until I calmed down that he let me catch him!! Learnt that he preferred the ethos, ethics, just much more gentler way that working with the clicker makes me!!! Don't you just love it when they teach us a thing or two and again with positive reinforcement!!!

My other story is with Lizzie. She has a mind of her own. For fun would come out of her stable to re noticed - more you ignored her the worse she was - much like a naughty child having a bit of a tantrum, but does get noticed. So with use of just positive clicker work we did the following Every time she walked into her stable at night, c/t, stand still c/t, stand still and head collar off c/t and even when we went to close the door, and she stayed in c/t. Now able to take off her lead rope, in she goes, take head collar off shut the door, c/t All done by positive reinforcement. Believe me prior to clicker there were some very negative things used to contain this pony and nothing worked. Story of how horses feel about clicker this may help
She has also stopped listening to the rider when the rider forgot to use clicker from under saddle - once clicker was re introduced she worked and tried really well."

Shirley also has a horse that cribs (Grace) and she and Grace have worked out a system so that when Grace needs to go crib, she does so and then returns and lines up with Shirley so Shirley knows she is ready to play again.

LOOKING AHEAD

One of the things I like about clicker training is that we don't really know where we can go with it. My horses continually amaze me with the things they figure out and offer to do. I really believe that by becoming a more creative thinker and learning to think outside the box, I have improved as a clicker trainer. I think it is important to share ideas so that we can all learn from each other. What may seem obvious to you may seem new to me and vice versa. So, I would like to encourage anyone to send me their ideas to add to this article. My intention is to update it regularly to add new ideas for ways to shape behavior in new ways. If you want to send me something, please email me at kabart315@gmail.com.

I would like to thank all the members of clickryder and the_click_that_teaches yahoo lists that contributed to this article. Even though only some of you are named in the text, your ideas and input were all helpful. So thanks to Doris, Lottie, Cindy, Cynthia, Heike, Melissa, Tanya, Shirley, Caeli, Amanda, Laurie, Barb, Arlene, Peggy and Jane. I hope I didn't miss anyone - if so let me know.