Every time I see the film *Matilda* I am struck by the brilliant depiction of two very different types of teachers that this child meets. There is the soft and gentle Miss Honey, and the beastly bully Miss Trunchbull. It is easy to figure out which one has the most success with her students and efficiently promotes learning.

Just as students have their own style of learning, teachers also have their individual teaching styles, and these styles can be very diverse. For example, take the command methodology instructor (if you have ever studied dance you may remember the type), whose student produces a precision performance as a predicted response to a cue “…and 5 and 6 and 7 and 8 step and step and lift and turn…” as compared to the instructor who demonstrates, uses props, and works by the student’s side. Obviously, some methodologies are better suited than others to giving riding instruction. Whatever your teaching style, the bottom line should be remembering that an effective teaching methodology aims to create a dynamic learning environment and to engage the attention of the student to the material that is being taught.

Most of us can easily recall, or even currently work with, a particular teacher that we very much admire. Perhaps it was a teacher in grade school or university, a clinician, or even a teacher in your barn. What were the qualities that made them such good instructors? To go back to the film *Matilda* mentioned above, here are the points that stand out between two very different teachers:

**Good = Miss Honey**
- Invites students for cookies and milk at story time (not really necessary in a riding school but still an admirable quality)
- Is kind and knowledgeable, encourages instead of belittles
- Shows respect to everyone
- Thinks of students’ safety and well-being
- Is firm, yet fair
- Offers challenges, supports and guides students through the learning process
- Encourages participation and group relations
- Is a good communicator as well as a good listener; likes to answer students’ questions
- Uses positive reinforcement and makes learning fun
- Breaks down challenges into small, doable chunks
- Uses variety in class program: hard work followed by fun activities
- Assesses students’ ability and progress
- Follows and revisits goals

This is the teacher you want to be and want working in your barn.

**(Very) Bad = Miss Trunchbull**
- Actually seems to hate students, especially kids (why is this person teaching, anyway?)
- Is a control freak and needs to be in charge
- Is very full of self-importance; loves the sound of her own bellowing, fog horn voice as she shouts, belittles, ridicules, and yells the whole time
- Plays to an audience with a big false

*The Two Faces of Teaching—Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull*  
*by Didi Arias*
There is no comparison between the two teachers, really. One is a teacher, and the other obviously should find another line of work.

It is all too common to visit a riding school and watch teachers that lack an apparent sound teaching methodology. Perhaps they are brilliant riders who never learned to teach, or maybe their own personalities and interests hold them back from being good educators. Though not as dreadful as Miss Trunchbull, we probably have all seen in action examples of the following riding teacher stereotypes:

The Traffic Director…
gives directions but never really teaches. Students are asked to do little more than go from one movement to the next and from point A to point B throughout the entire ride, with the occasional cue to change gait. The student may receive no more input than a “Mrs. Jones, put your heels down” during an entire hour. This is the lesson content, week after week. No new skills, no demos, no real input, just going through the moves. Some students are happy with this because they have no higher expectation. This teacher may be uninspired, lack knowledge, or be afraid to make waves with the clients for fear of upsetting anyone. Boring.

The Yo-Yo…
is up and down all the time. One minute she is soft and sweet and the next she bites your head off. One minute you are her best student and the next you cannot even catch her eye. You never know where you are with this teacher. Another type of yo-yo teacher is the one that promises to start teaching a new skill next week and then never teaches it, or promises a show or a fun day that never materializes. This teacher may have some amazing information to impart, but has a very inconsistent approach.

The “Hey, Look At Me”…
gives demonstrations. Demonstrations are great during riding lessons, but some teachers take it too far. In fact, some spend the entire lesson exercising or training their own mounts and forget about the student. Or they may go through the difficult jump combination over and over again, to show how well it can be ridden, but hey, what about the student? This is the teacher who is in the arena for herself and not for her students.
The St. Elsewhere...
is mentally not present during the class, but is lost in the Elsewhere. She is doing her nails, talking on the phone, has her mind on what is going on in the barn and not what is happening in front of her. She has no clear lesson plan, is disorganized, and probably arrives late to class. She may be a very nice person and even a knowledgeable horse person, but she needs to learn to be able to separate her Elsewhere from the Present-In-The-Arena.

The Superstar...generally is the teacher who has gained some recognition and success as a rider and believes she has achieved it all. These teachers feel that their status means they are just so Ab Fab that you are incredibly lucky to have them as your teacher. They spend time chatting with parents and grandstanding to spectators, come to class late (as they have been talking to the Big Breeders in the observation deck), and are on the phone booking clinics as your paid-for minutes tick by. These teachers oftentimes only have an interest in you if you show notable talent, and are mostly concerned about your ability to succeed and uphold their name. Sometimes these instructors can be the ones that “lose it” and have been observed to be pretty darn tough on a horse that may be misbehaving because nobody is going to show them up in front of their adoring audience.

I like to think that there are more good instructors out there than the opposite. I myself am most definitely not a perfect person, rider, or instructor, and I think that perhaps we teachers, like riders, need to have two lifetimes to learn to be our personal best. Although I do not physically hand out cookies and milk during class, I do try to provide plenty of encouragement, praise, and good instruction, the real cookies and milk of life. When my young student wrapped her arms around me after class and said, “You’re just like Miss Honey,” I knew I was ahead in the game. That’s all you can really ask for, isn’t it?

More Words of Wisdom

“The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.”
– Author unknown

“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”
– Oscar Wilde

“If there is anything that a man can do well, I say let him do it. Give him a chance.”
– Abraham Lincoln