

“Dealing with that horse has helped me to understand my peers better”: of equine-assisted interventions and diversity and including

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Abstract

Purpose – This professional insight contribution introduces equine-assisted learning (EAL) to the field of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in organizations. As a form of experiential learning (Clark *et al.*, 2024; Stock and Kolb, 2016), EAL answers the call for more practical rather than cognitive forms of EDI interventions in organizations by offering participants instant opportunities to experience and practice with old and new behavior (Bilginoglu, 2021; Meola, 2016). Relating participants’ EAL experiences to theoretical EDI knowledge, this contribution provides the ground to initiate a conversation about considering EAL as an additional element to our current EDI work, both in theory and in practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Inspired by observations working as EAL facilitator and EDI scholar and practitioner, I analyzed fragments of participants’ reflections based on EAL experiences using alterity as a sensitizing concept. As a means to create a space without judgment in which people can encounter each other free of normalized thoughts and structures, alterity as a concept enhances our understanding how to increase diversity and inclusion (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Janssens and Steyaert, 2001). Organized along the lines of the three conditions and three tactics theoretically qualifying alterity (Janssens and Steyaert, 2001), the analysis explores elements of EAL reflections in light of such conditions and tactics.

Findings – Illustrating congruencies between EAL and alterity, this contribution provides initial insights on how EAL may help to bring alterity into practice. Showing that EAL bears elements of alterity and relying on previous studies showing that EAL experiences translate well to other (work) environments, the findings of the analysis provide a first stepping stone to consider EAL as a means to help translate alterity into practice. As such, the findings also suggest that it may be worthwhile to further explore EAL in (organizational) EDI contexts.

Originality/value – Introducing EAL to the EDI context offers opportunities to challenge our view on our current EDI work, both in theory and practice. Further practicing and studying, while starting and continuing conversations on EAL or other forms of experiential learning, may provide new ways of supporting EDI in organizations.

Keywords Experiential learning, Alterity, Diversity and including, Equine-assisted learning

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

[Plate 1](#) and [Plate 2](#) (following [Plate 1](#) in time), show two moments of an equine-assisted learning (EAL) session. Before the activity, I, as their EAL facilitator, instructed participants: (1) to lead the horse around the circle (marked by a rope); (2) to stay within individually designated spaces inside the circle (marked by bars); (3) to prevent the horse from entering the circle; (4) not to touch the horse.

In [Plate 1](#), the horse stands still, ears slightly back, facing the participants - who, except for one, stand still, facing the horse. [Plate 2](#) presents a different scene: the horse, ears forward, and

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Plate 1. Picture taken during an equine-assisted learning (EAL) session with a group in 2022. Source: Created by author



Plate 2. Picture taken a little later than [Plate 1](#) during the same EAL session with a group in 2022. Source: Created by author

all participants are in motion. Two participants closest to the horse move alongside the horse, while others take various directions. One participant extends a hand toward the horse's head. Though the images do not indicate what initiated the movements depicted in [Plate 2](#), something must have spurred the shift in positioning and behavior. As facilitator, I explored this shift in a post-activity conversation, encouraging participants to connect their experience with potential learning and behavioral insights applicable to their daily lives.

This professional insight piece positions the idea of *horses helping individuals to understand their peers better* in the specific context of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), presenting new means and opportunities for impact for EDI practitioners and academics. Through my work as an EAL facilitator and an EDI scholar and practitioner, I regularly recognize elements of EAL resonating with elements closely connected to EDI, particularly to the concept of *alterity* ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)), such as the need for be(com)ing open and sensitive to the other and their needs or be(com)ing flexible in one's approaches to harmoniously collaborate: During EAL sessions, I observe such behavior change between participants and horses (see [Plates 1](#) and [2](#)); participants' reflections in writing or conversations provide evidence of similar behavior change after EAL sessions in their everyday life with other (human) beings. As such, EAL may offer a means for translating its experiential insights to EDI contexts. Therefore, I aspire to further explore EAL's potential role in EDI work by analyzing EAL participants' written reflections using an alterity-lens based

on the work by [Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#). As our current EDI work often still focuses on cognitive learning approaches, neglecting the need for actual behavior change in EDI ([Dobbin and Kalev, 2018](#); [Guschke and Christensen, 2021](#)), I aim to advance new ways to support *doing EDI* (in organizations and beyond) by introducing EAL to the EDI context as a means to ignite behavior change.

To explore the resonance between EAL and alterity, I introduce both concepts in more detail, together with information on the data collection and analysis. Subsequently, I share and analyze fragments of participants' written reflections on their experiences during a sequence of four EAL group-sessions. Finally, I offer thoughts on how we may understand EAL in relation to alterity and what this may mean considering the potential contribution of EAL in both organizational and academic EDI work.

Paving the way

As a lecturer at a Dutch university, I integrate EAL into courses addressing practical skills and behavior change, such as *dealing with insecurities* or *collaboration*. Beyond teaching, I work as an EDI scholar and practitioner, navigating both the academic exploration and transfer of knowledge on EDI to the everyday practicalities of workspaces. Part of this transfer occurs through adapting policies and optimizing processes, for instance in hiring, evaluation, and promotion. Yet, having policies and processes in place is not enough: policies and processes need to be executed, often requiring change in individual behavior - i.e. a transformation from *how we do things here* towards *doing things differently* – in order to generate the desired changes towards (more) EDI within the specific context. Hence, besides reshaping normalized institutional policies and practices, EDI work also involves challenging and shifting ingrained behavioral patterns.

As we know both from research and practice, facilitating sustainable behavior change is challenging, especially when behavior is embedded in normalized (organizational/societal) discourses, beliefs and structures. My observations during EAL sessions and reading of participants' subsequent written reflections suggest changes from (normalized) familiar behavior to new alternatives during and after EAL sessions. In this sense, EAL sessions may encourage an openness to both reconsidering ingrained thoughts, beliefs, and habits and experimenting with new possibilities.

In (theoretical) EDI work, *alterity* describes the space allowing to move beyond normalized thinking and behaving, rendering new ways of (mutual) engagement away from the dominant norm ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). Encouraging to *step aside* through temporarily letting go of one's beliefs and judgments, alterity creates room for *the other's perspective*, providing a space for individuals to *become* ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). Considering *stepping aside* as the precondition of alterity providing the room for what they call "dance of perspectives" (p. 83), [Ghorashi and Sabelis \(2013\)](#) describe alterity as enabling "connections that are based on necessary reflection on discursive positioning to create empathy and changing perspectives" (p. 83). Thereby, alterity opens possibilities to explore and possibly change (normalized) thinking and behavior.

Coalescing EAL observations and EDI insight, particularly in relation to alterity, grounded in my work as EAL facilitators and EDI scholar and practitioner forms the basis for this professional insight piece.

EAL: of horses, humans and learning

EAL is a particular approach of experiential learning ([Clark et al., 2024](#); [Stock and Kolb, 2016](#)), which generally counteracts what in cognitive learning approaches is often critiqued as standing in the way of actual behavior change: the lack of experiencing old and practicing new behavior ([Dobbin and Kalev, 2018](#); [Guschke and Christensen, 2021](#)). EAL provides human participants with ample room for experiencing old and experimenting with new skills and behavior through the interaction with horses, both during the session and thereafter ([Bilginoğlu, 2021](#); [Meola, 2016](#)).

Why horses, in particular?

Generally, horses are considered particularly good teachers of social and emotional skills, compared to other (therapy) animals (Clark *et al.*, 2024): besides characteristics horses share with other domesticated or companion animals, such as being in the here-and-now, having no hidden agenda, having the ability to forgive quickly (Karol, 2007), being direct and honest in interactions with others, including humans (Russel-Martin, 2006), horses additionally hold a set of distinctive features that make them unique partners in (animal-assisted) learning.

Their nature as prey animals living in a herd equips horses with a certain kind of social behavior, which appears to be particularly beneficial in EAL (Selby and Smith-Osborne, 2013): horses need to constantly be aware of their surroundings (i.e. both environment and companions), intuitively and subtly communicating any detected changes in their (immediate) environment to their companions, be it other horses in the herd (Chalmers, 2014; Dell *et al.*, 2008), or humans they interact with (Clark *et al.*, 2024). During EAL sessions, horses immediately react intuitively to and thereby “mirror” participants’ (e.g. participants; other horses possibly involved in the session) body language, behavior and intentions (Dell *et al.*, 2008; Goodwin, 2007; Stock and Kolb, 2016). Plates 1 and 2, for instance, illustrate this “mirroring”, where Plate 1 shows both horse and participants standing still, facing each other, and Plate 2 shows both horse and participants moving. Likewise, Saggers and Strachan (2016) describe how horses will react with fear, when approached aggressively or disrespectfully, while they will willingly cooperate, when attended to reasonably (e.g. calmly and with care). Participants to EAL session therefore experience the horse’s immediate behavior as a reaction or feedback to their own behavior and intentions, allowing participants to increase awareness of how they communicate and interact with others (Clark *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, horses are considered unique, adequate, equal and active partners in EAL experiences (Bilginoğlu, 2021; Clark *et al.*, 2024; Coffin *et al.*, 2024).

Horses, humans and learning: how does it work?

Guided by a trained EAL facilitator, participants engage in un-mounted activities with horses, followed by reflecting “... on their actions in the moment, develop awareness of how their intentions are perceived by the horse, and draw conclusions about how they may in turn be perceived by other humans, thereby challenging preconceived ideas about relationships and communication” (Clark *et al.*, 2024, pp. 3–4). This transformation from EAL experience to new insights and behavior change greatly relies on horses’ nature as herd and prey animals: Immediately reacting to any change in their environment, horses teach participants to become aware of how they behave and what this may elicit in others (Clark *et al.*, 2024). Sullivan and Hemingway (2024) use the term “biofeedback” to describe the synchronization between horses and participants, referring to the equivalent of the psychophysiological synchronization between horses with other members of their herd. Besides the interaction with the horse, the EAL facilitator also plays an important role in supporting the transfer from the EAL experience to the participants’ personal or professional life (Stock and Kolb, 2021). After the EAL experience, the EAL facilitator starts a reflective conversation with the participants, inquiring about their experiences, how they recognize EAL moments in everyday life and what certain insights may mean for future interactions or behavior (Stock and Kolb, 2016). In doing so, the facilitator opens opportunities to give meaning to EAL experiences in participants’ daily lives.

Often, EAL is used to work on critical life skills, such as trust, respect, honesty, open communication and self-awareness (Bilginoğlu, 2021), leadership or management development (Kayes, 2002; Meola, 2016). The skills and behavior focused on in EAL are generally transferable to non-equine settings (Sullivan and Hemingway, 2024), such as work or personal life, and are maintained over time (Clark *et al.*, 2024): for instance, Meola (2016) describes how participants to EAL sessions reported improvements in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management at work up to at least six months

after EAL sessions. [Bilginoglu \(2021\)](#) proposes to support EAL with post-session reflection and evaluation activities, such as assessing one's own learning, in order to enhance results.

EDI: of alterity

The active promotion and implementation of laws, policies, practices, and interventions with the aim of increasing inclusion and (outcome) equality between members of different social groups in organizations has been only marginally effective, violated and rejected, or even counterproductive ([Groeneveld and Verbeek, 2012](#); [Janssens and Zanoni, 2014](#); [Prasad et al., 2006](#)). Many EDI initiatives risk failure as they expect *the other* to adapt to dominant norms, while maintaining their position as *the other* ([Ghorashi, 2022](#); [Zheng, 2024](#)). The entrenched fixation on and power of the norm repress critical debate about the very domination of this norm, enhancing inequalities and distances between social groups ([Ghorashi, 2022](#)). Similarly, [Maguire and Hardy \(2013\)](#) challenge normalization as being the antipode of problematization, hindering critical inquiry and potential change. [Ghorashi \(2022\)](#) argues that disrupting the elusive power of normative thinking does not require direct opposition, but “*in-between-actions*”, such as the creation of *in-between-spaces* free of judgment by anyone sharing the space. Such judgment-free spaces enable *alterity* by providing a prerequisite for listening to each other from the other's perspective ([Ghorashi, 2022](#)). Considering the other's perspective in this manner opens opportunities to question normalized thinking and doing, allowing for alternatives beyond dominant conventions ([Ghorashi, 2022](#); [Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)).

[Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#) position alterity at the individual level, portraying a space of (continuous) *becoming* without having to comply to norms predefined by dominant systems: encouraging to step aside from predefined norms, alterity offers space for developing alternative ways of thinking and behaving. This theoretical framing of alterity illustrates its potential to enable individual behavioral change.

With *qualifying alterity*, [Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#) delineate what is needed to create a space allowing for individual *becoming*. The core of the work resides on their suggestion to “consider the other from the position of the other” ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)), encouraging individuals to let go of their own beliefs, thereby enabling themselves to listen to and encounter the other and the other's beliefs without judgment. This suggestion thus entails letting go of dominant normalized beliefs and categorizing individuals based on fixed identities ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). Moreover, this suggestion embraces identities (and differences) as “subject in process” (Kristeva, 1994 quoted in [Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#), p. 128) or “performative subjectivity” (Nealon, 1999 quoted in [Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#), p. 130). This understanding of identities and differences is about *becoming*, rather than *being*; it is about continuously being in the process, rather than reaching some predefined and fixed end-state ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)).

In order to create a space in which individuals can *become* continuously, [Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#) further *qualify alterity* in three conditions (i.e. *thought of becoming*, *becoming anonymous*, *becoming non-human/child*) and three tactics (i.e. *stepping aside*, *resisting by creating safe spaces*, *sensitizing*). The conditions describe the characteristics of the space for alterity, opening up the room for continuous *becoming*, instead of adhering to dominant norms or aiming for a specific, pre-defined end-state ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). The tactics describe actions or interventions to shape the space for alterity ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). Herewith, [Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#) carefully describe what is necessary for creating a space for alterity and thus continuous *becoming*.

EAL and EDI: of horses and alterity

The means of *qualifying alterity* ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)) illustrate how to create the space for alterity in which individuals may continuously *become*. Yet, these illustrations remain abstract, lacking clear suggestions on how to translate conditions and tactics into

concrete interventions to be actively used in practice. In line with this, critical (diversity) management studies are generally challenged as being too theory-laden, too abstract, and too little engaged in developing actual practices or interventions based on research findings (Holck, 2016; Janssens and Zaroni, 2014; Parker and Parker, 2017; Spicer *et al.*, 2016).

Looking for a way of how to bring the theoretical framework of alterity into practice, EAL may be an opportunity: to provide an example based on what has been discussed so far, consider how the structural set-up of EAL sessions with concrete experiences, facilitated reflection, new experiences in non-equine settings, providing further opportunity for development and learning, may support continuous *becoming* central to the concept of alterity. Relating such observation to the lingering question of how to practically create a space of alterity sparked the idea to analyze EAL participants' written reflections, while employing the conditions and tactics of qualifying alterity as a sensitizing concept, to explore EAL as one of the potential ways to bring alterity closer to practice.

The EAL participants' written reflections used in the analysis were collected as part of a personal-development-module I taught at a Dutch University's honors program during the academic year 2023/2024. As part of this module, students participated in four EAL group-activities evenly spread across the academic year. The entire group of first 13 and later 12 (after one student dropped out of the module after session 2) students were split in two groups of six students for the actual EAL sessions. The topics of the EAL group-activities were: dealing with insecurities, working together, personal relations, and be(com)ing satisfied with one's achievements. As such, the topics of the activities were not explicitly linked to EDI. In addition, the participants were not prompted with any EDI knowledge or knowledge on the theory and practice underlying EAL prior to the module. All participants gave their verbal (prior to engaging in the EAL sessions) and written (after engaging in all EAL sessions) consent to use their reflections as data for future research and for writing this paper. Students reflected twice on every session, first, within one week of the session, followed by another reflection about six weeks later. The reflections were guided by two to three questions on students' learnings during and experimenting with new insights after the sessions and on the role the horse played for their learning [1]. As submitting the reflections was strongly recommended, yet not mandatory, not all students submitted reflections for each reflection moment. Nevertheless, I received multiple reflections from all students, and multiple reflections for most moments of reflections, all of which I read for the first time after the personal-development-module was officially completed.

EAL – alterity in practice?

Subsequently, I share selected written fragments of participants' reflections on EAL sessions, analyzing each of them in light of alterity as qualified by Janssens and Steyaert (2001). One by one, I first present participants' reflection fragments resonating with the three conditions (i.e. thought of becoming, becoming anonymous, becoming non-human/child), followed by fragments resonating with the three tactics (i.e. stepping aside, resisting by creating safe spaces, sensitizing) described to qualify alterity (Janssens and Steyaert, 2001). I conclude with a general paragraph on EAL and alterity in practice.

The process – thought of becoming?

The horse still followed us, after we opened the communication again: life does move on and I can learn (even if it is taking time and is frustrating sometimes). (participant #5)

The previous reflection illustrates participant #5's take-away of a situation in which the horse moved again after standing still for a while (similar to the situation we see in Plates 1 and 2). Participant #5 experienced the EAL session in terms of a sequence of consecutive moments, interlinked by changes in specific conditions: Once the participants "opened the

communication again” – the word “again” in this quote hinting at participant #5’s experience that the communication had previously been “closed” in a not further elaborated way – the horse reacted to their change in behavior (i.e. opening a previously closed communication) and engaged with the participants by following them. Subsequently, the participant gives meaning to this experience for their life in general, highlighting the continuous flow of live and their opportunity to learn (e.g. develop/change thinking and behavior) as a sometimes challenging process across time.

Participant #5’s reflection on the horse’s response to their behavioral change illustrates how this experience elicits an ongoing learning process extending beyond the immediate experience. As such, the reflection aligns with the *thought of becoming*, one of the three conditions for alterity: the *becoming* of an individual is not seen as a direct transition from one state to another, but as a continuous process of exploration without a predetermined endpoint (Janssens and Steyaert, 2001). The emphasis is on continuous experimenting and learning, whereby each new experience offers an opportunity to develop oneself further. The general set-up and underlying philosophy of EAL may be helpful in translating Janssens and Steyaert’s *thought of becoming* (2001) into practice. Providing participants with *concrete experiences* through the interactions with horses, EAL offers opportunities for *reflective conversations* and *active experimentation* with new ways of thinking and behaving in follow-up EAL, or in the everyday (work) environment (Meola, 2016; Stock and Kolb, 2016). Such active experimenting brings about new concrete experiences, providing new opportunities for reflection and successive experimenting, encouraging continuous developing and learning. As such, both participant #5’s reflection and the set-up of EAL may be interpreted in line with Janssens and Steyaert’s understanding of the *thought of becoming* (2001).

Unbiased - becoming anonymous?

Often it [i.e. interacting with humans, added by the author] is not as unbiased as we would like it to be. (...) observing the actions of the horse seems like the most direct feedback that we could get. (...) Thinking of the horse as someone without these intrinsic biases of age or maybe gender, as an entity that bases its choice on how much it feels it can rely on you, is therefore a reassuring thought. (participant #6)

Participant #6 reflects on how interactions with humans are often affected by predefined ideas or expectations in relation to age or gender (i.e. certain identity/status markers). Participant #6 implies that such preconceptions affect interactions (e.g. feedback) between human interaction partners. In contrast, horses are described to provide “the most direct feedback” (i.e. feedback that is not affected by preconceptions due to identity/status markers) that participants may receive. Participant #6 feels reassured by encountering the horse as someone who does not take such preconceptions into account, but who purely bases their way of interacting on “how much it feels it can rely on you”.

Participant #6’s reflection of how the horse does not attach any meaning or consequences to socially constructed identity/status markers aligns with Janssens and Steyaert’s (2001) description of *becoming anonymous*: individuals develop themselves without establishing new structures of domination and hierarchy, thereby opening up the space for development in all its variety and indefinite possibilities. Interactions with horses may help individuals to develop themselves free of structures of domination and hierarchies: horses consequently do not judge based on preconceptions related to a participant’s looks, history, or socially constructed identity/status markers, such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or economic status (Gehrke, 2009; Meola, 2016). Horses solely react to their counterpart’s intent and behavior (Frewin and Gardiner, 2005; Gehrke, 2009; Meola, 2016). In EAL, horses facilitate participants’ experiences of interactions in which socially constructed markers and hierarchies become meaningless and thus do not affect (individual) development. Reflecting on and learning from such experiences may equip participants with insights and skills to *becoming*

Emotions and feelings – becoming non-human/child?

(...) the horse was like a mirror. It reflected to me how I was feeling. When I was open and relaxed, the horse responded. When I was tense or anxious, I felt like the horse felt the atmosphere. It made me realize how much our inner state affects our interactions. So, now I am trying to be more aware of my feelings, especially in social situations. (participant #7)

Participant #7 first describes their experience of the horse's reaction to their own feelings and emotions. Participant #7 uses the image of a mirror to illustrate that the horse exactly reflects their own feelings and emotions, as if "the horse felt the atmosphere". The horse's reflections of their own feelings made participant #7 notice that their own feelings affect interactions with others directly. Participant #7 transferred this experience with the horse to their everyday life by being more aware of their feelings when interacting with others.

Participant # 7's reflection is an example of how interacting with horses may support individuals to (re-)connect with feelings and emotions, potentially eliciting behavior change. With introducing *becoming non-human/child* as the third condition for alterity, [Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#) also accentuate the prominent role of emotions and feelings in bringing about change: individuals longing for encountering the other from the position of the other need to act out of sensitivity and intuition ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). Such qualities oppose the characteristics of systems trying to streamline human life through dominant discourses ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). As such, sensitivity to feelings and emotions is essential to opening up room for disrupting normalized/normative thinking and bringing about behavior change. Experiences in EAL may encourage participants to act more congruent with their actual feelings and emotions. Generally, humans are prone to comply with societal pressures and dominant discourse ([Gehrke, 2009](#); [Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)), although these may oppose their emotions. Horses' behavior, on the contrary, is directly connected to their emotional experiences ([Gehrke, 2009](#)). As prey animals living in a herd, horses' survival depends on and therefore they trust those who give congruent emotional and behavioral signals ([Gehrke, 2009](#)). When being emotionally and behaviorally incongruent while interacting with horses, participants in EAL experience the consequences immediately through the horses' freeze, fight, or flight reaction ([Gehrke, 2009](#)), clearly opposing trust and collaboration in the human-horse interaction. Interactions with horses thus encourage participants to open up to encounters in the present moment and to tune into and act more congruently with their feelings and emotions. Thus, working with horses in EAL may elicit humans' sensitivity to and acting in line with their own and other's emotions, which may provide a stepping stone towards *becoming non-human/child*.

Making room – stepping aside?

In their reflection, participant #4 describes how their view of how to treat animals changed completely when regularly interacting with the horses during EAL. The participant was surprised that during one of the last EAL sessions, they wanted to literally step aside to make room for the horse in the post-activity-conversation, not excluding the horse by closing the circle we formed when talking. The participant reflects on how they saw other people treat the horses with love, respect, care, and calmness, something that they had not attentively experienced in this way previously. Going on, participant #4 describes that they want to practice similar behavior with both a stray cat coming to their place regularly, and with other humans. Participant #4 concludes their reflection with: "I'll make sure to let myself be more open to unconventional ways of doing everyday tasks. (...) if I encounter an interpersonal conflict then I'll try to solve it in ways that are novel to me and might be uncomfortable in some cases." (participant #4).

Participant #4 shares a situation in which they wanted to literally include the horse in the post-activity-conversation by opening the circle we formed while talking. This wish was something novel to them as they felt surprised about it. Reflecting on this situation, participant #4 made sense of their changed needs and behavior by having observed others in previous EAL sessions interacting with horses in a loving, respectful, caring and calm way. Subsequently, participant #4 transferred their reflection regarding this specific situation with the horse to their everyday life, describing how they want to change their behavior towards both animals and humans in their direct surroundings. Participant #4 extends their meaning-making of their EAL experience to everyday situations by stating that they generally want to act more openly and unconventionally, for instance when solving interpersonal conflicts.

Participant #4's reflection is an example of how interactions with horses may guide individuals to leave established positions (i.e. how they are used to doing things) in order to enable new ways of encountering others. EAL participants exploring spaces away from their common position within familiar contexts aligns with *stepping aside*, known as a tactic for creating a space for alterity: [Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#) contend that letting go of one's position within a given system and engaging in continuous movement is necessary for actual development of the self. EAL may help to bring stepping aside as described by [Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#) into practice: humans often interpret a person's characteristics in terms of socially constructed identity/status markers and consequently position others (or themselves) accordingly within hierarchies of (social) systems. Such positionings subsequently affect mutual interactions. Unlike humans, horses do not attach meaning to a person's characteristics ([Frewin and Gardiner, 2005](#); [Gehrke, 2009](#); [Meola, 2016](#)), which prevents horses' interactions with humans from being diluted by a person's identity/status markers. To illustrate, while humans in organizations often "follow" someone, because they carry the functional title of a "leader", a functional title alone will not make a horse follow anybody. Interactions with horses in EAL may thus provide participants with experiences of what it feels like, if an encounter is not informed by claimed or ascribed identity/status markers. In such encounters, individuals become disengaged from and possibly encouraged to leave their own position within the system. Leaving their own position, individuals experiment with stepping away from dominant discourses (re)producing hierarchical positioning predefining everyday encounters ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). [Stock and Kolb \(2016\)](#) describe how equine-assisted interventions "level the playing field" between organizational members belonging to different organizational (status) groups (e.g. union and non-union employees; managers and their direct reports), offering the opportunity for equal dialog. During EAL, participants may thus experience what it means to *step aside*, letting go of their own (status) position, moving around, exploring alternative spaces and positions beyond the dominant system.

New contexts and worried coordinators – resisting by creating safe spaces?

The whole experience [i.e. the first EAL session, added by the author] pushed me out of my comfort zone (I was in a new place, with people that I almost didn't know ...) and I felt like the horse was my safe zone. There is always pressure when it comes to interacting with other people and since I was not that familiar with the girls at the session, some insecurities started to rise up. However, the moment when one of the girls and I walked into the ring with the horse (...) that awkwardness almost disappeared and since we were both focused on the horse, it was very easy to talk to each other and interact. This was not the case when we were outside, waiting for the other girls to [do the assignment, added by the author]. So being in there with it [i.e. the horse, added by the author] helped us act more freely with each other. (...) Realizing that a common goal unites people very easily is an insight that I will try to use, especially when it comes to meeting new people (...) if I manage to find something, even if it is small, for us to do together at the beginning of the interaction, this will probably make the whole communication much smoother. (participant #2)

Participant #2's reflection describes how the novelty of the first EAL session, being at a new place, working with unfamiliar people, positions them outside of their comfort zone. The situation of waiting outside the arena for their turn to interact with the horse elicits several insecurities in participant #2, such as how to interact with unfamiliar others in this novel situation. Once in the arena, together with the horse and one other participant, participant #2 experiences the horse as their safe space, bringing in focus and helping participants to open up more easily when interacting with others. Subsequently, participant #2 transfers this EAL experience to everyday life by inspiring them to look for common ground when interacting with strangers to smoothen the beginning of a communication. Participant #2's reflection highlights how horses may liberate situations from common pressures or normalized ways of doing things, thereby creating safe spaces for encountering each other differently.

Illustrating how EAL sessions may enhance personal development by providing safe spaces for resisting normalized thinking and behaving, participant #2's reflection concurs with what [Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#) describe as another tactic for alterity, *resisting through the creation of safe spaces*. Safe spaces provide opportunities for unrestricted self-development adhering to personal preferences, as safe spaces are boundaryless, providing alternatives to the space defined by dominant discourses and systems ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). Resisting the system through the creation of safe spaces resides in the tension between the system with its predefined and streamlining structures, and the child-like, the embodiment of feeling, emotion, and expressivity ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#)). Through creating safe spaces, EAL may help participants develop skills to navigate this tension between the system and possible alternatives more in line with their own needs and preferences. This experience away from their usual environment and free of everyday pressures may offer participants new insights and possibilities, leading to variations in their thinking and behaving ([Stock and Kolb, 2016](#)). Such variations in thinking and behaving may oppose normalized ways of doing things, as participant #2's reflection illustrates.

The following fragment describing a situation that I encountered with a course-coordinator of the program further illustrates how EAL sessions potentially provide safe spaces for resisting what Janssens and Steyaert call *accepted discourses* (2001) and ways of doing things. *During post-activity conversations, we regularly explore how participants do (not) follow certain "rules" set by activities' instructions, such as "you may not leave this space" or "you may not touch the horse". Starting each topic to reflect on with an observation - for instance, that participants touched the horse, while sticking to not leaving their designated space (see for an example Plate 2) - the conversation often revolves around questions like "which 'rules' do we follow in everyday life - and why?"; "which 'rules' do we (eventually) ignore - and what is needed to do so?". Hearing about such conversations, the course-coordinator jokingly said: "I hope the students do not decide not to follow any university rules anymore, after having followed the sessions".*

This fragment shows how "resisting" is literally discussed during EAL sessions. Such conversations on the meaning of (not) adhering to "rules" during the session (and beyond) may plant a seed for challenging and resisting normalized ways of thinking and behaving in other contexts. The coordinator's remark on following university rules provides a concrete example of what such challenging and resisting may look like, namely that the participants challenge and/or resist aspects of the university's rules. We see how EAL may *create safe spaces* free of everyday pressures and expectations, providing the room to experiment with new behavior and encouraging participants to *resist* the dominance of a particular system through experimenting with new behavior.

Horses attuning to humans and vice versa - sensitizing?

(...) I really think that because the horse can actually sense its environment, and somewhat the feelings of the people around it, this creates a 'driving force' between a human and the horse. It's like a relationship dynamic, that needs to be balanced and harmonized in order for activities to work out.

And to achieve that, I noticed that me, myself, first needs to be balanced, harmonized and at ease. (...) I could most of the time see that the horse was not responding, hesitant, or even avoidant to us, and those were the times that I was tense myself. This was partly what I learnt observing the horse and my colleagues (participant #4)

Participant #4 describes the horse's sensitivity to its environment and the EAL participants' feelings and emotions as an essential element that keeps the relationship between the horse and the participants going. To collaborate with the horse, participant #4 feels the need for establishing balance and harmony in the relationship with the horse. Participant #4's reflection illustrates how they experienced the need to tuning into the needs of the horse and adapting their behavior accordingly in order to work together. Participant #4 also described how this attuning between the horse and human participants happens in a mutual way, for instance when the horse avoids participants when they feel tensed themselves.

Participant #4's reflection on mutually tuning into the other to establish collaboration between the horse and participants, resonates with *sensitizing*, another tactic for alterity (Janssens and Steyaert, 2001). *Sensitizing* allows individuals to be open and receptive to embrace multiplicity (i.e. various and co-existing alternative thoughts, behavior, approaches) instead of sticking to the dominant discourse of the system (Janssens and Steyaert, 2001). Janssens and Steyaert (2001) compare *sensitizing* to real listening, which, if done attentively, may support individuals to leave their own beaten track (i.e. thoughts and behavior possibly informed by the dominant discourse) and paves the way for alternatives to the normalized. As such, *sensitizing* may be understood as actively conceiving multiplicity through being attentive and receptive to the other, irrespective of their presentment.

EAL may help to bring sensitizing into practice, as interactions with horses invite participants to recognize that there is more to a situation than merely their own perspective. Stock and Kolb share a participant's quote illustrating how EAL may encourage participants to become more attentive to different ways of approaching the same situation: "Some people took different approaches to doing that. And you got to see the results of those approaches on different horses and different people" (Stock and Kolb, 2016, p. 46). Whether initiated by direct interactions with horses or by observing peers, EAL provides a space for attuning to others in interactions. Such practical attuning in EAL and associated behavior change resemble *sensitizing* as described by Janssens and Steyaert (2001) in supporting individuals to acknowledge and respond to others' needs, interests and perspectives instead of merely adhering to their own preferences.

From qualifying towards practicing alterity?

Dealing with that horse has helped me to understand my peers better, making me more fit for the dynamics (...). (participant #7)

Reflecting, participant #7 illustrates that EAL supports them in better comprehending their peers, thereby equipping them for future interactions. With this reflection, participant #7 summarizes the core of EAL, which is providing a space for experiencing interaction, reflecting, and learning, ultimately changing participants' thinking and behaving. Relating specific elements of EAL to *conditions* and *tactics* of *qualifying alterity* (Janssens and Steyaert, 2001) depicts how interactions with horses may form a starting point for individuals to both experience and continuously embrace *being as a process*. The previous analysis shows how EAL may offer an opportunity for interactions free of normalized (hierarchical) structures and dynamics informed by socially constructed identity/status markers. Additionally, the analysis delineates how EAL may practically enable the creation of safe spaces, allowing sensitivity and receptiveness to emotions and feelings of the self and others. Lastly, the analysis depicts how EAL provides room for experimentation and development of, again, the self and others, both during and after the actual EAL session. As such, we may constitute that EAL provides opportunities to bring both conditions and tactics of alterity to life: through its

set-up and developing dynamic between horses and humans, EAL may provide spaces that allow for meeting others free of normalized ways of doing predefined by a dominant system. In doing so, EAL experiences may spark participants' continuous thinking and behavior change. By encouraging *becoming* in practice in this way, EAL may pave the way from *qualifying* towards *practicing alterity*.

Discussion

Inspired by my work as both an EAL facilitator and an EDI scholar and practitioner, I analyzed participants' written reflections on their experiences during and after EAL sessions using an alterity-lens based on the work by [Janssens and Steyaert \(2001\)](#). This analysis illustrates that EAL experiences create the space for and support participants in recognizing and letting go of not always functional, yet familiar thinking and behavior patterns. Furthermore, the analysis shows that in doing so, EAL experiences provide room for experimenting with alternative thoughts and behavior during and after EAL sessions. Alterity has been theoretically discussed previously as a means to bring about more diversity and multiplicity in organizations by providing a space for questioning normative thinking and behavior, allowing for experimenting with alternatives ([Ghorashi, 2022](#); [Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013](#); [Janssens and Steyaert, 2001](#); [Ossenkop et al., 2015](#)). What was missing was a concrete possibility to translate elements qualifying alterity into practice. The previous analysis may be understood as an example to provide this missing piece, as it illustrates how participants' EAL experiences may help to translate both conditions and tactics of *qualifying alterity* into practice.

As the current data was neither collected in an organizational setting, nor specifically focused on EDI questions, this professional insight piece is not to be understood as *evidence* of a link between EAL and EDI in organizations. Rather, this professional insight piece may be understood as a first step to consider EAL in EDI work, possibly serving as a stepping stone for future inquiry, both in practice and academia: Illustrating that participants' reflections on EAL sessions may render insights and behavior change resonating with elements of alterity intends to arouse both practitioners' and scholars' curiosity to further explore EAL as a means to transfer certain elements of EDI knowledge into practice. Concrete reasons I consider a further exploration of EAL in the EDI context worthwhile in the future are the following:

First, the previous analysis illustrates that EAL bears elements relevant to qualifying alterity, showing that EAL sessions may offer a space in which participants can experience and experiment with old and new behavior ([Bilginoglu, 2021](#); [Meola, 2016](#)) relevant to EDI contexts.

Second, we know from previous research on EAL in organizations that EAL experiences related to, for instance, leadership or teamwork lead to change in participants' behavior once back at work (e.g. [Gehrke, 2009](#); [Meola, 2016](#); [Stock and Kolb, 2016](#)). While EAL has not yet been studied in the (organizational) EDI context, such results encourage assumptions on similar transfer from EAL to (organization-settings in) EDI contexts.

Third, participants' reflections provided ample examples interpretable in light of alterity, even though the EAL sessions referred to did not explicitly focus on EDI topics. In my view, this strengthens rather than weakens the idea of an added value of working with EAL for EDI topics. Participants themselves highlighted experiences aligning with elements of alterity without being prompted to such elements, neither prior nor during the EAL session. In case of EAL sessions explicitly devoted to EDI topics, facilitators may direct their questions during the post-activity conversation towards elements relevant to the specific EDI topic. In doing so, facilitators can support participants' learning and behavior change specifically within the EDI context. It seems reasonable to assume that such a specific focus on EDI in the post-activity conversation may bring about even more reflection and learning related to EDI than what this study's participants' reflections showed, as the sessions and thus post-activity conversations these reflections are based on did not have an explicit EDI focus.

With this contribution, many questions around actual dynamics and possible benefits of implementing EAL in organizational EDI contexts remain still unanswered. Yet, the previously developed line of thought may spark interest in practitioners and scholars alike to further explore and exchange about EAL as an additional element to our current EDI work. Subsequently, I will share some additional thoughts on what opportunities EAL may bring to both organizational and academic EDI work.

Some thoughts on EAL in organizational EDI work

As we have seen, EAL focusses on inducing thought and behavior change on the individual level. In itself, individual thought and behavior change is a valuable contribution to individuals and others they interact with. Besides, together with the cultural and the structural level, Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace (2019) mention the individual level as being part of establishing sustainable structural change. Ample evidence further suggests that changes on the individual level may extend to the group and possibly the organization level, for instance through micro-emancipation (Spicer *et al.*, 2016) or small wins (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000; Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Weick, 1984, 1992), in which individuals induce change in organizations, bottom-up. Such change initiated by individuals slowly spreads out in the organization, over time potentially affecting group and/or organizational levels. Possibly, EAL participants' take-aways from EAL sessions focusing on EDI questions may elicit similar changes, starting on the individual level, but over time potentially going beyond. In that sense, EAL may be interesting to consider not instead of, but in careful consolidation with other elements of EDI work, such as interventions on the group and organizational level, to facilitate mutual reinforcement of induced changes in thoughts, behavior, and structure (e.g. organizational policies and processes).

This contribution may also be understood as an encouragement to further explore and share experiences based on other forms of experiential learning. Understanding EDI work as a combination of both structural and behavior change, collecting and exchanging about new approaches to potentially achieve either of them are necessary. With respect to behavior change, our EDI work may benefit from modes of working offering room for practicing with old and new behavior (Dobbin and Kalev, 2018), something that experiential learning can provide in many different ways.

Some thoughts on EAL in academic EDI work

Introducing EAL to EDI work in this contribution for the first time, (at least) four opportunities for future empirical research arise: First, we may investigate, if the *theoretical reasoning* that EAL elicits behavior change in participants in line with behavior we aim to achieve to support EDI in organizations, generally *holds in practice*. Eventually, comparing EAL outcomes to outcomes of more cognitive approaches used to support individual level change in EDI contexts may be interesting, providing more insight into the added value of EAL alongside other interventions.

Second, we may want to better understand how exactly participants may benefit from new insights and behavior obtained during EAL, again, possibly in comparison to other EDI interventions: In *what kind of situations* and *how long* do participants refer to EAL with a specific focus on EDI? How is this similar or different compared to other individual level EDI interventions?

Third, the field of anthrozoology (i.e. the study of the interaction and the relationship between humans and animals), generally studies mechanisms underlying interactions between humans and animals in animal-assisted interventions through behavioral and physiological measures (e.g. Griffioen, 2020). Taking a social science perspective, we may want to study participants' *sensemaking* of the interactions with the horses, to better understand the role of the horse in participant's learning and behavior change in EAL, ideally related to the specific EDI context.

Fourth, when working with the help of animals, we need to make sure that this happens in a respectful, responsible and sustainable manner. Therefore, we need to further develop both our understanding and practical guidelines as to how we can work together with animals in the best possible way, as continuously done, for instance, by the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations.

Conclusion

Coalescing my observations and insights doing EAL and EDI work inspired this professional insight piece and continuously feeds my interest in further exploring what EAL may spawn once actually embedded in (organizational) EDI contexts. Yet, irrespective of the specific focus of our individual EDI work, our shared EDI work will benefit from exploring and exchanging insights about innovative modes of doing EDI work, both in practice and in academia. So let's continue trying, observing, exploring, experiencing, exchanging, listening and learning, both in theory and practice, to continuously advance EDI in organizations and beyond.

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Note

1. These are the three questions the students received for answering right after each EAL session:
 1. Write a short reflection on what you personally learned from the session. This may be either directly related to the topic of the session, or it may be related to something else that came up for you personally during the session. (max. about 500 words)
 2. Write a short reflection on which role the horse(s) played in your learning experience. Also describe what it was about the horse(s)/your interaction with the horse(s) that played a role in your learning experience. For instance: How did the horse(s) help you in your learnings? What did you learn through your interaction with the horse(s) and/or by observing other participants? (max. about 500 words)
 3. Write a short description of how you think you may want to use the insights from your personal learning experience of this session in your daily life starting tomorrow. (max. about 500 words)

These are the two questions the students received some weeks after each EAL session (approximately after six weeks, plus/minus two weeks depending on holidays or other practical implications):

 1. Write a short description of how you have used the insights from your personal learning experience of the last equine-assisted learning session in your daily life up until now and how you think you may want to use them in the future. (max. about 500 words)
 2. Write a short reflection on what you now consider the most important insights you gained from the last equine-assisted learning session. This may be either directly related to the topic of the session, or it may be related to something else that came up for you personally during the session. Also, looking back from where you are at now, describe what it was about the horse(s)/your interaction with the horse(s) that played a role in your learning experience and how it played a role. (max. about 500 words)

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