

Equine wisdom: Letting horses do the teaching

The Sabre Equine Learning Centre, which opened north of Whitewood in March, uses horses as the primary teachers in a non-intrusive form of education that benefits everyone from the classroom to the boardroom.

BY CHRIS ISTACE

Cowessess School teacher Therisa Sayer walks arm-in-arm with a pair of students, who represent both the right and left arms of a three-person organism that must work together to complete a given task.

Sayer is the "brain" in an exercise called "Who's the brain?"

"Left arm: Pick up the tray," she says. The student to her left uses his free hand to grasp a red tote tray from the bench in front of him.

"Right arm: Pick up the brush with the red bristles and put it in the tray," Sayer says. The student on her right grabs a brush from the bench and places it in the tray being held by the other student.

Later the trio—still arm-in-arm—move down the riding arena to a square marked with flour. To their right, a rope lays in a circle on the floor of the arena. Three horses stand

together at the far end of the room.

The "brain" and the "arms" separate. Sayer must give instructions to the students as they guide one of the horses into the rope circle and calmly keep it in place, all without touching the animal.

The exercise is meant to develop effective communication, co-operation, leadership, appropriate assertiveness, adaptability, teamwork and problem solving among its participants. It is one of many that promote a variety positive personal development and social skills at the Sabre Equine Learning Centre.

Located at the Sabre Quarter Horse Ranch about 22 kilometres north of Whitewood, the learning centre sits perched atop the north hills of the Qu'Appelle Valley. Ellen Thompson-Frick—co-owner of the ranch with her husband Greg Frick—and Leanne Perrin-Bear established the facility

after receiving national certification in equine assisted learning (EAL).

Both are EAL facilitators trained through the Building Block Equine Assisted Learning Program Series at the Cartier Equine Learning Centre in Prince Albert. The program, which has been around for about two years and grants facilitators national certification, was developed by the Cartier Equine Learning Centre with the participation of the Saskatchewan Horse Federation/Equine Canada.

EAL has facilitators, but the teachers in the learning system are actually the horses. Participants must learn to talk and act in a way that develops a positive relationship with the animals, which are extremely sensitive to their surroundings and quick to react to certain stimuli.

"Horses are super sensitive," Thompson-Frick said before the session with the Cowessess School stu-

dents began. "A horse can hear your heart beat from 50 metres away so if there is any conflict or panic in you, it's going to show up in the horse. People have to work their way through that. Horses respond in the right way with correct energy."

In this way, EAL encourages individuals to behave in a way that is conducive to developing positive relationships. They learn social skills that can easily be transferred to the human world, like developing co-operation, courtesy, patience, responsibility, appropriate assertiveness and appreciation for other people.

"The horse world is so much like

ours," said Thompson-Frick, the centre's director and lead facilitator. "Everything depends on trust and respect. Some people have asked me why we wouldn't use dogs for this. You can kick a dog and it will come back to you. Kick a horse, and you have to earn their trust and respect back like you would have to in the human world."

While the non-direct method of teaching with horses holds the kids' interest, the non-intrusive method of letting the horse provide the feedback through exercises helps keep kids from reacting negatively.

"A horse isn't verbally saying anything to them. It isn't judging them," said Thompson-Frick. "It is reading what the person saying to them through verbal cues or through a person's body language. It counts on kids to become more self-aware."

Perrin-Bear, Sabre Equine Learning Centre's program co-ordinator and assistant facilitator, is also a registered social worker. She became disillusioned by the more conventional forms of working with troubled youth. After learning about it from Thompson-Frick, Perrin-Bear found

EAL more effective than other methods of social work, particularly for rural kids.

"When I started to talk about this with Ellen in February, I really started to connect with it," she said. "I've long been an advocate for rural-based service delivery. Social work today is primarily focused in methods that reach out to urban kids."

Today, EAL is used for a variety of reasons, from behavior modification and life-skills education to leadership training and team building in both youths and adults. However, it was initially developed as curriculum for at-risk youth behavior modification.

"(EAL's) effectiveness comes from how quickly change begins to happen in the kids," said Perrin-Bear. "Some (social work) services are not as effective because kids have become desensitized to it. This is so different that it engages them better."

Thompson-Frick learned about the program through family. A nephew who was having trouble with at school benefitted from the program.

The Cowessess School students

are considered a targeted behavior group and are attending the program once a week for 16 weeks to develop their personal and social skills. The three youths are the first from the school to be put through EAL programming at the Sabre Equine Learning Centre.

"Hopefully, the teachers can take some of what they've learned back to the classroom with them and help the kids make a habit out of proper social skills that they haven't developed yet," said Thompson-Frick.

Sayer, who has taught at Cowessess school for 13 years, says she is starting to see improved behavior from the students. Last Tuesday's session was their sixth.

"You can be given a set of obstacles to overcome on paper to develop teamwork, but it's still very contrived. With a horse, the obstacle is real and you know immediately if what you are doing is working."

—Leanne Perrin-Bear



Chris Istace photo

Sabre Equine Learning Centre facilitator Ellen Thompson-Frick (foreground) watches as Cowessess teacher Therisa Sayer (centre), the "brain," tells her "arms"—a pair of her students—what to do to equip a horse grooming tray. The equine assisted learning exercise is called "Who's the Brain?" and is used to develop communication, co-operation and assertiveness.



Ellen Thompson-Frick



Leanne Perrin-Bear



Chris Istace photo

Cowessess School teacher Therisa Sayer (right) watches as two students groom a horse during a recent session of equine assisted learning at the Sabre Equine Learning Centre near Whitewood. Originally developed for at-risk youth behavioral modification curriculum, equine assisted learning is now being used for everything from working with troubled youth, school classes, couples, families and corporate staff.

"It's gradual, but it's there and that's what I'm looking for," Sayer said about the Grade 7 student's behavioral development. "It's interesting to them because it's a different opportunity to learn from the traditional classroom."

Sayer said she optimistic that the kids are taking what they've learned with the horses not only back to school, but into their homes and their community. She'd like to see an expansion of Cowessess School's participation in the program.

"I'd hope the school could enroll not just the targeted behavior students, but upper elementary classes as well, because there's a lot of good skills taught here that are very valuable to students."

Thompson-Frick has seen improvement in the Cowessess students. One in particular is improving relationships at home with a simple skill he's learned at the centre.

"With one of the boys, the first time he came he didn't want to engage the horses. He actually wanted to punch them," she said. "Now he's caring for them and wanting to pet them and braid their hair. He's even told me he's gone home and braided his cousin's hair, which is huge for a boy that was pretty challenging to begin with."

Adult education

Besides the benefits EAL has for developing emotional growth and learning in children, it is also a valuable education tool for adults, said Thompson-Frick.

The Sabre Equine Learning Centre has primarily served younger participants in the little more than a month its been operating. However, their EAL services are also being promoted

to professionals in a variety of industries, from corporate management to health and education.

Thompson-Frick and Perrin-Bear also believe EAL can be beneficial for relationship development between couples, among families, or among teams of people from the sports or business fields.

The exercises are tailored to the group's specific requirements. Participants can learn more effective communications skills, possibly reducing turnover at the office. They also have exercises for motivation or dignity and respect.

All of the exercises have a non-direct, non-intrusive format. The horses make the education clear cut; their actions determine whether an individual or team is moving in the right direction.

"(Working with adults) is a little different, because adults are a little more set with their personalities and with the way they do things," said Thompson-Frick.

Perrin-Bear believes EAL is more effective than the staged team-building exercises found in the boardrooms of some corporations.

"You can be given a set of obstacles to overcome on paper to develop teamwork, but it's still very contrived," she said. "With a horse, the obstacle is real and you know immediately if what you are doing is working."

From the beginning, Thompson-Frick has found it difficult to describe EAL and the services Sabre Equine Learning Centre provides.

"I'd come home every weekend when I was taking the course and I'd get goose bumps when I talked about it," she said. "I couldn't describe it in a sentence . . .

"My part is the arena. I get bouncing in there. I just love it. You know exactly what's happening. Some days, you know exactly what the horse is thinking."

After 12 years as a riding coach, she's excited about carrying the educational benefits of horses to a whole new level.

"I could teach people to ride, but when we had a group come, we could see that some people needed more than just getting on a horse, as good as it makes them feel," she said.

"You know it's going to be huge, because it works. That was the exciting part of being in on the ground level."

EAL program benefits

Through equine assisted learning, horses have been found to be effective facilitators for emotional growth and learning. Participants learn to process feelings, behaviors and patterns while gaining a greater awareness of themselves and others.

EAL also develops a wide variety of skills and promotes many positive personal habits, including:

- The development of skills in communication, teamwork and problem solving.
- The development of healthy relationships.
- Finding success over obstacles.
- Learning to appreciate others.
- Building confidence and self-esteem.
- The development of a personal work ethic, responsibility and appropriate assertiveness.
- Learning the importance of hierarchy.
- Learning the importance of having distinct personalities, attitudes and moods.
- Learning the value of work and having fun.
- Engaging in discussions and activities that allows participants to learn more about the horse and themselves.

Horses are effective at helping humans develop life skills because of their nature. They are sensitive to and aware of their surroundings and are quick to react to situations with honest and instant feedback.

The facilitators use of the horse as educational tool multiplies the participants rate of success at self discovery. Horses magnify and mirror an individual's problem immediately and can't discern a participants motive or manipulate their behavior. However, a horse's sensitivity and intuition can provide individuals with a method of self-discovery that is effective and life-changing.