

Why Do You Force Your Ways?

by Frank Fingarsen

Matthew was a maddening student. He never did what I asked of him and his school work was dismal. Parents' Night was coming up and I planned to bring this situation to a head. A special letter had even been sent out to his parents because I felt there was a need to confront them about the boy's attitude, and in fact, his complete lack of learning.

It was going to be touchy but it was something I had to do. Matthew was a big worry. He and I got along well enough outside of school but the classroom seemed to transform him into something else altogether. This young adolescent's learning skills were very low indeed. His work was of poor quality, his study habits were atrocious, and his attitude towards school was even worse. He was never successful because he never seemed to care. If he wasn't dozing, he was joking around; if he wasn't joking around, he was bothering other students. He was a problem I was determined to solve. Parents' Night was going to be a showdown.

Thomas, Matthew's father, would be the epitome of attentiveness, I thought. It was about 8:30 in the evening when things began to take shape. Parents' Night had been slow and the staff was ready to close up shop. I was sorting report cards back into a pile and compiling a list of the visitors for the office. I was feeling quite sorry that Thomas hadn't been there.

Matthew had been acting up lately and his work was at a standstill. I wanted so much to change this situation and hoped that his father could help.

I guess I must have been dozing (meditating) at my desk when I was jarred awake.

"Tansi [commonly used greeting in Cree meaning 'Hello' or 'Hi'], boy, hello. You got some time for me?"

His disarming smile poked its way through the doorway. He seemed concerned and wanted to talk. But I was ready for him.

We joked around for a while as I waited for the right time to put my master plan into action. I was really prepared: I had Matthew's books (such as they were) in a little pile; my planbook was ready to disgorge the lack of accomplishments by date, subject, and mark. My audiovisual aids were there to impress this man with proof of my work ethic; the machines were lined up in a corner to show that I've tried every conceivable piece of equipment available to humans. All for that son of his who couldn't learn and didn't want to, anyway.

Minosins

He was impressed when I discussed flashcards and listening centers; the videotape machine seemed to interest him and he especially liked the prerecorded stories that I had on cassette tapes. He muttered his "minosins" [Cree for fine, wonderful, that's good] and I thought, "Isn't this great!"

I mentally patted myself on the back and felt that I had finally found an ally who I could use against the boy! An ally who would convince his lazy son that I, the teacher, was right, after all. I was ecstatic.

Then out of nowhere, this question:

"Can you set a snare?"

My expression must have shown a need for repetition.

"I said, can you set a rabbit snare?"

Hesitantly, not knowing the reason for his sudden change of topic, I answered, "Uhh...no, I can't."

"Can you set a beaver trap? ...How 'bout a net under the ice? ...Can you cook bannock on a rock?"

"No, I can't...but what's that got to do with your son?"

"Well Matthew can and so can I. His little brother is learning fast and pretty soon he'll know it good. And I'll teach you, too, if you want but I'd never force you to do it. Why do you force your ways?"

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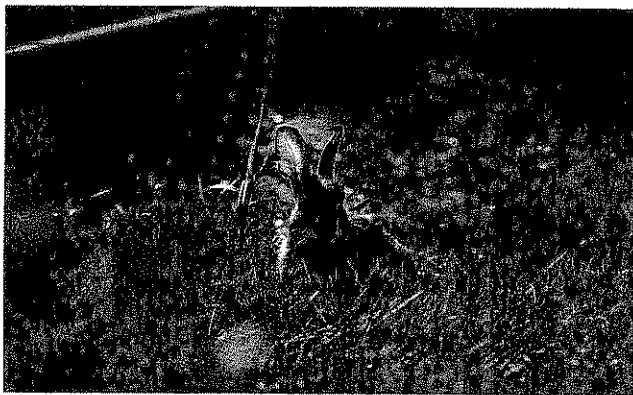
He smiled, then, as only he could, knowing that he had reached into my soul. I didn't seem to fully understand, so he continued.

"My Matthew is special. He's the very best young trapper around—even sometimes better than me! How come you say that he can't learn? He's learned lots. Maybe not your stuff—but lots!"

He talked as he slowly rose from the too small desk that I had dutifully provided for the parents and he backed his way toward the door, his hands gesturing as he spoke.

"You know, we don't want to be exactly like you and I know you don't want to be like us.

"Show your kid how to learn. Show him how to use his mind. He has a good one. I know! I've known him much longer than you have. Don't just try to drag him into your world. He doesn't want to be there. He has his own."



Weesagaychuk

"Matthew doesn't like to read about your fancy world but he loves stories about the bush and about hunting and about Weesagaychuk. [A common character in Cree legends—mischief maker, can change form in some stories.] He also loves to draw about his life but he says he is not allowed. How come? How come his pictures make my trapline come alive and he can tell so many things with his art and you tell me he can't learn? Maybe he doesn't read so good here but he can say more than anyone I know, in his own way.

"Maybe if you gave him stuff that he knows about, he would try harder for you. He reads at home and he's pretty good. Don't make him into something he's not. Help him to become a better Matthew...Please."

Our eyes captured each other's intensity and we both knew, at that moment, that there was a bond: an understanding between two people who wanted the best for this Matthew.

He touched the brim of his cap with his index finger as his way of bidding farewell. Smiling, he left me with "Matt will never be a Mistigoosoh [Cree word for non-native, usually used for Caucasian]—he doesn't want to be one. Please don't try and make him into something he's not. Help him become a better him and I will be grateful always."

Great Lesson

He disappeared out the door taking his smile with him. There I sat, transfixed and deep in thought. This weather-beaten trapper had just shown me what educating is supposed to be all about. I'll never forget him nor his great lesson.

I had tried all kinds of methods to reach into Matt's psyche. I used basal readers, SRA Language Labs High-Interest/Low-Vocabulary reading series. I made him listen to prerecorded tapes while having the book in front of him. I threatened, I pleaded, I bribed—all to no avail.

What I didn't really attempt was that which would come from the boy himself. His father provided the key that unlocked it all.

With this new-found knowledge, I began to work with Matthew and—wonder of wonders—he began to learn. I took advantage of his artistic abilities and his own experiences. He began to work and he began to learn. He didn't become the class "Einstein" but he did begin to read and find out about things and he did progress. I was his guide and he was my tutor, at times. I learned much about northern lifestyles and the people. I owe it to that late evening lesson that Thomas gave me that night at the school.

From that day on, I taught the "Matthews" in all my classes from a different point of view. My lessons evolved from their perspective as well as from mine. Their experiences, their lives, their needs, their abilities all became part of the learning experience for them. I began, finally and realistically, to teach by taking them from the known to the unknown. Teaching has never been the same. ❁