

However Imperfectly, Part 1

Transcript of Podcast Episode 342

Julie Walker: Hello and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

So Andrew, our topic today is your talk, your article, your book, *However Imperfectly*, which ... That’s a lot to cover in one podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Especially since I wrote one book, and it took twenty years to collect up enough for one book. At this rate I will not write another book.

Julie Walker: But I think you have promised on this podcast at least one or two books that you’re going to write. So I think if I don’t hold you to it, perhaps our listeners will, and then maybe there’ll be more.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. But a goal with no deadline is no goal.

Julie Walker: It’s true. A goal without a deadline is a dream. So, well, this article that you wrote that then evolved into a talk ...

Andrew Pudewa: Slight correction – it was a talk first.

Julie Walker: Oh, okay.

Andrew Pudewa: Then I wrote it. And then it became the first main chapter in the book.

Julie Walker: Right. And what you loved about this being in the book was there was no limit because oftentimes we say to you, “Andrew, we need a seven-hundred-word article on fill in the blank.”

And you’re like, “How can I say all of that in seven hundred words?”

Andrew Pudewa: This got a bit longer.

Julie Walker: It did get a little bit longer, but I just wanted to invite our listeners to listen in as you described just kind of an overview because I really don’t want to belabor this. We want them to get the book, and actually if they’re Premium Members, they can get the book absolutely free. So Premium Members get this book absolutely free. If you are not a Premium Member, become a Premium Member so that you can get this book absolutely free. They can read it themselves, and also in here is a link to watch you give this talk as a video. But let’s just start with the title, *However Imperfectly*. What does that mean, Andrew?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, Point #2 out of the seven points, which I subtitled “Lessons Learned from Thirty Years of Teaching,” is process is more important than product. And so many of us get caught up thinking about the product, the artifact, the perfection level. And in that Point #2, I quote G.K. Chesterton, who reportedly said, “Anything worth doing is worth doing badly.”

Julie Walker: Which is not what I would’ve expected you to say because my mom always said to me, “Anything worth doing is worth doing well.”

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I think Chesterton’s point was it’s very hard to be perfect. Right? It’s hard to, say, understand something a hundred percent, especially if it’s something worth understanding. So I point out, okay, I have read and taught Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, and I don’t understand these things perfectly.

Actually I understand them very, very, very far from well, but it’s still worth it to read it and teach it to your children or in my case, other people’s children as well. So I was thinking about that. It doesn’t sound too good: anything worth doing is worth doing badly or poorly. But what did he mean?

And so I thought, well, what he’s probably saying is what I experienced, which is anything worth doing is worth doing even though you do it imperfectly. And then I kind of expanded that idea to my whole life and thought, well, I’ve pretty much done everything imperfectly.

Julie Walker: Right. Haven’t we all?

Andrew Pudewa: But it doesn’t mean it wasn’t worth doing. And so that’s where the title came from, was I did what I did however imperfectly. And good, I believe, has come of it. So that’s where the title came from, and I liked it. I also liked it because the abbreviation is HI, which corresponds with humorous interpretation, which is a category of speech in competitive speech and debate: humorous interp. But you know, I wasn’t intentionally creating a double entendre of barely an acronym; it could also say, “Hi!”

Julie Walker: Well, that’s what I was thinking. You know, you’re a friendly guy, so I’m sure that that resonated somehow with you unintentionally. So you mentioned seven points. So do we have time in this brief overview to mention all seven of them?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, if it encourages anyone to unpack these a little bit either mentally on their own for their own life. Or read the book. Read the article. Listen to the talk. The first one—and I don’t know they’re any particular order of hierarchy—it’s more kind of, I guess, the flow of my stream of consciousness thinking when I put this talk together.

The first one though, I think, is a lot what a lot of people face when they decide to teach children as an adult: either their own children or other people’s children. And that is, it’s very hard not to do to your kids, to your students, what was done to you. And this idea that when we come into teaching, regardless of what we’ve read or what classes we took in college or the influences we have, the greatest impact, the greatest influence overshadowing everything else is our experience of having been taught.

And that lasted the longest period of time. Most people were, you know, in a school for over a decade, some approaching twice that. And so when we say, “Okay, I’m going to teach these children,” there’s this kind of continuous pressure to do to them, to create the environment, to use a process to create, have a relationship that is based on our experience of having been taught.

And it’s hard to kind of step back and say, “Well, was what was done to me a good thing or the best thing?” So we, you know, we bring in a lot of things that kind of challenge that paradigm. For me, and I mentioned the first challenge to that, was John Taylor Gatto. And first was *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Education*.

And then his kind of magnum opus was *An Underground History of American Education*. These are hard books to read because ... I mean they’re hard, and they’re freeing to some degree because you realize that this educational system that really ... I mean, if you were to say, “What is the greatest influence on overall society of a country,” the education system has got to be number one or in the top few.

And so the impact of that. And so Gatto helps to make you realize number one, the tremendous impact of that and then the history and reasons as to why we have things the way they are. You know, a lot of people just go through school.

Nobody asks: Why are we age segregating children? Why are we doing this *A, B, C, D, F* thing? Why do we believe that textbooks are the, if not the only, certainly the best way to deliver necessary information to people? You know, we don’t even question that. And so Gatto’s work causes us to question that. What Gatto doesn’t necessarily do as well in his writing ...

And he, of course, passed on, I don’t know, four, five, six, seven—I don’t know—years ago. But what he doesn’t necessarily do is give us a good plan to do something that would be different or better. We’re kind of left on our own after we read Gatto. So you know, a lot of my work in the last couple decades, I think, has been to deliver that paradigm, challenging stuff and give people hints as to how they could go about doing something differently. And I’m not the only one. There are many people who are working in this world to say, “What would a different education world look like?”

Julie Walker: Hints. You said *hints*, but I was also thinking in permission. Sometimes we need that because we went through that public school education where we were ... We did what we were told. We were trained very well to do what we were told.

Andrew Pudewa: It’s deep-level stuff. And I kind of joke. And you know, it always gets a laugh. But I’ll be at a homeschool convention. I’ll say, “The reason we keep coming back is because it’s like a Schoolaholics Anonymous.

We get together and say, “Yes, my name is Andrew. I went to school for twelve years. I don’t want to be like that anymore.” And just to reaffirm in community that we can challenge that deep-level, almost genetic-level thinking about institutional education. So that’s the first one, you know. And then the second one is this idea of anything worth doing is worth doing even though you can’t do it perfectly. And you know, we encounter this in a few ways.

One is we have this tremendous attachment to the product that our students create, and we get so attached that we feel like if it isn't perfect, then somehow we failed. Right? Whereas my point in "Process over Product" is that what kids leave childhood with isn't the stuff in the portfolio. They leave childhood with the experience they had in learning.

And then they go off and do very, very different things. It's funny; we imagine, for some reason, we have to give every child the same close-to-identical education so that they will what? Be good citizens? So they they will be ready to do, I don't know, a baseline job? But when we look at adults, well, we all know different stuff. And we all have passion and excitement about different things in the world.

And this individuality – sometimes we kind of have to fight for it against this tendency to believe that we are still some cog in the system that Gatto explains that's what the schools tried to make us be. So this idea of "What's the experience that children are having as they are learning?"

And one example that I had, and this was early on I started to realize this, was this very odd phenomena of having kids do competitive speech and debate. Particularly in my world, it was policy debate. So you get this really obscure kind of resolution for the year. And I remember the first year that I coached and helped. I don't ... I wasn't really a coach. I was just like, we're all trying to figure it out. We didn't have a coach.

But it was that "Medical malpractice law in the United States should be significantly reformed." Well, I mean, how much do any of us know about medical malpractice law, let alone a room of a couple dozen kids who are thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old? I mean, they don't even know what the words are.

And so you're just starting at the beginning. And then over the course of the season, you know, six, seven months from the beginning of the school year till you get into tournaments and competition, you are spending a lot of time learning about medical malpractice law. And what's the value of this, right? It's so obscure.

It's not in the information per se, which may or may not be interesting although I observed the fact that the more you study something, the more it becomes interesting. What I noticed was the way the students were studying was different than the way that you would, say, pull out a physics textbook and say, "Here, you're fifteen years old. You have to go through this textbook" or something, right?

Andrew Pudewa: The way they were studying was primary sources. They were very motivated by the positive peer pressure of competition. They were reading and writing and discussing to minute points of detail, these aspects of medical malpractice law. And what I noticed is that when you go deep into a thing like that, you actually start learning the subject.

So we would look at subjects and say, well, there's history. There's the grammar of something. Just what are the words even mean? And how do people use language in that world? There's the economics and math of the thing. There's the politics and current events of the thing. And see, you end up getting history and economics and current events and language in a much more real

way than you do when you say, “Okay, Chapter 1 of this textbook – I have to prepare to pass the test.” Right? And you know, the kids then grow up, and they forget because it’s just not something that gets reinforced over daily life. I’m sure that they remember some bits of information. But you would say, okay, they didn’t remember ninety some percent or more. I don’t know. Can you have more than ninety some percent? I guess it’d be a hundred.

But you know, they didn’t remember ninety percent of the information, which is about the same of a biology or a physics or a history textbook. But what they did take away was the experience of pursuing something and going deep into it. And that’s really the skill that when you take into adulthood, whether you end up going into music, or you go into engineering, or you go into— What else do people go into: political science or history or medicine, right—the skill of being able to zero in, go deep, and know how to learn. That is what really has lasting value. So that’s kind of where I got this idea of process over product.

And then, you know, corresponding with that is this idea that understanding is kind of overrated because anything worth really learning, you won’t understand it all anyway any time soon, maybe never. But that doesn’t mean it’s not worth it. So you’d say, “Well, I’m never going to understand this. I’m never going to understand Shakespeare.” Well, okay, that doesn’t mean it’s not worth having an experience, trying, learning something about Shakespeare. Fill in the blank.

Julie Walker: Sure. Wow. Okay. That was #2. #3?

Andrew Pudewa: So Point #3: all children are different. This is kind of a “duh.” Right? I mean, when you say all children are different, everybody who has any experience with children would say, well, that’s obvious; why are you even mentioning it? The reason to mention it kind of goes back to Point #1, which is our education system and underlying philosophy assumes that all children are going to kind of learn the same thing in the same way according to the same chronological schedule so that you get the same result. And that’s what our textbooks and tests and age segregation really was all created to do.

Julie Walker: And the standards, the school standards that ...

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. And you get these standards. And now I’m basically not a person who would say there isn’t a kind of *cultural literacy*, to steal the term from Hirsch, you know, that is valuable. It’s good for all Americans to know about how their government works, right? So I’m not saying that there aren’t things that are in common to all citizens and all human beings that have value. What I am saying is that when you try to do that in the exact same way according to the exact same schedule to get the exact same results from all the children that you’re teaching, well, you generally fail.

Julie Walker: Well, and I think every classroom teacher would absolutely agree with this. And we experienced this firsthand most obviously in our *Structure and Style for Students: Year 1 Level A*. We had kids in that class that could hardly read, and we had kids that ... We looked at them and thought, “You’re too old for this class.”

So we had this huge disparity between abilities, but yet they all had the same writing assignment. And they did produce different results. But the truth is because they were so different and because they were given the same assignment, and they produced different results, they still, all of them, enjoyed the activity and had success.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it goes back to Point #2, which is process, not product. We weren't teaching the class so that we could prove through the product that they all learned the same thing, right? We were teaching so that they would experience the process. And then they leave our control, and they go off somewhere else. And what they take, then, is the experience that they had. And they may or may not remember their style techniques checklist or their topic-clincher rule or their essay model.

Julie Walker: Oh, please. They have to remember the topic-clincher rule.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you know, everyone, all children need different levels of repetition, but ...

Julie Walker: It's true.

Andrew Pudewa: So you know, I bring into this the idea of contrasting it with music teaching. And as many of our listeners know, I was for a large amount of my adult life a music teacher: violin, Kindermusik. And I always think, you know, every teacher would be a better teacher if they were a music teacher first because there's certain things in music we don't think about in the same way.

Number one, I don't care really when someone starts to play the violin; you can start at four. For some kids that's great; for others it's a disaster. You can start at seven. You could start at ten, fourteen, forty-four, eighty-four. It doesn't matter to me. What matters is that you start, right, because that's how I would make money.

But you know, so we don't have this idea that, oh, no, if you don't start at five and a half years old, somehow you're going to be behind for the rest of your life. I mean, that doesn't make any sense at all. And you know, Dr. Suzuki himself didn't start playing the violin until he was twenty-something.

So there's, you know, that. Another thing that we never do as music teachers is compare children based on age or compare speed of progress based on age and say, oh, well, this seven-year-old, you know, started and made it through Book 1 in a year and a half. And this seven-year-old is still halfway through Book 1. Therefore, one outcome is better than the other.

There's no comparison; there's no need to judge. What matters—and this is something that I really understood from being in Japan—it doesn't matter the level of complexity. What matters is that a child plays whatever they play well. Right? So you can be on the fourth song in Book 1, playing "Go Tell Aunt Rhody." And I'd rather have a student who plays "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" well than a student who slops through a Vivaldi concerto. Right?

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: So we can't really look at the level of sophistication as a judge of progress. So there's that. We're not comparing. What do we compare? The child with himself or herself, right? So is this child making good progress? That's the only thing that matters. And you know, I've told parents in homeschool: That's the most important thing ... isn't where is this child in relation to other children based on age, but where is this child based on where they used to be? Right? So are skills improving?

That's the only thing that matters. And you know, you could walk into any classroom in the country: public, private, charter, co-op, any, family, twins, right? You look at any case where you have age-segregated children even if they've been together for years, and you'll discover quite a variety in aptitude, ability, interest level in different subjects.

Why? Because all children really are different. So it requires a balance. You want ... Okay, I want all children to learn enough about how our government works so that they can vote responsibly and understand current events and be citizens, you know, with knowledge. But that doesn't mean I have to teach exactly the same thing in exactly the same way according to exactly the same schedule to everybody because they happen to be a certain age.

So again, you know, that Point #3, all kids are different, is kind of connecting with that Point #1, which is it's hard not to do to them what we did to ourself.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Point #4.

Andrew Pudewa: Don't get me started on Point #4 because particularly right now I might go railing. But the very simple fact is that progress, when you use it in the term *progressive*, does not mean improvement, right?

Progressive does not mean better. There are lots of ideas that have been introduced into education over the past, well, century or two, almost, that have not been an improvement. But we call them progressive ideas because they are new. So in our world today, progressive, particularly as pertains to education, but you could look at this in other areas and where the word is used, doesn't mean improvement. It simply means *new*. And new does not always mean better.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: So you know, part of what we have done is, I think, with our Structure and Style program, with our spelling, with our, you know, PAL program for reading, with pretty much everything – we haven't done anything particularly new. What we have done is look and find ways that people used to do things better and reintroduce them to people who have not met those ideas or that methodology because they've been steeped in progressive for their whole life.

And so it's funny, you know, you meet teachers. And they go, "Wow, I've never seen anything like this before." Well, they were doing it about two thousand years ago, and it worked for a

very, very long time. So we can rest on the fact that this is a method that is very successful. And it's only new to you.

And you know, it's understandable. Like you get a job; you have to make things better. Well, the most likely thing you're going to do is figure out a new way. And so you work real hard on inventing a new way. And you get other people to help you invent a new way. And then you come up with a thing, but you're so invested in this.

If it doesn't work, then you can't really say, "Oops, I was wrong. I have to go backwards and look at what used to work." You have to come up with a new newer, a newer new way. And so you get this problem where progressive introduction of ideas doesn't mean better. And if they don't work better, then what do you do about that?

We all get very attached to our ideas. And it takes, you know, some serious level of humility and repentance and things that are neither easy nor popular.

Julie Walker: When I started working for you, Andrew, I taught you a word that every now and then you throw back at me, and it's called *sunk costs*. And basically investing a lot of time and energy into an idea that ultimately falls flat. Oh, and you have to decide: At what point do I fish or cut bait? What time, at what point do we walk away from this idea?

And maybe it's just "we're not ready for this idea." But the thing is, when we talk about new ideas here at IEW, we're basically re-presenting these same ideas that you had talked about to a new audience in a way that they can appreciate.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And we've tried various things from, say, a marketing standpoint that didn't really pay off. And because we live in kind of a free market, capitalist way of thinking, we would say, well, that didn't work; let's not throw more money at that. But you do see in less free enterprise environments, such as, oh, governments and government-run things, people get very attached to their way of doing something and say, well, it didn't work, so what we need to do is **more** of the same.

So you keep throwing more money at something that didn't work, assuming that more money will suddenly change that. And then you can get stuck doing that for years or decades. And there's that attachment, that pride element that all human beings are susceptible to, which you know, I think is one reason why in general, free markets produce better results because you can't get too attached to something that isn't working from a financial, practical perspective.

Whereas if you have kind of an unlimited amount of money to keep throwing at something, well then, you can get very attached to your way. I mean, if we had an unlimited budget, we'd still be paying for billboards. Right? Remember our experiment? We had a contest. And we'll have to wrap it up here, I know, but for our listeners, they may be amused to know that oh, what, seven, eight years ago?

Julie Walker: Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: We had a little contest, said okay, let's try this. We'll get an equal amount of money, right? It wasn't a huge amount, but it was a good, decent attempt. And we'll throw one amount at billboards and the other amount at postcards. And we got a special web domain. And we're going to try to track this and see. Well, neither of it really worked; it didn't pay off. So in our world we would say, well, there's no indication that doing more of this is going to help. So let's just not waste our money that way.

Julie Walker: So we've not bought a billboard since.

Andrew Pudewa: But if someone gave us half a million dollars and said, "You can use this for this reason," well, we would've happily spent that whether it would work and pay back or not. You see?

Julie Walker: But because of those mistakes that we learned from, we invested our energy in dollars in other ways that have been successful.

Andrew Pudewa: Exactly. Redirect. And you know ... And our goal, I mean, honestly, our goal isn't to get rich or to grow a huge company. Our goal is to help as many people as possible. So anyway, that idea of *progressive* – certainly it's a politically charged term in our world today. But I think if everyone would step back and say, "Okay. It doesn't really mean guaranteed progress; it just means you're going to try something different, something new." And new is not always better.

Julie Walker: Well, we are going to stop right there, listener. We're going to pick this up again next week. And we'll get five, six, and seven and maybe some bonus tips in there as well.

Andrew Pudewa: You could just turn to any random article in that book, and I'm sure I could talk about it.

Julie Walker: Yes, you can. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: My pleasure. Thank you.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.