

Supporting Co-ops across the Country

Transcript of Podcast Episode 344

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, every ten episodes we do this thing called Homeschool 101.

Andrew Pudewa: Is this one of those days?

Julie Walker: It is not. And the reason I say that, is it could be in that many people who are homeschooling, have been doing it for years, are perhaps encouraging their friends to consider this path, often mention this idea of co-ops as a way to homeschool. And I just wanted to kind of start out by saying just a couple things. Co-op is spelled with a hyphen if it ...

Andrew Pudewa: Otherwise it’s a coop.

Julie Walker: Right. Which reminded me of one of the very first times I watched your youngest daughter do a little speech at a 4-H, where she was showing off her chicken.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh my. You remember that?

Julie Walker: I do. And now she’s all grown up and has her own business doing social media and link in the show notes, and off we go. But, yeah, so that’s not what we’re talking about. We’re not talking about chicken coops and 4-H and ways to help your children do public speaking. What we’re talking about is co-ops, and I know both you and I have certainly engaged in that activity during our homeschooling years, of which are now in the past. But my goodness, you can hardly bump into a homeschooler today who is not doing some type of co-op activity.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And there’s such a range too. There’s, you know, ones that operate almost more like a hybrid school. And then there’s ones that are really kind of just very, for lack of a better expression, loosey goosey.

Julie Walker: Yeah. Mom at the dining room table and the neighbor kids decided to join them. That’s probably the lowest end of the spectrum. But the reason why I wanted to mention that this is not a part of the Homeschool 101 series is those: we try to gear them toward people who are just getting started or maybe even not even started yet but considering homeschooling.

And one of the things that I loved about homeschooling – kind of year after year, I would start fresh by thinking what do I want to accomplish for my children, for our children this year? And there are some pros and cons of co-ops, and the biggest con is you are having to march along to the beat of someone else’s drum.

And so if you're just starting homeschooling, maybe the best way to start is just figuring it out on your own and figuring out what is best for your family, and maybe that's like ridiculous. Are you kidding, Julie? This is the year 2022 or whenever you're listening to this, and no one homeschools that way anymore, but maybe ...

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you know, I think co-ops often come into existence and can, not always, but can follow the trajectory of a school. But if you look at a school, very often it happens because there's a handful of families that say, well, we could do this better. We could do more. We could enjoy each other. We could be more organized and accountable if we did this together.

And so that handful of families may start a co-op or in some cases a school and hire teachers. It could be a hybrid school two, three days a week. It could be a full-time school. And it's a pretty small operation, right? So if you've got half a dozen families with an average of two and a half, three kids per family, you're only dealing with maybe up to twenty kids.

And they're all different grade levels. So it's kind of like a, you know, let's homeschool together only over at the church because we have a few more rooms and a little more space. Well, that can be very attractive. Other people look at that and say, oh, there's great social opportunities, and there's someone who really loves what they're teaching, and, oh, there's a drama class or an art teacher who's really exceptional.

So more people come, and then as more people come, it just gets a little more complex. There's more people who are going to teach, more kids. Then there's people who want to have their kids, but they don't like the "I'll do part of the work" side.

Julie Walker: So the drop and go.

Andrew Pudewa: Of the co-op side. Or, yeah, I love this for my ten year old, but I also have, you know, a five and a two year old, and so what do I do with them?

So you get that start growth period. Then it becomes big. And then sometimes people say, well, I don't like that anymore. So very often you'll see the founding people in this type of program will be the first ones to leave and go off and do something else. But for the most part, I think, you know, it's a great opportunity for so many people who are kind of new to homeschooling to meet other people who very often have more experience.

Julie Walker: Right. Yeah. So I have a list of questions for the two of us to talk about. These questions may sound very familiar to you. They're the six questions, the who, what, where, when, why, how questions.

Andrew Pudewa: I thought it was going to be like five hats or four bow ties, or there's some system you've used on us before.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes. You started by my first question: what is a co-op? And I like to think of it as a spectrum. It's either mom with a few kids, some of them not her own, doing one class at

her dining room table at her home, whether it's cutting the frog or doing writing classes. That's on one end. On the other end is a hybrid school, where these teachers that you've hired are actually issuing grades that now show up on a high school transcript. That's a huge spectrum.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And of course, the cost is a factor too. If it's just: Here, you come over to my house, and I'll do one little thing with a couple of your kids along with my kids and her kids while you do something else with my other kids and her other kids. And then she'll watch the babies in the other room. Okay.

You know, that's a start. And it's very low cost, and usually these classes – I think people tend to go toward enrichment, right? They would like to do those kinds of things that they wouldn't necessarily do in the reading, writing, and arithmetic zone: things like music or art or drama or maybe what? Poetry or ...

Julie Walker: PE. Yeah. You know, my boys would run and play soccer or go swimming. Southern California, you know, you can do PE in the backyard, not our backyard but our friends' backyard. And that was PE.

Andrew Pudewa: Two hundred days a year.

Julie Walker: Pretty much.

Andrew Pudewa: But you know, and then as it grows, then people generally will bring their talents. And that's what I think is part of the magic, is you've got, you know, a homeschool mom or dad who knows something, loves something.

I would say loving the thing is more important than having taught it before because if you love it, you'll teach it well because your passion will drive it. And if you don't know something about teaching it, you'll find out. You know, I'm very ... In fact, this was part of my talk "Three Best Things I Did as a Homeschool Dad." We could reference that.

Julie Walker: Okay, great. Which we currently don't have a recording of that as of this date.

Andrew Pudewa: We did podcasts on that, didn't we?

Julie Walker: That's true. We can refer you back to podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: But I was saying a dad can teach a class. And he doesn't have to be a teacher. He doesn't have to have a whole lot of experience teaching if it's something that he knows. And then, you know, he teaches his kids and a few other people's kids. And boom, you're off and running, and that can make a huge difference.

Julie Walker: Yep. I like that. Okay, so you know, going through our litany of questions, to borrow one of your phrases. What are the pros and cons of doing a co-op? Why would you do this? And why would you not want to do this?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you can chime in anytime you want, but I would say probably the biggest thing for a lot of people is community, right? It gets them out of the house; they go to the church. There's other homeschool families, and there's other homeschooled kids. And so you know, one of the, I would say, kind of ignorant statements people make about homeschooling is that somehow their children are going to lack socialization opportunities, which is just not true.

I mean, it's been debunked any number of times, but when you have a co-op or a program that you can go to, then you just realize, oh, there's kids all over the place. And your kids are interacting and playing and usually in kind of a mixed age setting.

If the co-op or program is small enough, you really couldn't divide children by grade level or age, and so they kind of have to be batched and, you know, learning together side by side, interacting, doing projects with kids that are two or three years older or two or three years younger, which we know is the best possible group socialization environment.

Julie Walker: And you wrote an article on this that we have in your book *However Imperfectly*: "Mixed-Age Classrooms."

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And that was more looking at how would you do that in the school, but some of those benefits ... So I think number one: social opportunity, variety in the week, getting out of the house, meeting new people. The second thing would be, and I've talked about this before too, is we're not all good at teaching everything, and we don't all like teaching everything.

So for example, I have pretty much zero interest in teaching science in the kind of formal sense of, what do they call it? Earth science, life science. And then you get into biology, chemistry. I just wouldn't ever want to have to do that because my strength is not there; my interests are not there. So I could say, yeah, I'll just ignore science completely for my kids. But no, what would be better? Find someone who loves it, and get my kids with someone who loves it.

And so very often if you have the right sized group, you kind of will have a parent who loves something, and you may cover almost everything that you would like. So, or it's a little bit like brokering deals. Like yeah, I'll take your kids, and I'll do speech and writing and literature and logic. Those would be things I would like; I would enjoy spending time teaching. And then you take my kids, and do biology and chemistry. That's a great deal.

Julie Walker: Do you know, Andrew, that that actually was the beginning of the program that I started and ran for twenty years at Biola University?

Andrew Pudewa: It doesn't surprise me, but it'd be interesting to kind of do a study of that program to see, you know, how it started, how big, and then how large it got and how things changed and what people did or didn't like about it as it grew because you had hundreds of kids in this at one point.

Julie Walker: Yes, we did. And when I left ... I left when my youngest was no longer being homeschooled. And that's when I picked up the phone and said to you, "Hey, you said you were

interested in having me work for you. Do you still mean it?" But the thing is is that cutting up the frog – that was something I did not want to do.

So Mary Diaz in the OurGym did ... And she's not teaching anymore either. But she taught a little class for just a handful of my friends, and that was the beginning of what grew into be the Biola University Star Program, which extended to multiple campuses across Southern California, which continues even though it's not a part of Biola University. It's called Star Academics, and some of my friends are still running this program, and they're trying to maintain that idea of parental involvement, which is a big part of a good co-op.

You still have the parents involved, kids ... being like-minded. You want your kids that you ... You know, you're going to great lengths when you're homeschooling your kids to give them the education to pass on your values to your children. You don't necessarily want to expose them to something that might be contrary to that, especially in the younger years. And some of the other things, like how many days a week do you want to be out of the house? That, to me, was also important. Otherwise, homeschooling becomes carschooling.

Andrew Pudewa: Carschooling, especially in California, where we have to sit in traffic to go anywhere. But you solved that problem. You just moved right next to where the school was.

Julie Walker: Well, exactly. That's what you do when you're ... So yeah, we had a great deal of success. And I would say that especially in those high school years, my boys benefited greatly from the instruction of other tutors that helped them form, even spiritually, their lives today, you know, who they are today.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and that was the third benefit I was going to point out is external accountability.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, when you've got kids that are nine, ten, they live to make mommy happy. But once they hit maybe twelve or thirteen, that intense desire for their mother to be happy isn't nearly as strong. And sometimes there can even be conflicts, but someone else's mother, who you do not know how to push all the buttons, you know, can maybe bring in a level of, I don't know, rigor or accountability that is hard at a certain age.

So you know, I've thought young teenagers really do benefit by having someone else say, "Yes, this is what you have to do, and you have to have it done by next Tuesday." And then there's the positive peer pressure, right, which is, well, if it's just mom, "Well, I just didn't have time. I'm so sorry; I couldn't do it." But you've got to show up at class on Tuesday, and everyone else has their, you know, homework done.

Julie Walker: Well, we would hope.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, now it's a different ball game because the kids don't care so much about mom or the teacher as much as they care about the peer perception. So that positive peer pressure can also be a real plus.

Julie Walker: Right. Well, and let's segue just to the couple of cons that are a part of a co-op. And one of them is that idea of mom excusing the students' work. So, you know, "We were too busy this week. Our toilet overflowed. Dad was home on vacation, so we wanted to spend ..."

And all the excuses that ... You know, you and I both went to public school, and I had a tenth grade English teacher.

And you know what she would say to me? I don't want excuses. I want production. And I think that would be a thing that I would charge homeschool co-op leaders to embrace, and that is: fail them if they don't turn in their assignment. Now ultimately the parent is the one giving the grade. But those kids need to learn that accountability and results is actually a really good life skill that they need to bring into college and career.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I remember from a time management course I did decades ago, you know, they would say, "You can't ever use the excuse 'I didn't have time.' " Everyone has time. It's just a question of how you choose to use it. And that's a hugely important life lesson. So, yeah, it's very easy, especially when mom is making the excuse for you. Any other challenges or frustrations that you recall parents having?

Julie Walker: And this is an interesting little story. When we were first starting our program that we decided to make it more formal at our church, we actually interviewed another person who had attempted the same thing and failed and just kind of took notes. And one of the things that she advocated was a student code of conduct where the students ... Now we were mostly working with junior high and high school students. The elementary students came later.

As you say, you know, at the ... We definitely had the momentum going, but more and more students were joining. But we wanted the students to also sign the code of conduct that included even a dress code. Now that does ... A dress code is just basically saying I will be humble and submit to this authority.

It doesn't mean that we're squelching who you are as a person. It just means, yes, in this environment we're going to have a dress code; we're going to have a code of conduct. We're going to not use foul language. We're not going ... You know, some of the yeses and some of the nos. And so having the students buying into this was an important part of establishing a co-op where parents felt comfortable.

Another big thing that I mentioned earlier was having parents involved. And so it wasn't a drop and go program. They had volunteer requirements where they had to sit in on their students' classes and either help with grading or help with crowd control or whatever at least twice a semester for each of the classes that they were enrolled in.

And that helped them see, ooh, my student is not behaving as well as some of the other students, and let's get them involved. And so just definitely having more organization. And that really laid

a foundation so that we were able to grow and not have to worry about gum chewing and messes because we had rules for those that the students and the parents were willing to help follow.

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, the idea of code of contact or policies: That's going to inevitably to get a little more complicated or a little more extensive, the more people you have. So you know, someone who's going to start a group like this – I think would be super wise to do what you did, which is talk to someone who's been at it for a while and say, okay, if you could go back and do things a little better from the beginning, what might that be? And we can all keep learning from each other that way.

Julie Walker: Well, and to that end I wanted to mention a couple of resources. And you know, you can google and find all kinds of links to how to start a co-op, how to join a co-op. There's all kinds of resources to find a co-op in your area. There's one right here in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, that is growing and thriving.

But our own Pam Barnhill, one of our affiliates, actually has several blogs on co-ops and how to run them. And there's actually—not she herself—but one of her contributors talks about even running it as a business and having employees as the teachers, which, you know, that's organized, right? And then, Kristy Clover, who, yes: *Simply Joyful*.

She does a great YouTube video that we'll link here that just kind of shares the pros and cons and kind of some of the things that they've really done well. Just kind of inspire you, listener, to consider. You are no doubt in a co-op or some type of organized schooling environment. Are there things that you could be doing to make it better? Are there things that you need to be careful of that you don't go down a path that's going to lead to essentially school at home, right? Because that's ... If you're homeschooling, you're homeschooling for a reason. What are those reasons?

Andrew Pudewa: There are some subjects that I think lend themselves very well to group instruction over individual. And there are other subjects that lend themselves more ideally to individual instruction. If we were just to compare, say, writing and math, right? So in math everyone kind of is on a path through complexity, and the ideal situation is they can, you know, go their own speed.

So when you get a bunch of kids, and you try to teach them math together, then inevitably you can't make the differentiations and have enough groups to keep everyone really engaged and challenged unless you do math that is completely different than the standard math book. Whereas writing, I think, is often best taught in a group setting because you can access other people's ideas and grow, kind of have a group imagination to draw on rather than just whatever you have.

And we saw that when we, when ... Well, I've seen it for years. But when we made the videos for the *Structure and Style for Students*, you know, one student would say something kind of offhand or maybe even making a joke. And then some other student would end up taking that idea and really building off it and finishing their paper, finishing their composition with someone else's idea.

And so that sharing of the mind and memories and imaginations and perspectives – I think that works very well in teaching writing. And of course, you know, we couldn't probably even count how many co-ops are using one or more of our products in that way.

Julie Walker: Well and of course, I would love to speak to that as the chief marketing officer for IEW. When you look back at our history, you first and foremost made a teacher-training course, *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, which, of course, we still sell. It's been revised a couple times. And I think what we've got right now is the best. It's so good.

And that's what we do here at IEW. We're teaching teachers a different way to teach writing that has been so successful. Well, what sprung out of that was the theme-based books. You wrote *Bible-Based Writing Lessons*. Lori Versteegen wrote *U.S. History-Based Writing Lessons*, and the theme-based series kind of took off. And we have a dozen or more theme-based books that were actually written.

Lori's books were written as she was teaching co-op classes in Southern California. And then the other thing that was happening almost at the same time in parallel was these student videos that you were doing. At first it was how do I show teachers, kind of like demonstration lessons. This is how you actually teach a group of kids.

And then it grew into a little bit longer. And then now it grew into what is our *Structure and Style for Students*. And in a way just like you said, those students that came here every week that were a part of that ... Wow, what a great co-op to be a part of.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. It was kind of that. We had widely mixed age ranges, at least three years, maybe four between the oldest and youngest in the group. And they, I think, very much looked forward to getting together and the synergy, the idea sharing, so ...

Julie Walker: Well, and then because of how these materials were created, they lend themselves so easily to being used in a co-op setting, you know, whether you're using a theme-based book ... And we sell—well, I won't go into numbers because that just is going to be overwhelming when I think about it—to so many students who are in a co-op.

What is Mrs. Brown teaching this year? Oh, she's teaching *Ancient History-Based Writing Lessons*, so we're all going to buy that book. And wow, suddenly we're selling a lot of these books. At the same time you have another teacher, Mrs. Jones, who has decided to do the *Structure and Style for Students*. Our own online classes, which in a way are kind of like a co-op – they meet one day a week.

Those students are going through the *Structure and Style for Students* on their own at home but are meeting together for accountability, for further instruction. And it's all laid out. It makes it super easy for those parents to get the help to be able to learn, to be able to help their children learn how to write.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, it's funny. When we were homeschooling our kids, the idea of online classes was pretty much not in existence, and we might have sneered at it. But you know, over

time and then particularly during the pandemic period, everything became ... You know, if you wanted to do anything with anyone else, it was now online. And the thing that, you know, is kind of nice is people can live wherever they are. And they can kind of be a part of a virtual group in a way. So, yeah. You've got a couple more questions, but we're running out of time.

Julie Walker: We are. And kind of the last thing is just how would someone go about starting their own co-op?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, they would contact Pam Barnhill or Kristy Clover and get information. There's probably a lot of people who've walked this path. And so like anything, don't reinvent wheels when you don't have to. Learn from whom you can. I think the best thing is to always just start small.

If you've got two other families, you've got enough kids to do a couple classes. So maybe it's one day, one afternoon a week; two hour and twenty-minute classes with a ten minute break in between. Then everybody can play ultimate Frisbee if the weather's good afterwards. And then that will naturally attract people. And then you may benefit from growing because you've got more parents who are bringing more of their enthusiasm to make available.

You know, the challenge is then, well, you can't really do it in your home. So now you've got to look for a church or a community building or something. And I would just say don't have a goal to make it a big thing. If you're blessed, and things work out, and you can, you know, then you can start asking people to contribute money.

So you can pay for a facility. Or there's a special teacher that you want to have, someone who's really good at, say, drama. And produce a play. Okay. And so then there's the financial aspect. But let that grow organically.

Julie Walker: Yep. I like it. Well, this has been a great conversation. Thank you, Andrew, for your insight into this topic.

Andrew Pudewa: We'll have to do Part 2 of this sometime. We have to interview some of these experienced co-op people.

Julie Walker: Okay. Sounds great.

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