

The Power of the Method Transcript of Episode 386

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, I’m at a loss. I don’t know exactly how to start this podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: You’re kidding me. You always have such a good start to podcasts.

Julie Walker: Well, and the problem is not, I don’t know what to say. I have two things that are coming together in my head at the same time, and I can’t say them both.

Andrew Pudewa: No, you can’t say two things at the same time.

Julie Walker: No.

Andrew Pudewa: If you’re going to say one thing, you can’t say the other.

Julie Walker: It’s true. It’s true. So I do want to touch on both topics though, eventually. So we are delighted to have in the studio with us, Karen Cuellar. And Karen and her family are featured on the cover of our homeschool Magalog this year. So, Karen, welcome to our podcast.

Karen Cuellar: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Julie Walker: So we featured you, Karen, well first of all, because you have a very good looking family, and we just need to have attractive people on our cover. Otherwise, people are going to walk away.

Andrew Pudewa: I can’t believe you said that.

Julie Walker: But also because your students were in the *Structure and Style for Students* course. Grant was in the Level C, the high school course. Gabby was in Level B, the middle school course, and Josh Level A, the elementary course.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, I can’t believe that was almost six years ago now. They’ve grown up so much.

Karen Cuellar: They have grown so much.

Julie Walker: Yes. And Josh, who’s the youngest and just the cutest little kid in *Structure and Style for Students: Year 1, Level A* and *Year 2 Level A* is a teenager now.

Karen Cuellar: He is, yeah. Every bit of a teenager.

Julie Walker: Yep. And, Grant is off to college and my goodness. Okay, so I just thought it would be fun, Andrew, for Karen to share with us if she can go back in time and remember what it was like to have her kids here in the studio being scrutinized, well by me mostly, but by and being taught by Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, every week for two years. Those kids though, will forever be that age in my mind because I had such a good relationship with all of them.

Karen Cuellar: You did. Year 2 covers. So Grant, I think it's just pretty cute in the Magalog, there's a picture of Grant holding the binder with his picture on it, Gabby holding her binder with her picture on it. And Josh, little cute Josh, who's not so little anymore.

Karen Cuellar: Well, we were tremendously blessed by being chosen for that. And it literally changed our lives and changed our homeschooling journey. So you saved me from a pit, I would say. We were struggling big time, had just left a co-op. We were just kind of dangling, didn't know what we were doing.

And this opportunity came along, and like I said, we were blessed, and I looked at it that way. And we were here every class and every session. And Josh, back then, I had done very little writing with him. And even on the first video, you can see him struggle to write with his pen. And as the youngest, when you're homeschooling the olders, sometimes the little one gets, you know, they just kind of get what they get.

So for him, I mean, tremendous growth the first year in writing and just writing sentences and forming sentences. And he grew so much that year. And then Gabby had always kind of struggled with a little bit of dyslexia and kind of being behind and not very confident in her studies, and she flourished under IEW.

Her creativity came out. She's super creative, and she enjoyed writing. Now, she did not enjoy writing pieces that were factual information. She liked the creative part.

Now, Grant, he's a factual information writer. He is not creative at all, and his writing was so dry and hard. He was not a natural writer at all and not a good writer even when we began. and He just so informational and as the course went on, he became, it's his favorite subject now. And he can do it well. So it just helped him tremendously kind of hone in on that, lay the foundation for what he could do, and then also spruce it up to where he could, he could be creative and learn how to be creative.

So, IEW laid that out in a very simple way to, for them to grasp how to do those things.

Andrew Pudewa: Part of the brilliance, I think, of the way Webster organized the units is this alternating between report, research, facts, and then stories, pictures, inventive writings, so that each type of student gets a chance to do what they love to do or get better at what they like, and then also improve what they don't like as much.

And then it starts to all come together toward the end. And so I've just, I've always kind of been amazed at that. How did he figure that out?

Julie Walker: Exactly. I was actually having a conversation with some guests that we had in town recently about the brilliance of the system, and it's not something that you came up with. It's something that Webster came up with, but I don't even think he knew the brilliance of what he had come up with.

Andrew Pudewa: No, I think he kind of stumbled into it. I mean, I would chalk it up to the supernatural assistance and influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, but it certainly has shown that for many, many kids.

One of the things that I mentioned a lot to people, like continuously, I'm at the end of convention season, so I've been in gosh, I counted it up. It was like 16 different cities in four months of time. It's been crazy. But they have this feeling like the kids should do it all on their own. You know? I should tell 'em what to do and they should do it, and if they don't, well then it's not working. But I think you experienced this need to help as much as is needed, especially in the beginning.

Did you find that the case?

Karen Cuellar: I did, and I actually, when people ask me, we offer IEW at our homeschooling support campus. And so when they ask me about it, and I kind of know what they're looking for. They are looking for a hands-off approach. And what I always tell them is, you will get there. But you do have to do that first year.

You have to be engaged. You have to help because they cannot be independent writers until you teach them how to be independent. You can't just throw something in front of someone and expect them to do it on their own. So investing the time that first year, and then the second year it's more hands off.

And the third year they're on their own really. And so it is worth the investment, and it's worth the process. It's kind of a classical process with the repetition and repeating something over and over and over until you master it. That first year, you're just helping to do that. You're teaching them how to do that, and the second year they're really applying it and they get it and they remember from the first year.

And then by the third year you are, you're set.

Andrew Pudewa: I always say you can't help your kids too much because they will tell you when they don't need help. Did that happen? One of them said, okay, mom, I got it. Just leave me alone now.

Karen Cuellar: Well, I would kind of like you do on the board when you encourage them in the sentence or give them some ideas and things like that. Sometimes they needed it, but other times they, like for Gabby, for instance. When her creativity was taking off, she didn't want that input. She would need some help with structuring the sentence a little bit.

But she wanted to do all that. And then Josh kind of followed her whenever he was being creative. He wanted to be just really out there creative and didn't really need my input on their topics and what they were writing about, but did with the structure and the spelling and the grammar at the end.

So it kind of just transforms into that, where you give them good ideas and they learn how to think, how to use those ideas and apply them, and then you're really there just to kind of formalize it all and help them get it into a nice paper.

Andrew Pudewa: So the first week that we have the SSS, I give the kids blank paper and a very simple little prompt: write about your home. Fifteen minutes. I think it's fifteen minutes, right?

Julie Walker: I think the level C, you might have done twenty. And you didn't do it for Level A. You did a joke. Instead you told 'em a joke. Would you rather write a paper or do you want me to tell a joke? And of course, we fully expected them to say, tell a joke, and, but they did write that assignment at the end of the class.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And then, we do the same exact prompt with the same amount of time trying to recreate the exact same thing at the end of the twenty-four weeks. And then I give the kids the paper that they wrote at the beginning, and they get to compare what they wrote at the beginning with what they wrote at the end.

Did your kids have any particular observations about the difference?

Karen Cuellar: Absolutely. Well, I noticed that first class. I was like, oh man, how are they going to get through that? And you see all the kids are just kind of like, what do I write about? How do I, and you know, they're just kind of. Struggling to get that first little paragraph out and it's over. Something simple as their home, you know, but they don't, they don't know how to collect those thoughts, how to put 'em down, what to say.

So you see 'em all kind of struggling and they barely get anything out in that fifteen minutes. It's a miracle if they get six sentences and then the end of the class, when you tell 'em that same assignment, they just take off.

And there's no hesitancy. They just write and write and write and write for the full twenty minutes.

Until it's over and then, and they cannot believe what they've been able to put on paper in that short amount of time with just a short little instruction on what to write. So yeah, you can see tremendous improvement over the year.

Andrew Pudewa: The other thing that I do, and I'm guessing it's the second or third class when they have to actually now go write a paragraph from a key word outline. As I say, hire an editor and here's what you want. Someone who will fix up your paper and hand it back with no lecture attached. Did you find that difficult?

Karen Cuellar: Well, if I'm being honest, yes, only because of it needing my attention and time and me having to really hone in and focus on that and help them with that. So the first year, yes, that was, I had to do that more. The second year— less mistakes, less need.

Julie Walker: But were you able to give the paper back with a smile and no lecture?

Andrew Pudewa: That's the hard thing

Karen Cuellar: Oh, that's a question. Sometimes. There were often times I was like, you know but yeah, they didn't tell me there was no lecture attached. So.

Julie Walker: Well, and I realized, Andrew, when you were basically reminding me too of that story where the kids were faced with the blank page and a simple prompt. This is where most writing programs start, and I tell people, this is where most part writing programs start. We don't start there. And yet I'm like, oh my goodness, have I been lying?

But I think the point is...

Andrew Pudewa: No, the program doesn't start, but you know, if you're going to go try to get buff, you need a before and after picture to make the dramatic effect.

Karen Cuellar: True. That is true.

Julie Walker: Well, and I know with Josh, and there were a couple other students in that one Level A class who were certainly not used to writing any, any amount of words on paper, and some of them were even struggling with reading, and you really encouraged the parents to have the kids do copy work.

So Karen, did you have Josh do copy work?

Karen Cuellar: Yes, we did copy work and just really focused on his reading, writing. I mean, we were all in on this program, so that, just doing the program, you're getting spelling, you're getting grammar, you're getting reading all in one, really. So just by following through and doing the whole thing, we actually were checking a lot of boxes.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and the source texts even are written to provide kind of a broad range of interesting general knowledge.

We had kind of a theme, but it wasn't really, you know, a period of history or a certain book or something like our other theme-based books. It was much more of a general kind of thread, I think is the word we used.

I'll try to make that interesting. Are there any assignments that stick out in your memory as having been particularly delightful or particularly painful to any of the kids? I'm so curious what you might remember after these years.

Julie Walker: Ah, Unit 6.

Karen Cuellar: Fused outlines. The fused outlines were not, they were harder, you know? 'Cause there it is more work. It's a lot more work to do. But you can see it coming together. You can see the why and the why are you putting this effort into this particular paper?

So those were more difficult for my kiddos. They weren't like super big fans of those. But their product was always good after doing them, but my kids' favorites were always the stories, the narratives, the things like that where they could be creative. And all of the stories were interesting.

That's another thing that we liked is that every week, even if it was informational, it was really interesting, informational, something from some other part of the world or. And Josh still remembers your stories and those particular outlines about that information that he was given.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I even learned stuff like the Saguaro Cactus and Shackleton in Antarctica. I think the plastics in the ocean that was almost the most depressing of all source tech. That was a Unit 6.

Julie Walker: That was a Unit 6. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: It's interesting how kids love to learn stuff, and when you do that in the context of reading and speaking it back and using it and then writing it and presenting, polishing, and presenting, it just goes in so much more smoothly and deeper as well.

Julie Walker: I want to mention, because you brought it up, Andrew, I want to mention what the threads are in, at least Year 1 for Level A. The thread was deserts, so we wrote about the Saguaro cactus. We wrote about the desert tortoise. We wrote about Antarctica. We didn't get to Shackleton 'cause that was 2B.

Andrew Pudewa: That was a different thing. But Antarctica being a desert and camels.

Julie Walker: And then the writing from pictures. We had a little tent with a man inside the tent and the camel wanted to get in the tent.

Andrew Pudewa: We got some real good ones on that.

Julie Walker: And pushed him out of that tent and then in Year 1, Level B. It was this broad topic of Oceania, so we did the blue-ringed octopus. We did a lot of these strange creatures that lived in the different areas. We talked about the different areas in Oceania and.

Andrew Pudewa: And explorers who were there—Cook, right? Was it Captain Cook?

Julie Walker: Well, we did get into Level C, we did pirates, and then we were deciding whether or not a certain, like Drake, was he a pirate or was he a good—was he just a mercenary, you know?

Andrew Pudewa: He was a privateer. That sounds so much more refined.

Julie Walker: A privateer that's, yes. A privateer, not a pirate. And I think my favorite theme that first year, that favorite thread was the pirates because we started with the widow and this pirate ship that was sunk off the coast of New England and wrote about that. And then we ended with this idea of piracy.

And the students could write about anything they wanted related to piracy, whether it's on Blackbeard or whether it's on pirating software

Andrew Pudewa: Intellectual property. It was very broad.

Julie Walker: And then Julius Caesar and the Pirates was our Unit 3 there where he got captured by pirates.

Andrew Pudewa: One of my favorites.

Julie Walker: Yeah, it was a great story.

Andrew Pudewa: So now Grant is finished one year of college.

Karen Cuellar: He is on his second year.

Andrew Pudewa: He's on his second year

Karen Cuellar: He'll be 21 this fall.

Andrew Pudewa: Hard to believe.

Karen Cuellar: And he's, he's just killing life. He lives out on his own and...

Andrew Pudewa: And, and so has he reported back to you? Any particular things he learned that have become very, very helpful in the college world or?

Karen Cuellar: He flew through his English comp classes, which was always his hardest subject, but he actually enjoyed it and he even wanted to, which I discouraged a little bit, but challenge his instructors in their world views, I should say. He always wanted to have the paper that was going to be, The rebellious paper in the class or the different, you know, viewpoint or something like that.

And he had the courage to do that.

Julie Walker: And the confidence to write and the confidence to do that.

Karen Cuellar: To write it. And so, and he won a few students over in his class. So by just being able to put his thoughts down.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, it's funny, everybody uses the buzzwords. Critical thinking, like that's de facto good. Then when kids actually do that, it irritates a lot of people,

Karen Cuellar: It does.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm going to ask questions about this and not accept the book answers that you want me to accept. And so there's always that kind of danger if you go into the world. Are you going to be risking asking questions that might bother the teachers or professors or peers that you meet? Or are you just going to, you know, sit down, be quiet, don't make noise, and coast under the radar?

Julie Walker: And the reason I asked about the confidence in the writing is I think you would be more inclined to convey those difficult topics in your writing if you are a confident and competent writer. If you're not feeling that way, you're just like, I just want to see if I can get a C on this paper. I just need to pass the class.

Andrew Pudewa: If you're going to make a point that's going to challenge something, you better say it well. Otherwise..

Julie Walker: Yep.

Karen Cuellar: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Here's an example. I just have to tell you, this is so crazy. I got this ad for this new supplement that was like omega three, omega six oil combination, perfect balance, blah, blah, blah. And so I looked at it and I noticed that the name of the supplement was Men's Pro Aging Formula,

Julie Walker: Oh dear.

Andrew Pudewa: And I thought, hold on a minute. What they really mean to say is this is like an anti-aging or a pro anti-aging, or a pro longevity, but they totally misnamed the product. I'm not going to trust someone who can't use language to accurately reflect whatever science they're claiming they have in this thing. But I just thought, well, you know, words matter.

Karen Cuellar: It does. launching your aging forward with a supplement.

Julie Walker: No, this is not what we want. No. And Gabby, what's she up to today?

Karen Cuellar: Gabby's probably my most independent kiddo. She's introverted, which is kind of surprising, but she is very independent. She is looking into scholarships right now for college and just really focused on moving forward. She wants to be a paramedic and go into emergency medicine, so that is kind of the field that she's taken, but she can sit down and write anything though, finishing up her high school courses. It has become easy for her.

Andrew Pudewa: Another thing I have taught teachers all along is kind of Webster's edict: "hands on structure and style, hands off content." Like whatever they want to write, even if it doesn't make perfect sense or sounds a little goofy. Well, that's a function of age and maturity. Focus on the structural guidelines, the style checklist, the mechanics.

And don't worry about that. Did you experience that? Kind of having to think, Ugh, this just doesn't quite make sense the way I wish it would, but this kid is twelve years old so I can let it go. Was that, is there any interior conflict for you there? I.

Karen Cuellar: Yes. I am just by nature. I like to have a certain amount of control, and somehow, I am gifted to write. And even after I feel like my public education failed me. A lot of people feel that way, but I came out being able to communicate well. And not by them, but just naturally.

And so when I read something and it isn't that way, I naturally want to control it, correct it, and you know, get in there and mess with it. But one of the things that you had advised is not doing that. And so often I was having to, you know, reign myself in and just let them say it the way they wanted to say it with the creativity they wanted to use.

And back off of that a little bit, as long as it was correct. It may not have been what I wanted to say or how I wanted to say it, but it was correct and it functioned and it worked, and so I left it alone. But yeah, it was very challenging for me to let them be their own writer and let them flourish on their own.

And it ended up helping them.

Julie Walker: But you did have a guide. You had the checklist

Karen Cuellar: Yes.

Karen Cuellar: The checklist is fabulous.

Julie Walker: Your story is similar to mine in that I know how to write. I'm a good writer. But my son, who was also a good writer, but he was still learning. We would argue, this is before I was introduced to the beauty of the checklist and the beauty of the writing system and is like, oh my gosh, we're going to argue about all this stuff. This is, this is painful.

And then to have him go through the system and we pretty well. I won't say we stopped arguing, but we at least stopped arguing about writing. You started to talk about the checklist. Talk a little bit about that.

Karen Cuellar: I did love the checklist because you can write the driest sentence, which is the basic elements, and after going through the checklist, it is a fabulous sentence. When you add in all your dress ups.

Andrew Pudewa: Can be. Yeah.

Karen Cuellar: You add in all your clauses and you do all of it. It teaches them how to dress that sentence up and make it a great sentence.

And I had never seen that before. And it really does teach them how to write, you know, this is what you need to include to make writing more pleasing and more interesting. Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: We don't even say that. We just say, this is what you have to period.

Karen Cuellar: This is what you gotta do.

Andrew Pudewa: Whether it's better or not, I don't care at the moment.

Karen Cuellar: But it is better. It is a lot better. And it does just teach them how to structure something, you know, in a nice way and, and make sure all these things are included that just really form a good sentence. So I love the checklist. I'm a box checker anyway by nature. And once you get it all complete, you know, you've got a great sentence or paragraph.

Julie Walker: So I know that you are a very busy mom. I know that because we have been trying to get you in here to have this conversation with you for months. So what is it that keeps you so busy, Gabby? I mean, Grant is Grant. I'm calling you Gabby now.

Karen Cuellar: It's okay.

Julie Walker: Gabby's keeping you busy. No, she's not. But Grant has graduated, Gabby's independent and so it must be Josh.

Is that what's going on?

Karen Cuellar: They do. We participate in NOAH Sports and NOAH's a huge homeschooling sports organization here in Tulsa. And so my kids are in the track program. And so they eat, sleep, live track on their off things, and that includes me. And then outside of that I became involved with Aspire about seven years ago.

And after the first year, the director hit me up and said are you serious about? And we had talked about some ideas that I had in Oklahoma City with some programs I did there. And she said, are you serious about starting one here? And so we ended up launching Aspire Academy, which is a homeschooling support for homeschooling families where you can come and take a la carte classes.

It's kind of like college. You come and you can take one class, you can take two classes, or you can come all day. Which allows parents, if you have two working parents, we have some single moms. We have, there's just a lot of family dynamics and they still want to homeschool. So this kind of provides a support for them To either drop off or you can stay and get a discount. You can be involved in the community as much or as little as you want to be. So this keeps us pretty busy. We've got about a thousand students Aspire-wide. At Aspire Academy we have about 400

that take a la carte classes. So your science, your math, your IEW writing, all of that, you can come to academy and get that instruction and then go home and do homework.

Julie Walker: So does Aspire exist outside of the Tulsa area?

Karen Cuellar: It does not although our model is made to duplicate. And Amy Dean is the executive director of Aspire. She started it; we're on our tenth year. But she made the model. It's a ministry, and we're all volunteer. Nobody gets paid except for our instructors at Academy, but it's made to replicate and to spread. So we would love for that to, if somebody wanted to take the model and do it somewhere else, we would love to help assist and do that.

Julie Walker: So either move to Tulsa or start an Aspire Academy if you're interested in providing that opportunity for the families in your area. And you know, moving to Tulsa is not a bad idea. Andrew, you and I have recruited a lot of people to move out here, haven't we?

Andrew Pudewa: Did you ever imagine like twenty years ago, that you would say, I want to live in Tulsa, Oklahoma? No, it was not on the radar at all. But the city has grown on me, and you know, particularly the homeschooling community here is just so wonderful.

Karen Cuellar: You cannot beat this homeschooling community. And we, I came from Oklahoma City, but it is so much more here. It's everywhere, and it's growing, and there's so many opportunities for homeschoolers that to plug into. There's just options everywhere.

Julie Walker: So any final thoughts, Karen? Do you think our listeners should maybe look into *Structure and Style for Students* for their own students?

Andrew Pudewa: That's called begging the question.

Karen Cuellar: If you want, yeah, if you want an overall program, spelling, grammar, writing, even history, I'm even going to include that in there. There's so much history just in it that your kiddos are going to learn, but it really encompasses everything. It's a complete program, changed our lives, saved my homeschooling journey. So I am truly grateful for the program and what it has done for my family, my kiddos, and they're moving into college and moving on as adults. So, I would definitely recommend it. It's the number one go-to for me if I'm talking to a new homeschooler.

Julie Walker: Nice.

Andrew Pudewa: I bet you're, you're always on the eye for people who can teach in your Aspire program especially *Structure and Style*. So if there's anyone on the periphery of Tulsa or planning to move here that might be able to teach a couple days a week, I know you are always looking for the best.

Karen Cuellar: We are definitely, and IEW is highly sought after, so everyone wants it, and it's very hard to find a teacher, you know, that can teach it well. And we happen to have one thank, thank God, he sent us an angel this year to teach IEW. But there is a lot of need for it.

A lot of want for it. So yeah, we're always looking for teachers.

Julie Walker: Well, thank you, Karen, so much for making time out of your really busy schedule to join us here today.

Andrew Pudewa: And give our best to your kids.

Karen Cuellar: I will. Thank you for having me.

Andrew Pudewa: And we are, I am just so proud, profoundly grateful to all the families that participated in the video. And I think over the couple years, those kids worked their way into my heart, and they're just going to be the age they were, but they're going to be forever in my heart.

Andrew Pudewa: Someday I'll see all-grown-up, twenty-something-year-old Gabby and I might not recognize her.

Julie Walker: That's true.

Andrew Pudewa: I will remember the sweet quiet spirit she brought.

Karen Cuellar: Well, you are forever in their hearts as well. You made a big impact on my children's lives.

Andrew Pudewa: Give them my best.

Karen Cuellar: I will. Thank you.

Julie Walker: Thank you.

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