

IEW's Checklist Motivates for Success

Transcript of E394

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.

Julie Walker: So Andrew, I've been thinking about this podcast for literally months. I've been waiting for a time for us to have this conversation, and my lead in is a little long, so I'm just going to say right out the gate, what we are talking about today is what would motivate teens to want to do better in school.

Andrew Pudewa: I hope that you're not going to say candy.

Julie Walker: We are definitely not going to say candy. So what would motivate teens to do better in school? And this was an article that was actually featured in Education Week, which is a big educational publication that I subscribe to and just kind of keeping my fingers on the pulse of what's going on in education, the field of education, as we should always be mindful of. But what I thought about when I saw this particular article wasn't initially about what to do to motivate teens. It was more about, "I would love for IEW to be featured sometime in Education Week." And it reminded me of a song, Andrew, that you and I grew up with in the seventies.

Andrew Pudewa: Seriously?

Julie Walker: Yes, you ready? It's called "The Cover of the Rolling Stones." And this was a song written by Dr. Hook and the Medicine Show, and the song is all about, well, I'll read you some of the lyrics. "Want to see my picture on the cover Stone. Want to buy five copies for my mother. Yeah. Want to see my smiling face on the cover of the Rolling Stone." And the whole idea is, of course, he wanted to be in this publication that was the rock and roll magazine, and eventually he did get published. He did get his cover on the Rolling Stone, but it was more of a caricature. So I'm hoping that we will have a legitimate opportunity to truly talk to educators across the United States and around the world about what we're doing here at IEW. But in the meantime, we'll just do a podcast on this article. That is featured in Education Week. So the question is, what motivates teens to want to do better in school? And the answer is simply this—a chance to redo assignments. And I love this because we give teachers an opportunity to do just that, and you demonstrate that in Structure and Style for Students all levels, but in particular Level C. So without saying anything more about that, Andrew, can you tell me how we give teens the opportunity to redo assignments?

Andrew Pudewa: It is, of course, interesting to contemplate. How did we get to where we are with profoundly unmotivated teens? Right? Why? Why are so many teenagers in school number one, hating it? Number two, generally doing poorly on a broad statistical scale? Number three, just in a world of ambivalence and complacency, pretty much about anything pertaining to academics or learning or all that? How did we get here?

Julie Walker: Sure. Well, I don't know that I can answer that question, but I will talk a little bit about the research and some of the options that they gave. Basically, they sent out a survey to over a thousand students. So it was just a kind of a random selection of students and they were given twenty options. Some of the options included providing more feedback, offering more hands-on experience, assigning more schoolwork on topics that are relevant and interesting to them. Those are some of the top, top answers. Things like: make it funny, make it more engaging, those kinds of things. But the number one thing was that the students wanted an opportunity to be able to redo the assignments, basically learn from their mistakes, and have an opportunity to do better. They wanted to show that they were capable of doing better on the assignment.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that's fair enough. I mean, isn't that what we would all like?

Julie Walker: Yes. Like once and done-it's kind of a scary thing. I think of even something as simple as computer games. You've got a couple lives and if...

Andrew Pudewa: well, yeah. The whole thing is built on you're going to die and fail and be miserable for months until you finally beat the thing. And then you're going to have this explosion of dopamine and serotonin. I can understand how that would be the most appealing thing on that list. Most teenagers aren't going to [say], "Oh, if I just had more help, I'd be happier." I don't think that's going to go well.

Julie Walker: So when you first give students in *the Structure and Style for Students: Year 1 Level C* their assignments, you tell them how you are going to grade their papers. So describe your grading scale.

Andrew Pudewa: Only two grades: *A* or *I*. And the *A* doesn't mean whatever it means to some people, superior or better than someone else. It just means "accomplished or accepted." Like you did the assignment and you checked all the boxes and you checked all of the punctuation and mechanics, and you did it the way it's supposed to be done. It gets an *A*. It's accepted. It's like you've accomplished the thing. Now, if you were to take two papers that both got an *A* by the system, you would certainly notice qualitative differences between them, but especially in writing, it's so subjective. How do you get away from that? How do you get away from, well, I just like this better, or, I just think this is more interesting.

Julie Walker: Yeah. How do you accomplish that for the teacher? You have to be a mind reader.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so that's why we do it. And then *I* stands for "incomplete." You're not finished yet, and I will give you as much help as you need to be able to get an *A*. Like everyone can get an *A*. There's nothing that would prevent you from getting an *A*. In fact, I would even go so far as to say if I perceived that the student couldn't do the whole checklist, I'd cross a few things off the checklist, get it to the point where they could do it. And then when they do it, it's an *A*. But it really challenges our whole paradigm about grades. And what's the whole purpose of that? And is it really motivating? Those are complicated questions because grades have been around for over a hundred years.

Julie Walker: So that *A* or *I*. So the student gets an *A*. As you say—Accomplished, Accepted. They now have another assignment, and I think this is the thing that I really appreciate about the way we do grading in our writing system is we're using a rubric. It's very concrete. You did it or you didn't. And teachers have the option of doing points or no points, but if they were to do points, then basically you need to get a hundred points or a hundred percent in order for it to be an *A*. And anything less than that would still be an incomplete.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that's the way I would do it. Now there are teachers who just can't. The big problem with that is if you have one little thing wrong, one dress-up missing, and you decide, okay, I'm going to kick that back to the student, say, "you're missing something. Put it in. Resubmit." Well, if that happened once now and then, it wouldn't be a problem. But what if it's happening with a lot of students or what if you point out the things that are missing and they think they fixed it, they turn it in again, but there's still something missing. You kick it back a second time. I mean, there could be some students, you're kicking it back a third time, so now you've got a classroom full of students and some people are on their second "Gotta turn this in." Some people may be on their third "Gotta turn this in." Meanwhile, you've got new assignments. Well, that's hard. It's hard to keep track of all that stuff. And teachers will complain. But then I say, you didn't sign up to be a teacher because you want an easy life. That's not the goal here.

But I understand why some teachers would say, well, if you get 92% of the things on the checklist, it's still an *A* or 90 or whatever, the arbitrary number is. And then you kind of start going downhill from there, because pretty soon, well, there's only 87%. Okay, so what's that? Is that a *B*? Or is that the point where you kick it back and say, well, you gotta get at least 93% of the things on the checklist? I mean, a hundred percent is pretty hard nosed.

Julie Walker: Tell your story about Dr. Webster.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh gosh. Well, I started going up to Girouard. I went up a couple times, and they said, well, if you're going to keep coming up here, you can help us teach this thing. So I became Webster's assistant, slave, protege, whatever you want to call it. So he made me teach a unit, and then after I taught the unit, he said, well, you're going to do the assignment you gave everybody, right?

Julie Walker: Good job. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: I wasn't planning on doing that. I said, well, I have other tasks that I was planning to do, and he just pushed it. No, you should do it. Well, what are you going to do? So I knew that I had absolutely to get it perfect. I had to get every dress up, every opener, follow the rules, decorations, triples, format. Like I had to be sure that if I did this, it was going to be perfect, complete 100%. So I spent hours; this is like a three paragraph story, and I'm working, working, working. I finally think, okay, I got it. I gave it to him, and he gave it back to me and he wrote 98%.

Andrew Pudewa: And he said, well, you didn't put the date on the paper. I'm like, date on the paper? That's so stupid. But in retrospect it was right there on the checklist: name and date on paper. So I had missed a point of being careful, being meticulous. And I guess it was maybe a good lesson because I've never forgotten it. And that was 20, probably 20 years ago.

Julie Walker: And I love what you say to the students in the class, and you've said it here on a podcast a couple times, check what you do...

Andrew Pudewa: And do what you check, because some kids would write it and just be like, okay, and just check everything off, not actually use the checklist the way it's supposed to be used. And I didn't, I didn't go so far as to say it, but I have thought one reason why it's worth being so strict going to that 100% and you just redo it till you get a hundred percent and there's no, there's no, it's good enough. Because think of all the things in the world where good enough isn't actually good enough. Right? It's, we say that, oh, it's good enough. Well, I don't want to get in an airplane where the safety inspection was 93% done. I want a 100% right? You look at the complexity of the world we live in and how small errors can really undermine huge projects.

And we really need, I think, to cultivate this realization that we can, I mean, I'm going to say be perfect, not in the sense of being without flaw or being without sin, but what I'm saying is being complete, which is really the, the better definition of the word *perfect*. That's what it really means in its original forms is that it's complete.

So yeah, I get parents and teachers and get a little frustrated. I get a little frustrated, but it's teaching what Mrs. Ingham would've called one of the intangibles, right? Most of what teachers do that lasts isn't the transfer of information or knowledge or the specific cultivation of a skill. Whether you remember how to divide fractions or not when you're 40 years old, isn't probably going to affect your life unless you've been actually doing something that requires that skill, in which case now you still have it.

But what we do get from our teachers is we get this sense of being held to a standard, and that's, I think, what teachers and parents and mentors are really obligated to do. When you take on the office of parent or teacher or coach or mentor, You're saying, I will do whatever it takes to help you reach this standard. And the standard is going to be different perhaps from teacher to teacher, coach to coach, parent to parent. That's part of just human differences, but there's that relationship that gets created and the benefits of being held to that and striving and just doing something again and again until you can do it. And that's the life lesson, isn't it?

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly, exactly. When I think about it and we've talked about this before, high school and college teachers, professors are not as excited about assigning writing assignments because they don't want to have to grade all the papers. And so now we're adding one more thing and saying, Hey, teachers, to do a really good job, you need to kick it back and have them redo it if it's not good enough. And I think, like I said, with our, with the way that we grade papers, hands off content, hands-on structure and style, we can go through a rubric and be able to grade papers pretty quickly.

Andrew Pudewa: Webster never used the word *grade*.

Julie Walker: Yes, that's true.

Andrew Pudewa: He never said grade. I don't think I ever heard him say *grade*. He would say *mark*. And that's what you got was your mark, not your grade, your mark. And he came from, I think he came from an interesting background being born and raised in the early 1900s, there was an expectation of rigor that was kind of a carryover really from kind of the pre-industrial education model that still existed in the more rural parts of the country. His whole family, his teachers, his mother, his aunt, a bunch of other people, and they were raised

up 20, 30 years before that in the late 1800s, early, early 1900s. And we can go back and look at the level of expectation that adults had for students, and it kind of shocks us or frightens us today, like it would be unreasonable to expect young teenagers to be able to learn and do all that. And yet people used to. It was normal. And it was good for everybody. And that's how we got people who built a country, made it strong, did tremendous amount of good in the world through personal sacrificial action. And now this idea of sacrificial action is just gone. It's like, no, I don't want to do anything I don't have to.

Julie Walker: And I'm sure you've heard this expression, Andrew, because like you, my dad was a engineer in aerospace and this phrase “good enough for government work.” Was that ever floated around your dining room table? And how frustrated my dad was with this complacency even in that area. And wow, we've got satellites that are up there, thanks probably to your dad and mine, that were not just good enough for government work. They are good.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you're off even a little bit, and your satellite burns up.

Julie Walker: This is true.

Andrew Pudewa: right. So then how much how much time and investment and all that. But I don't know. I feel like when people can embrace this idea of you just do it until it's perfect. Not perfect in the sense of being beyond all criticism but complete. And I can see why teenagers would respond to that.

Yeah. It's an innate part of humanity. And what's the path to happiness, right? You look at all these unhappy people, like 30% of Americans right now say, I'm unhappy. Over half of people under 30 say, I'm unhappy. Well, why? It's because they've lost this world in which the way to be happy is repentance, reform, and reapplication. “Yeah. I messed up. Okay, now I'm going to do what I have to do, and I'm going to try again.” That's life. That's life. But the context for that has died out. It's died out in religion. It's died out in school. It's died out in work. And you have all these people who are, what's the term, quiet quitting? Like I'm just going to not do anything I don't want to do until they fire me, and then I can go get unemployment and continue to not do anything. The real satisfaction is in doing the things you don't want to do and doing them well. And learning from that. So people don't, they don't want to write papers. I don't want to write papers either.

But here's the checklist. Here's the method. Use your keyword outline. Wrestle those words into sentences. Read what you wrote. Look at the checklist. See if you have your stuff. Check it off, underline it. Put the numbers in the margin. Highlight the topic, clincher.

Julie Walker: All the things.

Andrew Pudewa: I mean, even if you're going to go be an auto mechanic, I'd like you to use the checklist to be sure you've fixed my car so I don't have to bring it back again next week. Anyway, I guess I'm a little bit on a high horse here.

Julie Walker: Well, and I used to say to my boys when I was homeschooling them, especially when they were teenagers, hard work is immensely satisfying, and I think we forget that if you work hard, you're going to be satisfied because you put in the effort and you're going to be able to show, yes, I've worked hard at this.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, but a good coach, whether this is in business or school or whatever, a good coach isn't just going to say, well, you, you failed here and you missed this, and you have to redo it. Go do it. No, they're going to say, look at all the good things. I love how you did this part and this part and this part, and you really are getting better here. And there's this other thing that you missed. Let me know if you need help. Do it again. Fix this one thing and we'll call it good. We'll call it a step up. You know the stairway's endless.

Andrew Pudewa: Another song from the seventies, right? Stairway to Heaven.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Well, teachers, if you are listening to this podcast and wondering how on earth you can. Achieve this high standard that we're suggesting is something that you're capable of doing, please contact our school's division. They certainly have experience in working with other teachers, and they themselves have done this type of grading and marking and grading and holding students to this high standard.

So Schools@IEW.com is the email address or just IEWSchools.com. And really, this actually applies across the board. This isn't necessarily for classroom teachers, this is for co-op teachers, homeschool moms. This whole idea of helping your teens achieve success in their school work so that they can be high functioning adults.

Andrew Pudewa: The only thing I might add is that there's this kind of egalitarian attitude that exists in schools that somehow it's unfair for one student to do less or more than some other student. So everybody's in the same grade. Everyone has to do the exact same number of worksheets or papers or assignments, and everybody has to take the exact same number of tests and, and if we don't have everybody do the same number of things, then somehow this is unfair and this can't be tolerated.

Well, Webster never had that idea. He actually had the idea that it was more important for each student to be challenged at their point of need or at their point of challenge. This is an old way of thinking. This is like an Oxford style way of thinking. This is when education wasn't standardized and conveyor belt-ish, right?

It's like, okay, I have a room full of students. They're all individuals. They all have different neurology, experience, aptitudes. So why would I feel compelled to have them all do exactly the same thing in exactly the same way? So Webster's thought was, Hey, if you've got hotshot kids and they finish an assignment and they've got their hundred percent, let them start another assignment. Have your box of backup source texts. And you're still in unit four, whatever, and you've got half a dozen extra source texts and you say, go get another source text, do another assignment. Meanwhile two-thirds of the group is still working on the thing they're working on.

And then the next third finishes, "okay, go get your next source text." Meanwhile, the last third of the group is needing to do this the fourth time, and you have to handhold their, handhold them all the way through it and point out and sit with them, and then they finally get it done. Meanwhile, the top third has finished two more assignments than the bottom third.

Julie Walker: They're proud of it.

Andrew Pudewa: Everybody is getting what they need. They're getting challenged at the point of need. And this was Mrs. Ingham's big thing. And Webster understood this. And I think it was just this older way of thinking about education. Equality is in opportunity, not in outcomes, right? And when you try to force the same outcome for everybody, then you lose both equality and freedom and you lose the edges of your group that can't conform to that. They either get frustrated, think they're bad, start hating it, tune out, or they just get bored and say, what am I even doing here?

Well, I think we need to just break the whole paradigm of people expecting that because children are approximately the same age, they should do exactly the same thing, no more and no less. So it's a tough one. I mean, I'd be very interested what some of our listeners think about this, especially teachers in schools. I mean are we just living in fantasy land? Is this totally impossible? Or is there a way that committed teachers who are willing to put in the extra energy and time can teach each student at their point of need? I'd like to talk to someone who's trying to do this.

Julie Walker: We welcome your input. Thank you, Andrew.

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.