

Podcast 406: Furnishing the Mind: IEW's Vision for 2024 Transcript

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: Well, Happy New Year, Andrew Pudewa.

Andrew Pudewa: It is the new year, and we are off and running, 2024. Who would have ever thought we would last this long?

Julie Walker: I know, right? Well, I want to take you on a short trip down memory lane. I have to hide this from you. I'm reading an article from your book, *However Imperfectly*, and I know you have the uncanny ability to read upside down. So I'm not letting you read this article because I want you to see if you can guess what this article is that I'm reading from.

Andrew Pudewa: I don't know.

Julie Walker: You wrote it in 2009, so that would have been 15 years ago, right? "Adorning our humble office, there are two things that always brighten my day and restore my focus, a map and a pile of papers."

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I don't remember what article that is from, but I do remember talking about how much I like maps. And when we did the SSS I insisted, let's get a big map on the wall so we can show the kids where everything is. And sometimes I'll just sit there and stare at a map, just thinking of the incredible hugeness of the world and of life and of creation.

Julie Walker: This is from the article, "What Are We Really Doing Here?"

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, "What Are We Really Doing Here?" And the pile of papers is what? Letters that people...

Julie Walker: Yes, yes, it's not a pile of all this work I have to do. No, it was letters from people who were impacted by IEW and what we do here. And I thought this being the first podcast of 2024, we could spend a few minutes talking about our theme for the year, which is Furnishing the Mind.

Andrew Pudewa: So last year we were working with special needs, special circumstances. We spent a lot of time on kids who have frustrations reading, writing, the whole language world. And I feel like we really were able to curate a lot of valuable information. And so hopefully any people new to our podcast will look through the previous episodes and see those things that may be of value if they've got that dyslexic, dysgraphic, ADD, ADHD, auditory processing kind of kid for whom the whole reading and writing on paper thing is, is challenging.

Julie Walker: Yep. So we've got two goals today, and I'm just hoping that we can get them both done in the short amount of time we have here, because we only have 20 minutes or so, because that's how long my walk is.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. Okay.

Julie Walker: Okay. So one of our goals is to discuss this idea. What does that mean, furnishing the mind? And the second goal would be to specifically talk about our theme, not just for the whole year, but for this month of January, and that is furnishing the mind with the need for IEW. What is it about IEW that can help listeners, families, teachers furnish their mind? So let's start with the first one.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I'm not quite sure when that idiom or expression was first used, but I believe it goes way, way back hundreds, if not thousands of years ago in this understanding that we're all born with a mind. We all have a brain. We all have a human cognitive function. And yet it's quite clear that it's furnished in different ways, where you're born, where you grow up, the people that you live with, what you encounter, your experience, what you read. So it's a very huge idea, and that's really what makes us all unique, individual people in such a big way. But we can narrow it down a little bit and say, well, what are the tools or the furnishings that would allow us to be most effective in various ways?

And, of course, our thing is arts of language, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking. So, how does that idea of furnishing the mind relate specifically to cultivating those skills? And so that's what we've been doing for a long time.

Julie Walker: A very long time.

Andrew Pudewa: And I remember when I first heard the expression, I just thought, that is so, so perfect to help everyone understand, everyone's got a different quality of brain, right? We're blessed or cursed by our genetics, our environment, our nutrition as we're growing up, the..everything to the air we breathe. And so we all get a house, a building, but we get to choose what we fill it with. And that I would argue it would be better to have a humble little bungalow of a brain with beautiful and good things furnished it so that it's useful and enjoyable and rather than a great mansion that's empty or full of trash.

I have to tell you this because it's a funny story, but I had a friend in college who was a drug dealer.

Julie Walker: Oh, dear.

Andrew Pudewa: And I went to his home one time in Mendocino County, which you know. And every house in Mendocino is a million dollars. At least, it seemed like it. Anyway so, I went to this house, and it was a beautiful, huge place. And we went in, and people were sitting on old milk crates. There was no furniture, it was ugly, there was nothing on the wall except a stupid poster, something that was ripped. I mean, the whole thing was just very odd to me.

Andrew Pudewa: And I think that impression stuck with me all these years after. That, yeah, you could have a beautiful house, but it could also be a miserable thing. Whereas I've been in, well, I've lived in small little houses that have beautiful art and comfortable furniture and

useful tools in the kitchen. So that's what we get to choose. So, how do we want to furnish the home of our mind?

Julie Walker: Yes. Yes. And I know that you speak to a lot of those types of practices in your talk, *Cultivating Language Arts – Preschool through High School*. So I was thinking it would be [helpful], if it's at all possible, for you to pick one or two of those ideas for the different developmental levels of children.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, most people who know me at all would know that I would be inclined to talk first about reading aloud to children. And then secondly, about the value of memorizing language, in particular, poetry. And we could unpack that quite a lot, but in that talk, I actually start with music. And the reason is because music is the first real form of language that we encounter because, before we even understand the meaning of words, we are impacted by the emotional, tonal, variety of sound that comes through music.

And pretty much in every culture through all of history, mothers have used it. sung to their children before they even talk much to them. And then when we start to differentiate the meaning of words, it really is the differentiation of tonal patterns. So if you want to create a higher aptitude toward language, then what you would do is be sure to have a musically rich environment for children. And, of course, I've talked about this a lot, and people can go find my talk, *The Profound Effects of Music on Living Things*, and listen to that. I don't think any of us really understand the phenomenal power of early musical experience and the cultivation of musical aptitude, and we, mostly, we don't do it well; we don't do it intentionally.

For a lot of people, music is very accidental, right? You go to a store, you hear music; you go get gas, you're suffering music; you go to church, you hear music; you may or may not engage with it, especially as a young child, but it's somewhat random. And what we're lacking then is the power of repetition to build familiarity. So, when you sing the same song again and again, or you play the same little melody on the piano, or even a recording, you take a little bit of Bach or a little bit of Mozart and you play that again and again and again and again, several times a day for a week. What happens is the child very quickly starts to memorize that pattern.

And in memorizing the pattern, it does two supremely important things. Number one, it creates the sense of anticipation, right? So if you know what's going to happen, you're more attentive to the thing because you're waiting for what's going to happen. And this is true whether you're reading books, watching movies, talking to a friend, cooking dinner. you have an expectation and that expectation creates attentiveness, which is a—I don't know if you call it a character trait or a mental habit or an intangible skill. But it's very, very valuable in young children, attentiveness. And then the fulfillment of expectation creates a joy. And so, I often will start a conversation about cultivating language arts with these ideas of creating increased attentiveness and a fulfillment of expectation leading to joy, firstly through music and then extended into children's books and picture books and the things that we would read to them.

Julie Walker: Reading out loud, music, reading out loud, memorizing poetry

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I think every parent and all of us grandparents have often wondered, how is it that this little kid will happily listen to you read them this book for the umpteenth time in one day. What is it about the repetition? I also discovered that it's the repetition that also builds the attentiveness and the expectation and then the fulfillment. It's like you hear

The Story of Ping, and you've heard it, a dozen of times or five dozen times, what's going to happen. But when it does happen, there's that burst of joy, that fulfillment of expectation.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And, I think today, in our modern world, we are assaulted by novel. It's like we have to get new information. We have to get the newest thing. We have to get the new version. We are trained by commercialism to get bored quickly so that we have to buy new stuff. And this starts happening before we're even aware of it at a very young age.

Julie Walker: Yep, the new toy.

Andrew Pudewa: Whereas, if you look back in history, it was more like you had a limited amount of stuff available, whether it was books or toys or places to go or things to do or people to see, so you had to be able to get deeper into the appreciation of those things to survive boredom, right? I mean, it's interesting how kids are naturally driven to cure boredom through activity, right? And if you don't do that for them, what do they have to do?

Julie Walker: Do it for themselves.

Andrew Pudewa: They have to go be creative. They have to go see new things that they didn't notice before and figure out new ways to play with the thing that they have. And my good friend and I have often had conversations about what we really need to help children in the world become better readers and better thinkers and contemplate better is to have a restoration of boredom. Let children be alone and bored and don't let them convince you that it's your job to entertain them 24/7.

Julie Walker: Yep. My son took my grandkids on a long road trip a few weeks ago, and for the first half of the time, he was equipped. He was ready because it was just him. His wife was home working, and it was just him. So it was a 10 hour road trip with

Andrew Pudewa: Two little kids, huh?

Julie Walker: A six year old and a three year old. And the first half of the time, they just talked and had little snacks that I'd prepared for him. And he was just so happy to... he was equipped, he was ready with the screen, but he didn't have to use it for many hours. And I just love that. I just love that getting away from the screens and finding ways to enrich their mind, furnish their mind through conversation, through music, through reading aloud, and all that. Okay, so, those are the primary, preschool, primary years. And then as we get older, when I think about furnishing the mind, specifically with materials that IEW can help families with, teachers, schools with, when do you recommend the best time to get started actually learning this thing called writing?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, well, let's just back up a little bit and talk about the fundamentals of furnishing the language facility. So, at the base level of furnishing is vocabulary, right? And you've heard me say, many times I'm sure, what I discovered in teaching writing, because writing is kind of like distilled thought. So when you ask someone to write something, you're asking them to pull out the best, most accurate expression of an idea that they can come up with, that you can't think a thought that you don't have the words to think it in.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And this strikes me true again and again. And what's the difference between an articulate person who can convey more complex, therefore more enriching and valuable information compared with a person who can't? It's basically the vocabulary. Do you have the words to do that?

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And in English, we're so blessed because we have so many words, and we have lots of shades of nuance in the words, words that are not quite synonyms but close, but you would choose them carefully because they have a different substrate of meaning. And understanding this and growing up in a rich vocabulary that is I, I'd say core to everything else. And it's done primarily in two ways, through the literature that comes into the brain and through the environment that comes into the brain. So if you read good books to kids and they acquire words from hearing, you have conversations around them with elevated vocabulary, that's just going to bring them up. That's just the natural function. And you can do the opposite. You can kind of shrink the vocabulary by restricting the environment or polluting it with a lot of pop, commercial, screen-based sound and information.

And then there's also what do we move from our passive vocabulary into our active vocabulary? So, you might hear a word and kind of know what it means, but to use that word, you have to have a more concrete concept of that meaning, and that happens through practice, primarily through conversation. And that is empowered by the memorized patterns of language that you would acquire from,, everything from nursery rhymes at the base to memorizing Patrick Henry's last couple paragraphs of "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech. It's on a spectrum of very simple, what people have always done for children, up to can we imitate and replicate the highest level of language that we know of?

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: And that's, that's called growing up. I mean that, if you're doing it right, you start with nursery rhymes and you end with memorizing Shakespeare.

So those two things, the auditory input, and then the moving of words from the passive to the active vocabulary, through conversation, narration, and the recitation of memorized language patterns. So that's level one, vocabulary. Level two is going to be what we might call grammar or syntax. So, how are words put together to be more or less effective? And again, these are patterned through literature and through recitation of memorized poetry and speeches, and scripture, whatever you are memorizing and what's interesting. And I learned this as a teacher of music. So who becomes the best improvisation musician? So take an extreme. You've got one student who learns to read notes and that's all they ever do and they never memorize a piece of music, but they practice typing notes from the sheet music to the keyboard. And they could play any sheet music you put in front of them, but they don't have anything memorized. Or take the opposite extreme, a student who actually never learned to read notes and just imitated by playing by ear. And then was able to hear a piece and practice it and memorize it and play it on demand and built up a huge repertoire of memorized repertoire. Well, who's going to be better at the creative side of music, the improvisation, the composition?

Julie Walker: Well, the student who was playing by ear.

Andrew Pudewa: because they have that huge database of what? Musical patterns. So when we are memorizing language on the foundation of vocabulary, we're also acquiring a great diversity patterns of speech, of this grammar, syntax, ways to put words together. And we all appreciate that really unique, creative way that an author said something, or that we heard someone say, or a really good public speaker who was able to be precise and be somewhat unique or stylish. And the goodness and the beauty of that blends together, and so I think we want to attend then to the syntax in the same way and knowing that it's doing something equally as significant.

Julie Walker: Well, and I love that you brought this back to music. We often talk about how teaching writing should be more like teaching music, and what you described the two extremes reminds me of how people attempt to teach writing, and how we teach writing is very different. And we don't rely on the grammar books where you learn the parts of speech, and then you just look at a blank page and have to come up with something, perform this composition, right? It's interesting that it's the same word, composition in music and composition in language. Only knowing the grammar versus starting with existing content. And that's how we do it at IEW. We start with existing content. We don't recommend that teachers and parents introduce grammar until they've done a year or so of IEW where they've got some content, and now they can create their own content and learn better how grammar works.

Andrew Pudewa: And we will do, I'm sure, this year, a podcast about grammar. But what's interesting is the word composition is from the Latin *posit*, which means to place. So, *com-*, place together. So, when you are composing things, you're taking existing things and you're putting them together in particular ways for a particular effect. And so again, that idea that the furnishing of the mind is about creating the building blocks and the templates and the patterns that you can draw on for creativity, for composition, and improvisation. The third aspect, and I know we're going to run out of time here, but the third thing that we're furnishing the mind with would be ideas.

So how do we effectively communicate something? Okay, I want to persuade people of something or teach people something. There's a concept there, there's generally a goal, an objective, but then there's the mechanics of building that into their imagination. And how is that done? With support. And “please support your argument.” Right? And that's kind of a weak point today, especially in the social media world. People just mouthing off what they think about something without saying, well, where's the support? Where's the evidence? Where are the examples? Where's the rhyme and the reason behind this? And I love that expression. I'm sure you've, you've heard it. People say it has no rhyme nor reason. I think that was first articulated in a Shakespeare play. But because those are ways that we can discern truth—through the goodness, through the poetic beauty of something, or through the logic. And when it has both rhyme and reason, it's very compelling. And I think we see some of the greatest stuff ever written from scripture to ancient poetry to the great novels. And you read a line, you just think, well, that not only makes sense, it's beautiful too. And then it's very compelling in its truth.

So when we are wanting to communicate ideas, then we draw upon that database of ideas that we have. That *stock*, and I would refer people back to the interview we did with Scott Newstock and how to think like Shakespeare, and we talked a little bit about this idea of the stock is all the ideas that everybody's ever thought of that are available to us. Well, there's

way more ideas available to us than we will ever hold in our brain at one time, but the brain is kind of like a, it can just keep gaining more and more. I don't know that any human being has ever actually experienced the limits of what the brain can hold. So we can always bring more in, and the more ideas we can keep in our mind, the more we have to be able to apply in our efforts to persuade or teach or inform or enlighten or support people.

And so, yes, and we'll do that. We'll say, well, that reminds me of this thing I read over there that supports this thing we're talking about right now or this experience that I had. But our experiences are limited by logistics, right? We only live so many years and we can only live so many places and do so many things. But when we fill our mind with the experiences of others through literature and through knowing that literature well by reading it more than once. I get kind of frustrated. People say, I read it. Okay. But I don't remember anything. I mean, I do this, too. I read that a long time ago. Don't remember anything. Can't talk about it. So, anything worth reading is actually worth reading again, and probably again and again. There's an old expression. I don't know who said it. Some ancient person. "Beware the man of one book." Meaning, if you meet someone who knows one book, really well, he's probably had the repetition of those ideas that his mind is well furnished with all of that. And of course, some people need more repetition than others, and some books are more memorable than others. But that idea of furnishing the mind with a great diversity of concept.

And I can't not finish this conversation without my favorite example, Frederick Douglass because in my experience, I can't think of a more remarkable example than Frederick Douglass of what a well furnished mind can do. And of course, for any of our listeners who are not familiar with Frederick Douglass, you should read at least one version of his autobiography. He was born into slavery, the very harsh, brutal situation separated from his parents at a young age. He was basically forced to work all his waking hours for all his childhood. It was illegal to teach an enslaved person to read or write or basically know much at all. I mean, it was, it was considered if you could prevent them from getting any education other than how to do these menial tasks, and they'd make a better slave. And yet Frederick Douglass in his young adult life became this phenomenally, unbelievably articulate man. Go listen to one of his speeches or read one of his speeches. Readily available all over the internet. And you just think, I could never write a thing like that. Let alone memorize it and go and deliver the speech. I mean, that is so far beyond my intellectual capacity. So here's a person who had the worst possible education during the most formative period of his life, and yet, he became one of the most well educated and articulate and compelling orators of his time, and I would argue, since then.

How did this happen? Well, I'm sure there are a lot of factors. I'm sure he was, blessed with a good quality of brain, but the thing that strikes me is his pointing out that he got a little book of famous speeches, *The Columbian Orator*, published in 1795, I think. And he "committed them all to memory."

He memorized a whole book of the best speeches that had been given or translated into English from Cicero, from the ancient through the medieval Renaissance enlightenment, even up into like, I think Patrick Henry's speech was one of the last ones in that book. He memorized them all. And this furnished his mind, not just with vocabulary, not just with syntax, a wide variety of syntax, not just with like the schemes and tropes and figures of speech of classical rhetoric that make it beautiful, but with a very seminal ideas of what is true, what is right, what is just.

Andrew Pudewa: And I just think, if we really understood the power of that, we would attend to it so much more in the education of our child. And if you went back 120 years ago,

go back to the turn of the century. Every eighth grade student, with very few exceptions, would have memorized “The Gettysburg Address,” the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence, and probably the last couple paragraphs of Patrick Henry's speech, and a whole bunch of Shakespeare.

And that would have been normal for every child to have committed that, plus other poems that had a culturally unifying effect of making Americans American and having this shared database of language and identity and concepts. And we're just lacking that so profoundly today. So part of this year's effort, I hope on *Furnishing the Mind* will be to inspire people to make a much greater effort doing some of those things that used to be just a normal part of growing into an adult human being.

Julie Walker: We're out of time, again, we seem to run out of time all the time, Andrew, but I do want to end where we began and just speak a little bit about what's happened in the last 15 years since you wrote this article. “Adorning our humble office, there are two things that always brighten my day and help restore my focus, a map and a pile of papers.”

And you mention in this article that the map had forty-six pins. Now, I don't have that exact map, Andrew. I'm sure it got lost in the move, but I do have a map in my office with pins all over it. And I know that there are more, many more than forty-six pins in there that represent the various countries where we have shipped materials to that have impacted people so greatly. And the pile of papers, well, we don't necessarily, unless we print them out, we don't necessarily have piles of papers anymore, but we sure get a lot of people saying thank you to you, Andrew, and to our company for the incredible work of IEW in transforming and helping their students become confident and competent communicators and thinkers. And that's really what we're doing here, isn't it?

Andrew Pudewa: That is really what we are doing here, and it seems as though we've been blessed in our efforts, and if we continue to strive for clarity of purpose and keeping things simple and empowering teachers and parents, we really can continue and I think grow our ability to help people improve in their listening and speaking and reading and writing and ultimately in their thinking skills.

So here's to 2024.

Julie Walker: 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.