

Podcast 439: Active Learning Strategies

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: Plato said, that which is honored is cultivated. I think too many of us do get stuck in, Oh, I have to fix that. Whereas if you just ignore it, it's more likely to go away.

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, our teachers are about ready to get back in the classrooms.

Andrew Pudewa: Boy, that summer just zipped by faster than any other summer, didn't it?

Julie Walker: It sure did. And actually some of our teachers are already in their classrooms. So I think this is very timely that we have this conversation about active training, active learning, active teaching, and what that all means.

Andrew Pudewa: As opposed to passive learning and passive training and passive teaching?

Julie Walker: Exactly. Now you think of a traditional classroom where you've got the talking head and that means the teacher is up front, lecturing, perhaps writing notes on the board and the student is expected to take notes. The bell rings, the kids all leave.

Andrew Pudewa: That would be me. Well, of course, we're making videos, so kind of a different environment.

Julie Walker: It's true. But even in the videos that we produce, you are very much actively cultivating learning from the students. I mean, they say you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink, right? You can teach a student, but you can't make them learn. But there are strategies that I know of that I've seen you employ in your group of kids or even parents or teachers, and I feel like you attended that same course that I attended.

Andrew Pudewa: In recreation?

Julie Walker: It wasn't in recreation.

Andrew Pudewa: I wasn't there.

Julie Walker: No, you weren't there. No, you weren't there. But it was actually when I was working for Biola. So that would have been now 20 years ago, there was an opportunity for professional development and it was available to all faculty and staff to go and hear this guy. This guy's name is Mel Silberman. S I L B as in boy, Silberman, Mel Silberman. He is the

president of Active Training. And I attended this workshop, like I said, about 20 years ago, and it was transformative. It truly was. And I was overseeing essentially a homeschool co-op on steroids, working out of Biola University. Biola was a sponsor of it. And we taught junior high and high school students how to do math, how to speak foreign languages, how to cut up the frog, and how to write. And of course,

Andrew Pudewa: That's where we met.

Julie Walker: That's where we met. Yes. So over the years, I have often thought about these active training strategies and have wanted to have a conversation on our podcast about it. And I thought, well, what better time than right now? By the way, I'm just going to give you the name of his organization. It's called, you'll love this, Association for Talent Development.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow, that's very familiar.

Julie Walker: Exactly, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: I would be super curious to know if he actually has any connection at all.

Julie Walker: Right? Yeah. With Dr. Suzuki. Well, and the website is td.org because I guess maybe ATD wasn't available.

Andrew Pudewa: That guy owns td.org?

Julie Walker: Yes, he does. Yes, he does.

Andrew Pudewa: That domain alone is probably worth a six digit number.

Julie Walker: Yes, td.org.

Andrew Pudewa: A two letter domain name with an org. Ooh.

Julie Walker: And so he, in that seminar, he shared several strategies that I have used over the years as I've been teaching or even leading a meeting, or there's so many opportunities where we want people to be engaged. You jokingly, I overheard you say to someone on my team. "The one book that I've never read, but I love the title, is Death by Meeting." And you know that I'm engaged in several meetings throughout the week.

Andrew Pudewa: Several is an understatement.

Julie Walker: Yeah, because in my vocabulary, several is four, and a handful is five, and I probably have two handfuls of meeting every day.

But I like to think that the meetings that I attend, whether I'm leading or whether I'm just a participant, they're not boring. We have a pretty high level of engagement. And that is kind of the whole point when you are teaching. If you're in a teaching environment, you want your students to be engaged because the more engaged they are, the more likely they are going to retain that information.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's all at that point of motivation and so relevancy and there's intrinsic relevancy and inspired relevancy. That's part of a meeting leader. And contrived relevancy is to control the variables to make it all more relevant.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Exactly. So let me share a couple of things that I've noticed that you do. And when I say couple, that means two in my vocabulary, so I'm going to up it to three, which means a few. A few things.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay.

Julie Walker: A few things that you do. I'm sure there's no actual number assigned to these words, but in my mind, that's what they are. One of the things that I love seeing you do, and you do this in almost every talk that I've ever seen you give, whether it's to a group of students or whether it's to a group of teaching parents, when you ask a question and it's a, "how many of you," and it's a yes or no question, you're asking them to raise their hand and your hand goes up.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh yeah. That's a trick I learned. Long, long time ago.

Julie Walker: And that's active strategy number one is raise your hand to model what you want the kids to do. The other thing that you do kind of related to that is you'll say, how many of you are this? How many of you are this? And you raise the other hand and you're basically demonstrating that there's two different options that they could be.

And I see you do that all the time, which I love. The second thing that I noticed that you do, and you do this every, every time you give the talk, *Nurturing Competent Communicators*. And listener, if you haven't heard that talk, you must be new because we talk about this talk all the time and how important it is and, and we'll put a link in the show notes so that you can, you listen to this talk. And you won't be able to see Andrew, actually you can because we have a video now of you doing this, but you do this thing where you're talking about reading out loud to your kids and you're having a hard time helping the kids focus. And your daughter came home from school and she taught the kids how to, and you say this every time.

Andrew Pudewa: What's that thing with one hook?

Julie Walker: What's that thing with one hook? And the very first time I heard you give that talk, I'm like, with everyone else in the audience, *crochet*. And now literally 20 years later, you're still asking.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yeah, I could probably muster up the word *crochet* if I had to. But it does cause people to fill in the blank.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: And part of that filling in the blanks is sharing the idea.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: So if I start a sentence and leave the end and you fill it in either verbally or mentally, you're participating in that idea in a greater way than you would be if I just said the whole thing and you said, yeah, I knew that.

Julie Walker: Yep, exactly. Exactly. And that is an active training strategy. Another thing that you do is kind of on the opposite side is if, and I've seen you do this probably as many times as we've done Structure and Style for Students video courses. I know that if our listeners are watching those videos, they're thinking that you had the most idyllic students because all those kids are as good as gold. Well, there's two things that happened. There's two things that happened, and that is we kept our promise to those students that if they did anything really goofy that they would be embarrassed about, we would cut it out. So we did a lot of editing of student behavior that was not good. But the more important thing that happened is you honored good behavior and you ignored bad behavior.

And I think that is an excellent strategy for basically classroom management.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. Well, it goes back to Plato as to many, many things, Plato said, that which is honored is cultivated. And then of course the corollary to that is that which you don't want, you don't want to cultivate, don't honor that. Don't give it any energy at all. I think too many of us do get stuck in, Oh, I have to fix that. Whereas, if you just ignore it, it's more likely to go away. It's not like customers. Well, it is like customers, right? If you ignore them, they go away.

Julie Walker: Yes. Well, we don't want to do that to our customers.

Andrew Pudewa: But, Dr. Suzuki was extremely good at this. He basically only said positive things, which is quite an accomplishment because for the most part, teaching violin in particular and anything in general, it can fall into being so much about correction, correction, correction, and you get too many corrections, pretty soon everybody's just unhappy. You're unhappy, kids unhappy, everybody. It's defeating. It's an emotional toll on the individuals and the community. So, how to teach just by that one point lesson, that reaffirming the positive, that thing you can say, "that's the good thing, do more of that," rather than "stop that."

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: It's tough. It's, it's very tough. And sometimes you do have to say, stop that, but there's a default mode and then there's an ideal. And if you can get the ideal to be your default, then you're just going to naturally get better results.

Julie Walker: We have not posted in a very long time, the picture of you being taught by Dr. Suzuki back in your early 20s in Japan. And so we'll be sure and post that.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's kind of irrelevant, but if you want to.

Julie Walker: No, it's not. I'm just thinking of our listeners, some of them might be brand new that haven't heard much.

Andrew Pudewa: They'll see a 23 year old me.

Julie Walker: They will see a 23 year old you. Surprisingly, how much you look like your son in that picture. Or the other way around, right? So the whole idea of active learning, active training is because of our tendency in a group to allow other people to speak, to raise their hand to participate, just kind of like human nature being a little bit lethargic, perhaps, and not being proactive and owning. And in this course that I took with Mel Silberman, he's the one that shared that statistic the number of people who are actively involved in any group is four. And so four people in a group of four are going to be actively involved in the conversation. Four people in a group of 10, four people in a group of 100, four people in a group of 1000.

Andrew Pudewa: But you can, you can fight against that statistic.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: By actively engaging the unengaged, the naturally unengaged people.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: Get your number from four to five.

Julie Walker: Get your number to, from four to everyone. That would be the ultimate goal of a teacher. I would think so. So here are just some ideas that I garnered from that seminar I went to all those years ago that I continue to use. We did this for Structure and Style for Students. We had the students sit at two at a table. So the idea of when you break up into groups, make sure the groups are two or three students.

Andrew Pudewa: yeah

Julie Walker: If you have four students, what you really have is two groups of two.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, what you have is a committee and then nothing gets done.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: And everyone pretty much knows that. Yeah. Partners seems to be best. Three can work, but I've always found that, and that's true with adults as well as kids.

Julie Walker: And so now that third person, that second person, is forced to engage. They can't just sit on the sidelines, generally. And then in those small groups, assign them roles. Yours is transcriber. You're going to write and take notes. Here's the reporter because at the end of our little breakup into groups and have a conversation with, within your group, we're going to have you share two or three sentences about what you learned. And so you've got the transcriber and the reporter, and they kind of have to work together to make sure that the reporter can read the transcriber's notes, right?

Andrew Pudewa: Those are probably better job descriptions than the leader and the dozers.

Julie Walker: Yes. Much better. Much better. The other thing that I learned from Dr. Silberman is when you're leading a class and you ask a question that you actually want an answer to, don't call on the first person that raises their hand.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, Yes. Wait until you have a selection of people who are ready to answer.

Julie Walker: Yep. Because if you call on the first person...

Andrew Pudewa: you'll always get that person. It's hard because there's always the stress of time, like, okay, I want someone to say this answer, and I want it quickly because we will run out of time. But it's time well spent, the pause, the pregnant pause that allows you to give birth to more participation and more ideas.

Julie Walker: Tell that story about your consortium, that literary book club that you were, you were teaching Jane Eyre. And you wanted the students to participate, and they didn't have much to say.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I was, I'd fallen into this trap of, I always ask the questions, and then they would give short answers. So, then I would have to ask more questions, and I thought, "This is not moving in the Socratic direction that I want." So, one day I just came and said, "Okay, who's got a question? Who can start us with a question?" And it was a long silence. And then one of the kids said, "What are you, what are you doing? What do you want?" I said, I want someone to ask a good question. And I don't know if I said this, but I thought, I'm willing to wait. That started the process of improving my book discussion skills tremendously.

Julie Walker: Yes. Yes, indeed. So just being patient and allowing the students to participate, because if you're monopolizing the conversation, how can they get a word in edgewise? And it's to their benefit. I remember you saying, and I actually applied what you said to my dad when he was in his later weeks and months, and that is sometimes they just need to hear themselves talk. And this was your preschoolers. So talk about that.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, yeah. Well, that is, that little story fits into my *Cultivating Language Arts: Preschool through High School*.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: discussing about how when children talk. It's a way they learn to hear what they're thinking. And so I had my little preschool, I was running for a couple of years, I'd put them in a little circle. I'd ask a question and let them all answer at the same time because I knew it was more important for them to talk than for anyone to hear what they were saying. And that's why when you take children, you put them in a, especially I'm talking young children, four, five, six years old, you put them in an environment. And you say, sit

down, be quiet, and only talk when you have permission. Neuro linguistically, it's a horrible environment. It's almost like saying, kid, shut off your brain for however long. So this idea of the importance of young children being able to talk a lot. I saw the cutest little video yesterday. This boy, it is a Scottish or Welsh accent. I wasn't quite sure. And his mom was off the screen. It was just this little boy. He's probably six or seven years old and maybe even a little younger. He said, Are we going to talk tonight? And she said, You always want to talk to me, don't you? He goes, Yeah, I do. And she says, Is that because you want to stay up later? And he goes, "No. This is when my brain just turns on, and I get all my ideas at night. And when I come home from school, you ask me, but I don't know anything. Until after a while, and then my brain just turns on at night. So, are we going to talk tonight?" It was so cute. I mean, I'm paraphrasing a little bit there.

Julie Walker: Yes, of course.

Andrew Pudewa: But I thought that's so interesting. He comes home from school, not much to say. Then he's got that period from being home from school until bedtime where life happens, where there's more involvement and engagement, and there's also the space so that he can reflect on those things, and it was just the cutest thing.

Julie Walker: That's awesome. Yeah, I'm thinking of, I have a handful of siblings, and they would always say to me, "Julie, how can you listen to dad say that same story?" Over and over. And he did. He had dementia, and he would tell that same story and my dad loved telling stories and toward those latter years. He didn't have many to share, but boy, he shared him over and over again. And I said exactly what you said. It's not so much for me, I don't need to hear this story again, but he needs to hear this story again. And what a gift that I have of remembering those stories very well because they were shared with me frequently.

So another idea that I gleaned from this workshop is using visual aids to really encourage students to participate. And one of the things that Dr. Silberman did in this class is he took, he actually had a little inflatable microphone and he passed it around and said, now, and so he was interviewing the students and because they had their little microphone, they felt compelled to share something and he did it with us in the class.

Andrew Pudewa: We did that in kinder music with four year olds. We had a little wooden, I mean they wouldn't have even known it was a microphone, it was just a stick as far as they could tell. But, , I would say to it, bah, bah, bah, bah, bah, and then stick it in front of their face. And they would then repeat to the best they could that rhythmic tonal pattern. And I remember thinking, this is really powerful. It would be hard to get a kid to do that without this prop.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: I don't know where Lorna Heyge, she was the founder of Kinder Music. I don't know where she got that idea from, but it, it's, maybe it's the, the old, old African talking stick idea. Here's the stick, you hold it, you get to talk. Now you're done. Everybody

has listened. Pass it on. Now you get to turn. I think it's very important in families, and most parents know this, but it takes kind of a vigilance to not let one kid just verbally run roughshod over a whole conversation. I remember in our family one time, the middle child in our case, she was, I don't know, maybe 11 or 12, she was sitting at the table. And she just started weeping. She's just sitting there, tears going down. What's wrong, sweetheart? And this is exactly what she said. She said, "No one ever gives me a chance to say anything in this family."

Well, what was happening? Older kids dominate. Little kids are loud. You want to give the... And it's that middle, middle child who can easily kind of get lost in the fray. So as a grandparent, I've been noticing that the family of multiple kids, I really have to referee a conversation. Otherwise, the younger one doesn't get a word in edgewise. And of course, that's an important skill. Maybe I should try the microphone thing with the talking stick.

Julie Walker: That would be great. I think about in our system when students, after writing a key word outline, they tell it back to each other. And I think, okay, that obviously is helping with developing their linguistic abilities. But it's also getting the knowledge of what they're writing about deeper into their soul. And I think about how alright, it may not be very efficient in terms of covering a lot of material to employ some of these strategies, but they're going to walk away remembering more. And that's what we want deeper, not necessarily wider.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm curious what this guy's opinion might be on presentations with slides. Because I don't like PowerPoint. I find it very handicapping in so many ways. And of course I am of the age before that, when we had overhead projectors, which were more like whiteboards. But I'm thinking about how do I use a whiteboard when I'm teaching kids? I have a plan. I know what I'm going to teach, but there's a certain spontaneity. And then there's the ability to point to something on that board and then elaborate and strengthen the concept with that visual and auditory input. And it is so hard to do that with slides. They are predetermined. You can't control the sequencing. It's hard to point to anything. I just wonder how many teachers feel almost bullied into always having PowerPoints for stuff. When what they might do better is to just go back to a whiteboard and use the PowerPoint only for things that they can't do on a whiteboard, which would be just pictures and diagrams, but no text.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: And I think that would improve things in many classrooms.

Julie Walker: Yep. I, of course, and you on occasion do use PowerPoint when we're doing like expository teaching where it's just like, here's,

Andrew Pudewa: Well, the webinar format you're kind of forced to.

Julie Walker: Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: But with the SSS and, and I recently did a TWSS again, and I just thought this is so much better than if I had to do this all with screens and projectors and fade in and out business. It's more human. And yeah, my writing isn't as neat as the font.

Julie Walker: The font.

Andrew Pudewa: But I think it's just a lot more engaging, and I'd be curious if he has any tips on how to use presentations better, because I'm not sure. My favorite book is, of course, *Death by Meeting*, which you mentioned in a previous podcast I've never read. There should be a corresponding one, *Death by Presentation*.

Julie Walker: Yes. So, the last strategy I'm going to share, and then we'll just kind of wrap it up, is something that I didn't get out of this course, but one of my professors in my MBA program used this, and that was the speaker lottery. It was an accounting class, and it wasn't basic accounting, it was more managerial accounting. Each of us had an assignment based on the chapter, but we didn't each have an assignment. We all had to be prepared to present. And then, he would pick someone. And even though he picked you the first time, you could very well have gone the second time, the third time. I mean, if luck would have it, it would be you every single time. So you always had to be prepared.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, you mean you could get picked more than once?

Julie Walker: Absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: Ooh.

Julie Walker: Yep. So I call that the speaker lottery. Which, if you are a full time teacher and you've got a classroom of 30 kids, and you've got 180 days, you can totally get away with this. Every student, every day, has to be prepared to recite a poem.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, it reminds me of something my friend Andrew Kern said to me once, "On my deathbed, my last words of advice to a teacher would be, ask a specific question of a specific student, rather than a general question to everybody, right? And that, okay, everyone knows you could be the one that gets called on here.

Julie Walker: Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: And maybe it creates a little bit of stress, but that's not always bad. There's the hormetic effect of the stress, which is I'll be better prepared. The other thing I think about, I don't know exactly how we came up with this idea, but the prop on the desk in the SSS, that was a brilliant addition because that little prop serves as an anchor in the memory.

And so kids are writing about something or they remember a lesson and they'll remember that. ship that was actually frozen into ice cubes and water for the Shackleton lesson. And stuff like that.

Julie Walker: Or the ice cream cone that we put on the desk.

Andrew Pudewa: And it was melting.

Julie Walker: And the kids were wondering, is that a real ice cream cone? And throughout that hour that we taught, it got meltier, and it's a real ice cream cone.

Andrew Pudewa: It got meltier and melter.

Julie Walker: And well, the most recent one with our Structure and Style for Students, year 3 level B, we had some blocks on the desk. And it was on Stonehenge. And so, we had two series of pictures, one was about these dinosaurs that you spent some time doing with the class on the Unit 5: Writing from pictures, with a series of pictures about finding a dinosaur in the jungles of South America. And here's another set of pictures and it's Stonehenge, but you didn't talk at all about it. And I was like, Oh, we should have reversed that so that you would have spent more time. How did these large stones get erected to be this monument to this day? But it's okay.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, nobody, I wouldn't know, nobody knows for sure.

Julie Walker: No, no, but it's a Unit 5, so it doesn't matter what you know.

Andrew Pudewa: But yeah, I just, and it's funny when kids come to visit here. We'll give them a little tour of the studio, and it's fun if they watch the video, and then we'll show them the prop closet.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, their eyes get so big.

Julie Walker: Yes, there they are.

Andrew Pudewa: All that cool stuff.

Julie Walker: The tent and the treasure map and the newspaper article, and yeah, that's very fun.

Andrew Pudewa: The bust of Julius Caesar.

Julie Walker: There we go.

Andrew Pudewa: And the swords.

Julie Walker: Yeah, yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: The skull.

Julie Walker: The skull, yes. So much fun. Well, lots of great suggestions that I received from that workshop all those years ago that, like I said, I still use to this day. And I think the most important thing that we can do for our students is do our best to get them engaged in the learning and employing these active training strategies for your students that can help them

then remember and maybe you will be immortalized as that student's favorite teacher of all time because you were able to engage them in their learning.

Andrew Pudewa: Maybe.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you, Julie.

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