

Podcast 446: Inquiry-Based Learning

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: You have to really enrich the resources of the mind to allow the better questions to come out.

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language podcast with Andrew Pudewai, 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.

Andrew Pudewa: Hey, Julie, I got something.

Julie Walker: Okay, great. Let's hear

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I've been traveling a lot this year.

Julie Walker: Yes, you have.

Andrew Pudewa: I was doing a talk in Hillsdale, not for the teachers there that we were working with, but for the homeschoolers in that area of Southern Michigan. The woman who organized the event, her very charming, I think 11 year old daughter, super articulate, one of these kids that just, does everything and is so excited about everything, IEW and all that, she, she, I guess had asked her mother, or her mother asked her, would you like to introduce Andrew Pudewa?

Julie Walker: Oh, very fun.

Andrew Pudewa: So we're in this beautiful little music hall in Hillsdale College, and she stands up there in front of the little music stand.

Julie Walker: Eleven years old.

Andrew Pudewa: At the lectern 11 years old, and she introduces me. She does not have a piece of paper in her hand.

Julie Walker: Okay. Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: But she had evidently mentally written the introduction, and then she recited it from memory without ever having written it down.

Julie Walker: Oh my.

Andrew Pudewa: for this audience. Would you like to hear it? It's a poem.

Julie Walker: Oh, it's a poem. Wow. That's amazing.

Andrew Pudewa: And the talk that I was doing was the one on memory.

Julie Walker: Oh, right.

Andrew Pudewa: *By Heart: The Goodness of Memory*. So here's her little poem.

Learning by heart is truly an art,
and one that should always be done.
And oh, how time flies
when you memorize,
because it's so very much fun.

But why, you may ask,
would you set to this task
that seems to be such a chore,
and spend all that time
simply learning a rhyme,
or a poem, or musical score?

Good questions are these!
And so, if you please,
let's welcome our speaker today,
a masterful man
who lived in Japan
and has very much to say.

He's quite a genius,
and for people like us,
he's set up a writing curriculum.
Want to write stories?
Learn poems at your ease?
It's all in there.
Take your pick of them.

He's memorized Suzuki books one through ten,
played those pieces over and over again.
He's memorized poems, too, Iwa.
Please welcome Andrew Pudewa

Julie Walker: Wow, Andrew, that's amazing.

Andrew Pudewa: I, I was, I said to her, Oh, I'd love to have a copy of that. And she goes, Oh, well, I guess I'll have to write it down. Because evidently she had just rehearsed this

whole thing in her brain and was holding it ready to recite. She did it flawlessly. And so then I guess she typed it up and wrote it down. Her mother sent it to me.

Julie Walker: Oh, that's very sweet.

Andrew Pudewa: But, I thought, what a great introduction. I've had many, many, many people read my biography off the website as an introduction for talks, but here I got a poem, and her name is Miranda, which of course reminds me of Shakespeare's, *The Tempest*, very poetic, poetic girl.

So, anyway, I thought maybe the listeners would be tickled by some little poem to start, because I don't know what we're talking about today, but I'm sure it's relevant in some way.

Julie Walker: It is relevant in some way, and I can see already how this can be relevant. Our topic today is called inquiry-based learning.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, that sounds so progressive and modern. I'm allergic to it immediately. Inquiry-based

Julie Walker: Yes. Well, and so this is kind of a buzzword, yes, and I subscribe to *Education Weekly*.

Andrew Pudewa: Weekly. Yes, I do too. I don't read it.

Julie Walker: I know, but every now and then I just like to kind of see what's going on in the education community. And this came across one day and I thought, Oh, I wonder what this is because I didn't immediately dismiss it as something new. Progressive. I said, this sounds like something we do at IEW because inquiry-based is about asking questions and asking yourself questions and that's how we do writing and we'll get to that in just a second.

I do want to point our listeners back to episode 439 where you and I discussed active learning. And I think the whole goal of this pedagogy is: if you get the students more involved in their own education, they are going to be more successful. But how do you do that in a classroom? And part of the thing that this, I have a couple articles that I'm pulling some content from, some good, some bad.

The bad part is the progressive education part. And they are not promoters of this rote type memory that we uphold here at IEW because of the value of it. So I think about Miranda and the poem that she wrote. Clearly, she has some content in her brain that she can now get out of because she's rehearsed it.

Andrew Pudewa: And that I think is the danger of this progressive idea, especially if you take it with very young children and you say, well, let's just do inquiry-based, everything delight directed. It almost throws out the idea of there are a lot of good things to furnish your mind with. And an unfurnished mind does not do good inquiry.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: A well-furnished mind will do powerful inquiry. That's why knowing stuff is good. But where's the balance? Because you don't want to just memorize stuff forever and never get to that point of asking questions about the world. So there's, well, who said that? The wisdom is always in the balance.

Julie Walker: It's so true. Who did say that? I don't know, but it's true. So I thought it would be helpful just to talk then about maybe developmental stages. And I'm thinking, of course, in the classical sense of the three liberal arts, which are

Andrew Pudewa: Grammar, logic, rhetoric are the trivium. We don't want to say the three liberal arts because there are seven.

Julie Walker: Oh, that's right, seven. Yes, there we go.

Andrew Pudewa: And we don't want to discount the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy, but that's for a different day, I'm sure.

Julie Walker: It's true. So the grammar stage is...

Andrew Pudewa: ...furnishing the mind, memorizing poetry, copy work, getting lots of beautiful language in your brain by reading and being read aloud to, and just living kind of steeped in the mass variety of beautiful language and expression and ideas and without that, not much else becomes possible. And I think that's where so many schools and teachers and kids are, they're not reaching their goals because the children are not getting the well-furnished mind through a more literary experience at home. And of course, media, busy parents, peers, all of that, it's not going to provide for them that richness of vocabulary that makes such a difference.

I'm reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to grandchildren right now, and I'm reminded of what a brilliant children's author Roald Dahl was, and one of the things he does that I appreciate so greatly is he's got, Willy Wonka, and he'll say a word, and it and then he'll say four or five different synonyms for that word, kind of increasing the emphatic nature of his statement.

But what's it doing for the child is it's putting all those words in a definition class. So they're hearing it, they're relating it, they're understanding it. And I fear that the more modern children's books that I've seen, they're not so rich like that. But then of course, the well-written book piques questions, right? And, and the other thing I noticed about it was, I would be reading and then maybe there'd be a pause or a chapter break or I would just stop and one of the kids would ask a question and then the very next sentence in the book would answer the question that young child just had. I thought, this guy, he's like a mind reader of young children. And so, it's almost kind of an inquiry directed book in a way.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes, yes!

Andrew Pudewa: They're wanting to know what a word means. Boom! There's more definitions. They're wanting to know what's going to happen next, or why something happened. And then he's got, he's got that just laid out perfectly, and I think it's the first book that all three of the children, 11, 8, and 6,

Julie Walker: I was going to ask you what their ages are.

Andrew Pudewa: have been just absolutely locked into. In fact, they didn't want to do much of anything else. I had to, believe it or not, tell them, we're going to stop reading and go swimming. Like, that was a new one, you know.

So, anyway, what's your article say there? You've got somebody who's written something about this.

Julie Walker: Yes, and so we talk about the types of inquiry-based learning. And the danger, I think, is this idea that the definition makes it student-centered, which could mean, and I think about the homeschool parent, who has a wonderful opportunity to provide an environment that can be totally rich, and I think of the language rich environment. But a student, five or six or even eight or nine, they don't know what they want. And sometimes this grammar stage is really where you need to provide more guidance. "You may not want this, you may not like this, but this is good for you. This is good for your soul. This is going to be good for your future to lay that foundation."

Andrew Pudewa: Well, of course, I have long talked about the nine units of the structure and style approach. And now we have nine with some extensions off the end. But people look at it, and they see this unit one and two and they say, that's too easy. That's not challenging. That's not thinking. That's not "real writing" when kids make a keyword outline from each sentence in a fable or encyclopedic little text. They're, they're overlooking the fact that it's a starting point for thinking skills. And I think that's where you're going with this: the relationship between inquiry based and cultivating thinking

Julie Walker: Exactly, exactly. So even an older child, like I think of that middle school child, if they are basically dictating to their parents, "this is what I want to learn," what they're going to want to learn is the next game of PlayStation.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, well, the other thing kids may have some questions just from being alive and growing up, but the quality of the questions they can ask is going to be directly connected with the quality of the information they have. So take a 10 year old who knows very little about space. They may have a question, like, how many stars are there?

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: right? But if you had a child who had been to a space museum or a planetarium, who had read some books on space, who was exposed to... it may be the history of space exploration to some degree, who had learned the names of the planets, and that some of them have moons, and that those planets are named after...

Julie Walker: Roman gods.

Andrew Pudewa: Roman gods. So that child who knows more is going to be able to ask better questions than the child who knows less. So there's your argument for furnishing the mind with good information.

Julie Walker: Exactly. So here are some of the benefits of inquiry learning.

Andrew Pudewa: According to what, who?

Julie Walker: According to this article in SplashLearn. This is a blog basically addressing the question, what is it and what are the benefits? So here are the benefits. Encourages critical thinking. Well, we've had any number of conversations about critical thinking and actually what is critical thinking.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, well, I don't like that as a number one point because it's so buzzwordy, but go ahead.

Julie Walker: Number two is improves problem solving skills. And then number three, encourages creativity. So I just want to take those three things and of course, as you say, apply it to our Structure and Style® syllabus. So think about critical thinking and what you say critical thinking is, and of course I agree with you, is being able to ask yourself questions.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yes, critical thinking, I think, implies a category of questions, right? So if I'm teaching unit 7, well, you've seen me do this any number of times, we start with the basic information questions, who, what, why, when, where, how, and then we might have some extensions off those. But then the next category of questions would be your sensory impression questions.

So what can you see here? Feel, taste, smell. So then you just don't start there. You just don't wake up in the morning say, I want to teach third graders how to do critical thinking. You, you have to have foundations, a pathway.

But where you get then is these value-based questions. What's the best? What's the worst? Are there any problems? If there's problems, there's also solutions. What's the value, what, what's the impact, what's the meaning of it all? You can't just jump into questions like that. You need life experience and an information database to be able to make the kinds of divisions and comparisons and analysis and synthesis that are required for critical thinking. So this is my big beef with stuff like this in these education pop things. You get all these primary and elementary teachers who say, "Oh, yep, we're going to just focus on critical thinking all day."

Julie Walker: Well, because they're required to, it's somehow written into the standards.

Andrew Pudewa: And then they don't use the time to furnish the mind that might allow the children to do better critical thinking when they're a little older. So anyway, go on.

Julie Walker: Well, you mentioned number two: involves problem solving skills. So, as you're doing this inquiry-based learning, using these critical thinking questions: what's the best, what's the worst?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, to do problem solving, the first question is, are there any problems? Right? So, and people tend to put up blinders about things, you know? Oh, well, it's fine the way it is. Let's just move on. But that's why I always like to say, if you work hard, you can find problems with anything. And if you work hard, you can generally find some possible solutions to any of those problems. There's a higher order of thinking. But, okay, go on.

Julie Walker: All right. And then another one that mentioned encourages creativity.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, creativity. Again, you can't get something out of the mind that isn't in there to begin with. You can't get vocabulary that isn't known. You can't get creative uses of words. You can't get imaginative variation unless you're furnished with the things upon which have that variation and all that.

So, those are all very nice sounding things, but I think all of the poor people out there who read this thing and then say, "Oh, wouldn't that be nice?" And then what are they going to do? They need to walk the path that we walk, which is to start basic, develop basic skills.

What is the first question we train children to ask?

Julie Walker: What are the key words in this sentence?

Andrew Pudewa: What are the keywords in this sentence? It's an easy question, but you have to ask the question in order to learn how to do the key word outline thing.

And then we go into Unit 3. What are the key elements of the story? That's a harder question. It's still not requiring you to make up a story out of the blue that's not gonna work. Or that may work, but is just too tedious for anyone to slog through. What are the key elements of this story, and this story, and this story, and this story, and by retelling a bunch of stories, going through that process: read the story, use the story sequence chart, ask the questions, retell the story, maybe change it a little bit, push the creativity, options: the combination and permutation of ideas. And so that's how you learn to write a good story, is by writing, retelling existing good stories.

Okay, then we go to Unit 4, now there's too much information, well that's everybody's problem. As soon as you wake up in the morning, you've got too much information. So then, the skill is, what is worth paying attention to? Of all the information you have, of all the facts available on this particular topic or subject, how do you divide it? And then what's important or interesting or relevant or applicable or meaningful in a certain context. And of course, that looks a little different for nine year olds than it does for 15 year olds.

And people sometimes when they first see our, the way we're set up with the nine units, and they'll often say, so you teach the same thing? Year after year? We use the same tools, but the child is growing in their maturity. They're growing in their furnished mind. They're growing

in everything, which then allows them to kind of use that tool at a higher level year after year. So you watch the way a nine or ten year old would use the Unit 4 idea to organize a paragraph, and it's pretty much random. Whatever is interesting. Well, that sounds fun. Let's put that down. But then you get someone who's been doing that for two, three, four, five years, now they're a young teenager and they, they have this sense. Well, what is the most interesting or the most important or the most relevant or the most applicable, the most useful part of the too-much-information we get. And it trains the sorting skill. And it's one of those things where you, a lot of teachers would just like the younger children to just be smarter. You can't do that. You have to engage them in the process that helps them learn to be smarter.

Unit 5. Pictures, right? We've talked about this any number of times. There's no text, so now your questioning process is harder. You've got a picture. Well, you've got to ask these questions. Who is that? You don't know. It doesn't tell you. So, now you've got to look in your, in your imagination, which really is just the collected up memory. We've talked about this fascinating fact that memory and imagination happen in the same part of the brain. You cannot have imagination without stored information. The more stored information you have, the more possibilities you have for combination and permutation of those memories into new and unique imaginative ideas.

Julie Walker: One of the big buzzwords about inquiry learning, and I want you to continue. We're in Unit 5. I want you to continue through the nine units. But one of the buzzwords or thing that they promote is that this is activating a student's curiosity. And the reason I want to bring this up here in the context of Unit 5 is that you demonstrate how to do Unit 5, you're doing it all together with the students, but you tell the kids, you can use this key word outline—I'm thinking about our Structure and Style for Students videos—you can use this one, or you can come up with something completely different. And I think that that's part of that active learning, the student is owning their education, they have the choice, there's their safety net, they feel secure in this, or they can go crazy.

Andrew Pudewa: And they know when they're ready to kind of branch off. And I was working with a lot of teachers these last few weeks with my travel because the homeschool season is kind of winding down, but now the before school teacher training is amping up. And so many, many conversations I have had with teachers who are understanding that this teaches a good writing process, but they still have this expectation that, "Well, I should be able to explain it to kids and then they go off and do it." And I came to this point, and I said to some teachers just recently, "Almost every problem that you have in teaching this, the first and best solution is going to be more modeling. Do it together, do it together, do it together. And don't be attached to the child very, very quickly being able to do it all by themselves." And so, that's why when we made the videos, we wanted to show the teachers, "Okay, you do it together. Next time, do it together, but let some of the kids know you can do it differently if you want to." And then the next time, let them know they're all welcome to do it differently, but you're going to do it on the board, and if they want to, they can peek up and copy anything I'm doing.

And as you said, that safety net, that gives that security, and security grows the confidence. And so then, "Okay, I can, I can do it. I can use some ideas here. And I can come up with some of my own ideas, or I can use an idea that someone sitting next to me said." And that there's this great swirling around of ideas, and that's part of the furnishing of the mind as well. So, any teachers out there, or parents, if you're having this feeling like, "oh no, my kid is not

able to do this by themselves, therefore I've failed." No, not at all. That just means you're still in the earlier stage of the process of building independence. So do it together, do it together, do it together. And don't worry if you have to do every single assignment together all year long because guess what? You're going to come back and go through all these units again the next year, and there will be a little more independence and the next year and a little more. And then at one point, as I say in the Four Deadly Errors talk, they will say, "Leave me alone. I know what to do." We don't want to cut them off from that support of being there and modeling and helping them ask the good questions.

Julie Walker: So, Andrew, speak to Unit 6, 7, 8.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yeah, so continuing on, Unit 6 is extension of Unit 4. But now there's not just one source of too many facts, there's too many sources of too many facts. So, now you get into the problem of arranging the facts in the more logical order. And again, teachers will complain, "Well, my 11 year old class is writing, I mean, they'll say 6th grade, I always translate grade into age just because—but they'll say, my students sometimes just...their paragraphs seem kind of random and don't make sense."

Just observe the child in daily life, And their life is somewhat random and doesn't always make sense, So, that's kind of natural, But you can't expect them to do more than they're doing. What do you do? Modeling and opportunity, modeling and opportunity. And you just keep rolling through that process. And then over time, they start to get it and say, "Oh, this fact over here would be better than this other thing as the next one in my fused outline because that kind of makes sense." And they're going to learn that through doing it. So, , this Unit 6 process is just so brilliant. And for people who have little experience in this aspect of research, well, we start everybody with some contrived source text that are kind of guaranteed to work, teach it, teach it, and then move into, okay, go get your own sources of information.

So, and I think that's another thing that bears on this inquiry based learning. Because you could say, well, what are you interested in? And, of course, If it's a little boy, he might say, warfare or knives. And then if it's a girl, she might say, horses, right? So, okay, well now go research what you want to research. Well, they don't necessarily know how to begin. And I will say, I think that sadly, we don't see as many easy-to-use encyclopedic book-based materials anymore. Like, you grew up with World Book, the Book of Knowledge, Childcraft

Julie Walker: Encyclopedia Britannica was in our home.

Andrew Pudewa: All those books that were designed for children to be able to get a controllable amount of information in an appropriate reading level with some appropriate, good illustrations. Those are invaluable on the bookshelf of a home or a classroom, and yet they're increasingly Everybody's shifting over to online resources, which are so much harder for children.

Julie Walker: Oh yeah, it's so loaded.

Andrew Pudewa: So, we need, I think, teachers today benefit from let's start with some contrived material to teach research. Then when you branch out and try to help them use real

books or websites they go find on their own, they have at least a little better sense of what to do with that overwhelm of information.

Julie Walker: Well, and I just want to speak to that contrived resources that we provide for Unit 6. You and I are pretty much the ones that write those right now, Andrew, and it's no small feat to put them together, to do all the research, but to make it possible for the students to decide what the topics are because it starts there too. What topics do you want to include? We have too many topics. What are the interesting facts? , one of our latest books that's coming out, I thought about this, or that's out now is *Frontiers in Writing*. This is a collaboration with Hillsdale College and their K-12 schools. And I wrote the Unit 6 source text on horses of the wild west. So I tried to get the boy element in it.

Andrew Pudewa: The Wild West

Julie Walker: the wild west but horses played a big part in that including the shows ...

Andrew Pudewa: And they're so beautiful. Horses are so beautiful.

Julie Walker: They are one of the little facts that I included was this novel thing that's actually kind of dangerous that's now outlawed is jumping/diving horses. Horses that dive off of diving boards into great tanks.

Andrew Pudewa: I think I've seen some, like, old movies.

Julie Walker: Exactly. So that was kind of fun.

Andrew Pudewa: So in our contrived text, we're trying to bring in those things that children will immediately think, Well, that's interesting. Which means it's not just the bare facts. We're digging a little deeper. And even the source text themselves are modeling some good writing. And that, of course, is the goal.

Julie Walker: Unit 7 we've talked about.

Andrew Pudewa: So, this inquiry based, I think we lead children in this direction. You get to Unit 7.

Then Unit 8, which we do in the middle and upper school levels, is combining the information with your questions about it and the opinions you might have. And we specifically wait to do that Unit 8 until the kids are a little older. They are in that logic stage, if you want to call it that. They're more likely to have better questions. They're more likely to organize things and have an opinion that isn't just superficial. But even that has to be modeled and taught and trained.

And so, the way I see Webster's nine units is this. And I don't think he knew, necessarily, the brilliance of what he was doing like a lot of people: they get inspired, they invent something, it works, they improve it. And then in retrospect, you can say, wow, there was kind of a

hidden hand guiding this whole thing because the progression of the questions through the nine units really does promote, I think, the goals of this kind of progressively sounding inquiry based learning.

Julie Walker: So we definitely want students to be intrigued. We definitely want them to enjoy learning, but sometimes that takes a little bit more coaching.

Andrew Pudewa: It takes coaching and it takes more than just the daily life of being busy in your family and watching shows and playing games and talking to peers. And you have to, you have to really enrich the resources of the mind to allow the better questions to come out. And that's where I wish this article had started.

But I guess that's what we do.

Julie Walker: That's what we do. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you.

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, Stitcher or Spotify, or just visit us each week at IEW.com slash podcasts. 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?

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