

Podcast 451: What Are We Doing Here?

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: What we're really trying to do is equip them with the tools for thinking better about everything.

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: Happy birthday, Andrew,

Andrew Pudewa: Happy birthday. Okay, sure. Why do you say that?

Julie Walker: Because it is November 2024, and it was 30 years ago you started this little fledgling company with you and your family after learning the method from Dr. Webster, bringing it from Canada to the United States. And we had a pretty big birthday party five years ago.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. Yeah, I was actually concerned that you were going to try to do another big shebang because being the recreation oriented person that you are,

Julie Walker: I love parties.

Andrew Pudewa: So I was mentally prepared to veto that, but I guess I don't have to since we're already here.

Julie Walker: We are already here.

Andrew Pudewa: But it is 30 years

Julie Walker: 30 years.

Andrew Pudewa: It went by very fast.

Julie Walker: It did. It did. And, of course, five years ago is when we launched the *Structure and Style for Students*® video courses. And we now have seven levels, two for level A, year one and year two, three now for level B that we just released the latest one, *Structure and Style for Students Year 3 Level B*. I think it's my favorite one so far. I think we got better with time.

Andrew Pudewa: We hoped we would.

Julie Walker: Yes. And then of course, two levels of level C, which Year 1, level C, we can actually invite people to get college credit for that, that dual enrollment option. So five years

ago was *Structure and Style for Students*. Ten years ago, Andrew, we did the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*® video course second edition.

Andrew Pudewa: third actually.

Julie Walker: Oh, right. We called it the second edition, but yeah, you're right, the third edition. But then in 2009, so before that, so that would have been 15 years ago, you wrote an article called "What are We Really Doing Here?" And I love how it starts because some of it is still very true all these years later. Although, well, I'm going to read, and then I'm going to tell you what part isn't true anymore.

Andrew Pudewa: Because I don't remember at all how I wrote, what I wrote.

Julie Walker: "Adorning our humble office, there are two things that always brighten my day and help restore focus, a map and a pile of papers."

I love that. I love how you start. I love that it's our humble office because at the time that you wrote this, we were all kind of all together in a barn in Atascadero, California.

And I have that map now. It's in my office. And we no longer have a pile of papers. We do have a bulletin board with several notes on it that well let me just read a little further.

"The map is an ordinary somewhat faded Rand McNally world, but what makes it special is there are 46 pins representing the 46 countries where we have sent IEW materials."

Andrew Pudewa: Wow, way back in '09, 46, and now it's a bigger number.

Julie Walker: Yeah, and of course, in every state of the United States and every continent, probably not Antarctica, unless someone took it down there on a cruise when they were touring Antarctica.

Andrew Pudewa: I haven't heard that, but someday.

Julie Walker: "The pile of papers is tall and ever growing. It consists of correspondence from many of the families and individuals represented by the pins on the map who have felt compelled to share their excitement and joy. Struggling students have grown into competent and confident communicators.

Years ago when I began this work, I was often surprised and delighted to hear that the stuck, the Structure and Style® approach was so educationally successful. But today the real effects of this work are becoming much clearer."

And that kind of leads into that opening statement about competent and confident communicators. Now we add on, and thinkers. Because we now know that this communication pathway that Dr. Webster developed all of those years ago that you then have built upon is actually more than just communication. It's a strategy for learning to think. So I thought it would be helpful for our listeners and just good for our souls to reflect back on these 30 years, Andrew, and just share some of the highlights of those years, starting from

when the humble beginnings, how this all began. And what you're looking forward to in terms of people learning how to write and speak and communicate in a world that so desperately needs those skills.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, well, I obviously never in my wildest imaginings would have imagined anything like what we have now. I was just really trying to find some side gig where I could make a little extra money and make up for the deficit between being a music teacher and on one income and expenses. It was always hard, so I tried a few weird things, but when I got this idea to do a writing seminar and I printed up some flyers and I made up this idea, Institute for Excellence in Writing, which does have an origin behind it, but I mailed those things out. Actually I sent them in a box with money to cover the postage to a homeschool group in Seattle, and I had arranged, and this is pre internet days, for them to put stamps on, I put the stamps on, they would put the labels on. And then send them out to their people. And I got 20 people to pay 40 bucks to listen to me talk for one day.

And I thought, well, that's more than I make in a whole week teaching violin. This has a lot of potential here. And it was really kind of a happy surprise. It was also an answer to prayer. And I don't think I ever thought it would be anything other than just a little side gig that I could do as a self-employed person, one more little revenue stream.

And of course, five years later, I was generating more income by traveling around and teaching writing seminars and selling VHS videotapes. And Dr. Webster and I had just created the spelling program, the Excellence in Spelling, Phonetic Zoo. And then it was kind of the leap of faith. Okay. I guess I can make this into a full time income. We wanted to relocate away from where we were living, to California. And so I kind of gave up all the music teaching and just went into it full time.

Julie Walker: And actually, Andrew, that's when you and I first met, right about that time.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. 'Cause you contacted me 98 or 99, about your program at Biola and would I come and do a thing? I would say yes to anything. I mean, literally anything someone asked me to do, I would do it because I was bootstrapping the thing up, and you got a very large group of people together there, too, too many to sit at tables.

We were in the chapel, almost a couple hundred people if I remember. And, I thought, I like this.

Julie Walker: You didn't like the fact that they weren't at tables

Andrew Pudewa: I did not like the fact that there were no tables.

Julie Walker: But you liked the numbers

Andrew Pudewa: true. Because I wanted them to be writing during the practicum session,

Julie Walker: but they were, they were using their notebooks as a little shelf.

Andrew Pudewa: I had to compromise on many things over the years.

But as the thing started to mature and people started to give their feedback, I started to realize this thing is much bigger than just teaching an English composition curriculum. And the comments that people would make about how it impacted them personally or how it probably the most dramatic thing was how it changed the attitude of a kid who was overwhelmed, stressed, confused, and that always comes out as hated writing to now a kid who liked it or at least could do it without hating it.

And sometimes even within a relatively short period of time, now their favorite thing and they're writing books in their spare time. And so that really helped me understand that what we're doing is more than just helping with an academic subject, but there's something deeper happening. I don't remember the first time I figured it out, but it was early.

It was early. How the the structural models, the syllabus, the way Dr. Webster put it together, the units one through nine, do so many things in terms of solving the quandary that parents and teachers have about what do you do? And how many people, I think everyone has at least heard one kid at one time or another, or a whole bunch of them, say, "I don't know what to write. I can't think of anything. I, I don't know what to say." And it's frustrating for the, the parents or teachers, cause this may be a kid that could talk your ear off. Has ideas just spewing out every orifice, but how to get that into words on paper seems overwhelming. And so what I realized then is Webster's starting with the key word outlines for everybody, regardless of age.

And people have this idea that somehow you should do something different because the children are a particular grade. Whereas my background in Suzuki method was more along the lines of: Well, everybody starts at the beginning, it doesn't matter how old you are, right? Everyone starts on this path, and you walk this path, and people walk it at different speeds, but if you do it consistently and decently well, you get excellent results.

And that's true with this writing program. If you just do it decently well, with a modicum of consistency, you get great results, and that became more and more evident over time. So I think the attitude transformation that occurs is because of the inner level of what's going on. Rather than, how do you write stories, how do you write reports, how do you do research, how do you structure an essay? It's more that problem of how do you access ideas, right? And so, pretty recently, three, four years ago, I started to really see the process clearly. To write anything, first, you have to have an idea. If there's no idea, there's nothing to write.

Julie Walker: And I think that's where many writing programs will start with, come up with an idea and put it on paper. We don't start there because we know that sometimes kids are dead in the water. They don't have an idea, so we give them the what to write about.

Andrew Pudewa: So I noticed there's kind of some categories of ideas. There's, first of all, an idea can either be in the memory or imagination. Or it can be immediate. So if I were to ask you, please write about the last trip you took with your family, I'm asking you to rely on your memory and imagination and find the details of that and then communicate those.

Whereas if I said to you, please write about the room we are in right now, you could just look around and see, okay, what's here and what could you say about it. And you might have some reflections from memory or imagination, but getting going would be pretty easy. You could just list the things that are here to start with.

Andrew Pudewa: So, with children, generally, giving them something immediate to write about will be easier for them than accessing their memory or imagination, which is a little counterintuitive to people who've heard these kind of ideas for writers. "Write what you know." Well, yeah, that's true. But when you're a little kid, you sometimes don't even know what, right? And I remember one experience in particular. A little boy was in a class and we were doing the Unit 7 creative writing thing, and he just started crying and he said, "I just don't know what's in my brain."

Well, that's understandable because when you're young, you live very much more in the moment. And that objectivity is a skill that develops with age and maturity and, and it can be cultivated, but it's not natural to younger children. The second thing is an idea can pre-exist in words or it can pre-exist in sensory impressions. So, if I said to you, please write about your dog. I'm asking you to take the experience of "dog" and find the words to connect up with the emotions, the activities, the feelings, what you see and hear and feel and taste and touch when you are interacting with a dog. That's very, very hard because you have to find the words that connect with those kind of visceral, emotional, gut level, nonverbal parts of life, whereas if I said, tell me your favorite Bible story or Aesop fable or Greek myth or fairy tale, that would be easier because that thing pre-existed in words.

And so you look at these two variables, immediate or memory and imagination, pre-existing in words or primarily in sensory impressions, what's easier? To start with, immediate things that pre-exist in words. And so, Webster, I don't think he thought this through. He was just basically navigating his problems of being a teacher back in the 50s. And, of course, the story of how he came up with the idea of key word outlines is very interesting.

But what I have come to see is that if you start there with immediate content pre-existing in words, nobody has the problem of, "I don't know what to say, I can't think of anything" because it's all here. So you immediately change the experience of the child from slight overwhelm to, okay, I can do this.

And then through the nine units, we move from really easy questions. Unit 1 and 2. The question is very easy. What are the key words in this sentence? Well, yeah, it's an easy question, but you have to ask the question to do the activity. Right? You have to read a sentence and ask yourself, well, which words are going to carry the meaning? Which words are going to help me unlock this idea and represent it? So, it is easy, but it is a question. And you have to have the ability to ask that question.

Then, in Unit 3, of course, you don't do every sentence, so it's a little trickier. But it's still, it's a story, and the list of questions is right there, it's a little litany. Right? Who's in the story, where or when are they, what do they want or need, what do they think, say or do, how is their problem resolved, and what's the end of it. Those questions become then the tool that

allows a student to take in a story and re-present a story. And these questions are a little harder, but they're still accessible. And I think most people who've ever tried to write a story wish their story was better. So, how do you learn to write better stories? Well, the same way you would learn to play better music or do better technique in a sport or something. You would do what other people have done until you're pretty good at that. You would retell existing stories, and then you would internalize a sense of what makes a good story. So again, it's a simple thing.

And sometimes people look at this and say, Well, that just looks awfully simple. Maybe it's, it's too easy, especially for my high school student or something. But no, it's not. Simple does not mean too easy or not good. That's a starting point.

Julie Walker: Exactly. I love that. Because it's laying a foundation, even when you were talking about units one and two. It is so powerful that we start there, Andrew, because every child, pretty much every child can do that activity. And if they're struggling a little bit, you can just camp a little longer there. But it's so powerful for English language learners, for those with learning differences. But then it's a great foundation, because you're always creating a key word outline. You're creating that habit of creating a key word outline.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. And we talked about habits from time to time on this podcast. Unit 4: Now there's too many facts. So now the question isn't just what are the key words in the sentence, but what are the most interesting, important, relevant, useful facts from too many? And that idea of a funnel or a strainer. And of all that you could say, what do you want to say? And making those decisions about the content. That's really an important thing. So when we work in the real world, we have limited time. We have meetings, we have to talk, we have to write stuff. We're pretty much like most businesses: a huge chunk of what we do is communicating about what we do.

And the essential skill that's at the foundation of everything is choosing to do, choosing what to say, choosing what to write, choosing what's the best use of the time and space we have available. And that's again, you look at a unit four [assignment] and it looks pretty simple, but it's setting a foundation for a life skill. Unit 5: we're back on the creative inventive imaginative side, writing from pictures and this idea of, well, now there isn't a story or a source text per se, there's a set of pictures and a method of asking questions about those pictures in order to invent or find content. And you and I, perhaps are on the opposite ends of how much we like Unit 5.

Julie Walker: It's true. I'm grinning over here. I love Unit 5.

Andrew Pudewa: You know that it's never been my favorite because I'm just not a creative, inventive, imaginative person and you are more that way.

What I have found so delightful is the system works for everybody, even the non-creative person like myself. And for the wild and imaginative kid, it gives them now a little more structure to harness that volcanic eruption of creativity that some children have.

Back in Unit 6: research. Now you don't, you don't have just one source with too many facts. You have too many sources with too many facts. And that skill, wow, the stories I heard. In fact, just recently I was at an event and a woman came up to me and said, "I do legal writing, kind of as a side gig while I homeschool my kids, and my company wanted me to write a summary of analyses of a particular Supreme Court decision." And so she had several different analyses of this, and she thought, I wonder if I could do a Unit 6.

And she did, she said I made a key word, basically I made a key word outline from all these different things and then I brought it together and of course, in doing that you have to cite everything very carefully, I'm sure. But she said, I didn't know if it would work and it might have taken me a little longer to prepare, but once I wrote it, I realized what I wrote was going to be not needing a lot of rewriting, like not having to work hard to reorganize all that stuff once it's in prose. So, again, in the most real world examples of real world application, this woman discovered our seemingly simple Unit 6 process that we can teach to third and fourth graders, as well as college students, as well as to graduate students, allowing her to do her work more efficiently with a better result.

Julie Walker: Right. I want to just insert this here. When I was in my MBA program, of course, we did a lot of writing, and I think it's one of the reasons I did so well in that program is because I knew how to write, thanks to you. But for our group project master's thesis, we worked on a business writing course. And we've never done anything with it because ultimately we have stories like what you just shared is business men and women are finding our program, are learning it maybe through teaching their students, maybe through other ways, and wow, they're learning to write. And so do we need a separate course on business writing? I mean, the probably the closest we have is the *University-Ready Writing*, which is a great preparation. A lot of Unit 4 summary. We call them precis in that. But really good writing is good writing, and that's what we teach.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I look at the progression of the questions, and they get increasingly more challenging through the nine units. So that by the time we do get to Unit 7 and say, here, write about your favorite restaurant, write about a trip you took, write about a person you know. And they are basically limited to whatever they carry around in their memory and imagination. They know how to access that because they have this habit of asking questions.

Julie Walker: So you started, before we got into the Unit 1 and 2, you started talking about this little boy who had nothing. And I know that you had taken these students up through the units, but he was still dead in the water. Please assure the listeners that that boy did not go home crying.

Andrew Pudewa: No, you can actually read his little composition on Legos. It's in the Seminar Workbook. And in the seminar I tell the story of how that happened and, and that, he was on the fourth day of a four day, the first and only four days he'd been in contact with, with our approach.

Julie Walker: We don't quite go so fast anymore.

Andrew Pudewa: No, no, we, we have learned over the years, we have grown in wisdom. But I was having a conversation with a person who serves the publishing industry by selling equipment. Right? printing equipment, which we have had to acquire more of, and he wants to know, are we a good credit risk, basically. And so he asked me two questions, which I thought were very good questions. The first one was, “Well, with the move towards, ebook and e and online learning and everything and the screenless, the paperless classroom, which is an ideal in many people's minds. Do you think there will still be a market for paper, like kids reading and writing on paper, or is that dying?”

The other question he asked along a similar line was now we have AI, and very few people really know all the things you can do with AI. In fact, nobody knows all the things you can do with it. And it's growing faster and faster and faster. But one of the problems that interfaces us with schools and teaching is this idea that AI can write stuff for you. So you give it a little outline, and it will write excellent prose. It'll do all the research, it'll put it all together, it'll be grammatically correct 99.9 percent of the time. These large language models, what they do is better than what most people can do. And of course, the problem in schools is kids saying, well, why don't I just have AI write my papers? That's what we do. We use technology. And so he was asking me with this, “There may not be much need for people to write stuff in the future. Do you still think there's a market for teaching it?”

Julie Walker: Oh

Andrew Pudewa: And my answer to both of those questions was kind of the same, which is actually there seems to be a reaction against the technology in a few ways.

Number one, I don't know anyone who would say, yes, I think it's okay that my children never learn to write on paper, that it's okay if they go through life always typing or more likely just talking to machines. I think there are people who see very clearly that this writing on paper is this distinctly human activity, and it's a beautiful thing.

And the wrestling with words, I think I certainly did when I was young. I would guess a lot of young men may have tried to write poems or letters or notes of a romantic nature to the object of their affection. And that just works better on paper because it's connecting with your, your heart and your spirit and your human nature so much more.

And then there's research we could get into showing that the brain actually operates differently when you're writing on paper, but I think we all realize that's not something we want to lose. Right? The equivalent would be, well, if you could just turn on a thing and let somebody else make music, why should you bother? Right? If you can listen to AI create automatically generated vocal sounds, why learn to sing? Right? You see the comparison.

Julie Walker: Yeah. Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: The other thing is it's true, the need for people to do writing may, in their work, may decrease with the rise of AI, but, and this is something Jordan Peterson points out very succinctly, I think, is that writing is essentially the distillation of thought. That's where you collect up information and you decide what's worth keeping and what isn't. What's

relevant. What isn't? How do you put that together? What's the most effective way to present? What's a winsome way to use language to communicate truth? And that skill we might call thinking, right? So while.. And I think we can make the comparison with algebra,

Julie Walker: Okay. Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm assuming that most people take at least one, usually two years of algebra, throw in some geometry, possibly some trigonometry. Well, above the simplest algebra stuff, right, which you may possibly find a use for in your daily life, most of it you never use. And the argument is, well, if you're never going to use a quadratic equation, why bother learning it?

But the answer we know is that it teaches you to think better. There are logical processes. There's the mental discipline. There's the holding of various things in your memory. There's the reaching a conclusion and getting an answer. All of that you learn when you study mathematics, and that's the skill.

Not whether you're going to use an equation to solve a problem in real life or not. You're probably not unless you're an engineer, but I'm certainly grateful for all the math that I took. Even though I don't think I used the math, I know that it shaped the cognitive process that I have. And I do think more math might have made me a better thinker, even though I doubt I would use calculus in daily life, but I think I would have benefited from the discipline of learning.

And so the same thing is going to be true about writing. We're not teaching writing specifically in a pragmatic or utilitarian way. Like we want everybody to go out and be able to write well. I mean, that's okay. And I think it has personal side benefits. But, what we're really trying to do is equip them with the tools for thinking better about everything.

And I fear that what we're seeing now with kind of the combination of a modern progressive approach to education, which will follow this line of thinking: well, if you're never going to use it, then why learn it? Why learn facts when you can just look them up easily? And combining that then with technology that atrophies all the skills it replaces, I think what we're seeing is a greater disparity between people who can think and everyone else.

If you were to go back 100, 150 years, the difference between well-educated people and less-educated people was not as different, like an eighth grade education in 1890 was a very good education, better than most people have today. And so everyone had a higher level of basic knowledge and skills and requirement for thinking and then they would apply those thinking skills to whatever they were doing, manufacturing, farming, sales, whatever.

But now I think what we're seeing is a greater stratification of people who are learning to think, almost as an elite skill, and everybody else. And who's going to control what? So I view the improvement of thinking skills as not just a fundamental human faculty, but also as kind of an essential component for the preservation of a free and civil society. So, whether that's what we're really doing here or not, it seems to me that we are at least a little piece of

that very complex thing called modern life, helping people in a very profound and significant way.

Julie Walker: I started this conversation with a quote from your article. I better end with a quote, and this is the last paragraph in your article. It has Greek in it, so I'm going to totally butcher this. I'm just going to admit this right now. "The Greek poet, Euripides, Euripides,

Andrew Pudewa: There's a lot of ways to pronounce Greek names, so we'll just, whatever you want to

Julie Walker: Euripides, I'm going with that. "The Greek poet Euripides was possibly the first to note that the tongue is mightier than the blade. And Jefferson echoed this when he exhorted Paine, 'go on doing with your pen what in other times was done with the sword.' We now must exhort each other. Let us continue to train our students in the use of this great weaponry, the skills of written and spoken English, so that when the crisis arise, we will have a force ready to wield the word of truth. This is truly our great work, our magnum opus, and this is what we are really doing here."

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, that's pretty well written.

Julie Walker: It's pretty well written. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you, Julie.

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/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.