

Podcast 473: Poetry Memorization through the Years

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: Historically, the education of everyone from historic ancient times up until probably a hundred years ago or less. The fundamental activity for primary education was committing a lot to memory.

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, Andrew, this is April, and I know that means a lot of different things to different people.

Andrew Pudewa: Generally warm and green, and we're happier because there's more sunshine.

Julie Walker: It's true. It's also your birthday month, so happy birthday, Andrew Pudewa.

Andrew Pudewa: I tend to forget that

Julie Walker: Yes. And some.

Andrew Pudewa: If you forget a birthday, does it not count?

Julie Walker: Correct. Exactly. Right.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm still like 50 something.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Exactly. It's also, someone decided, I don't know who decided that April is a good month for poetry.

Andrew Pudewa: Ah, yes.

Julie Walker: We find many things to talk about here for poetry, but I thought it would be fun for our listeners to hear the story of how this *Linguistic Development through Poetry Memorization* course came to be.

I have a box sitting on my table. Everybody's looking at it that's in this room. So Andrew, I know this is a little different than your first iteration, but how did you even come up with this idea of the value of memorizing poetry, resulting in now this course?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it was, gosh, over 20 years ago, and I had started to give a talk, which I still give to this day, called “Nurturing Competent Communicators,” and it's a two-part talk.

Julie Walker: Now it's a two-part talk. I remember when it was just a one-part talk.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, the first half was all about why it's so important to read aloud to children if you want to build that rich database of language, vocabulary, syntax, grammar, , literary techniques and devices, a good sense of language. And after I did that a couple times, I realized that another huge part of historically the education of everyone from pre-from historic ancient times up until probably a hundred years ago or less, the fundamental activity for primary education was committing a lot to memory, and children were responsible. It was normal that people would memorize the great poems, the sometimes, excerpts of the great epics, excerpts from famous speeches or documents in the 1800s, pretty much every school child would've memorized a lot of stuff, whether it was scripture poetry or things like Patrick Henry's last two paragraphs of his Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death speech. I think almost every middle school student in the country, in the late 1800s would've memorized the Gettysburg address.

And that culture of memorizing, committing to memory had just died out in the modern period, much of it perhaps under the influence of John Dewey and his attitude about memory and rote learning as being at best a waste of time and at worst a stifling of creativity and that education had to be all about discovery and experience and self-expression. And there's truth to that, but unfortunately it was the typical baby-with-the-bathwater and schools of education started to downplay or even criticize this discipline of committing language to memory.

So I became aware of this and I put it in that talk. And I have some experiences that I had both in Japan trying to learn Japanese as well as with some young children that I was, they were in my preschool program I was running, but way before I started IEW and how I've seen memorized language, vocabulary and sentence patterns and things just come out in their oral and written expression.

So I added that part in, and I started to tell people, this is how you would do poetry memorization the right way. And my background with the Suzuki Method, of course, was a Suzuki Method style. Like if you take the time to memorize a piece of music, why would you stop playing it? And then six months later have forgotten it? It's a loss. It's a waste. I gave people all sorts of suggestions about how to do poetry memorization in the most effective way, both for simple brain growth, because memorization is de facto good in terms of what it does for making connections between neurons, development of the language part of the brain, and then the practical applications of using language.

And I started to think, it's like anything you tell people: here, this is a great idea. Go do it. But then they need a plan. They need a program of some sort or else they start out and fizzle out. And of course we see this in anything that us human beings undertake. It's very easy to start

with a bang and then lose the momentum, and it falls off and you don't get the long-term benefits.

So I just decided, why not do it? And I started collecting up poems that I had grown up with, poems that were in the poetry books that I had loved, and I tried to choose poems that were going to be kind of gradually increasing in length and sophistication and maybe subtlety of nuance and and meaning.

So I put together the first iteration, which was four levels of 20 poems. And I recorded them all and I edited all the recordings. I did the whole thing myself. And I remember very clearly the weeks that I spent on that. And then we started selling it and a few years later was meeting people who said, oh, my kids memorized all these poems and.

Then once YouTube started to become a thing, people would send me links of their children reciting poetry and making a video and sending it to grandparents or posting it. And I started to realize this is having a tremendously good impact. And today I'll meet kids in their twenties who remember growing up and they'll recite some poem. Usually it's "Ooey, Gooney" 'cause that's number one, and everybody gets it.

Julie Walker: Well, and , speaking of those YouTube links, we'll, we'll put a couple links in the show notes. Oftentimes when a family is starting this, they're doing it with maybe their fourth grader or fifth grader, but the younger sibling who may only be five, is doing it right along with them, and that's what's just so adorable.

Andrew Pudewa: People have asked me, well, what age or what grade should you start this? And it's kinda like, well, what age or what grade should you start talking or when should you start playing a musical instrument? Or when should you start learning to draw? It's entirely variable. But with this, I think we have found that younger children can do very well, even before you would expect them to be able to memorize a multi-stanza poem.

Of course, you don't have to understand the thing entirely. I mean, there's poems that I still love today, and I have to say I don't understand them perfectly. You might throw in some Shakespeare in that. I don't necessarily understand it all, but that doesn't mean it isn't good and worth doing. And then what I have come to notice is that when children do, you can read a poem, talk about it, but when you memorize it, you commit it to memory, you learn by heart.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And that changes the nature of the poem. Instead of being over there, something you can appreciate. Now it's inside you, something you can really love.

Julie Walker: Yep. And we'll put a link in the show notes of a talk that you give: By Heart: The Goodness of Memory.

Andrew Pudewa: One of my favorites.

Julie Walker: It's a good talk. I'm thinking about our theme for the year: how to think. How does this contribute to the discipline of learning to think?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, probably in the, at the simplest level, it expands your vocabulary. When you have more words, you can actually think more thoughts, or you can think more nuanced or refined thoughts. We see vocabulary really is, is at the core of so much. And yeah, you can go get a vocabulary program and have kids do workbooks, but that's kinda way over there. That's in-one-side, out-the-other of the brain. Whereas when you can recite a poem and use a word confidently that you previously didn't necessarily know or have confidence using, it really expands your capacity to express more accurately the thoughts you're trying to think. So that would be the first level.

The second level would be grammar. And we know that the good and great authors are able to put words into pattern phrases, clauses, sentences, multi sequences that do. More in terms of building an image or a more well-developed idea than if you were to use simpler words with simpler sentences. So the complexity of sentence construction is also connected with the complexity of thought. So part of it is, well, let's learn ways that great poets have put words together. Sometimes it's a little different than what we're used to because we don't talk that way. And yet it expands our capacity to do that when we do speak or write. So that would be the second level: it's a great way to build what I would call the inherent grammar. The grammar, that you don't have to analyze it or explain it all. You just know you can say that that way.

And the third level, I think would be: the great poems contain great ideas and they may be artistic ideas. Some of Robert Lewis Stevenson's poems from *A Child's Garden of Verses* come to mind. They may contain historical ideas.

Poems like "Paul Revere's Ride" come to mind. They may contain philosophical ideas. William Blake. Simple, short, but really rich, really deep, and even poems with religious. Spiritual sentiments, uh, Christina Rossetti, "Who Has Seen the Wind?" type of thing.

Julie Walker: Well, when I think about current events or they were current at the time of the poem's writing, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" that's based on an actual historic event.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Yeah. So it's a way, in addition to great novels, it's a way for a child to gain access to a richness of ideas and concepts that you just aren't going to encounter in daily life or in the newspaper once people actually read them. But now what they encounter online and read. And so much of the prose that we see is just really kind of dumbed down. That's the way it's, that's the world we live in. But we don't want to just live in the shallows. We want to be able to dive deeper and explore the depths of the greater ideas that we are blessed with and part of our heritage.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. This would be one of those times that I would think it would be nice to have a video camera in this room. We don't; we just do audio, at least for now. But I

want to open this box and just describe what I'm seeing in this box so that our listeners maybe can appreciate this course a little bit.

So I open this box and in there, and I'm laughing at this. This is a wallet that has your talk Nurturing Competent Communicators. This is a DVD. Then there are five CDs of audio recordings of poems. And I know, dear listener, you are thinking, what am I supposed to do with a DVD?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's interesting though because I personally know, I even have a couple kids who, I guess because they like it, or more likely just a tight budget, they still have cars with CD players.

Julie Walker: There you go.

Andrew Pudewa: So I've had people say, oh, I love this because I have this old car, and we can listen to poems while we're driving.

Julie Walker: While we're driving. Yes,

Andrew Pudewa: And then the other benefit too is if you have a CD player, you can give it to a kid and they can just put it in and listen and they don't have to be connected to the internet or whatnot.

Julie Walker: And believe it or not, they still do sell CD players, portable CD players with little headphones.

Andrew Pudewa: Actually there's almost a revival of that right now. So many parents do not like having to give their kids iPhone-like devices all sorts of complexity and access to things. It's not tight, it's not easy. It's not here independent. So there's actually a resurgence of CD players because some of the devices designed for kids aren't very good fidelity.

Yeah. You can get music or whatever on these little, couple of my grandkids have them, but the CD still gives a higher quality, kind of like there's a resurgence in interest in vinyl today.

Julie Walker: Yes. I have a son who collects vinyl and uh, is very careful when he plays it. But I did wanna say to our listeners, there is a way to access these audios.

Andrew Pudewa: If you don't have an old car and you don't have a CD player, you can, after buying the program, download the MP3 files and stick it on whatever device you wanna stick it on and , give it on a device to more than one child. And I've even had old people. And I'm not going to define old because I might accidentally fit in that category now, but over the years I've had people even older than me say, "I bought this for myself because—" and then fill in the blank. I always wanted to learn poems but didn't. These are some of my favorite poems. Of course, the one I like to hear is, your voice is soothing. I never tried or imagined I would have a soothing voice, and then even people saying, well, I don't want to get dementia

in my old age, and I read that memorizing things helps keep your brain healthy. Yeah. So all sorts of reasons.

Julie Walker: So also in this box is a little spiral bound book of the poems for your students. So as you are reading them, Andrew, the student can follow along and they actually have some illustrations in there that your student can even color the pictures.

Andrew Pudewa: That was the second iteration of this. We thought, well, kids love to color. Why not give them something to keep their eyes and busy while they're listening? A poem is supposed to create images and imagination, and simple line drawings that aren't too detailed, that won't supplant the imagination of the child, can propel the child into a better concept, a better image, a better imagination and delight in the poem, much like illustrations in a children's book will help them kind of enjoy and keep on track there.

Julie Walker: Then of course the teacher's manual, and this is actually where the gold is. The audio recording. Absolutely. But the gold in this is your article, not an article.

Andrew Pudewa: It's the introduction to the whole program, explaining why and how to do everything and. How to maintain your repertoire and kind of a, an almost scientific method of saying every poem, every day up through level one

Julie Walker: and there's charts

Andrew Pudewa: every other poem, every other day of level one while you're learning level two. And then when you get past level two, every third poem, every third day for level one, every other poem, every other day for level two, while you're learning level three.

And by then you're starting to run out of time. And so then it recommends you can shift over to kind of draw them at random as much as you have time for every day. But the goal is don't forget a poem you've memorized. And the delight, of course, would be to be an older person and have memorized dozens, many dozens of poems.

And I say, if you do this the way it's laid out, you'll have grown up and hopefully have almost lifetime retention on eighty poems and twenty excerpts of famous speeches.

Julie Walker: Yes, because we did add a fifth level with this second edition that is excerpts from famous speeches, including some of those that you mentioned earlier today. So lots of great poetry. And how long, Andrew, this, so there's five levels. How long does this take? Is this a one year program?

Andrew Pudewa: No, no, no. This is like a book of poems you grow up with. And if you're doing the system and you're learning a poem and mastering that, continuing to recite it with all the other poems, and then you're learning a new one, it's really the E+1. It's the Suzuki method approach to poetry memorization.

And as my years as a violin teacher, you could never predict, you start with a child and it could take them six months or two years to get through book one. And that's, no, not better nor worse. Part of it is just the neurology and aptitude of the child. Another one is how much time do you put into it? And there's no schedule. It's just start now and keep going forever. And if you did get all those under your belt, you'd be pretty much able to go pick up any book of poems, pick one you love, and add that to your collection.

Julie Walker: There's two other things I want you to address and that we are pretty close to being out of time. So I'm gonna ask you two different questions after I say this. So listeners, when I am asked, how long did this take? I say probably five or more years, a level a year. But if you don't get a whole level done, it might take you two years to get through.

That's still 20 poems that you've now put in your heart. Even if you didn't do anything more than that, that would make you more literate than you know.

Andrew Pudewa: Memorized

Julie Walker: Right? It's like, when do you plant a tree? What's the best time to plant a tree? 20 years ago. What's the second best time? today Go wide. So here we go.

Get, get this. So Andrew, we have experienced people who are taking some type of written prompt on any topic, fill in the blank. And having had memorized some of this... because you can't bring in any resources... how does bringing in memorized work in your brain help you with these write-on-demand type prompts?

Andrew Pudewa: I, I would interject. Right here. I think a very important comment, which is if you want children to grow up and enjoy reading poetry, or if you want children to enjoy writing poetry, the number one predictor of kids who like writing poetry is having memorized a lot of poems.

Julie Walker: There you go.

Andrew Pudewa: So that's the first one. And then if you're in a situation where you have writing prompts, maybe it's a state standardized test or an application to a school or whatever might come up. Even a letter. Little snippets, little excerpts can pop out of a memorized thing and then you can change the words to say what you want to say and have this more literary, poetic, artistic, elegant, even winsome way of saying what you want to say by essentially imitating these myriad, countless, almost variety of structures that poets have brought into our language over the past many hundred years.

Julie Walker: I think about some talks that you give in our *University-Ready Writing* about who evaluates these types of written essays that are prompt based, and usually they're English or literature teachers. And if you're able to pull from your memory a line from Charge of the Light Brigade. I bring up the that

Andrew Pudewa: And fit it into your essay.

Julie Walker: fit it in. Oh, do you look good! And I think about when we often recommend this to families who maybe English isn't their first language. Can you speak to that briefly about why memorizing poetry can help in that regard?

Andrew Pudewa: It's the same thing if a student, especially ESL/EFL student, is just acquiring vocabulary from daily life, there's a functionality to daily life, but it doesn't get above a certain point of sophistication. We just don't live in a higher level of linguistic expression, perhaps as people used to. I don't know. But this is going to super strengthen. Vocabulary and syntax. And in that talk Nurturing Competent Communicators. I tell the whole story of how I lived in Japan. I was studying Japanese. I knew all the words I needed to know, and I knew all the rules of Japanese grammar, and I could communicate decently well, but I could never be sure it was good. And by memorizing a big chunk of what I used was a fairy tale translated into Japanese. I memorized that whole thing. And then I noticed that in my daily conversation with Japanese people, a little line, phrase, clause, something would hop out of that memorized fairy tale and then I could change the words to say what I wanted to say using a grammatical pattern I never could have put together just by using the rules of Japanese grammar.

And I think that's going to be true for anyone learning any language, whether it's their primary language or whether it is a second language.

Julie Walker: So our appeal to you, dear listener, is memorize poetry, and if you need some help and need a system, we've got you covered.

Andrew Pudewa: We've done so many things. We've produced so many things, but in a way, this is still my favorite thing that I ever created, just because I know how it enriches, not just the intellect, but the soul

Julie Walker: Yep. 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/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.