

Podcast 486: Unfairly Advantaging Your Students

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: It doesn't take a lot to find a decent book and read it to your family. It doesn't require specialized skills. It does, however, require the wisdom and the will to do it, to make the decision to do it.

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, it's the middle of the summer,

Andrew Pudewa: We feel it. It's nice and warm.

Julie Walker: It is nice and warm, and I would think that the kids are feeling nice and warm. I think about what you talk about with evaporation.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, there's that. But then there's also the fact that hopefully many of them are spending more time outdoors, so they're having more opportunity to be free of screens, contemplating nature, getting good physical exercises, sweating out the toxins that accumulate from modern life.

Julie Walker: Yes, we actually have a webpage called IEW.com/summer-help. We post things on there, what parents and teachers can do over the summer, whether it's get outdoors and play more. Do you know that fourth graders can get into national parks free and they can bring their family?

Andrew Pudewa: Is that up to fourth grade or just if you're in fourth grade? And what if you're 8 years old, and you're in fourth grade. What if you're 11 years old, but you're still in fourth grade?

Julie Walker: I think someone's going to have to research. I think it's pretty much yourself declaring because if you do it one year with that student, you couldn't do it the next year with that same student

Andrew Pudewa: I see.

Julie Walker: But I'm looking forward to my granddaughter being in fourth grade so that we can go to all the national parks with her.

But I digress. I totally digress. We are not talking about visiting national parks, although I will say as a senior now, see, I'm admitting my age. I have a lifetime free annual park pass.

Andrew Pudewa: I can't actually remember the last time I've been to a national park. It's very sad.

Julie Walker: There's not too many here in Oklahoma.

Andrew Pudewa: Not too many around here.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. But today we are talking about unfairly advantaging your students.

Andrew Pudewa: Well that doesn't make sense. How, how would you be unfair in giving advantages to your students?

Julie Walker: Well, there was an article written, and this article is 10 years old, written by someone who was quoting a university professor of Warwick, in England, this was Dr. Smith who said "bedtime story activities do indeed foster and produce desired familiar relational goods." He wouldn't want to ban them, but that parents who engage in bedtime story activities should definitely, at least feel kind of bad about it sometimes.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so Adam Swift, he is evidently a professor tutor of political philosophy. He, I believe, right now is at Cambridge, and he's written a couple books, one on family values,

Julie Walker: Interesting.

Andrew Pudewa: Not the way you or I might interpret that on at face value. Another one called How Not to Be a Hypocrite, which is also about how do you live as a privileged person. And most of us and most who are listening to our podcast are probably, compared with the world population, fairly privileged. And how do you be that but not be a hypocrite because you have an ideal of everybody having equal opportunity, I suppose. So, yeah, he's in this kinda weird zone. People react extreme. You look at some of the reviews and one of them is, "What a great razor knife cutting into the fat of flabby thinking," which is kind of a nice little metaphor there, , and other people saying, "This is sheer idiocy. Do these people grow up this way, or do they have to go to a special school to become this stupid?"

Sometimes the comments are more interesting than the articles, but I guess in his mind, this is kind of a paradox that has to be resolved. Yes. Reading bedtime stories to your children gives them an advantage in life.

Julie Walker: Yes. We advocate for that.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, we advocate for more than just bedtime stories. Like more reading to your kids would give them a greater advantage. And of course, there's questions about why that's true. But then his idea that, well, yeah, you can do that. You can unfairly advantage

your children. Read them bedtime stories, give them money that other parents don't have to give to children. Send them to a good school, private school. Move somewhere where there's better schools. You have the resources to give your children. Better opportunities, but what about all the children whose families don't have those resources? And shouldn't we feel guilty about that? I think it's a rather interesting perspective to consider. I mean, I try to be open-minded, even if my initial reaction is, what the heck?

Julie Walker: I like to think that people that are being well educated, who are thinking, which of course is our theme for the year, how to think, are going to be able to then better serve humanity because being smart for smart's sake or being a good thinking human being in and of itself isn't the goal.

The goal is to be a contributing member of society.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. It goes back to that concept of *noblesse oblige*, right? Those who have more are morally obligated to give more. And that's kind of the opposite, if you will, of an egalitarian ideal where if we could just make everybody equal in every way, if everyone had the same income, the same education, the same amount of time, free time, the same opportunities for, you name it: nutrition, travel education, then somehow the world would be better if we could force that level of equality or egalitarian life. Obviously that has never been and will never be because it would require a phenomenal force of government to control everybody, and it would be the opposite of freedom. And therefore I think most of us would argue counter to the natural order, which is we all have various circumstances. Our genetics are different. Our family—we're born into the time and place, and yet all of us, regardless of circumstance, have free will. And we've seen people rise up out of the worst possible circumstances and accomplish truly great things. I always like to tell the story of Frederick Douglass, born into slavery, prohibited from any education during the most important developmental period.

Julie Walker: Was probably not read out loud to bedtime stories.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Separated from his parents at a young age, and yet he exercised his free will, his natural intelligence, his conscience, his sense of mission, and became one of the truly, truly great communicators contributing hugely to the abolitionist movement and the equal rights movement. So we can always look at that.

We also see people born into huge amount of privilege, and what happens? Even if they go to a good school, but then they fall into various addictions and corruptions and end up in jail or dead. So it's part of the mystery of free will and the way things are and, but what can we do right now? Well, wouldn't it be a net social good if everyone tried to give their children advantages?

Julie Walker: Yes, and not succumb to the least effort. I mean, it's so much easier to plop your kid in front of a TV and just hit go. And then you don't have to read to your child because they're hearing it on the TV. But the whole danger of screens, and we've done several

episodes about that and you've written articles, "Paper and Pen—What the Research Says" for example.

And it's easy, and I'm going to slip right into our next topic of unfairly advantaging our students, and that is: let's just be careful about the whole danger of letting AI write your papers, because that in and of itself, I mean, it's so dangerous. You shared an article with me yesterday, Andrew, where in some schools they're saying, yes, it's okay to use chatGPT, but here's the qualifications.

Why would you allow that for your students? Well, because it's better than... I guess it's the pick your battles conversation.

Andrew Pudewa: And you could make an argument that it is a good skill, if you want to call it that for young people to know how to use technology, right? Whatever the technology of the day is. In my day we took a typing class in ninth grade so that we could type, and that was the technology available. I'm grateful for that. Actually, it's one of the few classes I remember because the keys didn't have letters and you really had to touch type. You had to memorize that stuff and get muscle memory and get it automatic. But now it's, well, how do you create good prompts to get good information from the internet, from AI: that's a skill. And so we just always have to be looking at that line where the technology will atrophy the skill which it replaces.

And how far do we plug in to the machine? And it's a generational thing too. People who grew up without the internet, we remember what it was like to go to the library and use the card catalog, or even more obscure the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* on microfilm where you could find. Articles and then go sort through microfiche to find the article that you wanted for your research paper. Yeah, I'm glad honestly that that whole process is speeded up, and there's PubMed and all sorts of things you can have great access to.

But getting back to this reading bedtime stories to children—because his perspective on that is that it's a net good because it builds strong family relationships. And he's kind of backtracked, I think from his original position of maybe 20 years ago that was more in line with Plato, which is that family should be eliminated and children should be raised by the state so that there's equality and control, and you can engineer society in that way although there is some debate in the world of philosophy as to whether that whole idea from *The Republic* was more just satire, kind of like a reductio absurdum. Like, here's what you want and if you get that, here's what you'll have and this is what it might look like and is that really what you want?

But, Plato being very subtle, didn't make it as obvious as, say, 1984, the Hunger Games.

Julie Walker: Oh my goodness. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: So there's the familiar bond that happens, and I've talked about this, how when you read, not just a bedtime story, but when you read to the whole family, right. So like

when both parents and all the children are experiencing the story together or better a book—because that's like a longer trip.

It's a little bit like taking a family trip. And you go somewhere with your kids and then for the rest of your life, people remember things from that, “Hey, that's like when we went to Mount Rushmore and had a flat tire.” And they remember that same thing with books. “Hey, do you remember in this story when Penrod had to hoist his dog up in his handmade elevator to...” and you get these images and experiences and emotions, and those become touch points that all the people in the family can share and that builds the relationship. That's a net good.

And I'd actually love to talk to this guy because—Where are his lines here? Because in theory I would argue, well, strong families make stronger communities. Stronger communities make stronger states. Stronger states make a better society. But how do you, how do you determine that? And then the very real moral problem of what do you do with people who are disadvantaged and how do you help them improve their families? I think what we're doing is in that direction

Julie Walker: I think so.

Andrew Pudewa: It doesn't take a lot to find a decent book and read it to your family.

That's not a huge amount of expense. It doesn't require specialized skills. It does, however, require the wisdom and the will and taking the time from something else, probably screen-based entertainment, to do it, to make the decision to do it.

Julie Walker: Well, in choosing which book to read, I'm going to offer two resources. One is our good friend Sarah Mackenzie. She has on her website Read Aloud Revival website. We'll put a link in the show notes. On her front page is a book generator like. Who is this for and what are your interests? And boom, up pops three books. I've used that many times for buying books for my grandchildren.

And yes, there's affiliate links in there and that's how she makes her money, but it's a fabulous tool. The other resource is most of our student curricular materials, *Structure and Style for Students* or our theme-based writing lessons, they do have literature suggestions, and this could be something that a student could read for themselves.

Andrew Pudewa: And we even have a book list on our website.

Julie Walker: Yes. Oh, that's the third one,

Andrew Pudewa: And most of those books are all old books that you can get either at the library or really cheap used.

Julie Walker: right. Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: And I think most families that are interested in what we do are the types that will gradually over time build a good library. If a book is worth reading, it's worth reading again.

Julie Walker: Right. Exactly. Well, and I do want to switch back over, so you and I are like playing tug of war here. I want to go back to the AI issue and just talk about how our Structure and Style approach to teaching writing for teachers who learn our method and perhaps come up with their own lessons or in our own curricular materials that we've developed, there's no need for it because we provide the resources that the students need to be able to be successful. The source texts. And the checklists and the stylistic techniques, and this is how you have to do it. And can you program some type of AI interface to be able to do it for you? Well, maybe not today July, 2025, maybe. Who knows, Andrew, maybe by December of 2025 they'll have this. But I think more importantly, once we get to the higher units where the students are having to come up with their own writing, perhaps a research project for Unit 6, we might provide them with the source text initially, but then when you assign the students to do their own research, you require—you're so mean—you require that the students actually bring in their own book.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. Well, why do we have children write reports? Why do we have them write about information? Well, there's several reasons. Number one, probably the one that most everyone would acknowledge right off is you learn it better. So if you collect up information, organize it and present it, you've run it through the filter of your consciousness, you've stored some of it in your memory. You've made connections with other things you know, and so you now have knowledge you didn't previously have. So by using AI to do most of that process for you, and then you try to tweak it around so that it doesn't look like it was AI written or whatever your goal is, you're not really engaged in that process. You may be learning something different, but it's a different thing.

A second reason we have kids write about content is because it's easier for them to start. And I've talked about how ideas can preexist in the memory or imagination, or they can preexist more immediately. Ideas can pre-exist primarily in sensory impressions, or they can exist in words. And so in the process of teaching kids writing, the easiest way to start is something that's immediate. Like, here it is. I can read it right now. I can see it right now. I have it right here to look at. And if it preexists in words, then moving it from that into a keyword outline type of intermediary tool or filter, then recreating those ideas on paper inwards, that's the easiest place to start.

And then we can move through that whole process to what experiences have you had and what have you learned from them? What feelings can you identify and how has that affected you for better or worse? And that kind of reflection AI's not going to do that for you. I fear that if we, if we knock off the opportunity for kids to wrestle with kind of concrete, easily verifiable, achievably available and somewhat accurate information, if we eliminate that part of the whole sequence, are we going to end up with people who can write from their

experience and harness their own reflections on something and share that with the world? That's a skill that's extraordinarily valuable, whether it's in the social forum of politics and society, or in the personal forum of having a better life. I'm sure someone's written a book called *Writing for a Better Life*. Actually, there's a book called *Grammar for a Fuller Life* that I read a couple years back, it kind of was talking about the more you intimately understand the language you use, the more fulfilling the use of language is for you.

Julie Walker: Yep. Well. We've mentioned this before in a previous podcast about perhaps we're creating a gulf, not at IEW alone, but we're joining that work not to create the gulf, but the gulf between parents and teachers who want to teach their children to think and write well, and using writing as a tool for learning to think better versus those that are caving into culture and the easy path. And there's going to be that disparity in our society twenty years from now. And so we want to create here at IEW students who, and teachers who value writing and thinking through all the pathways, whether it's reading out loud, whether it's memorizing poetry, whether it's learning to write well, having a variety of sentence structures and good vocabulary and good thinking and clear, cohesive paragraphs.

Wow, that's a big thing. But we've got a pathway to do that.

Andrew Pudewa: It sounds to me like you're saying if all parents and all teachers did many of the things that we promote and teach and support the world would be a better place.

Julie Walker: I would. Andrew Pudewa, you're exactly right.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I think that's what motivates us too. I get up and I don't know, I've tried to not look at anything resembling media or news for a couple hour. But at some point in the day, it hits me, and usually the things that pop out are the things that feel dangerous. This worries me a lot—this increasing gap between people who know things and are competent in the world of thought and ideas and everybody else, and I think that this is a further widening, almost like the wealth gap too, where you know more than any other time in history, the smallest percentage of people control the greatest amount of the wealth on the planet. Do we really want that intellectually? Do we want the smallest amount of people to control all the information on the planet? That I think has been addressed in a few different dystopian novels. I guess we should add to our tagline: “listen, speak, read, write, think, fight dystopia now. Unfairly advantage your children for the betterment of all.”

Julie Walker: Sounds great.

Andrew Pudewa: Bumper stickers.

Julie Walker: Sounds great. Thank you,

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.