

Podcast 497: Writing and Classical Education with Donahue Academy

Episode Transcript

Edward Watson: We were plugged in with the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, and their representative had sort of a white sheet of highly recommended resources, and as far as writing was concerned, IEW was the majority of the list.

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: One of the myths that we have been working to dispel over the years is that IEW is just for homeschoolers. That it was a method and a curriculum that was intended to be used just with mom and her kids at the dining room table.

Andrew Pudewa: Which is odd because when I learned the thing back in 1990, it was in Canadian schools and everybody was school teachers. And then I brought it in and started doing some seminars for homeschool parents, built IEW up over time and, a few schools, mostly through a homeschool connection would find out about it, but people did tend to think, oh, well that's, that's a homeschool thing. So yeah, but not anymore. That's for sure.

Julie Walker: Nope, not anymore. And it's really fun to kind of watch our company grow and the number of customers increase. And overall our company has continued to grow over the years, but the fastest growing area in our company is our school's department. And we are so honored and thrilled, quite honestly, to have with us the headmaster and vice principal of Donahue in Ave Maria, Florida as our guest today. So welcome to our podcast.

Dr. Snyder: Well, it's great to be here. Thank you for having us.

Edward Watson: Yes, thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: Now this school is particularly dear to us because we were able to use them to showcase a success. We put them in the school's magalog, and then we made a little video. I have to tell you guys, I went to the ICLE conference, which is the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education in Lincoln, and we did a sponsorship, and so they were showing that video that we made with your students and teachers and you know, it was kinda like you get five minutes and we played the video and, I dunno, it was like three minutes or something and then I had two minutes to say something.

Well. I wasn't up on the stage yet. They just played the video and at the end of it, everybody clapped for the promotional video. And I thought, I don't, what do I have to say now? So.

Dr. Snyder: That is so funny. Oh, that is great.

Andrew Pudewa: They enjoyed seeing your students and the joy and the little clips and you came across very nicely. So we're super grateful for your willingness to make it possible for us to communicate to other schools the success and enthusiasm that you've had. So thank you.

Dr. Snyder: Absolutely. No, it's our pleasure. We love IEW for sure. Big fans.

Julie Walker: I think it would be helpful for our listeners, because you're hearing two male voices. We're hearing Dr. Snyder, and we're hearing Mr. Watson, for the two of you just to introduce yourselves a little bit, so maybe the listener can identify who's speaking and what your role is with the school.

Dr. Snyder: Sure. Again, yeah, happy to do so. So I'm Dr. Snyder. I am principal of Donahue Academy. I have been principal here for three years now, have been associated with the school for 10 years. So six years when the school first opened from 2007 to 2013 and now going on four years, so 10 years total. In between those two times I was a founding headmaster of True North Classical Academy, which is a classical charter school in Miami, which is where I met Andrew for the first time and used IEW.

Edward Watson: Hi, my name's Edward Watson. I'm the assistant principal for curriculum and instruction here at Donahue Academy. I'm starting off my third year here. Prior to coming to Donahue, I was the vice principal at a Catholic school in Newark, Ohio, St. Francis de Sales, and I helped them make a transition from a very standard diocesan school to the first Catholic classical school in the diocese of Columbus. So I came down to Ave Maria to visit Donahue, and then shortly thereafter, my wife and four children and I moved down here to live and work here.

Dr. Snyder: And Ed Watson was recently ordained as a deacon, so he is really Deacon Watson.

Edward Watson: Yeah,

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Congratulations. It seems that there's kind of a you're in the Fort Myers area at least.

Dr. Snyder: more Naples area.

Andrew Pudewa: Naples, but that's what I had to fly into was Fort Myers.

Dr. Snyder: Yeah. Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: But it seems like there's kind of an explosion of interest in classical education in that part of Florida. Uh, is that true? Because there were—you had a little regional conference that I attended and there were people from several different schools and then I know there's a couple Hillsdale K-12 schools in that area as well.

Dr. Snyder: That's right. In this small geographic area of Naples, Fort Myers, you know, there's us as a Catholic classical school. We've been around since 2007. There's Naples Classical Academy, which is a Hillsdale classical school, and then there's Mason Classical Academy, which is another classical charter school. So within a very sort of small geographic area there's three classical schools.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, and one of my friends just moved from Tulsa to that Naples area to work in one of those schools. Marcel Brown, I don't know if you've met him.

Dr. Snyder: Yeah, I do know Marcel, so he's the principal of St. Elizabeth Seton, which is a Catholic parochial school in Naples.

Andrew Pudewa: Soon to call itself classical. If Marcel has any, anything to do. Yeah.

Dr. Snyder: Right. Actually, what's interesting is now there are three Catholic classical schools in the Diocese of Venice. We're a diocese of fifteen schools, so there are three, and then next year, two more schools are becoming classical. So a third of the diocese in Venice by next year will be classical.

Andrew Pudewa: It's great! Now let's kind of have you, from your position, why are these schools wanting to become classical? What are some of the challenges that new classical schools face and what attracts people? Like why would parents either rush toward it or be drawn into it?

Dr. Snyder: I mean, so I think with classical schools, I think classical schools get education, right. And so just in terms of this sort of metaphysical kind of stance where we approach reality from the outside and then it comes in. So this understanding of this approach to reality, I think is right from a classical perspective. Modern progressive education really starts with the individual. So it's individual out as opposed to outside coming in. I think that's a point to bring out, focusing on classical texts, on great books, really good literature, and exposing students to the best of what's been thought and said throughout western culture. Our tradition is rich, and I think there's a recognition of that. This resurgence of recognizing the rich tradition that we have. You know, education is for life. It's not just for for a job. And so it's that focus on learning as a good and an end. In itself as opposed to just using it as a means to an end. There's a lot of reasons why I think classical education is becoming more widely practiced.

You know, those are just a few, but the curriculum is so much better. You know, speaking of IEW, it's just so much better. It's the right way to learn. I think it, again, it just gets education, right,

Julie Walker: So I'm curious, you mentioned IEW, how, how did you stumble upon this homeschool curriculum that we were talking about? How did you stumble upon us and what materials are you actually using in your school?

Dr. Snyder: Yeah, so I'll address the first part of the question. I'll let Deacon address the second part. So as I mentioned in the beginning, I was the founding headmaster of True North Classical Academy. So this was back in 2015, and that was when I brought IEW into True North and have been using IEW since 2015, so for 10 years now, and used it at True North with so much success.

The teachers loved using it, the students loved learning from it. And so when I came to Donahue in 2022, naturally I wanted to bring IEW to the school.

Edward Watson: You know, sort of tagging onto the previous question about the difficulties when the school that I was at previously was looking to make the transition, we fell in love with the idea of embracing the classical model and pursuing the true and the good and the beautiful. But the big question that we had was practical, like, how do we do this? What changes do we need to work with? We knew that we wanted to improve the writing of our students, but we weren't entirely sure how to do that.

And so we were plugged in with the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, and their representative had sort of a white sheet of highly recommended resources to go to for both training and formation, but then also for practical use in the classroom. As far as writing was concerned, IEW was the majority of the list. And so we spoke to a consultant and kind of figured out how that was going to work for St. Francis at that time, and then adopted it just as I was transitioning to come down here, and I've had nothing but positive reports about the improvements in writing that we had at that school.

When Dr. Snyder came on here at Donahue and made the transition, and that was part of my first year here. We were using *Structure and Style for Students* in sixth through eighth grade, and I believe the program has the same name in the lower grades as well. Then we did teacher training. I believe that Dr. Snyder, did you have, did you have a representative come in to do onsite training initially, or did you use the Structure and Style video training series?

Dr. Snyder: We used the videos.

Edward Watson: So that's...

Dr. Snyder: I do want to invite Andrew down at any point—open invitation to Andrew.

Edward Watson: So both at St. Francis then and here at Donahue the training videos were instrumental in the formation of the teachers. But then, this past year through our contact with IEW and then through one of the teachers that we hired, we changed over to the thematic units in grades three through eighth grade.

Edward Watson: So they follow the same unit structure, I think, but they're focused on a particular time period or section of literature. And those have been very well received here. We are in the first week of school, so it's new territory, but our new fifth grade teacher absolutely loves them and brought them from Naples Classical Academy with that recommendation as well. So we're having some good success with it. We like it.

Julie Walker: So I just want to go back a little bit to the training because you mentioned a couple different ways that we do offer training. We of course have the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* video courses that you know is Andrew on video training your teachers. But what works so well is exactly what you guys did, and that is had your teachers do it together and help each other out and complete the practicum assignments.

We also have the opportunity to send one of our implementation coaches. Either Jeff Nease or Andrew goes out to schools and trains them, but then those that are being trained also receive those training videos. So you get the fire hydrant approach with the one day or two day training. But then you can also go back and see the training videos. And teachers that have gone through our training program, especially in schools, if they're using our curriculum, they're going to find the curriculum so much easier to use. It's going to make sense because our curriculum, whether you are using the videos like the *Structure and Style for Students* that you mentioned, or one of our writing across the curriculum type theme-based books, it's still a structure, structural models and the stylistic techniques that we teach. That's IEW.

Dr. Snyder: Yeah, and I remember bringing Andrew down when I was at True North. For in-person training. I had other IEW trainers come down in person, and it was really great. I mean, our teachers benefited so much from it

Andrew Pudewa: Is Donahue a K-8 school or do you go up through high school now? I can't remember.

Dr. Snyder: PK through 12. So we start with four year olds in preschool and we go all the way up through 12th grade.

Andrew Pudewa: And what we obviously hope is that the students who have several years of *Structure and Style* or theme-based, whatever, when they hit high school, they really have a confidence, a knowledge. They know how to write, and then the high school teachers can really capitalize on that and do all sorts of more advanced things. That's always what we hope happens. How's that worked for you? Are the high school students coming in well prepared?

Dr. Snyder: I would say absolutely. You know, again, this is our third year using it here at Donahue. And so our sixth graders three years ago that used it are now entering high school. And feedback that I've received from our teachers is that they're very well prepared. We really focus on writing throughout grades here, but certainly in high school there is a lot of writing done, and our students are definitely well prepared.

Just anecdotally, my daughter who graduated last year from Donahue, now going off from university. She went through IEW for many years and writing college essays and now writing in college. I mean, her writing is just so good and it's because of the years of IEW training that she had. There's no doubt.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and having a really smart dad helps too, I'm sure.

Dr. Snyder: That helps too.

Edward Watson: I can offer the opposite point of view because I'm not the smart dad, but my daughters and my son go here now. My son has not started IEW in kindergarten yet. So, but for my older girls, I mean, they had a good start prior to arriving at Donahue and it has just the writing program here has really helped them progress significantly. Their ability to edit that we also use in tandem with, with it is *Fix-It! Grammar*, and that's been incredibly helpful for my sixth grader and my eighth grader just to help with their revision process. It's pretty wonderful.

Julie Walker: So how does it actually work in a classroom?

Edward Watson: Well, so I'm thinking about one of our lead teachers. He's the dean of our logic stage grade six through eight, Landon Fulmer.

I mean, he follows a very similar structure using *Fix-It! Grammar* as sort of the warmup for the students at their seats and then going through and following the thematic unit. And so they'll read the piece and then apply the keyword outline, develop their notes from that, and then do the rewriting piece for their self-created passage.

The topic. Changes over time, but the structure of it continues and repeats and allows the students to really build up their skillset there. The checklist at the end for revision helps to know exactly what they're accountable for. It's been very helpful for them.

Dr. Snyder: He likes it so much that as middle school dean, he adopted the key word outline kind of structure just like for taking notes in general across disciplines. So students are trained how to take notes, you know, via this key word outline concept. It is diffused through everything in our curriculum.

Andrew Pudewa: You also do stress or put significant effort into public speaking or presentation skills for the students. I would assume the key word outlines have helped that greatly as well.

Edward Watson: Absolutely, we do. In fact, you know, once our students get into high school, so we call it the rhetoric stage, and there is a heavy, heavy focus on public speaking. And so again, you see the students—there's a clear, just a poise and a confidence that they have in public speaking as a result of all of the times they're getting up in front of the class to present their writing.

And so it's the public speaking part is a very important part. I love the fact that that's built into IEW and the students are getting it from the early ages all the way on. So by the time they get into high school where the focus really is on rhetoric, their skills are just so refined.

Andrew Pudewa: That is awesome. I guess this is kind of a dangerous question, but is there anything you imagine that we could do better to help you accomplish your goals? Like our goal is continuous improvement, right? We're Excellence in Writing. So do you see anything that we could do better to serve you?

Dr. Snyder: I'm trying to think. You know, the teacher training that we had for the older grades was very helpful. Some of our younger teachers were interested in teacher training that was a little bit more targeted towards them.

And when I reached out to an IEW rep they immediately shared with me some resources that I hadn't found through the website yet. And so the teachers found that very helpful as they're trying to adapt the lesson plan format that we use in the very younger grades. Those were very helpful. And then they had then the freedom to select the items from the lesson plan format that they needed. And then if we had other resources or other methods that we used for say spelling or grammar in the younger grades, they could sort of pick and choose.

So that modular approach was helpful. I think the program that, Andrew, you shared with me at the conference about memory work and poetry, I wasn't aware that IEW had that, and so that was very helpful as well. I guess the most helpful thing for me would be just me becoming more aware of what IEW has to offer and how we can apply that in our classrooms.

Julie Walker: I am laughing at that comment because your students and the two of you are featured in our school magalog, and I'm thinking maybe we should ship you one of these so you could see what we have to offer.

Andrew Pudewa: No, I'm sure they know. I was just, I'm always curious. How do we strengthen what we're doing to ensure people have the absolute best success that can be had?

Well, I will look forward to seeing how things develop over the next three years and five years and ten years if I live that long because it's very exciting what's happening at Donahue. Classical education—it frightens some people. Just the term it seems like, oh, this is going to be hard, or this is going to be stuffy, or this is going to be not applicable to the modern world. And I think what you're part of, what we're part of is trying to say, no, we have this rich tradition. These methods and materials that have been used for a long time. We have our system, but it goes all the way back. You can trace its roots into the ancient grammar and rhetoric exercises. So I love that we're working together on this and the energy and the hope for the future of, you know, schools in this country is I think... There's so much in this classical renewal that I would encourage any of our listeners who are in Florida, you know, take a look there for those who are elsewhere, take a look around it because they're popping up all over the place.

Julie Walker: We are, of course, continuing to encourage our homeschooling families, and actually with every single order that we ship out from our warehouse, they get three pieces. They get the homeschool catalog just in case they don't have it, the *Magnum Opus Magazine*, which is a collection of our students' great works, published in a beautiful format, but they're also given a school's magalog that has a little sticky note on it that says, give this to a fellow school teacher.

And I think that maybe that's been helping the Schools Department grow. And I love what you said about connecting with your educational consultant because that's what we want to do here at IEW is we want to make resources available to you. There's a lot. We have a lot of resources, and as you mentioned, you didn't know about some of these things.

Well, we have them available and maybe just the best thing to do—so if you are a school teacher or an administrator or you know of someone who is in that camp, you can actually go to IEW schools.com and that will kick you over to our school's landing page where you can connect with an educational consultant and maybe have some incredible success stories like Dr. Snyder and Mr... Deacon, I should say, Edward Watson able to share with us today. So thank you gentlemen so much for being with us and for sharing your faces on the video. And if you haven't seen our school's video, we will certainly put a link to that in our show notes that you can see the face of these gentlemen that we've been talking with today.

Edward Watson: Well, thank you so much for having

Dr. Snyder: us. We really appreciate it, and grateful to to be again, to be asked to be on this podcast.

Edward Watson: Yes. Thank you very much.

Julie Walker: Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you for your time. Have a great school year.

Dr. Snyder: Thank you so much.

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.